

Glenn Campbell's
Philosophy Notes

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Quality of Consciousness

A driver talking on a cell phone is a dangerous thing. Some studies suggest it is worse than driving drunk. When you come to an intersection and see another driver on the phone, you have to recognize that his mind is not all there and he might not see you.

Some jurisdictions have responded by banning the use of hand-held cell phones while driving, but the occupation of the hand is not the safety issue. The real problem is the division of consciousness, which impairs the driver's concentration.

I don't know what consciousness is, but it is clearly a limited commodity. If you try to do two things at once, you are going to have only half as much of it to devote to each task. The more tasks you attempt, the more shallow your thinking processes become for each.

In the case of driving, the division of consciousness can be an immediate safety danger. In other cases, it just leads to stupidity and poor decision making.

The division of consciousness is one of the great diseases of the modern world. We are now bathed in stimulation. It is considered normal to be constantly occupied by television, an iPod, a video game or the internet. In their professional lives, many workers are required to

respond to one problem after another, with little break between them. The result is that no one problem gets very much conscious attention.

What this breeds above all is passivity. Because people are overstimulated all the time, it is hard to get them worked up about anything. They will make the minimal decisions forced upon them, but they are less likely to engage in optional planning or prevention.

A driver on a cell phone is not proactive but reactive. He'll respond to a crisis on the road, but only after a significant delay. He won't be thinking about potential problems before they occur, so he isn't primed to take action when they come to pass. This increases the chances of catastrophe.

Likewise, in all areas of life, the heavily divided person is not likely to contribute much to the quality of what is happening around him. He'll react to an imminent threat but will remain passive otherwise. What this gives us, in essence, is a nation of sheep.

Think of how people watch the evening news. They may be moved emotionally by a news story, but the chances that they will do something about it are very slim because that story is replaced by another and

another and another in their stream of consciousness. The end result is that the typical TV viewer takes no action at all.

It could be argued that the quality of personal consciousness is worse now than it has ever been in human history. While we now have rapid access to information, this hasn't necessarily improved our lives, because we are now dealing with too much. Overstimulated people don't think deeply about things. They become information zombies.

The only way to improve one's quality of consciousness is to reduce the stimulation. To regain the clarity of your thoughts, you have to essentially lock yourself in a prison cell without television, radio, news, phone or internet. Twenty years of this deprivation might be unpleasant, but a few hours of it can be a blessed relief.

Without stimulation, you can begin to do what a cow does with the grass she has just eaten: She regurgitates it and chews it some more. This is the greatest joy and benefit of consciousness: being able to relive past experiences and anticipate future ones. Life is much deeper and richer when you not only experience interesting things but also have time to think about what you have experienced and integrate it into your whole.

Most people, however, can't tolerate a prison cell. If you locked them in an empty room, they would instantly become "bored" and demand to be let out. This is because they are addicted to stimulation as surely as a smoker is addicted to cigarettes. If they suddenly lost their stimulation, they wouldn't know what to do with themselves.

For these people, you have to keep things simple. With their tiny attention spans, you're not going to get much depth or action from them.

You just got to watch that they don't run you over.

Glenn Campbell