

## The inner eye of consciousness

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To mark the 400th anniversary of his birth, France declared 1996 to be the Year of Descartes. In Sydney, Australia, a conference celebrating his work was held in April. I wrote to one of the participants, asking if I could have a transcript of proceedings. As an aside I suggested that Descartes was right to divide life into material and non-material, as in out-of-body experiences a person's immaterial 'self' is located one place, while the physical body is elsewhere. The philosopher replied that like most of his colleagues, he felt the notion of being conscious and outside one's body to be nonsensical, as how could one be aware of anything without sense organs? I think the answer is that consciousness itself is our primary sense organ.

It was once felt that eyes acted much like cameras, but we now know an eye is an extension of the brain. Data entering the eye are manipulated and processed long before they reach the occipital lobes at the rear of the brain. Kevin Kelly has written: 'We know that eyes are more brain than camera. An eyeball has as much processing power as a supercomputer' 1 .

The eye-brain unit is a sense organ at the physical level, but it takes self-awareness in order to 'see' things. Take, for example, a boxer who continues fighting after being knocked unconscious. There's no doubt his eyes tell him about his opponent's movements; but ask him afterwards and he'll say he can't remember a thing, he didn't see a thing.

In an article 2 , Paul Davies asked what readers felt about the prospect of people being zombies, carrying out tasks without inner awareness. I once played football for some 15 minutes while unconscious. For two or three of those minutes I was about 10 metres above the playing field, looking down, with everything seen in mirror reverse. \*The rest of the time was a blank, yet I had continued to play, so my eyes were functioning. The eyes seem to be machinery used by the physical body to cope, in the sense that a computerized robot would need a sense organ to do a similar job.

In contemporary culture we assume that the reception of data and all subsequent cognition happens in the brain, yet I once had an experience when my thinking was distinctly located in my hands (this reminds me of William Golding's novel *The Inheritors*, where our ancient ancestors did thinking with their feet). Researchers have found that immune systems, and even the complex nervous system in the gut, may act as adjuncts to the brain. It seems likely, therefore, that not all sensing and decision-making needs be located in the brain.

Magneto-encephalography (MEG), used to pinpoint mental activity, may produce odd results: sometimes the images show activation in unexpected locations - even outside the skull. Researchers using MEG feel that it is reasonable simply to ignore such obvious recording glitches, but the wider world of science is often aghast as such a cavalier attitude to data 3.

In future researchers may be able to show that consciousness permeates the material universe. Thought may be everywhere, but recognized by us only when it occurs in a sufficiently concentrated form.

In his article, Davies asked if zombies (without self-awareness) could converse with us. I can't recall ever doing so when outside myself and still conscious. However, I've verbalized when my self-awareness was not in its usual 'command-post' location.

At university I gave a talk on the liberation of The Netherlands by Canadian forces in World War II. For some five minutes I used my notes. I then had an unusual state where I ignored the notes and stood at a large map, taking the class and lecturer through the entire campaign, naming contingents, commanding officers, dates, places. For over 30 minutes I functioned the way Napoleon probably acted all the time. I had left the 'consciousness cage' that traps us in our ego selves, and tapped into the subconscious (unconscious?) genius that we all have. Yet at no time was I distinctly out of my body.

On another occasion, I had a meal with a friend who was alienated from her Irish father. My mouth abruptly opened and began speaking in a broad Irish accent. My friend went white and stared at me, transfixed. The words went on for about three minutes. To me the words were like a foreign language. Again I was not entirely out of my body. I had some self awareness but no understanding of meaning.

It seems obvious to me that consciousness, outside the body, is not made of matter. It must be visiting from a different dimension. Orthodox scientists ridicule the notion that there can be another (spiritual?) dimension. Some of these scientists then return to string theories containing numerous dimensions! I feel consciousness is as basic as time (duration), space (extent), and matter/energy (substance/activity). It even may be that consciousness is the ground state in which the others are embedded: the thought before the deed.

To suggest that conscious life arises from dead matter seems far-fetched; to argue that life is a product of another dimension raises the spectre of an infinite regress. It is not satisfying to postulate a mysterious cause, but what if this actually is the case? Must we refuse to accept the correct answer because of intellectual snobbery? Which is paramount, the 'illogical' but obvious existence of self-awareness, or artificial rules of science? To me, because of my personal experiences, the answer is obvious: consciousness emerges from vacuum before matter emerges; indeed, consciousness may *be* vacuum.

Many scientists disagree and feel that the material universe is all there is; anyone claiming to have inexplicable experiences must be confused. However, I am inclined to believe that spontaneous psi is commonplace among less analytic people in our society. Consequently, I suspect that scientists' neglect of psychic phenomena contributes significantly to the ever-growing gap between that small minority who believe that their views of reality are rationally based and the vast majority of our citizens who cannot distinguish between rationality and irrationality and who know only the reality of experience 4 .

Note how this says that those who believe in their experiences are inferior to the small number who can explain away or ignore all anomalies and therefore inhabit a rational world. This view elevates the mere compilation of 'facts' above, in Maurice Nicoll's words, the '...inner individual authentic perception which is the only source of real knowledge' 5 . The universe is *not* rational, from a human perspective, as Niels Bohr saw so long ago. Will the news ever sink in! I learned how to design, conduct, and write up scientific experiments in a university Biology course, where I was an 'A' student. No-one can tell me I can't think rationally. As for my episodes being hallucinations - I have to admit that this may be the case, but if so, then I must also admit that I may be hallucinating while typing this article! I gain nothing by taking this option.

I can't see why 'rational' scientists have to adopt such a hostile attitude towards psychic events. There seems to be things about out-of-body experiences that could be researched

and quantified. For example: I've been above my body and I've been level with my head; but I've never been below myself looking up. Why should this be so? Is it the same with others? Another point, raised by Davies, is the question of whether it is possible for a body to converse when self-awareness is located elsewhere. A survey of this would be interesting. The majority of my out-of-body experiences and other psychic states last either around three seconds, or around three minutes. Is this standard for others? In every out-of-body event I've felt serene, which means to me that I'm in my 'eternal mode' and therefore more at home than when in my mundane body. Do others feel the same? I've noticed a hypnotic effect following many of my psychic episodes, where it is only hours later, or next morning, that I realize something unusual has happened. Is this a common feature? What could be the reason?

These are a few things that might be investigated scientifically, while still realizing that mystic experiences cannot be shared.

I feel sorry for philosophers, totally trapped in their bodies, who construct their theories of consciousness from reading the theories of other philosophers, also trapped in their bodies, in what mimics an infinite regress. Without the hard evidence of personal experience to go by, I can understand why these 'rationalists' refuse to believe those of us who have been out of our bodies, and why they say, with the absolute certainty that comes only with a complete lack of evidence, that we have been hallucinating. It must be suffocating to spend a whole life cooped up inside oneself!

#### References

1. KELLY, KEVIN *Out of Control: the new biology of machines* Fourth Estate, London, 1994. p. 50
2. DAVIES, PAUL 'Return to consciousness' *The Australian*, p. 24 (22 May 1996)
3. MCCRONE, JOHN 'Maps of the mind' *New Scientist* p.33 (7 January 1995). Being able to sense things outside one's body may explain a chameleon's ability to change its colour to match its background as seen from different angles.
4. MCCONNELL, R. 'The "enemies" of parapsychology' *J. sci. Explor.* **7**: 419 (1993)
5. cited in SCHUMACHER, E.F., *A guide for the perplexed* Jonathan Cape, London, 1977 p. 14.

#### Footnote

\* Of all the out-of-body experiences that I've had, this was the only one with a mirror reversal. Colin Wilson, in his *Mysteries* (Hodder & Soughton, London, 1978) wrote about how Robert Monroe reported seeing his body in a mirror-image