

Tucson III: Towards a Science of Consciousness

April 27th - May 2nd

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Consciousness is growing up. The study of that archipelago from which each of us is born as an island and into which we sink back at death no longer need be furtive and concealed, but has become (largely) respectable and (almost) mature. Tucson III reflected this. Somewhat fewer delegates (800 rather than 1000 plus at Tucson II), some familiar presenters describing the working out of now well-known themes, but many vigorous minds, young and old, struggling and making progress with problems hard and soft.

We began with a plenary on the self, and ended five days later with aesthetics and consciousness. Between came 16 plenaries of two or three speakers, 20 concurrent sessions with five speakers in each, all of which contributed to a total, including posters, of 481 presentations. An excellent volume provided by the Journal of Consciousness Studies containing the programme together with all available abstracts helped to ease the pain of choice. The venue is relatively spacious, and I found the ambience relaxed, friendly and confident.

For me high points included Frances Vaughan's presentation, in a plenary session on transpersonal psychology chaired by Charley Tart, on the dimensions of consciousness; B. A. Wallace's sensitive exposition of training the attention in Buddhism; and P. Hut's description of what he sees as convergence between modern science, phenomenology and Dzog Chen. An excellent plenary called 'The Explanatory Gap' drew contributions from Levine, McGinn and Rosenberg. Valuable discussions and a workshop on sleep and dreaming, and a presentation by Richard Gregory, characteristically both thoughtful and entertaining, entitled 'What do qualia do?' also stay in the mind.

A mind, though, somewhat overwhelmed by the volume and at times by the incompatibility of the information put before delegates. Even (perhaps particularly?) in this field unexamined assumptions abound. The importance of becoming aware of, and making explicit, one's own starting point, and of attempting to bring together data drawn from different point of view before elaborating and testing hypotheses, was seldom recognised. Arthur Zajonc's talk on 'Goethe and the science of consciousness' was not surprisingly a notable exception. Two lasting impressions. First, the divide between those who consider that 'more of the same' will crack the problem (if indeed there is one) of consciousness, and those believe that science, or scientists, need to grow and change before we can even get a handle on it, is as alive as ever. As a related issue, a number of speakers had to be reminded that uncovering the correlates of a phenomenon does not provide a satisfactory explanation for it.

Second, a memorable though informal meeting took place in the bar of the conference hotel on the evening of the last full day. A member of the Organising Committee was present, and took notes with Tucson IV in mind. Most of those attending were women, two of whom had convened it. The theme of the gathering was that not only were few of the presenters women, but that both the format of the sessions and the topics chosen tended to deny expression to the feminine point of view, whether that should come from a woman or a man. As examples, no small group settings were provided for sharing and experiential exchange, and very little was said about the relationship between intuition and

consciousness. I think this criticism was just. Maybe Tucson IV will possess the confidence of the young adult, and will joyfully embrace the insights of scientists themselves evolving into the partnership society of the new millennium. I hope to be there to see it.

Julian Candy is a psychiatrist interested in Mind Body relationships.