



Beyond the Brain VIII: Self and Death – What Survives?

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University of Kent at Canterbury 21 - 23 August 2009



Fourteen years ago we gathered at St John's College Cambridge for the first Beyond the Brain conference. The powerful impetus generated on that occasion has fuelled further meetings every other year, three in all last century and five this. So this year's event marks the beginning of a second set of seven, providing an apposite moment to take stock. Has the cultural climate shifted? Were topics and themes discussed this year that could not have featured 14 years ago? Do we now have a clearer and more complete map of the territory that lies 'beyond the brain', or indeed beyond the grave? Can we speak of progress?

At first glance we might note with satisfaction the contrast between the titles of the first and eighth Conferences: 'New Avenues in Consciousness Research' and 'Self and Death – What Survives?' One cautious and non-specific, the other much more focussed and daring to assume the fact of survival.

But then some of us may recall that opening address in 1995 by Willis Harman, then President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, who so sadly died between the first and second Conferences. He had written extensively about what he called the new metaphysical foundations of modern science. At that first Conference he talked about the need to change the assumptions and presuppositions that

make up the 'central myth' of our culture, but to change it wisely, without falling back into superstition. He described the beginnings of a unifying vision that might draw together emerging findings, in for example the understanding of the causal efficacy of consciousness and the role of non-local effects in psychical research, with the already established discoveries of science.

Against this background we may wonder whether we can speak of progress. What today are our metaphysical foundations? Do we have a coherent, or indeed an evolving, 'central myth'? How far on are we with the journey that brings us closer to a unifying vision? So let us return to the eighth Conference.

To anticipate a little my conclusion, the physical setting for this meeting was curiously appropriate to its content. We arrived on a showery Friday afternoon to face daunting difficulties in locating reception, the accommodation, the dining hall, the lecture theatre, all spread over three separate sites. Especially if elderly or disabled, as many were, getting from place to place, even later during the weekend when we hoped we knew where we were going, was often a lengthy and frustrating procedure. A signposting for disabled access led no further than to a long featureless corridor. Room numbering failed to conform to the conventional integer sequence. Vast windows gave sudden provocative glimpses of a distant and unattainable city clustered round its cathedral, far below and bathed in damp sunshine. Yet as it turned out the accommodation was comfortable, the food particularly tasty, the lecture hall quite satisfactory, the format and presentations of high quality (thanks - for the eighth time - to our indefatigable Programme Director David Lorimer), the technical and general arrangements excellent (thanks to Martin Redfern and Charla Devereux), and the city was Canterbury, for some of us the spiritual centre of England.

Following custom, on the first evening **David Lorimer** introduced the topic before enabling the speakers to introduce themselves. He noted, following Freud, our inability to envision our own death, an event that Freud as an atheist took to imply extinction, though many at this conference might regard it as a process of transition or even transformation. Much evidence suggested enhancement rather than diminution of awareness once the body had dropped away.

The following morning we enjoyed a lucid and balanced presentation of some of that evidence by **Professor Bruce Grayson**, Director of the Institute of Perceptual Studies at the University of Virginia. Belief in post-mortem survival is based not on wishful thinking but on much experiential evidence. Founded forty years ago by Dr Ian Stephenson, his Institute continues to amass data relating to previous lives of people now living, to people now dead who continue to manifest to the living, and to the independence of the mind from the brain, including near death experiences. He outlined some of Dr Stephenson's meticulous work with young children who manifest cognitive and personality characteristics of deceased people unknown to them,

sometimes including birthmarks and bodily features relating to the mode of death. He recounted striking examples of 'drop-in' apparitions who manifest unexpectedly through mediums with subsequently verified accounts of events quite unknown to those present. While evidence that mind may function separately from brain provides only indirect evidence of post-mortem survival, it is nonetheless a necessary if not sufficient condition - and it is there in profusion, from demented people who become lucid before death, through severe hydrocephalics with normal intelligence, to complex, vivid and verifiable NDEs while heart and brain are 'stopped' and the body is empty of blood.

One of the strengths of Professor Grayson's presentation lay for me in the depth of detail he gave to the tales he told, by many of which both he and his audience were visibly much moved. Our next speaker, Dr Peter Fenwick, impressed us rather with the range and variety of accounts he provided, drawn from his now extensive research into End of Life Experiences. He spoke of premonitions of death, death bed visitations and dreams, death bed scenes, cultural attitudes to death, readiness for death in relation to a 'life task', coincidences, and the odd behaviour of animals and of mechanisms such as clocks. He then turned to the hospital and hospice management of death, drawing on carers' accounts of ELES: their initial difficulty and later relief at talking about these relatively common events with investigators and colleagues, and the lack of training for those who assist professionally at the process of death. Death is a profoundly spiritual experience, and yet its significance both in itself and for life is still ignored and marginalised. The evidence he presented amply justified his plea that it should be brought into much clearer focus, both scientific and cultural. A plea we ignore at our peril.

However, as a commentator from the floor pointed out, neither of the first two speakers really addressed the question of the nature of that element of the self that survives. Certainly we have massive evidence that something survives, but how should we characterise it? In the afternoon **Dr Andrew Powell**, founder chair of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, which co-sponsored the conference, began to address this issue. Speaking calmly and clearly, he used his experience of

past lives, both his own and those of patients, to illuminate the distinction between the mundane self, which as its name suggests is of the earth and dies with the body, and the soul self, which does not. Whether or not reincarnation is a reality, recollecting past lives can sometimes foster evolution and growth of the soul self, provided unfinished business is dealt with, reconciliation achieved, and the death itself worked through. His stance was gently pragmatic rather than dogmatic, reminiscent of the inclusive and pluralistic 'many spiritual worlds' approach of Jorge Ferrer rather than the more hierarchical and unitary 'perennial philosophic' construction of Ken Wilber.

After tea **Professor Betty Kovacs** continued the theme of personal disclosure in sharing with us some of the remarkable and enlightening experiences surrounding the death, in separate car accidents, of her mother, husband and son, all within a three year period. Following an early vision, she characterised herself as an academic who before these experiences was 'addicted to the rational mind', for ever requiring one more proof, one more demonstration of the spiritual nature of the universe. Her husband she described as initially a natural sceptic who could not understand or share those early experiences. Then a series of pre-cognitive dreams, waking visions and synchronicities, many shared between herself and her husband and involving the presence of her son after his death, transformed all of them, bringing to her the understanding that the whole universe is alive, alive with love. The miracle of death is that there is nothing but life, to paraphrase the title of her book. Concern about the earth in its current struggle to bring forth a new form of our species is reflected in the characteristics of many of the souls now coming to incarnation.

Some might consider that the contributor to the conference who provided the most satisfying and synthesising answer to the question posed by the title was **Sir John Tavener**. He also provided continuity, in that his composition of the piece of music we heard after dinner on Saturday was provoked by the striking conversation between him and musician **Paul Robertson** that took place on the Saturday evening two years ago at Beyond the Brain Conference VII at Bath. In introducing a recording of this recently premiered work, entitled *Towards Silence*, Paul told us of the serious indeed life-

threatening illnesses that recently had struck both Sir John and himself, and from which Sir John is so sadly not yet fully recovered. The work comprises four movements that may be called Waking State, Dream State, Deep Sleep and Unity, and draws on the resources of four string quartets and a large Tibetan bowl. Listening to it provided an indescribable yet fulfilling counterpoise to the words that overflowed around us for the rest of the weekend.

Next morning Portuguese diplomat **Dr Anabela Cardoso** told us of her remarkable experiences with Instrumental TransCommunication (ITC). This it appears is a term referring to the emergence chiefly of voices against background noise in electronic devices such as radios. These phenomena are thought to be one way that people who have died attempt to communicate with us, the living. Although she found it somewhat difficult to convey the impact of her results, given that her examples were chiefly in Portuguese and necessarily within a noisy ambience, she provided a useful and interesting account of recent growth in this field. As Paul Devereux commented during questions, messages that emerge through the 'modulation' of steady noise have occurred through history, as far back if not further than oracles in ancient Greece whose utterances were to be heard in the little cave behind a waterfall.

Our last speaker was **Dr David Fontana**. His was the most systematic attempt to answer the question posed by our title, and indeed to describe the characteristics of the life that awaits the element of us that survives in the afterlife. He drew confidently and fluently on a very wide range of sources, from the great spiritual traditions through mediumistic accounts to experiences of his own with a playful poltergeist, painting a picture of an hereafter in which at least initially we retain our personal characteristics while we continue to absorb and benefit from the lessons of this world as we pass through the four lower planes of the hereafter. Our state of mind at the time of death may well significantly influence in what sort of place we find ourselves: violent death or suicide may tie the bewildered and distressed subject to the earth as a haunting spirit, trapped until they call for help. However, progression through the lowest planes of repentance and remorse (sometimes pictured as Hades or purgatory) will lead to the plane of

illusion, where we meet with people of like mind to conjure up a world of our making and from which it may be that if we choose we can reincarnate; and then on further to the glorious plane of colour and to the formless planes beyond. 'In my father's house are many mansions' as David aptly quoted, and one might add don't get stuck in one room – the principle of non-attachment applies as much in the next world as in this: 'don't be attached to results; angels fly because they take themselves lightly'.

In addition to the formal sessions, we had the opportunity to debate Conference themes in small groups, and also enjoyed a partial and tantalising viewing of a documentary based on the Scole report, that concerns a long series of remarkable 'conversations' between a group of the living and a cohort of the dead.

In closing the conference **David Lorimer** remarked how natural it was for us to want to know a little of what may await us when we die. He hoped, though not it struck me with much confidence, that after this weekend we might have a better conception of the map of the territory that lies beyond the grave. My impression was that although the delegates generally much appreciated what they heard, and enjoyed the Conference, the individual presentations, however powerful and intriguing, lacked explicit coherence amongst themselves and thus did not yet offer, to use Willis Harman's terms, an emergent unifying vision, much less a central myth. Rather like the physical arrangements, each element was good, even excellent, in itself but did not readily come together with the rest of the set-up to make a convenient and easily functioning whole. The

difference of course is that the physical arrangements can be improved and given a little trouble a map devised to show their relationships clearly and unambiguously. My personal inkling is that what lies beyond the brain and beyond the grave cannot be mapped because there is no territory: after all 'territory' relates to the earth and to the persistence and consistency that the dimensions of space and time imply. This does not mean that we must do without a vision or a myth, nor does it deny that there was much implicit overlap between the different accounts, but it does suggest that we look towards Jorge Ferrer rather than Ken Wilber to be our guide: streams that feed the many-shored ocean of spirituality rather than quadrants and levels that tower progressively over each other; both/and logic rather than either/or.

So in two years time I hope that we shall meet in a place where sleeping, eating and participating are located no more than a stone's throw apart, to discuss how we may preserve and nurture that ocean of spirituality rather than how we may clamber further up a possibly illusory and perhaps only too individual mountain of enlightenment.

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Since retirement he has served as a Trustee of a hospice and as a Council member of the SMN. He is a Founding Member of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He has always been puzzled by consciousness, and maintains an interest in the poet and scientist Goethe.





Towards a New Renaissance 3: Harmonising Spirituality, Nature and Health

Berlin, 30 October- 1 November 2009

A Personal Account – Claudia Nielsen

Berlin in early November was resplendent! Very cold, but the weather was beautiful!

Berlin was also preparing to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Wall, which kept West Berlin an island within communist East Germany. I could not forget that, as I walked around the area in which the conference was held, close to Friedrich Strasse, which in a bygone time was part of East Berlin. I walked along it just short of 20 years ago with my son, who was then 14 on a visit shortly after those momentous days when the Wall was breached. It was however still mostly there and I remember the bleakness of the streets, the crumbling buildings which had been so obviously glorious in a distant past, the fearful corridors of Check Point Charlie, through which my son and I walked, following what must have been fearful footsteps of other less lucky people than us! Today this monument to people's misguided exercise in power and control is gone, and Friedrich Strasse is a bustling high class commercial centre, a symbol of the triumph of Western democracy and capitalism.

This setting was not unconnected with what we came here to discuss. Our conference was organised in association with the Faculty of Agriculture and Horticulture of the Humboldt Universitaet, and sponsored by the Schweisfurth Foundation, an organisation which over the last 20 years has been involved in research and promotion of sustainable and ecological means in food production, animal welfare and general land care.

Over the weekend we heard a number of presentations, given by speakers from a variety of backgrounds. Most of the presentations addressed the politico-economic origins of the difficulties we are facing regarding the production of food, and explored in different ways the culture which

gave rise to the unsustainability of the current situation. Karl Marx was quoted more than once, not for the solutions he proposed, but for having identified issues which are still with us. Many speakers addressed epistemological issues, and education as a central need for correct action was mentioned often too. In spite of the critical tone of most of the presentations, they all, without exception, offered a vision for a way forward.

One of the main themes to emerge, is that a shift in consciousness is necessary, informed by a greater focus on understanding. **Prof. Henryk Skolimowski**, Prof of Philosophy and Chair of Eco-Philosophy at the University of Lodz pointed out that 150 years ago the interpretation of the world undertaken by philosophy intended to create heaven on earth. In our effort to achieve this we have become so industrious that we have tipped the balance and are now creating hell on earth. To redress the balance, a whole new epistemological approach is required in which it is recognised that ecology is more than just environmental protection; it is a vision rooted in spirituality. Other speakers endorsed this view: **Heiner Benking** suggested that harmonisation, the aim embodied in the title of the conference, required us to step out of one's point of view to examine an issue, and make an effort to understand what unites different positions, rather than what divides them and **Prof. Chris Muth** mentioned the need not only for good knowledge, but also for good action.

The politico-economic system which gave rise to this current situation came under scrutiny by various speakers and for **Prof. Johannes Heinrichs** the ecological problems lie ultimately in the nature of Western democracy. He made the point, which has struck

me personally so often, that because Western societies depend structurally on economics, our kind of democracy is not based on human rights and values, but on stock markets. The activities of large corporations, whose *raison d'être* is to bring in ever higher profits to fulfil the expectations of their shareholders, frequently sacrifice ethical and moral values in exchange for the ever greater pressure to increase their market share. Many of those large corporations are involved in the production of food.

Speaking about the politics of food, **Charla Devereux** gave us the shocking example - Monsanto, who developed a 'terminator' gene in seeds of plants resistant to pests. Whereas normally farmers keep seeds from one crop to start the next, the sterility of Monsanto's seeds ensures that farmers need to come back to them for new supplies.



Although it is true that Monsanto have put a halt on this technology, the fact that such a major player can even think along these lines betrays values which are patently morally compromised. This theme was taken further by **David Lorimer**, who referred to Karl Marx's insight that the capitalist system runs counter to natural agriculture because profits are privatised whereas environmental, health and social costs are socialised. If this was a pertinent consideration then, how much more so today! We were also reminded

that many scientists are funded by these large corporations and are therefore unlikely to be independent, with everything that this may entail! Another depressing consequence of the system is that maximizing profits will typically mean below the poverty line level of wages to workers in export industries in developing countries, animals forced to produce ever more per individual irrespective of their suffering, the depletion of soil due to lack of regeneration, pollution by fertilisers and pesticides etc.

In our materialistic world we have lost the respect for Nature. This was underlined most clearly by two speakers intimately involved in land husbandry: **Prof Franz-Theo Gottwald** and **Dr. Stephan Krall**. Although Franz-Theo comes from a perspective of abundance and Stephan from one of scarcity, both identified the same problems and behind their diverse worldview, their solutions were similar. Franz-Theo proposes that as soon as we understand that the land can produce enough for everyone, we can find the solutions. Stephan on the other hand provided us with statistics showing the unsustainability of the situation, for instance the relentless growth in population on the one hand and limited arable land in the world on the other. (One of the consequences, which I heard for the first time, is the policy of 'land grabbing' by which countries - China and South Korea for instance - are buying large swathes of land in Africa to produce food to be shipped back to their country!) Being very familiar with those problems which are central to their professional lives, both speakers agreed that the solution must come from a worldwide change of attitude.

Both speakers pointed to the need to minimize the consumption of meat and dairy produce, as this large scale industry is totally unsustainable in a whole range of ways, from the use of land to grow cattle food, to the vast use of water – now already a scarce resource. Both speakers also pointed to the need to bring production and consumption geographically closer together, minimising transportation costs, and both agreed that a more respectful treatment of the land, to include the soil, crops, natural resources is important, an aspect in which the Schweisfurth Foundation of Prof. Gottwald is deeply involved. Other speakers referred to these aspects also and Stephan pointed out that much of the way forward is within the area of politics indicating that we, the ordinary people have power. This point was also made by Charla who reminded us that Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* led directly to the banning of DDT.

A shift in consciousness is clearly necessary to reconnect us to spiritual values that inform us as human beings. This was evident in the distant past when cultures invested the land with meaning, and as **Paul Devereux** said, the land was the 'living book in which myths are inscribed'. Developing this theme Paul showed pictures of simulacra, landscapes of recognisable shapes in Nature, which were seen as sacred. The idea of course is not to revert to the past, but to find values congruent with the present to reconnect us with our environment.

Many of our values in the West come from the Bible and **Johannis Heimrath**, suggested that the New Renaissance must endeavour to follow in the same steps of the Enlightenment which freed us from superstition. He wants religions to examine their texts and identify statements that continue to foster superstitions and teachings which are unsustainable in the 21st century. We must furthermore become aware that this hubristic attitude and the culture of greed in which we live is rooted in our shadow side, and **Matthias Ruff** suggested that work with the personal as well as the collective shadow must be part of any model of right action designed to take us forward towards a more feasible future.



Other speakers gave very interesting presentations, **Dr. Marina Wilhelm**, a linguist suggested that understanding etymology will help us connect at a deeper level with the original meaning of words and consequently with the spiritual principle which gave rise to those words. **Stephan Otto** promoted evolutionary management, suggesting that companies follow a model which parallels what we know of evolution and **Dr. Leszek Sosnowski** explained the role Descartes in the principles towards which Western society bows. From **Romila Santosh** we heard about the philosophy of Ayurveda in relation to health and living, **Dr. Ove Sviden** told us about the importance of peace for Sweden, and his personal commitment to this principle and **Prof. Ed Sarath** pointed out that the arts also have a role in bringing about a more conscientious future, and that education must be in the forefront of any proposal for the way forward.



Ed also delighted us with some jazz on Friday, and again on Saturday evening, when we were the guests of Franz-Theo who hosted a delightful dinner at an organic restaurant. Berlin was an excellent venue, not least because it stands as a symbol of the defeat of communism and the victory of democracy. On this, its 20th anniversary though, we were forced to look at the other side of the coin, and realise that the same system which brought freedom, wealth and affluence to so many, is also indicted with bringing many more people catastrophically close to ill health and even death, as well as ruining the soil and inflicting suffering on animals and so on. And to cap this picture of gloom, as Stephan Krall reminded us, the even sadder reality is that the affluent nations of the north are likely to suffer much less with climate change than the already impoverished nations of the south. This is morally unacceptable!

The conference portrayed the current situation with all its challenges and concerns. It is clear that only when we realise exactly where we are will it be possible to decide where we want to go - then a change of attitude becomes plausible. Different solutions have been proposed and although a change of attitude at corporate level is imperative, it is at personal level that the real power lies in bringing about the critical mass necessary for the values of the New Renaissance to take hold. Green shoots of this shift of consciousness can be seen in various ways, not least in the fact that this conference was one of many taking place around the world looking at different aspects of the current reality. This feels positive and empowering.



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Science and Imagination SMN Annual Gathering

3rd - 5th July 2009 - Lindors Country House Hotel

Max Payne



The AGM took place in the idyllic surroundings of the Forest of Dean during an interval of fine sunny weather. It all added to an enjoyable week-end. Proceedings opened on the Friday with a challenging exercise in deconstruction delivered with oratorical brilliance by **Lance Butler**. Using the linguistic philosophy of Derrida he dissolved away the certainties that many members of the SMN might hold dear, and ended in a state of total nihilism which he equated with the transcendental negativity to which Zen Buddhism aspires. The talk aroused the most enjoyable controversy which continued until late in the evening.

On Saturday **Marilyn Monk** gave a

fascinating insight into the connection between mind and body. The DNA of the genome is the hardware which determines the workings of the body. But the genes can be switched on or off by chemical agents that are the epigenetic program. In turn there is evidence to suggest that this epigenetic program can be affected by emotional and environmental factors. In this way there is a path way from the inner subjective aspect of mind to the outer objective expression of the body. Not only has this implications for prophylactic medicine, but it suggests a new neo-Lamarckian interpretation of biological evolution. **Keith Beasley** followed with an exploration of meditation techniques. He advocated

a discipline of active visualisation, in contrast to one pointed concentration. Unlike those who merely talk, he put his insights to a practical test. His audience were invited to undertake the two meditations there and then, and afterwards report their results. Exactly half the meeting agreed with him.

Iain McGilchrist followed with *The Divided Brain & the Making of the Western World*. He examined the neurological paradox that the frontal cortex of the brain is divided into a right and left hemisphere, and yet it has a network of connections between the two. Functions are not crudely divided between the hemispheres, both can carry out the dominant functions



folk song by Bernard Harrer. The Network magic worked again.

After the relaxed delight of the Saturday evening, Sunday morning was the time for the serious work of the AGM. **Chris Lyons** explained how the SMN had the British disease. Like the government, and too many of the people, the Network was spending more money than it was getting in. Chairman **John Clarke** led the AGM into a serious discussion about what we were to do about it. As a background the AGM was given a paper on Crisis as Opportunity: Seizing the moment for a New Global Renaissance. Discussion in groups produced many thoughtful suggestions for the Board to follow up. These included the Chairman's project to make a network of networks so that the SMN could act as a condensing seed group to bring together all the other groups seeking a new paradigm for the 21st century. On the other hand there were many suggestions for bottom-up activity including the resolution that each SMN member should strive to recruit a new extra member. However perhaps the most important conclusion was the unanimous agreement that we were not going to allow any financial blip to get in the way of the dynamic progress of the SMN.

Max Payne is a Vice-President of the Network and is seen second from the right below, with Peter Fenwick and John Clarke in the foreground..

of the other, yet there is a subtle difference in the separate operation of the hemispheres which may determine the balance of a personality, and indeed of a whole civilisation. The right hemisphere is the intuitive synthetic unifier, and the left hemisphere is the rational analytic operator. Both are necessary, and both hemispheres control all functions, but the right balance is when the right hemisphere is the master. Our Western civilisation suffers from an excessive dominance by the left hemisphere.

After lunch the Gathering adjourned to a contemplative walk around the picturesque ruins of Tintern Abbey to be followed by an evocative reading of Wordsworth's poem. With a rapid switch from the right to the left hemisphere **Keith Wakelam** ended the formal proceedings with a sophisticated analysis of the use in modern physics of imaginary numbers (using i the square root of -1). He suggested that they were used as a device to conceal the possibilities of alternative non standard views of physical reality such as Bohm's hidden variable or dark matter.

In the interval before Saturday dinner **Furug Neyzi** demonstrated her researches into the aura. As a psychic she would claim to see an individual's aura, and she was anxious to investigate electronic apparatus which gave coloured pictures of chakras and auras on a monitor. The aim was to see if there was any correlation. Many attendees collaborated, and it was

thought that the question was worthy of further investigation.

In past years the opening slot in the evening entertainment has been taken by Di Clift with guitar and song. In Di's absence Parmita opened the proceedings with a lovely rendering of a Bengali song by Tagore. This followed by songs from Keith Wakelam and Chris Lyons, jokes from Jacqui Nielsen, recorder pieces by Clement Jewitt, a reading of one of her own poems by Diana Williams, a comic reading by David Lorimer, and a music quiz arranged by John Clarke. The evening was rounded off by a Styrian





Towards an Understanding of the Primacy of Consciousness

James Le Fanu

Towards' was very much the operant word in this well attended conference at the School of Economic Science on 11th October. For, while the gist of the supposition of 'The Primacy of Consciousness' can be understood in juxtaposition to the many intellectual and philosophical difficulties posed by its antithesis 'The Primacy of Existence' (or Matter), the term 'consciousness' itself proved rather too elastic, and its non-materiality too elusive, to defy any satisfactory conclusion.

Thus the concept of consciousness was variously equated, depending on its context, with the grand philosophical position that Mind precedes Matter associated in the Western tradition with Plato and the German transcendentalists and in Hindu spiritual writings the Upanishads with Atman ('that which shines') as the cause of everything exists. At other times consciousness was deployed in the (relatively) more restricted sense of the sense of

'awareness' or subjective experience whose relationship to the material brain the Australian philosopher David Chalmers has described (without understatement) as 'the hard problem'. Still the proposition of 'the primacy of consciousness' in either context could scarcely be more relevant in the light of the systematic inability of neuroscience over the past twenty years to provide an adequate explanation of the human experience.

Professor Dennis Blejer, an engineering physicist associated with the School of Practical Philosophy and Meditation in Boston in an ambitious opening contribution sought to reconcile the intellectual presuppositions of Western science with the mystical Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedanta on the grounds that both involved a search for truth based on deep insight or observations integrated through the power of reason. The paradox here, Professor Blejer argued, is that the laws of nature, though inferred through the methodology of science, are themselves not amenable to scientific verification. They are rather 'axiomatic' in the sense that they are of eternal validity. This applies most obviously to Euclid's laws of geometry but also Newton's laws of motion, the laws of thermodynamics, electromagnetism, relativity theory and quantum mechanics. There is, he suggested, a clear parallel here with consciousness (in the sense of subjective awareness) that is similarly axiomatic in that it is a primary fact of human experience, yet not susceptible to scientific verification.

The implications of this parallelism are certainly intriguing but, more contentiously perhaps, Professor Blejer then went on to claim that the much broader concept of consciousness in Hindu philosophy that equates it with Brahman ('Brahman is real, the world is an illusion, the self is not different from the Brahman') might similarly be considered axiomatic.



Graham Dunstan Martin in full flow



The anti-materialist philosopher **Graham Dunstan Martin**, author of *Does it Matter* and *Living with Purpose* in his contribution 'The Case for Mind as the Maker of the Universe: a philosophical perspective' approached the issue of the primacy of consciousness from a rather different, if perhaps more readily accessible, perspective. He first drew attention to the fragility and intellectual inconsistencies of materialist explanations of consciousness. This is most apparent in its inability to account for the raw sensory material of conscious experience, or qualia as perceived through the senses. 'There is an absolute gulf between the electrochemical message and the subjective experience,' he argued, 'once something passes from the world of physical processes over the threshold of consciousness, [the scientists'] physical instruments fall silent.'

This obviously leads to the question of the origin of 'consciousness' and the inadequacy of having to suppose it must have evolved from unconscious (non purposive) matter. It is just as probable that it did not so evolve (at least in the sense that evolution is commonly interpreted) but rather that consciousness is the fundamental property of the universe, so fundamental indeed that the universe could as readily have been created by consciousness.

The evidence for this proposition is in the first instance logical, in the sense that the universe must have had a beginning thus requiring it to have been brought into existence by some non material force. Martin also claimed it can be inferred empirically from the experience of mystics of both Eastern and Western traditions. From them we learn 'the universe is a vast living unity, with which our consciousness is linked at a deep level. This Whole is ineffable: it is utterly beyond normal comprehension; it possesses power, timelessness, bliss, knowledge and benevolence.'

The third main speaker, **Dr Elisabet Sahtouris**, prolific author and member of the World Wisdom Council, described how though trained as a scientist she became disillusioned with the immensely influential Darwinian perspective that we inhabit a non-living universe from which 'by some miracle' life emerged from non-life, intelligence from non-intelligence. The reverse, she maintains, is the case. We inhabit a living universe where consciousness is not, as commonly portrayed, a late emergent product of materialist evolution but its exact opposite. This in turn has profound implications for the prevailing materialist version of biology where rather we should suppose that 'our cells know what they are doing and the genome is intelligent'.

There was a rather more critical tone to the prepared five minute contribution 'from the floor' of the afternoon session. David Lawton from Manchester, while conceding that consciousness is not merely a secondary attribute of highly evolved creatures, took issue with the reasoning behind two assumptions that are often cited in favour of its primacy. The first is the 'filter' hypothesis of brain functioning to account for subjective experience as opposed to the conventional 'generative' model with the supposition it acts as a 'transmission device' picking up the messages from consciousness and translating them into individual's perceptions. Next he challenged the claim that the insights from mystical traditions offer empirical support for

the primacy of consciousness. 'They may affirm the experiential nature of the world, but none assert that experience, let alone consciousness, is itself the fundamental reality.'

Tony Morris posed the substantial question that if, as he put it, consciousness is so 'great', why is there no evidence of it elsewhere in the universe – 'why has it only emerged within this type of bipeds on a little planet on the edge of a minor galaxy?' Rather, he claimed, we invented the notion of consciousness to replace God, which serves the same purpose being an exercise in 'wishful thinking', a mental defence against knowledge or our own mortality.

The meeting closed with a vigorous discussion between speakers and participants with yet more reflections on why, no matter how persuasive the arguments for the primacy of consciousness, it is difficult to establish what this might entail without lapsing into ineffective or inconsequential speculation. Graham Martin reminded the conference 'you will never find consciousness, because consciousness is doing the looking.'

*Dr. James Le Fanu combines practice as a family doctor in South London with writing a twice weekly column for the Daily Telegraph. His books include **The Rise and Fall of Modern Medicine** that won the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and, published this year, **Why Us?: How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves** ('quite wonderfully refreshing' – A N Wilson).*

