

Report - Consciousness and Brain

German Group Meeting

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Our autumn-meeting took place in December 2000 at a symbolic venue called „Hexentanzplatz" in the low mountain range of the Harz in the northern part of Germany. Hexentanzplatz means witches dance-floor. There is a legend that at this place on the top of a low mountain an old witch used to live, her name was Watelinde, and witches often met there to dance with her and do other mystical things. Today there is a hotel and the place is very popular.

We used the history of the place as introduction into the theme of our meeting: Consciousness and Brain. Witches used to live in two worlds, the one we all agree upon and another individual and transcendent one which is beyond common understanding. Consciousness as well is crossing borders e.g. the border of the physical body. Consciousness has this kind of dualism between experience and cognition, self and universe. That is the reason why consciousness is not easy tangible. The attempt to approach consciousness on a pure physical basis meets exactly these borders. Eccles shows this dilemma in his book "Evolution of the Brain: Creation of the Self" when he tried on 380 pages a materialistic explanation of what consciousness is in order to explain then on the last two pages that the only way he can imagine consciousness is as supra-natural and implanted by god into the foetus.

This dilemma was as well reflected in our meeting. The attempt to explain consciousness on a physical and materialistic way - even if it is not reductionism - meets always borders. On the other hand the classical dualistic approach like introduced by Descartes is as well unsatisfactory. Many of the things happening in our brain can be explained specially if quantum physics is used with its open and holistic approach. But what about the phenomena of near-death experience if consciousness is far away from the physical body? And what about reincarnation and how could we explain our free will (if we have one)?

Another difficulty was tackled in a presentation and discussion about consciousness in living beings. Is consciousness bound to certain structures like the complex brain? This for example is found only in animals and not in the kingdoms of monera, protocista, fungi and plants. Moreover in animals a complex brain is only existing in some few groups as cuttle fish (Cephalopoda) and vertebrates. And even in vertebrates consciousness is proven only in warm blooded animals as birds and mammals. That is only a minute group compared to all living beings. But what about all the others? How are they in a position to separate themselves from the quantum continuum?

Life is defined as something which draws a line between itself and the rest of the world. In other words life is an open system but autopoietic to define itself as a system. And this delimitation must be - spoken in quantum physical words - the collapse of the wave function of the quantum continuum. And for that collapse, an observer is the prerequisite. But can an amoeba be an observer? And if not how can it be separated from the world - or is it only us who separate it as we are observers?

All these questions has been intensively discussed but obviously not solved. Consciousness is a complex phenomena and obviously not only existing or not existing. It has probably appeared in the evolution as a gradual thing until its highest form as self-consciousness. Or is consciousness identical with a multi-cosmos and living beings are only sensational organs, as pointed out in one presentation?

Many questions remained open and will definitely be followed up in future meetings. But one thing was unanimously clear: we are all happy to have a self-consciousness cause it enables us to hold such exciting meetings.

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