

Graham Horswell

## *Nature & Human Nature*

*13th Annual Conference of the Consciousness & Experiential Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society at St Anne's, Oxford, 2010*

'Mind is part of nature, not apart from it' was, according to the programme, the starting point for this year's annual conference of the Consciousness and Experiential Psychology section of the British Psychological Society. The conference organizers (John Pickering and Susan Stuart, ably assisted by Gethin Hughes, Emma Crofton, and Emma Shackle on behalf of Oxford University) had drawn together a collection of contributors whose interests include ecology, eco-psychology, neuroscience, eastern traditions, neuropsychiatry, philosophy, art, architecture, and artificial intelligence (amongst others). For this reviewer, such a diverse gathering gave a wonderful air of the multidisciplinary nature of consciousness studies in modern times, and fostered an atmosphere of good-natured debate throughout the weekend.

Apart from the keynote addresses, the conference was mainly structured in parallel sessions, which forced attendees to make some very tough decisions in terms of where to focus their attention. For my part, I decided to station myself arbitrarily in one room for each day in the hope that I came across some interesting talks that I might otherwise have passed up — and this was certainly the case. So what follows is not a blow-by-blow account of the whole conference, nor a comprehensive synopsis of individual talks, but one person's general experience of the weekend. I'll take the opportunity now to apologise to those who presented that I didn't get to listen to, or that I fail to

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mention herein, but unfortunately, physics being what it is, I am as yet unable to be in two places at once.

Let's start with the Keynote Speakers — a trio of leading lights in their respective fields:

First up was Peter Fenwick, who took the audience through a fascinating discussion of his research into NDEs, deathbed coincidences, and other phenomena related to human death. It was a great treat to hear a respected neuropsychiatrist candidly discuss his interest in such 'controversial' ideas, and the evidence he has gathered — impressive by its sheer magnitude — was persuasively presented.

Professor Fenwick posits a possible five-dimensional reality to explain phenomena related to dying, drawing on various ideas from the study of quantum mechanics. He also highlighted the possibility of 'fields' of consciousness — similar, as far as I could gather, to Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphogenetic fields (another controversial theory) — but his preference was clearly towards the former explanation. His latest book, *The Art of Dying* (co-authored with his wife Elizabeth), draws together his evidence and ideas, and if the book is as entertaining and thought-provoking as his presentation, I can thoroughly recommend picking up a copy! He has an infectious enthusiasm for his research, hampered only by the comparative lack of funding available for investigations into death-related phenomena. One can only hope that more professionals of Professor Fenwick's standing lend their support to such endeavours in future.

On Saturday afternoon came David Abram, described in the conference programme as a 'cultural ecologist, philosopher, and performance artist' (and from what I gather, these are only some of the many strings to his bow). His talk focused on climate and consciousness, and how nature and landscape directly affect our feelings, emotions, and awareness. The speech was playful and poetic, but don't let that fool you into thinking that important issues were not being discussed — the themes addressed directly relate to some of the most pressing problems we face as a species.

Dr Abram highlighted Gaia theory (as proposed by James Lovelock) — the concept that the biosphere has a rudimentary agency; it is a subject as well as an object. His own ideas suggest that 'each land has its own psyche', each landscape directly influences its inhabitants, and thus one's state of awareness changes as one moves from one place to the next. Climate has a similar effect — changing individuals' moods, emotions, disposition, etc. — and Dr Abram proposes (implores) that, as a species, we need to reconnect with nature rather than trying to dominate it.

Finally, on Sunday morning we were treated to an enigmatic discussion of the eastern traditions from Matthijs Cornelisen. What this man doesn't know about traditional Indian psychology simply isn't worth knowing, and he spent the morning indulging us with a thoroughly coherent account of 'The' Indian view (i.e. the common themes running through Indian traditions, the 'broad consensus' of the many views available).

Firstly, Dr Cornelisen described how, in the Indian traditions, consciousness is *primary*, it does not 'arise' from brain function, or from anything else, it simply *is*. Consciousness is transcendent, cosmic, and immanent. It exists not only in humans, but in everything — we are just one manifestation of it (i.e. consciousness exists in many modes, one of them mind).

According to 'The' Indian view, the ordinary waking state of humans is enmeshed in the workings of the mind (or brain), so we (westerners) tend to equate consciousness with the brain as an organ, but there are many different types of consciousness (such as the habits of the form and function of matter) which pervade nature as a whole. So the universe remains in perfect balance because consciousness is in everything, and 'everything must know everything in order to behave in the correct way'.

As if these three talks weren't enough to be thinking about over the course of a weekend, conference delegates were also exposed to numerous thought-provoking discussions from other contributors:

Richard Stevens (one of the founding members of the CEP section, I believe) introduced us to his 'Trimodal Theory' of human nature. This theory suggests that we, as humans, have three 'modes' or 'bases' underlying human action — biological, symbolic, and reflexive — and that, potentially, mankind's 'recent' dissociation from the natural world could be explained as an imbalance between these 'modes'. The paper provided a fresh approach to man's apparent 'need' to command his environment, and how best to address the problems that derive from this propensity.

Adam Melinn talked about 'Consciousness in Objects and Animals'. This session was an introduction to panpsychism (which was clearly distinguished from animism or monism), and hinged on the idea that 'objects, as well as animals, may have memories or some type of conscious narrative attached to their existence as individual things'. For example, and to paraphrase Nagel's famous article, Adam wondered 'what is like to be a baseball bat?' He focused on the idea that all objects have the ability to store information/'memories' about past events, and that in a way this information is a form of

communication, and as such can be considered, on some level, to be a form of consciousness.

To give you an idea of the good-natured debates at the conference, in the Q&A session at the end of this presentation, one listener argued that there is a need to specify that there is a difference between *storing* information and *using* information — it could be argued that consciousness is the *use* of information rather than just the ability to store it. It is only because we (humans) have the capabilities to interpret the ‘memories’ held by objects, that the possibility of objects containing consciousness can even arise. Unfortunately, the session time out before this debate could really be fully concluded...

Paul Stevens spoke lucidly about ecopsychology. The view presented in this talk relates to the concept that we are integral to the environment, not separate from it (echoing the thoughts of David Abram). ‘We are made of our environment,’ Paul stated. ‘The environment is not a scene through which we move, but the medium within which we are embedded.’ Paul’s presentation hinged on the idea of ‘embedment’ — the idea that ‘our inclusion in an environment is an essential part or characteristic of ourselves’ — and how we can potentially *use* this embedment to foster a more symbiotic relationship between nature and our individual selves. (As an aside, Paul presented a shocking statistic from the WHO: they suggest that depression will be the second biggest killer by 2020 — second to heart disease — so it seems obvious that we need to address issues of personal contentment and happiness sooner rather than later.)

Bryony Pierce’s talk, she stated, was more of an initial airing of an idea she has been developing — that of panabstractism (**not** panabstractionism as people apparently repeatedly think — refer to it incorrectly at your peril!) Bryony playfully asked if we really need another -ism, given the veritable plethora of confusing -isms that exist today. She argued that there is, however, room for one more — panabstractism: the idea that abstract relations are part of everything, and physical things cannot exist without abstract relations. Could consciousness arise from abstract relations and not straight out of physical matter (as physicalism would have us believe)? Bryony didn’t know, but she rightly suggests that this is a philosophically underdeveloped area of enquiry.

Rob Pepperell came at consciousness from a different angle still, claiming that mind creates the world we experience, and suggesting that there is powerful evidence and argument against a mind-independent reality. His talk focused on how art can be seen ‘to contribute to questions about mind, nature and existence’ — giving the

audience an insight into how artists ‘have explored many of the same essential problems as metaphysicians and scientists, even if they have done so by different means and with different outcomes.’ Rob highlighted some of the works by Cézanne, Braque, etc. and interspersed his own insights with direct quotes from the artists themselves as to how they experienced reality.

In his talk, Peter Wyss argued that the notion of ‘emergence’ fails to hold any explanatory power. He asked, ‘do we really explain anything when we say that something emerges from something else?’ This type of question is likely to be received coolly (at best) by theoreticians that claim that consciousness will eventually be explained in terms of underlying neurological processes, but Peter was persuasive in his arguments: for example (and taken from the abstract of the talk), ‘when we claim that mind emerges from matter, we mean to say that mind connects to matter in an unpredictable way. Hence, we express not only our confidence that mind emerges from matter, but also our ignorance about how this is possible.’ As such is the case, Peter claimed, we should stop using the term emergence as some sort of explanation of the phenomenon of consciousness. Rather, we should accept that consciousness appears to be a thing in itself — i.e. ‘emergents are entities that are ontologically (or existentially) dependent on their bases, yet have a distinctive and independent identity as being of a new kind.’

As mentioned above, the presentations briefly described here make up only a fraction of what was on offer throughout the weekend. Other talks that I attended, but that space limits me from discussing in detail, included Aaron Sloman’s discussion of virtual machines and whether Darwinian evolution can be successfully extrapolated to explain consciousness (or ‘putting ghosts into machines’); Tristan Moyles’ talk on conceptualism and animal perception; James Buchanan’s presentation on Merleau-Ponty and object transcendence; Alex South on habit and Merleau-Ponty; Joulia Smortchkova’s discussion of mental pointing/demonstration; Alfredo Martinez on Antonio Damasio’s work on the mind–body problem; and Michael Braund’s discussion of ecological psychology.

Even this list is not exhaustive — there were numerous other sessions that I simply could not attend, all of which would undoubtedly have been as thought-provoking as the others. Finally, there were also a number of workshops (of which I only made it to Keith Beasley’s on Reiki healing), and these seemed to go down extremely well with the other delegates I spoke to throughout the conference.

All in all, the conference was jam-packed and highly successful. The theme was extremely well-received by everyone in attendance, and it was brilliantly organized. I can thoroughly recommend attendance at future events, especially if you're new to the conferences (as I am), because you will be warmly welcomed by a close-knit community of likeminded individuals.