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Why Consciousness Conferences Are Not Really Getting Us Anywhere

A Stone-Age Anthropologist Explains

In 1998 I asked my friend Tjiniman, who is a stone-age hunter, to give us his non-western perspective on 'Tucson III' (Murinbata & Whitehead, 1998). Most people thought I just made Tjiniman up and the whole thing was intended as a joke, and he has spent the last two years worrying about this. Since then he has gained a modest BSc in Social Anthropology, though in my view the examiners failed to appreciate some of his less obvious insights, and he deserved a higher mark. He now has a better understanding of us white people and our ways, and this is his second attempt to make us see the truth. He did ask me to edit his text and take out any thing that white people might mistake for a joke, but in many cases he accused me of cutting the best bits and made me put them back in. I had to add the notes and references because Tjiniman thinks all ideas come from the ancestors and no one should claim credit for them — CW.

Tucson is set in a grand country, surrounded by desert and mountains, with much bush meat and other good things. There are wild pigs and black bear and everything the heart could wish for, but I soon learned that a man can not hunt in your country, for you have no women who know how to accept meat. When I begin my formal oration, they turn their backs and walk away most rudely, and when I offer them the choicest portions of kidney fat, they break into a run.

You people know that incest is wrong, but you have forgotten why it is wrong. It is wrong for the same reason that a hunter can not eat his own kill, for all animals were human once (e.g. Overing Kaplan, 1975), and incest too is cannibalism, and if we all eat our own blood there will be nothing left to exchange, neither partners in marriage nor meat (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Knight, 1991), and exchange is the basis of all human societies (Mauss, 1925). Even warfare and revenge exchange like for like, and no warrior can live without prowess and fame.

Tucson is a great city of walls and concrete and motor cars. There are broad walkways with no people walking in them and public spaces with no children playing. There is no one to read the notices, which say 'No skateboarding'. Some white anthropologists have described the way I think as primitive, emotional, concrete-operational, primary process, child-like, or pre-logical (for example, Boas, 1911;

Lévy-Bruhl, 1926; Taylor, 1963; Hallpike, 1979). But I have now studied your science and found words to describe the way you think, which is culturally-induced secondary autism. You value object intelligence over social intelligence and technology over the arts; you teach your children the three Rs much too young when they should be playing and learning to be conscious and you do not believe anything you can not see, touch, or measure. Even your old men dress up like John Lennon because they don't know who they really are.

Some of you laughed when I described 'Tucson III' as a ritual, but I now know that a scientific conference is the exact opposite of a ritual, for ritual aims to carry everyone back to the beginnings of time and the truth of all things (Eliade, 1949) but science aims at what you call 'progress', which as I understand it means to get further and further away from the truth. But it must eventually follow a great circle back to the beginning again so I do not know why you white people have to take this long and laborious detour.

Among my own people no one laughs at any one who seems to be ignorant or foolish but only at those who are conceited, or who try to take power that is not given to them by others (Boehm, 1993; Knauff, 1991; Erdal & Whiten, 1994). Those are the ones who are truly foolish because we can not live except through each other. That is what you white people have forgotten and why you have such antisocial customs. You do not exchange tokens of humanity when you meet such as arm pit sweat and you sell food through automats¹ which denies humanity twice over. But what shocked me most was the iron bedstead in my hotel, which forced me to sleep in the car park. Since I for one have no wish to lose my soul and be a zombie, I never sleep near anything magnetic.

I could prove my point with any number of presentations at Tucson 2000. On the one hand you have the cognitive and neuroscience camp, who mainly think that people are self-sufficient computing machines, and on the other you have the phenomenologists and Buddhists, who also think consciousness is private even though Gopnik and Meltzoff (1994) have shown that it is social, and who believe they can discover 'pure consciousness' without third-person reflectivity (Mead, 1934). You must have noticed that when any one talks about 'pure this' or 'pure that' they are always men, or women talking men's language, and what they are really talking about is menstruation. Now I confess my own people are guilty of a lie, for in our secret men's societies we justify our dominion over women on the grounds that men are better women than women are.² That is, we menstruate properly in synchrony through subincision of the penis (Knight, 1991) and this is purity as opposed to the menstruation of women which is disgusting and takes place in isolation huts. We isolate them like this because if we did not they would start to menstruate properly again and get back all the sacred flutes and ritual power which were originally theirs (cf. for example, Strathern, 1988). That is why women's blood is both polluting and sacred as well as the blood of kinship, cannibalism, Christian communion, or meat you have killed your self (Knight *et al.*, 1995).

No anthropologist would discuss anything out of its social context and anthropologists know that all the 'higher religions' such as Buddhism and phenomenology arose

[1] Based on a Kwakiutl informant of Franz Boas, cited in Lévi-Strauss (1967, p. 44)

[2] Tjiniman borrowed this phrase from Lionel Simms, Dept. of Sociology, University of East London.

with the city state and early nation states when men were not just dominating women but other men as well. Even shamanism, because it ended the days when everyone passed freely between the worlds, hides a good deal of inequity. Hindu cosmology, out of which came Buddhist meditation practice, is a grand justification of the caste system, which turns men into slaves and women into property even of their own sons, and allows Big Men to pretend they can create themselves without owing anything to their Mothers. They deny consciousness to the Mother of us all with the principle of *Prakriti* (Ramakrishna Rao, 1998) and insult their Mothers with the doctrine of *Maya* which claims that Mother Earth Herself is a delusion. Alchemists in Europe and the Middle East, following in those same misogynistic footsteps, tried to make babies without Mothers by masturbating into baby-shaped alembics (Needham, 1980). Western science has a misanthropic origin too — one group of men, Enlightenment scientists, seizing the power to dominate everything from another group of men, the hierarchy of the Christian Church (Jordanova, 1980).

So Christof Koch³ can point out that certain processes in the brain are conscious and certain others are not, and fail to see what this tells us. Namely, that if you have a brain process which is of no potential interest to any one except you it can not be conscious. As Milner (1998) and Goodale (1998) noted during ‘Tucson III’, egocentric vision is unconscious, and only the kind which is useful to us all is conscious.

Kevin O’Regan⁴ gave a most interesting demonstration of change-blindness which revealed how unconscious we are of visual changes which are without social meaning. But from this he drew the inference that visual consciousness is itself a grand illusion. In fact, ‘grand illusionism’ was the only significant new trend at Tucson 2000. When people start denying everything, it is a sure sign that they are not really getting anywhere. The theory of *Maya* was an early example of grand illusionism, and look what a cover-up that was. So what is the point of trying to understand consciousness if you’re not? In fact, several times I found myself wondering if *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was really a documentary and all the people talking about consciousness are just trying to hide the fact that they’ve been body-snatched.

The most interesting thing I learned at ‘Tucson 2000’ is that schizophrenics can tickle themselves.⁵ In contrast, I guess that autistic people cannot be tickled at all. Autistics do not recognize the agency of others, whereas schizophrenics are drowned in otherness, being other even to themselves. Doesn’t that tell you what the function of consciousness is? Several speakers tried to guess the answer to this question using what passes for common sense amongst westerners: making decisions, planning, and all those other egocentric things. But autistic people, who are trapped in egocentrism, lack reflective access to their memories and can not plan for the future either (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1994), so awareness does not become useful until it becomes socially reflective, and it can not become reflective unless it already exists, so it could not have evolved in a Darwinian manner could it? That’s a problem for you Tucsonites but not for the five thousand other cultural groups in the world who take the normal view that awareness was there from the beginning.

[3] In the end-of-conference panel discussion.

[4] J.K. O’Regan, ‘Change Blindness and the Visual World as an Outside Memory’ (Abstract 221).

[5] C. Frith, ‘The Control of Action and the Experience of Agency’ (Abstract 130).

I must say I enjoyed the ayahuasca talks⁶ because ayahuasca is egalitarian. It is subversive like the Internet, because it makes knowledge available to us all and not just privileged experts like shamans, academics, and secret government agents. But apart from that I did not see the progress that science is supposed to achieve. If conferences are really about progress then you would expect all the people who gave plenaries last time to give plenaries this time to show how much progress they have made. The only ones I recognized were Vittorio Gallese⁷ and Stephen LaBerge,⁸ but despite the importance of social mirroring and learning through dreams, they got stuck in concurrent sessions where not every one could get to hear them. So apart from ayahuasca and schizophrenics tickling themselves, all we got in the plenaries was grand illusionism, first person perspectives, Buddhism, and such-like, which are pretty much all the same thing.

Two years ago I suggested that if you carry on with transcendentalism and the re-enchantment of science you might bring the Rainbow Snake back to life,⁹ but I thought I made it clear that you can not do this without a lot more social performance such as the Zombie Blues or Michael Winkelman and Barbara Crowe's shamanic drumming workshop. I suppose it is a step in the right direction that cognitive scientists have started talking about embodiment and intentionality¹⁰ but all they are giving us so far is the autistic body, the body that does not know what song and dance are for, that can not engage in make-believe, take part in a sacred ritual, or understand Little Red Riding Hood and Snow White. There was no mention of social mirroring *performance* apart from one paper by my friend Charles¹¹ and even he was just another talking head.

Since learning that 'Tucson III' was not a ritual I have been to your churches and they are mostly about talking heads too, and no one crosses between the worlds there either, so I began wondering what is your truth that you keep going back to. Then I realized that you have private rituals which you do in your homes and these are about television gun fights and recreational drugs. But instead of making your drugs sacred as we do you criminalize them so they are all about gun fights too. In fact, wherever anyone tries to cross between worlds you have a gun fight, so it seems you want to keep every one stuck inside their heads and never experience truth like us real human beings.

One night in the car park the black bear came and took me out of my body. I was drawn up to the sky by a thread until I came face to face with God. God said 'Oh, it's you again,' and I said 'You know why I am here.' Then God put down his hunting gun and took off his hat (cf. Katz, 1982), which I have never seen him do before, and

[6] L.E. Luna, 'The Varieties of the Ayahuasca Experience: A Multi-Cultural Phenomenological Exploration' (Abstract 372); B. Shanon, 'The Cognitive-Psychological Study of Ayahuasca' (Abstract 370).

[7] V. Gallese, 'The Intentional Brain: Agency and Motor Representation' (Abstract 166).

[8] S. LaBerge, 'Smooth Tracking Eye-Movements Discriminate both Dreaming and Perception from Imagination' (Abstract 252).

[9] There are rainbow snake myths throughout Australia, Africa, and South America. The rainbow is a bridge between heaven and earth, and since snakes shed their skins, they represent death and rebirth, or the passage between the worlds (Eliade, 1951).

[10] Reviewed in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6, Nos. 11–12, 1999.

[11] C. Whitehead and R. Turner, 'Is Role-Play a Default State for Human Consciousness?' (Abstract 281).

invited me to sit with him. ‘Tell them to study the five thousand people,’ God said, ‘and then they will know how people think and behave in the real world, and what it is they really need to explain. But even this will not tell them every thing, because there are no more human beings who use their minds in the old way, in the days when people spoke the language of animals and knew no work, hunger, disease, or death. The best any one can do is study the people who do not read or write.’ We sat for a while and watched the beautiful game animals who roam around God’s ranch house in the sky. ‘Is there any thing else?’ I asked. ‘There is,’ said God, ‘but it will turn their ideas of time and space inside out and back to front, and they are not ready for that yet.’ So I have now told you every thing God told me to tell you.

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