And The Danube Runs Through It …’

Review of TSC 2007, Budapest, July 23–27

This was my first ‘Tucson-overseas’ conference, and I will begin by briefly comparing this series with the (to me) more familiar ASSC and Tucson conferences — several of which I have reviewed for JCS.

The Universe of Consciousness Conferences

With a long tradition of interest in full-spectrum consciousness issues, psychologists, philosophers, and a pharmacologist at the University of Arizona hosted a ‘one-time’ conference in 1994, under the title, ‘Toward a Science of Consciousness (‘TSC’)’, with some 300 registrants. It then developed into even-year ‘Tucson’ Conferences, with some 1000 in 1996 and about 700 per conference since; retaining the original conference’s title. Tucson conferences have had virtually every major (and minor) consciousness scientist and philosopher presenting, but seem best known for their additional coverage of the ‘sixties’ topics such as meditation, transpersonal psychology, psychoactive drugs, ‘pure consciousness’, panpsychism and parapsychology; plus a revival of early twentieth-century speculations on the possible role of quantum physics in producing consciousness.

The odd-year TSC conferences began right away in 1995 in Italy, followed by 1997 Denmark, 1999 Tokyo, 2001 Sweden, 2003 Prague, 2005 Copenhagen, and now 2007 in Budapest. The 2009 conference will be in Hong Kong. These draw close to 200 people. The University of Arizona Center for Consciousness Studies provides some funding
for these odd-year TSC conferences and helps with organization, advertisement, email lists, and the like. This journal (JCS) offers free advertising. The local organizers make major decisions and carry out the conference. There is consideration of establishing an affiliated European Center for Consciousness Studies in Salzburg, where the Quantum Mind Conference preceding this Budapest Conference was held.

The Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC) began as a membership organization with elected leaders in 1994, immediately after Tucson-1, in order to set up a second Tucson conference, but one more narrowly focused on mainstream consciousness science and philosophy. Conferences have been held every year since 1997, have alternated between Europe and North America, and will soon include Asian sites, beginning with Taiwan next year. These draw 300–400 people, including many who also attend Tucson. In contrast to both Tucson-related conferences, there is almost none of the ‘eastern’ or ‘quantum’ emphasis. Surprisingly, at Budapest I saw very few of the many folks with whom I have regularly hung around at Tucson and ASSC conferences.

Preliminary Remarks about this Conference

I have been told that many of the things that seemed different about this Budapest conference are due to the choices of the local organizers, George Kampis and crew, and the fact that much of the planning had to be done at the last minute. While, in the spirit of a NY Yankee baseball umpire, ‘I calls them like I sees them’, my tattered faux-Aussie hat is tipped to all those who take on the planning and running of off-campus conferences.

One of the most noticeable differences between the two larger ongoing conferences and this Budapest gathering is the fact that there were only 6 plenary addresses — generally at the beginning and end of each day — while other conferences have more and longer plenary sessions, with as many as 4 speakers. The paucity of plenary pontificators was made up for by a crush of concurrent concatenators. There were seven 2-hour-block concurrent sessions, scheduled in 3 rooms with from three to five 30-minute speakers in each. A poster session broadened the participation even more. The attendance was somewhere between the 154 who had paid by the opening session and the 190 who had registered. The balance of plenary and concurrent speakers allows me to summarize the former more briefly than usual in these reviews, using my unspent space and energy to point to some
interesting dynamics of those concurrent speakers I heard. As a responsible reviewer, I made a point to attend a mixture of concurrent sessions. As a compulsive reviewer, I only missed one talk of one concurrent session, subject to the local-space laws of pedestrian physics.

### Plenary and Some Concurrent Speeches

Those of us who coin such phrases as ‘it’s 8 of the one and 2/3 of a dozen of the other’ and ‘that’s like comparing cumquats and pomegranates’, do not like to report conferences in chronological order. (Maybe we ought to check with Penrose and Hameroff to see if there is some way that we can experience conferences in non-chronological order. But wait, maybe we do already!) In any case, I will combine plenary talks around basic themes, present gems from concurrent talks that relate to those themes, and intersperse tantalizing tidbits about the broader conference experience. In order to prevent undue reader vertigo, I will at least start with the beginning and end with the end.

Plenary speakers Kovacs, Stoerig, and Pribram told detailed stories of empirical work in which they had been involved. Pribram and Hameroff are both empiricists who deal with quantum and field theories of consciousness. Papineau and Brook are both philosophers who laid out clear conceptual frameworks for consciousness science. At the very end was a Plenary Round Table, with empiricists and conceptualists talking about academic programs in consciousness studies.

1. **Empirical presentations using pedestrian physics**

The first plenary speaker was **Ilona Kovacs**, a graduate of the host university (Budapest University of Technology and Economics) who is now back there. She gave a good, clear, presentation of her own involvements in neural correlates of visual awareness, gestalt perceptual maps, and stereoscopic vision. Stereograms (where each eye stares at slightly different arrays of dots until a 3-D picture jumps out) demonstrate that 3-D vision can arise without monocular cues. The bino/mono issue is also raised in binocular rivalry (where the two eyes are not able to blend their percepts), which might occur because of ‘eye competition suppression’ of a monocular image or because of ‘stimulus competition’ suppression of a coherent binocular image. Kovacs explored occipital, temporal, and parietal lobe connectivity, with reference to her Contour Integration Paradigm and studies in Biological Motion. One of her more intriguing findings is that biological motion detection seems to centre on the area above the inferior temporal cortex, in dynamic interaction between lower and higher
level areas. Such interaction is not just a matter of loops or a single ‘reentrance’ but of constant interaction.

**Petra Stoerig** was the fifth plenary speaker, presenting cutting-edge data on conscious and unconscious vision in the blind. She mentioned total blindness from lesions of the retina; impairment of light-dark discrimination from lesions in the path from retina to hypothalamic suprachiasmatic nucleus; and visual reflexes implicating retina to pretectum. Moving to cortical types of blindness, Stoerig raised an extremely important question: do lesions of primary visual cortex (V1) abolish all vision? Stoerig and others have studied **blindsight** (BS) patients for conscious and non-conscious visual responses in their impaired V1 areas. By raising the power of mechanical, electric, or magnetic stimulation, Stoerig and colleagues have been able to evoke **phosphenes** in BS patients, even coloured or pulsating phosphenes. They have also found **pseudo visual hallucinations**. **After-images** are rarer. There is also evidence of retained **synaesthesia**. Therefore lesions in V1 do not abolish all conscious vision. What retinal information gets through (around V1) is qualitatively or quantitatively insufficient for conscious detection. Thus activation of higher areas must lead to the visual phenomena charted. This has led Stoerig and others to work hard to help persons with cortical blindness to recover some normal veridical conscious vision, through stimulation, sleeping pills, and training in cortical blindness. Stoerig plaintively declared at the very end of her talk: ‘I would like to make all the blind see.’

**Karl Pribram** was the second plenary speaker. I had expected to hear his elaborate talk on visual consciousness being a form of holographic activation of neural electrical fields, which he had presented at the Salzburg Quantum Mind conference preceding this Budapest conference. Only at the very end of his talk did he mention ‘quantum holography’, which he asserted was now more alive than ever. Instead he gave a history of major findings over the last 60 years in attitudes, emotion, and motivation — in which he had at least a peripheral role. He had lost his jacket with his PowerPoint presentation, which would have helped us follow him despite great difficulty in hearing him. He kept struggling with the lapel mike, asking ‘can you hear me?’, at least as often as God asked that of Adam. I sat very close, taking copious notes, and followed him pretty well. Many people visibly ‘tuned out’ after a while or even left: a shame, because it was really quite good.

While Pribram did not claim to have worked with William James or Freud (with whom he began his remarks), he did lay out his direct or indirect collaboration with a number of other greats since 1947, when
he set out to study how the brain processes emotions. When Kluver and Bucy removed monkeys’ hippocampi and amygdalae, Pribram petted some of those tamed monkeys. Pribram worked with Papez, who famously defined emotional circuits — ‘he and I argued about everything’. Through these series of studies, it was found that the amygdala focuses on relevant stimuli while the hippocampus focuses on what has become habituated! He closed by talking about episodic memory, mentioning the famous patient, HM, whose two hippocampi had been surgically removed, but whose emotional responses seemed intact.

I have now heard Pribram at three very different types of conferences. After my concurrent-session talk on a dozen or more paradigms in modern consciousness science (which he attended), I had the marvelous opportunity to talk with him, asking about Peter & Brenda Milner, Donald Hebb, Vernon Montcastle, Walter Penfield, Goodale and (another) Milner — and even Stuart Hameroff. Pribram was quite candid in his remarks — including giving me a gentle hint that my talk left out an important point that Pribram has been making about consciousness over the years! Me bad!

A number of the concurrent sessions presented important empirical findings related to different aspects of consciousness science. Donald Weaver, a neurologist/anesthesiologist and quantum chemist, spoke on the molecular mechanisms of the ‘wakefulness/sleep/anaesthesia’ dimension of ‘core consciousness’. He and his colleagues have worked on modeling the GABA-A chloride-ion receptor so crucial for the natural and anaesthetic loss of consciousness. Weaver is an especially colourful and energetic speaker. He related how he had received hate mail from an article in The Economist, for suggesting that consciousness had molecular mechanisms, receiving such epithets as ‘you primitive fool’ with your ‘backward thinking’. He wondered out loud if that was from one of his patients! Also dealing with neurological issues, Laszio Nemes spoke on publicity, bioethics, and the science of chronic disorders of consciousness, dealing at some length with vegetative states, coma, and minimal conscious states. He mused over the fact that philosophers use imaginary creatures like Zombies, while these real disorders of consciousness are far more important. He noted that there were huge spikes in the numbers of scientific papers on vegetative states in the early 1990s and again in 2002, related to the publicity on the tragic cases of Nancy Cruzon and Terri Schiavo. He noted that 40–70% of vegetative state patients recover — depending upon whose statistics are used. (I assume that Schiavo’s husband drew from the lower and Schiavo’s parents drew from the higher figure.)
Toshi Shinba dealt with the related issue of ‘arousal and the frontal cortex’, looking at the late evoked potential CNV in rodents. He suggested this as evidence that some animals have consciousness. He traced brainstem locus-ceruleus norepinephrine arousal mechanisms, reward stimulation, working memory, and attention. After laying out philosophical groundwork, Gabriel Mograbi presented some interesting findings that: when white people are shown a human face for 30 ms, black faces activate the amygdala more than do white faces (suggesting ‘racial prejudice’). But when the faces are shown with 525 ms exposure, black faces reduced amygdala activation compared to white faces — implying that the frontal lobe (which would not admit racial prejudice) inhibits amygdala functioning. Mograbi also referred to brain scan differences in subliminal, inattentive, attentive, pre-conscious, and conscious perception. The frontal lobe’s role in ‘consciousness’ suggests that consciousness may be fundamentally a preparation for action. Mograbi is an engaging speaker and used PowerPoint powerfully, including showing a seventh-century picture of ‘throwing a baby out with bathwater’, which he claims ‘eliminitivism’ does with conscious experience. He was also the professor who mentioned ‘hydra-headed monster dualists’, cited below.

2. Empirical work assuming quantum physics

The third plenary speaker, Stuart Hameroff, gave the clearest, most dynamic, and most colourful presentation of the conference — and the most coherent presentation I have heard of his views over several conferences — on dendritic web synchrony as the putative neural correlate of consciousness. I recognized both his core points and several new findings that he had incorporated from other consciousness conferences in recent years. A multi-conference friend of mine, Stewart Sansum, was even more impressed than I was, telling me that he was ‘almost converted’ by Stu’s talk. A new conference acquaintance, Donald Weaver, who is himself a quantum chemist and theoretical/practising anaesthesiologist (as is Hameroff) told me that Hameroff is ‘still very speculative’.

But, enough of the preface and on to the summary of Hameroff’s talk. We don’t need cortical ‘global activation’ for conscious experience; we don’t even need the cortex to have conscious experience. There is no one place or time where it all comes together. Almost every other theory of consciousness deals with the forward and backward networks where each neuron activates the next through axonal-dendritic delayed chemical ion channels. Following Pribram,
Hameroff prefers to see consciousness arising through ‘sideways’ dendritic-dendritic electrical gap junctions, ‘with no delay whatsoever’. Such dendritic-dendritic firing leads to the ‘gamma synchrony’ that many see key to conscious experience. Microtubules in dendrites serve as information processors in this synchrony. Loss of consciousness comes from loss of gamma synchrony, while ‘altered states of consciousness’ are products of altered synchrony. Buddhist monks show extremely high gamma frequency and coherence, as do persons who have ingested Ayahuasca — whose gamma and beta synchrony are raised. The dominant view of chemical-ionic networks (of Koch and almost everybody else), where consciousness is mediated by ‘spikes’ or ‘firing’ is a ‘big mistake’. Because of this, the prospect of ‘conscious computers’ in a dozen years is not going to work. (What a relief, Hal!). One of the side benefits of accepting an ‘integration’ model over a ‘spike/firing’ model is that the latter would preclude a priori ‘non-local effects’ such as ESP (which would not bother Koch one dang bit!). Hameroff talked about the ways in which quantum effects are (presumably) crucial to these d-d integrative fields. It takes about 100,000 neurons to bring some mental event into consciousness. Hameroff suggests a ‘neutral monism’, wherein mind and matter are united in some underlying reality, or the view that consciousness is a fundamental element of the universe.

A few concurrent sessions dealt with or mentioned quantum forces. Huping Hu spoke of ‘evidence of non-local, physical, chemical and biological effects’ related to ‘quantum brain’. He found that applying magnetic pulses to the brain — from a distance — caused the brain to feel the effect of an anaesthetic, when that anaesthetic was placed between the magnet and the brain. The Q&A period brought out the fact that he had tried this with only four subjects: ‘me and my family’. (I believe the four subjects were his wife, his wife’s parents, and Hu himself.) Hu pleaded for others to replicate his findings. Prior to attending the session, I had found Hu’s abstract to be bizarre — and then found his talk even more bizarre. Donald Weaver — the neurologist and quantum chemist mentioned above — was chairing the session in which Hu spoke. I had to resist the evil urge, during Q&A, to ask Weaver to comment on Hu’s talk! Weaver thanked me later for my uncharacteristic reticence. David Hodgson, an Australian judge, brought in quantum mechanisms to explain how science can accommodate free will. With QM, locality of causal influences is refuted, causality is found to not be total, and determinism is unlikely. In the Q&A, Hodgson acknowledged that the loss of determinism leads to randomness. Prior to mentioning quantum mechanics, Hodgson noted
that non-conscious information processing systems (such as computers) can respond only to constituent features of events; while conscious systems can respond to experiences as gestalt wholes. In the Q&A, Gabriel Mograbi and I referred to humans having both intuitive and rational decision-making systems, involving distinct prefrontal circuits. In his talk, Kenzo Iwama differed from Hodgson in maintaining that a robot which can select between two paths to a goal, based on information acquired during its experience, has ‘a free will’ — and that Iwama’s ‘robotic program makes a robot conscious of self.’ In his talk, Bruce Kotz mentioned that his ‘Reduced Functionalism’ has ‘much simpler explanations’ that quantum theories.

3. Philosophical clarifications

The title — but not conclusions — of the fourth plenary speaker, philosopher David Papineau’s, talk sends shivers down empiricists’ spines: ‘Limits of Consciousness Research’. Papineau assumes (a) materialism, (b) conceptual dualism of phenomenal versus material concepts, (c) the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness research which seeks to identify the material referents of phenomenal concepts, and (d) that subjects’ reports on present and past experience constitute material referents of phenomenal experience, similar to the concept ‘water’ referring to samples of water. Papineau articulates the basic strategy of psychological research as being the finding of brain activations that are present with certain experiences or abilities and absent without them. Papineau charitably said he did not want to say that this kind of research should not be done! However, there are too many brain-mechanism candidates for given experiences or abilities, plus other problems. Papineau also raised the question as to whether lower-level brain processes (40 Hz) are sufficient for consciousness, or whether they need to be paired with higher order thoughts or access mechanisms, examining Sperling’s demonstrations and subliminal perception, and warning us against ‘intuitive dualism’ which looks for some extra property above the physical — maintaining that ‘substantial looking’ issues might have no ‘fact of the matter’.

A number of concurrent speakers staked out interesting philosophical positions, which they generally related to empirical findings; or even, themselves, generated some of those findings. We have mentioned Bruce Kotz’s ‘Reduced Functionalism’. Harald Atmanspacher holds to a ‘contextual emergence’ theory of consciousness, which he defined as distinct from ‘strong reductionism’ and ‘supervenience’ on one side, and ‘radical emergence’ on the other. In
`contextual emergence`, the lower mechanisms are necessary but not sufficient for the higher mechanisms. Richard Patterson overly applied empirical findings in ‘mirror neurons’ to explain several things about the experience of music: referring to ‘echo neurons’, ‘audio-visual mirror neurons’, mirror neurons in emotions, empathy, cognition, speaking, and the like. In the Q&A, I suggested that the findings were much more limited in application than in his portrayal, but that perceptual and emotional systems did seem to have mechanisms something like ‘mirror neurons’, which have been found with very simple intentional behaviours such as gesturing, reaching, facial expressions, and the like. It is too easy to take some sexy new findings and see their application in every dimension of our concerns! Psychologist Jiri Wackerman advocates an ‘integrated psychophysics which precedes both physics and psychology in the ‘pure experience’ of William James. While not a panpsychist himself, Leopold Stubenberg stated as arguments for panpsychism that consciousness is in the constructs of the universe, that emergence is impossible, and that reductionism is absurd. His topic was that Bertrand Russell’s ‘neutral monism’ is neither panpsychism nor idealism.

Several speakers used linguistic findings to defend specific theories of the relationship between language and consciousness. Jordan Zlatev does empirical work in comparative linguistics — comparing motion-emotion metaphors in English, Swedish, Bulgarian and Thai — to show evidence for ‘concept-language interaction’ theories instead of ‘universalism’, on one side, and ‘strong language dependence’, on the other. Richard Menary referred to Vygotsky’s findings that children dialogue with others first and then with self: first out loud and then through ‘inner speech’ — to point to a ‘dialogical self’ that is far more embedded than Dan Dennett’s ‘abstract narrative concept of self’. Maxim Stamenov pointed to findings in his field of linguistics to conclude that language seems indispensable for human ‘secondary’ or ‘cognitive’ consciousness, but is not accessible to consciousness in a reliable way. In fact he dubs language as the ‘manager’ of the ‘Cartesian Theater’, which makes the latter possible.

David Pitt defended his Phenomenal Intentionality Thesis, wherein we need to posit conscious, introspective, non-inferential knowledge of content. He considers as one of the errors of twentieth-century philosophy of mind, the attempt to reduce consciousness to something physical as we now understand physical, such as to say that ‘consciousness IS cortico-thalamic stimulation’. We need to be ‘methodological dualists’ rather than to have the ‘arrogance of assuming that we can explain all with present knowledge’. With Heidegger and
Titchener, he would bracket the relation between experience and brain and study experience on its own terms — without worrying how it fits into the physical world; looking as such questions as ‘how many types of experience are there’. I proved to be an impassioned reviewer when I questioned his logic (in the Q&A) of suggesting that by dismissing the ‘arrogance of assuming that we can explain all with present knowledge’ one can build the case for going to the other extreme of bracketing the relation between experience and brain! I called that a ‘throw back to Brentano’; to which Pitts said that we have not accomplished anything in relating experience to the brain. He added, ‘I say this as a philosopher’. My response: ‘thankfully many philosophers disagree’. Ah, the myth of being a neutral observer!

The sixth plenary speaker, philosopher Andrew Brook spoke on the Representational Base of Consciousness. His entire thesis can be found in his opening two sentences: we can be conscious (a) of the world, (b) of our own representational state, and (c) of ourselves as subjects of the states. A single model can capture features of all three and unite them with cognition. There are problems with both ‘higher order thought (HOT)’ views and ‘first order experience (FOE)’ views. Rejecting the ‘principle of representation’ (that representations can only represent something other than themselves), which HOT and FOE theories share, Brook proposes the alternative of self-presenting representations (SPRS). The most intriguing feature of his proposal (to me) was that non-human animals might have representations with the same tripartite potential, but not possess the cognitive function to exploit all three types. Brook explored the possible ways in which various components of cognitive processing (such as perceptual modes, language, sense of self, etc.) merge together into ‘global representations’ and thus ‘joint consciousness’, opting for compound representations being replaced by a single global representation, which he credited to Williams James. Off the main subject: during considerable and varied discussion, Brook declared that he sees no good argument for ‘extended mind’ views. He also commented that philosophers ‘puddle around in mere possibilities’, for instance zombies. Practically no one thinks they can possibly be created, but that does not hold us back one bit. (Way to go, Brook!)

Marie Guillot raised similar issues to Brook’s in her concurrent talk, discussing the whole alphabet soup of HOTs and SRTC — self referencing theories of consciousness. She maintains that self referential theories of de se thoughts are either paradoxical or restricted only to first person statements. They are circular, with vicious circles that become pathological. She closed with the line from the movie Total...
Recall, where the doctor said, ‘You know, Doug, neither you nor I are really here.’ Jorge Goncalves focused on the HOTs issue, specifically maintaining that Freud’s process by which the ‘pre-conscious’ becomes ‘conscious’ is very similar to van Gulick’s HOGS (higher order global states) process by which consciousness recruits non-conscious states into a global state. In the Q&A, I encouraged Goncalves to contact van Gulick regarding that parallel.

4. Final round table discussion

George Kampis, Zoltan Jakob, myself, and two others formed a panel on Consciousness Studies in Education. I talked about having taught Psychology of Consciousness as an undergraduate course, on and off since 1992. Another person spoke of being a part of a Consciousness Studies department. George and others discussed the growing field of consciousness studies. Some in the audience raised a concern that this conference was too concerned with science. As someone asked: ‘Why not “toward a culture of consciousness”?’ We talked about ASSC and the Tucson conferences and how they may both be focusing more on scientific rigour than ‘culture’; and the need for a big tent in the field. We urged people to attend more of these conferences and to subscribe to JCS.

Moderators and Speakers in Concurrent Sessions

There was a range of moderator styles for the concurrent sessions — something seen in all of these conferences. In terms of time keeping (25 minutes to talk & 5 minutes for questions), some moderators were quite passive (so that one session spilt over long enough into the final break time to delay the final session for everybody by 20 minutes!) while others were very strict — ‘ruthless’ was what George asked us to be — and called ‘time’ either at the end of the 25 or the 30 minutes. Most made minimal introductions, not even checking for name pronunciation; while a few mentioned the name of the talk and something about the persons, a courtesy which was not perfunctory because not a single plenary or concurrent talk had a title attached to it in the programme. One had to dig that out of the printed abstracts (and all but one plenary speaker lacked even an outline). At least one moderator offered to give first crack in the Q&As to persons with opposing views to the speakers. For instance, at the end of one speech, the moderator commented that the speaker had begun with the statement that ‘certain moves of Bertrand Russell are exploited by panpsychists’ — and asked if there were any genuine panpsychists in the room who would
like to respond. Another speaker had referred to ‘hydra-headed monster Dualists’, so the moderator said he would give first response to any hydra-headed monster Dualist in the audience. In both cases someone unashamedly responded.

Some of the characters in concurrent sessions:

- One philosophy professor walked back and forth looking down, with a glass of water in his hand — which he then exchanged for his glasses. When told he had 5 minutes left (but was only half way through his handout speech outline), he looked up and told us the rest of his speech in 5 minutes.
- Some speakers were too soft-spoken to be heard, even with a mike; while others were very loud. Some looked down at their Power Point laptop screen the entire speech, while some turned around and looked at the large screen — with their back to the audience for most of their talk.
- Some had no ‘props’ at all, while many had PowerPoint or transparencies, others writing on the board, and some giving a basic philosophy argument on a hand out sheet.
- Several speakers didn’t show up — some of whom had not notified anyone. (Come on, folks!)
- Occasionally speakers contextualized their talks to relate to the host city; for instance referring to the Chain Bridge folk festivals on weekends — of which my wife and I availed ourselves both weekends.

George moderated all of the plenary sessions and, I believe, moderated one of the concurrent sessions during most time slots, giving his personal stamp to much of the conference. He seemed exhausted and relieved when the last session was over. Other hard workers, whom we take for granted, are the folks from JCS, Elsevier, John Benjamins, MIT, and so on, who make available current books in the various conference topics — but who have to miss most of the sessions and often do not make enough profit in the small conferences to even pay their own way there.

Conference Embodiment

The conference presented a couple of grand social times. On the opening (Monday) night there was a wine and food reception in the Buda Castle District. I was not able to get to that, but I understand it was grand — except that I am told that many hungry conference goers walked back and forth getting food in front of the welcoming speaker from the Hungarian Academy of Science. (Come on, folks!)
Secondly, there was the extra-pay option of a romantic 3-hour dinner cruise on the Danube: ‘Budapest by night’, Wednesday night. Seeing the city by daylight and then by night, enjoying the Hungarian buffet, and having some down time with other conference-goers and their spouses and friends — it doesn’t get much better than that!

Conferences have a wide variety of ‘housing’ options. I have stayed in dormitories of the host university, in nearby hotels, and quite distant hotels. A few of us, including my wife Martha and I, stayed at the Orion Best Western Hotel, about 2 miles away. Most of the time several of us from there walked back and forth — in what turned out to be the worst heat wave in Hungary in years. Far more of our group stayed at the more up-market Gellert Hotel, only half as far from the conference site as the Orion. Because of major construction on the Budapest Metro system, those in the swankier, closer hotel were without air conditioning and even water, for at least part of that heat-record week.

I know from personal experience that conference going can be very lonely if one comes alone and has not yet made many friends within the conference-going ‘consciousness community’. On the other hand, conference going can be embedded in very rich experience if one is there with ones significant other (my wife mentioned above) and some very dear friends (who will go unnamed, for their sake!) and have some time before, during, and after to explore a gem of a place like Budapest. Martha and I also added on, after the conference, a hydrofoil trip up the Danube to Bratislava and travel around Austria (to Graz, the Alps Salzburg, and Vienna) with some other dear friends. Fortunately, the grand Danube runs through Budapest, Bratislava, and Vienna. It doesn’t get much better than that!