

Robert K.C. Forman

A Watershed Event

*Neuroscience, Consciousness and Spirituality
Conference, July 2–4, 2008, Freiburg Germany*

Freiburg (Germany) was far away from my home near New York City, and I was dreading going. I had heard by way of the grapevine that there would be a number of materialistic reductionists there; as the token religionist, I wasn't looking forward to being bludgeoned or even worse, ignored. But there we were, happily ensconced in our pleasantly courtyarded Freiburg hotel, 30 of us, mostly men, mostly scientists, and mostly non-reductionists. And all open minded about the connections between spirituality, neurophysiology and consciousness.

I was to speak last to this 'Meeting of Experts'. I was glad, for my planned remarks were aimed primarily at the 'materialists' who were not there; I would have been preaching to the choir. So going last encouraged me to listen well throughout and speak to what I was hearing. And I was glad because what I was hearing was as profound, as new, and as inspiring as it was coherent. I was indeed inspired enough to offer an summary of the surprising, exciting consensus I heard over the two days.

We humanists don't often offer hypotheses, certainly not to august bodies of scientists. But I felt emboldened. After all, the purpose of the conference was to address the questions, 'Can a modern day neuroscientific, functionalist or emergentist model of consciousness accommodate spiritual experiences? ... What would a model of consciousness have to look like that is both true to our modern scientific knowledge and phenomena reported by spiritual traditions?'

Correspondence:

Robert K.C. Forman, The Forge Institute, 383 Broadway, Hastings on Hudson, NY 10706, USA. Email: Forman@TheForge.org

As Harold Walach, our kindly and well organized chairman, put it, we were there to explore methodologies of inner experience, and explore consciousness, not only from the neuroscientific point of view but from all points of view, including the transpersonal and the non-dogmatic. Or as youthful Antoine Lutz put it, we were there to 'take subjectivity seriously.' So that made me, someone who studies spiritual experiences, in as good a position to hypothesize as the next fellow.

So, being welcomed and being last, I offered the following as the emerging consensus I was hearing in the group. Since it was quite well received, I offer it here as a summary of what went on. We make no claims about universality. All positions about consciousness were not represented in the room. We were all folks who are interested in and open minded about spirituality; and God knows not everyone is. So I offer it here more modestly, as an hypothesis perhaps. Or, as clear eyed Jonathan Schooler put it, as a 'bold thesis for us to consider'.

1. Consciousness is fundamental element of reality, like an additional dimension.

- Jonathan Schooler, Harold Walach and many folks in private conversations suggested that consciousness may exist in itself.
- It is outside of time, pre-linguistic, yet somehow witness to time. Pim van Lommel, the belle of the ball, studies Near Death Experiences. He described his meticulous research which found that near death experiences (NDEs) are experienced as outside of time. Ernst Pöppel suggested that consciousness forms impressions that build towards language within a 3 second window; I offered that mystical experiences are experienced as outside of time.
- As a fundamental element of reality, consciousness is non local or spread out. It is experienced by mystics as just that, non local or spread out. NDEs are experienced as interdeterminately beyond our human body; one experiences oneself as rising beyond the body. Brian Lancaster, in a fetching discussion of the connections between neurophysiology and Kabbalah, suggested that we can move from the personal to the divine indexing system.
- The field of consciousness is parallel in some way to the quantum vacuum field. The theory of consciousness we were developing as an independent field out of time may connects with the

quantum field in some way. Perhaps the connection is on the level of ions flowing in and out of the membranes in the brain, suggested Henry Stapp in a demanding talk on the role of physics in Quantum Collapse. There was no agreement in the room on how consciousness may connect with or parallel the quantum vacuum field.

- Jonathan Schooler, in what was probably the most creative offering of the conference, showed a video of consciousness as like wave moving through time, and suggested that mystical experiences are like ‘riding a tidal wave of consciousness.’ From what I know of mystical experiences, however, consciousness is experienced by such people as more like a field than a wave. Both Schooler and myself suggest that consciousness is whole and undivided; that for which there is movement.

2. *Consciousness is mediated by the brain, not excreted by it.*

- Throughout the conference we heard phrases suggesting that consciousness is a ‘transducer’ or like a ‘radio receiver’ or a ‘relay station’.
- Pim suggested that the brain is a ‘conveyor not producer’. Jeffrey Schwartz, with his typically vivacious energy, exhorted ‘It ain’t in the brain, it ain’t in the brain!’
- Matthais Braeunig, a youthful member of our hosting team, said ‘consciousness takes place with the help of the brain, but is not within it. Brains’, he added, ‘are transducing consciousness’.
- Hartmann Romer was ill; in his presentation, his alter ego suggested that there is a ‘non local correlation between consciousness and the brain’.
- Mario Beauregard suggested that there is no one sub organ like the thalamus that is active in the spiritual process, but rather there is a complex multi dimensional process. That’s why, suggested Antoine Lutz, that in meditation we see greater coherence across large brain areas, and high ‘amplitude gamma synchronicity’. This implies that the whole brain may be involved in some way in the transducing process.

3. *Consciousness is independent of brain processes.*
 (This stems from principle 1 & 2)

- ‘As the field of consciousness is experienced through consciousness-transducing brains,’ said Matthais Braeunig. ‘Consciousness appears to exist independently of the brain, though it remains unobservable unless transduced by brains.’
- Most so called anomalous experiences, often ignored or ridiculed by the scientific community, point to the possibility that consciousness is independent of the brain. Distant viewing and predictive (future) viewing, were mentioned.
- Pim’s research on Near Death Experiences, which are sometimes veridical, clearly suggests that people can have experiences even when there is effectively no brain activity.
- Thomas Metzinger described his creative studies on Out of Body Experiences (OBEs); they suggest that human beings can have experiences beyond the body.
- Mystical experiences sometimes carry the sense of being non local or spread out beyond the body. There is brain activity during them, as Mario Beauregard effectively described, but this sense may reinforce the claim that awareness is not limited to our bodies. As Walach suggested, mystics can be aware of themselves and of the infinite, even simultaneously, which reinforces the hypothesis that consciousness is not limited to brain or egoic processes.

4. *Our ability to connect with that which is larger may be a normal state of human beings.*

- In one of the most stimulating talks of the gathering, Matt Rossano took us back to the earliest days of hominid life, when Shamans brought people to health by having them focus their attention around the fire. In effect, he said, our ability to connect with that which is larger may have been one of the distinguishing capacities of human beings, as on of the original capacities that gave early human beings an advantage over other species.
- Over time this ability to focus on that which is beyond led to our ability to hyper-focus.
- In this hyper focus, we lost sense of the whole as we developed more and more automatized and culturally trained cognitive

patterns. Thus enculturation may have overwhelmed our early ability to open to what is larger.

- Thus as Arthur Deikman points out elsewhere, meditation may serve as a de automatization process, making it a way to recover that which is more fundamentally ours. Metzinger said effectively the same thing when saying that the ‘first step is to let go of all worldviews,’ helping us recover our lost sense of a connection to something larger. Or, as Kabbalah says, according to Brian Lancaster, we should ‘untie the knots from the self, step out of the structure we’ve created.’

Astonishingly enough, I found myself thinking, even surrounded by those hard headed scientists, in religious terms. Brahman, the non dual, panentheistic principle that is one core notion of Hinduism, is said to exist independently of the cosmos and of the person. Like our theory of consciousness, it is its own kind of stuff, a kind of dimension all its own. But, like consciousness, it forms itself into form, and comes to be ‘formed Brahman,’ much as consciousness comes to be formed as an individual. Thus formless Brahman, like the consciousness in this hypothesis, exists simultaneously and hidden within its formed aspect. The ‘formless within form.’ Finally our consciousness, which Hinduism calls Atman, can come to experience its true nature as Brahman; much as one might experience the independent domain of consciousness in certain anomalous experiences.

As I said, our emerging hypothesis was well received. We knew, and spoke of, the many, many questions that it opens up. Some that we named were:

- How might the body transduce consciousness?
- Can consciousness exist verifiably outside of brain/person? If so in what sense?
- Might there be any way to measure consciousness outside the brain? We jokingly asked if there might be a ‘consciousness-o-meter?’
- Where does the domain of consciousness come from?

There are countless more.

Yet the feeling in the final go round was, I felt, one of sincere satisfaction. We had found a community, many said, always a gratifying sense. We had heard a cascade of excellent talks. One said ‘I did not have a single moment of boredom.’ But even more important, several

mentioned that we seemed to be part of a larger movement that may lead to a paradigm shift, one which may lead to a new and fascinating approach to science and our larger worldview. We were encountering the possibility of a science that might take seriously the full range of experiences and in a non-dualistic way.

Jeffrey Schwartz captured the moment's seriousness and importance that I think we all felt. 'The implications here are enormous; they are political as well as scientific. And they are important. So as Franklin said when the founding fathers signed the declaration of independence on this day 232 years ago, "Gentlemen, we must all hang together or we will surely hang separately."'

Whether or not that group turns out to be that important, the gathering was for many of us the first in which a group articulated a fascinating, bold and possibly true new approach that could tie together East and West, spirituality and science, brain and inner experience and could begin to account for anomalous experiences. I was honoured to be part of it.