

Bill Faw

Search For 'Facts', 'Truth' Or 'Enlightenment'

*You Get Them All In the Big Tent of Tucson-2002
— And Quantum Too*

I have long concluded that psychologists seek 'facts' but don't care about 'truth'; while philosophers seek 'truth' but don't care about 'facts'. After attending Tucson-2002, I would create a third reckless stereotype: eastern philosophy (and perhaps western humanities) seek 'enlightenment' but don't care about 'facts' or 'truth'. To avoid this seeming to be the equal-opportunity put-down that it really is, let me amend that to: scientists seek inductive 'facts' about consciousness, western philosophers seek deductive 'truth' about consciousness, and eastern philosophers seek transcendent 'enlightenment' — to grow, transcend, or lose my/our own consciousness. To make it even more complicated, there are — obliquely bridging the facts, truth, and enlightenment camps — brain-probing anaesthesiologists and others advocating an intriguing package of quantum mechanics, microtubules, pan-psychism and causation-running-backwards-in-time. H-E-L-P! With the echoes of the conference still in my mental ears, I dedicate this report to Mountcastle, Maharishi, and Monty Python.

The five Tucson *Toward a Science of Consciousness* conferences have been big tents in which presenters and searchers for consciousness facts, truth, and/or enlightenment can find what they want — and much that they don't want. The thing that makes the Tucson conferences so exciting is that there are many attempts to bring together two-way interactions among facts, truth, and enlightenment, in addition to the quantum crowd's three-way-interaction.

Let us begin this report in an interactive way, using a blend of zen koan, western dadaism and cognitive methodology. Try saying 'Tucson-2002' fast, 22 times. Whether you say it 'Tucson — two thousand two' or 'Tucson — two oh oh two', you will end up speaking in a mantra. Now, try saying 'Tucson-2002' 202 times at a steady pace, and you will experience 'semantic blindness'. You will

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hear the words but they will lose their meaning. But, whatever you say, you cannot say that there was ever a dull moment at Tucson-2002. (Actually you *can* say that, but for me it would be a non-veridical assertion.)

Those of you who read my report in this journal¹ of last year's Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness conference at Duke, know that I have attended four of the five ASSC annual conferences but that this is my first of the biennial Tucson conferences. Naturally then, in the ineffable judgment of the top brass of this journal, that makes me the perfect person to write about Tucson-2002.

Through stealthful inquiries and discrete background interviews, I have pieced together some interesting tidbits about the relationship between these two constant consciousness conferences. The first Tucson conference, 1994, had about 300 registrants. The second, 1996, conference swelled to 1000. Some of the 'fact-seeking' people at Tucson-1996 wanted to move *from* 'toward a science of consciousness' to the '*scientific study* of consciousness' and launched the ASSC conferences the next year. Tucson conferences leveled off in numbers to about 700 — the approximate number this year — and the new ASSC now draws some 300 people, including a number of people who attend both.

Many people with one foot in each camp, including the afore-mentioned top brass of this journal, worried that the formation of ASSC would reduce the Tucson conferences to their 'softer' side. Many of these people have worked hard to keep a good balance in the Tucson offerings. I feel that they have kept a rough three-way-balance between fact, truth and enlightenment in Tucson plenary sessions — with a growing weighting toward first, empirical facts, second, western philosophical truth-searching, and third, enlightenment. In contrast, the plenary sessions at ASSC have been overwhelmingly scientific and secondarily western philosophic, with very little of the humanistic/eastern emphasis. My joyful — albeit patronizing — conclusion is that there is good reason for both conferences to exist.

In addition to the fore-mentioned formative years and frequencies, Tucson conferences are almost twice as long as ASSC — with workshops on Saturday and Sunday and sessions and events then running until the next Friday. Tucson conferences are always held in Tucson (duhhh!), while ASSC conferences alternate between Europe and North America (LA; Bremen; London, Ontario; Brussels; Duke; and Barcelona). The *plus* side of this for Tucson is the stability of leadership, accommodations, and expectations. Tucson conferences are held during most professors' school year, a factor that was, combined with the week-long schedule, decisive in my decision *not* to come to the last two conferences. I understand that the Tucson leaders are wrestling with both problems.

Both conferences have a similar blend of pre-conference workshops, opening reception, plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, poster sessions, and banquets and tours. There is a cash bar at the poster sessions, perhaps to make the posters *seem* more coherent and profound. In addition, Tucson has a poetry/music bash and an 'end of consciousness' party at David Chalmers' desert hacienda, in the

[1] 'Whither consciousness studies? ASSC-5 Conference at Duke, June 27–30, 2001', *JCS*, 8 (8), pp. 70–4.

environs of another well-known millionaire recluse. Each ASSC conference has a specific conference theme (implicit learning, binding problem, contents of consciousness, language, etc.), while all the Tucson conferences have a broad ‘-magazine-style’ spread, with everything-and-its-dog that passes for consciousness being considered. Each conference has been historically associated with a specific printed consciousness journal — Tucson with the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, and ASSC with *Consciousness and Cognition* — but officials from both journals participate in both conferences and both journals carry material coming out of each conference and court writers associated with the other journal. The John Benjamins consciousness series and *Consciousness and Emotion* journal, MIT, Oxford, and some other presses gladly solicit authors and sell their books and journals at both conferences.

The range of topics of plenary sessions at Tucson-2002 — are you still working on saying this 202 times? — the range of topics of plenary sessions at Tucson-2002 is broader than the topics at an ASSC conference, both because of their differing soft/hard balances and because of the broad magazine-style of Tucson. These topics were: sensory substitution, the neural correlates of consciousness (NCC) of meditative experience, conscious/unconscious decision-making, binocular rivalry and NCC, the contents of consciousness, emotion and consciousness, machine consciousness, consciousness in action, the question of pure consciousness, art and the brain, sleep and coma, nonclassical brain states, and downward causation. Get the picture?

I had heard that because of this broad range of topics, fewer people go to every plenary session than would be true at ASSC. That seems to be right. I, however, made a point of staying through every moment of every plenary session (except the last, because of my flight schedule) and a crap-shoot of concurrent sessions, but I skipped the poetry bash, banquet and closing party, and only made it to part of one of the poster sessions — to pace myself to make the obligatory sessions. If I go back in 2004, I will enjoy myself more and let some other wiseacre write it up.

There were times that I had to steel my journalistic resolve when people were pouring out of sessions that were less engaging — having found there *were* a few dull moments after all. People deserted all three kinds of sessions (fact, truth, and enlightenment), but it was in the midst of an enlightenment session that a neuropsychologist friend of mine whispered as he walked past me to the exit, ‘I can’t stand any more of this crap!’ His remark gave me deep insight. There is probably not a symmetry in responses. An enlightenment-seeker would not have evoked bodily excrement to describe a tedious-presentation of empirical findings, but would describe it as being irrelevant or just tedious. I did find it interesting to learn from the poet, himself, that the winning poem at the Bash was entitled, ‘Microtubules, my a***.’ He told me he wrote that poem during the same enlightenment session that evoked my other friend’s, shall we say, embodied remark.

The two most *poignant moments* for me at the conference were inside and outside of the first plenary session. After Paul Bach-y-Rita and Peter Meijer gave

third-person reports of their work in ‘sensory substitution’, in devising tactile and auditory devices that give some degree of sight to blind persons, Pat Fletcher gave a first-person account of her journey back to sight with vOICe soundscape technology. That session brought tears to my cynical eyes and demonstrated Tucson’s self-acclaimed blend of first- and third-person reports at its best. (I understand they have had a prosopagnosic and other folks speak in previous years.) There were other times when videos were shown or self-reports were read — usually with the obligatory tag about these showing first/third-person interaction.

Right after the session with Pat Fletcher, I was talking with an acquaintance of mine about how that session might fit with a talk he was to give later. It turned out that he had missed that session, but was intrigued for personal reasons. His brother is going blind and he wondered if this equipment might be available for him and who might he talk to? He left me to track down the principles involved. He was able to talk with folks and is going to look into this.

In addition to sizing up the behaviour of an organization or standing conference, one can learn a lot by catching its self-conscious statements; in this case hearing conference leaders, speakers and questioners refer to the audience as being a bunch of philosophers (sic!), being awed by the scope of the conference (sic-er!), and emphasize the first/third person interaction in presentations (sic-est!). It is a well-known social psychology finding that such self-presentation maintains and shapes a group’s identity. (I included this poignant fact so you would realize that not all of us psychologists do research with fMRIs on cat’s knees.)

Let me share some examples of the plenary sessions devoted to ‘facts’, ‘truth’, ‘enlightenment’ and some to the interactions thereof. The double-plenary sessions on ‘sensory substitution’ contained the poignant first-person, science, and clinical blend mentioned above, with a real attempt to wax philosophical. The plenary session entitled ‘neural correlates of meditative experience’, was obviously an interaction between ‘enlightenment’ and ‘fact’, but basically told by folks in the enlightenment camp. One speaker, Fred Travis, was from the Maharishi University of Management. ‘Conscious and unconscious decision-making’ and ‘Binocular rivalry and the NCC’ were heavily scientific. ‘The contents of consciousness’ was a mixture of Western and Eastern philosophy, with some psychology. ‘Emotion and consciousness’ looked like it would be hard science with Kaszniak and Adolphs and a third person talking about fMRI studies. But the third speaker, Dick Bierman, talked about ‘anomalous anticipatory behaviour’, empirical evidence of subjects’ showing a differential anticipatory response to randomly shuffled erotic, violent, or neutral pictures *before* the subjects saw the pictures. This session turned out to be more weird than anticipated — but then, hey, they scoffed at Columbus’ faith in a direct Atlantic route to India!

Alex Cleeremans announced the next session on Machine Consciousness — a very different type of blend of science and ‘new age’ — as raising provocative issues, but perhaps not as provocative as those of the previous session. The

Machine Consciousness session was, indeed, provocative, with Ray Kurzweil predicting exponential growth in exponential growths in about everything from life expectancy, robots soon to be taken for conscious (passing Ray's Turing Test), and in the ability to down-load and transfer one's entire memory and brain activity into a machine. This is heady stuff until you reflect upon the strong-AI claims of 30 years ago. Rodney Brooks was there to assure us that not every AI-geek believed in heaven/hell on earth by the time of Windows-2022.

'Consciousness in action' and 'consciousness and wakefulness in sleep and coma' were solid scientific presentations, with philosophical finesse. It was kind of fun hearing presenter Nicholas Schiff and discussant Petra Stoerig go back and forth in response to a question by Robert Van Gulig, as to whether the specific-thalamic circuits or the non-specific (paramedial) thalamic circuits are more essential for basic consciousness — and then to see them basically agree (as Robert concurred with me after the session) that the paramedial thalamus circuits seem essential for basic arousal, the posterior lateral (specific) thalamic circuits essential for the contents of consciousness, and the paramedial (again) crucial for connecting together the individual pockets of modules activated by the specific thalamus. Good stuff! (I was one of the people who had urged Nicholas the day before to include his paramedial thalamic material.)

'Is there pure consciousness?' was a grand debate between Western and Eastern philosophy — although both by westerners. It was an unusual debate because the 'con' position went first. Barry Dainton stated western-logical reasons why contentless-consciousness made no sense, and Jonathan Shear (from my alma mater VCU) argued back. Shear took an interesting audience poll, asking us how many of us had had experiences of 'pure — contentless — consciousness.' As he read it, about 70 or 80 people — out of the 400–500 in the hall — raised their hands. Many of these same people raised various questions about meditation during many different Q/A periods. They seem to represent the stronghold of the 'enlightenment' crowd. Despite the tone of my comments, I hope they remain strong in the Tucson conference.

'Art and the Brain' featured veterans V.S. Ramachandran and Semir Zeki (played by Susan Blackmore, who read part of Zeki's paper — since Zeki failed to show), with Amy Ione as the discussant. Although this journal was plugged several times during that session (as carrying Zeki's article), I felt that Ione was rightly disappointed with Zeki talking about art and music and the brain without really using his neuroscientific expertise in dealing with a lot of relevant research in the area. Ione made the excellent point that when a neuroscientist makes a *philosophical* point, we should not give it the weight of a *scientific* point. 'Rama' was his usual delightful, provocative self in extending the rare gift of synaesthesia to represent just about any 'commonsensical' linkage between two senses in 'metaphor'.

The 'nonclassical brain processes' plenary was our basic exposure to the microtubules, quantum mechanics, backward causation and the like. It was interesting to hear the chair of the session, Stuart Hameroff, giving the most provocative statements and responding to most responses in the question time. Hameroff

is the anesthesiologist mentioned above, from the University of Arizona's Center of Consciousness Studies. He proclaimed that panpsychism may be the solution to the problems of proto-conscious qualia, the hard problem, quantum coherence, pre-consciousness-leading-to-consciousness, the free-will problem, analogous time going backwards, and microtubules. While such remarks are provocative, sceptical brain-research folks find Nancy Woolf's careful reportage of actual microtubules in actual pathways to be more credible. But, then, every revolution must have its shares of flaming prophets and cautious plodders.

Let me close with one of the more delightful aspects of conference-going: meeting interesting people over lunch and the like. Just a few vignettes from my schmoozings:

- talking with an astronomer from the US Naval Observatory whom I had met at ASSC5, who had just realized (from our discussion) that most people can form mental pictures.
- this astronomer's revelation came during one of several talks in and outside of concurrent sessions about the fact that I and a small percentage of people are mental non-imagers. The upshot of some of these talks was a general agreement that we need at least perceptual or verbal brain-area activation to 'think', but not necessarily to have full conscious awareness of the images.
- an economist from the Federal Communications Commission in DC who had spent time as a student at Maharishi University and was interested in collective consciousness (such as evidence that group meditation has made some urban areas more peaceful); he had attended the parapsychology workshop; we also talked about economics, Marx, Keynes, etc.
- a good casual talk with Anthony Freeman, managing editor of *JCS*, learning more about his rocky experiences as a questioning Anglo-Catholic and his blend of working for *JCS* and some local pastoring; we also talked historically about the various 'consciousness' conferences and journals.
- two Brazilian men that I met at different times: one interested when I mentioned mental imagery, to which he talked about how imagination controls many people and seems to underlie superstitions, as the imagery seems to take us over; he has worked in Brazil in imagery therapy. The other Brazilian is a tenure-track physics professor who felt he could not tell his colleagues where he had taken off to this week, for fear they would look askance at this particular pursuit of knowledge in a way that might even jeopardize his tenure.
- a retired philosophy and mathematics professor who was talking up his book which was on display — wherein he maintains that the 'hard problem' is really an impossible problem, since we cannot predict the smell of ammonia from its chemical properties. He and I agreed that even Nagel's bat does not *know* what it is like to be a bat.

A great time was had by all!