

Let's Not Blame It on the Brain

Alternative States of Consciousness for

Tapping into the Potential of Evolution

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The current essay is the result of an inner struggle that I faced during the recent years, and that surged more acutely after reading the book of Arthur Koestler, Ghost in the Machine¹. For many years, I felt that something was wrong with the human species, and this sentiment grew stronger in opposition to at least other two experiences in my life, i.e.: on the one hand the uplifting relationship with my horses and my dogs, who are consistently behaving in a loving, gentle, generous, and kind manner; and on the other hand, my engagement in consciousness—altering practices, such as active dreaming, meditation, reiki, or shamanic journeying, during which I noticed that there was a glimpse of “a better and enhanced me, within me,” as well as within other humans, something that revealed empathy, joy and peace during the sessions that I was leading or participating in, something that was shedding light on a better future for all life on Earth.

On top of these, there were all my readings about the “other” history of humankind, the one revolving around spirituality and mysticism, and presenting itself very differently from the “mainstream” history. As someone who plays the piano, I can provide the example of the octaves on the piano keyboard. On an average, any piano encompasses eight octaves, and the mainstream music sheets work with three or four octaves that are placed at the centre of the piano keyboard. There is where the mainstream history of mankind was played, for the better or worse, within the most accessible area of human consciousness. Nevertheless,

¹ Koestler, Arthur—*The Ghost in the Machine*, Hutchinson & Co, 1967.

some of us tried the other octaves, and the music started to sound more harmonious, and we were able to even hear the cosmos in the new musical compositions.

Finally, there was one more layer of contrast to the human's predicament, in my view, and that was revealed to me during my journeys to Peru and Tibet. I remember, as if it was yesterday, the moment when we arrived, after four days on the Camino del Inca at the Intipunku (i.e., the Gate of the Sun) located above Machu Picchu and, as the sun started to rise and the clouds were spreading away, the splendour of the Inca settlement was being uncovered. That was the moment when I realised that, even though we call our world "the civilised one," especially in the global North, Machu Picchu was, in my view, the most beautiful, harmoniously built, and wisely designed "city" that I have ever seen. Furthermore, in Tibet I felt overwhelmed, in a good sense, by the immense knowledge accumulated and systematised, the complex structure and organisation of the spiritual life within the temples, as well as by the purposeful focus of an entire country² on pursuing spirituality as main goal at individual and community level.

As we are the prevailing species (and by no means the superior one) that has been intervening on the planet, and that changed the reality of life on Earth, for all species, pushing the planet on the brink of extinction, the question of the essay is:

How does the consciousness of the human that brought about this reality differ from the consciousness of the human who will potentially transform this reality?

Introduction

I did not expect to arrive, during my years of adulthood, at the situation of having to deal, emotionally and mentally, with manifold struggles triggered all at once, by three factors:

1. The frustration of being part of a species too often overcome by meanness and greed, a species that willingly and intentionally murders its kin.

² At present, the former independent country of Tibet is part of the Republic of China, following its occupation, and it is administratively defined as "the autonomous region of Tibet."

2. The anguish of facing the multiple crises of today—overheated planet, wars, collapse of biosphere, and, moreover, of perceiving the lack of awareness, responsibility, of urgency, and the prevailing neglect of the profound crises, by us, humans.
3. The pain of witnessing the extinction in progress, in fact accelerating, and of imagining, even if as only one scenario of many, the near future dissolution of nature, animals, and humans.

One might say that to handle the above issues, I should see a shrink. Well, not me...I prefer to go riding with my horses, jog on trails in nature, meditate, daydream, write, spend time with humans with whom I share the same values, and, for quick health fixes, use intentional self-healing, see my homeopath or acupuncturist. Nevertheless, I would like to stress the fact that these are not ways to “deal” with reality. I am underlining that the crises of today sum up to a consciousness crisis, hence a consciousness shift, upgrade, mutation, or leap, no matter how we name it, is ardently needed...One more step in the infinite evolution of all sentient matter: planet, beings, universe...The process is by no means human-centric (even though we believe or would like it to be about us), yet we need to responsibly and “consciously” play our part and bring our contribution.

I shall refer in the following paragraphs to “problem consciousness” and “solution consciousness,” yet this phrasing is used only within the scope of this essay to render the contrast between two types of awareness at the human level, one that led to the present “breakdown,” and one that could potentially lead to a “breakthrough.”

“Problem” Consciousness

The history of human species, a short one within the history of planet Earth, was paved both with misery, and glory. The aim of the current essay is neither to diminish the achievements, nor exaggerate the failures of human history. Yet the aim is, first, to highlight several factors (e.g., biology, mindset, worldviews) that brought us to the critical situation of today, when we perceive the planet as “dead” matter, external to us, and hence we feel entitled to aggressively exploit its resources.

According to Jean Gebser³, the mutation of consciousness that shaped recent history is the rational/mental one, implying separation of self from environment, and imposing our will on nature. Furthermore, in terms of worldview, as Christian de Quincey⁴ observes, materialism claims that matter is insentient, and *the world is wholly made up of objective physical stuff*. The human-centric view adds to the problem, and then, according to Arthur Koestler, there is, as well, an inherent “mistake” in the biology of the human, that apparently pre-conditions us, and will potentially lead us to our doom.

Thus, about half a million years ago, the human brain grew explosively, which led to the consequence of insufficient coordination between the old (i.e., brainstem/instinctual brain, and midbrain/limbic system, emotional brain), and new brain (i.e., neocortex). Koestler maintains that there is an innate *schizophysiology* in our species, a conflict between what we *feel* and *think*, that we are endowed with an organ that we don’t know how to use, and more significantly, that we are powerless in front of this situation.

Alberto Villoldo frames the same issue of the old and new brain split as “the ways of fear versus the ways of wisdom,”⁵ and maintains that *the old brain perceives the world as a frightening place, filled with rivals competing for the same scarce resources, while the new brain comprehends that we are all connected*.

The problem does not reside in the triune brain *per se*, described by the American neuroscientist Paul D. McLean⁶, encompassing *the* reptilian brain which is instinctual, the mammalian brain which is emotional, and the neocortex where reason and logic take place. The problem consists of the poor connection between the old (R- and M-brains) and new brain (neocortex), as de Quincey notes: *even irrational beliefs are felt to be true*.

Each component of the triune brain plays, of course, an essential part. For example, “fight or flight” (or freeze) is a highly efficient survival mechanism found in all species. From my experience, I was able to understand this response through engaging with my horses. Thus, while riding with them in nature, a pheasant took sudden flight from a bush (moved by the

³ Gebser, Jean—*The Ever-Present Origin*, Ohio University Press, 1986

⁴ de Quincey, Christian—*Radical Knowing*, Park Street Press, 2005

⁵ Villoldo, Alberto—*Power Up Your Brain. The Neuroscience of Enlightenment*, Hay House Inc, 2011

⁶ Quoted by Alberto Villoldo

same survival mechanism, after sensing the presence of the horse), and my horse jumped to the side or burst into galloping. The “fight or flight” response is healthy if it remains brief, responding to an actual and immediate threat. However, it could develop into pathological expressions if the response is prolonged, e.g., by ruminating on (false) problems, and thus developing a high level of stress, caused by the unresolved “fight or flight,” which turns into a frustrating “freeze,” with negative implications.

Moreover, it is important to mention that, besides the poor coordination between the old and new brains in humans, our reasoning abilities (rooted in the more evolved neocortex brain) could neither avoid the bloody history of humankind, nor solve the crises that we face today.

As de Quincey notes, the challenge is twofold: “*on one hand, we lost touch with the deep foundation of reason in the feelings of the body, and the networks of feelings in nature. On the other hand, we have not made full use of the gift of reason we already have.*”⁷ He titles the prevailing consciousness of modern rationalism as *postconquest consciousness*, quoting anthropologist E. Richard Sorenson, and mentioning that, by its nature, *dialectic and rational*, postconquest consciousness is *confrontational*, as one person’s idea is confronted by an opposite idea of another person, and hoping that a new synthesis will arise from the encounter.

Unfortunately, the way that the encounter took place between the postconquest and *preconquest* modes of consciousness turned into a big loss for humankind, one that continues to reverberate in the world today. Given that the preconquest consciousness seeks to accommodate differences for the greater good of the community, it yielded in front of reason, of the postconquest consciousness.

“Solution” Consciousness

Why is it that the indigenous people did not suffer the consequences of the apparently “split brain?” Why is it that, endowed with the same brain, they lived and continue to live in

⁷ de Quincey, Christian—*Radical Knowing*, Park Street Press, 2005

harmony and deep connectedness with the Earth, with the “more-than-human?”⁸ Why is it that, instead of anguish and pain, the consciousness of the indigenous peoples brings about feelings of joy, peace and solace?

To respond to these questions, I would like to first refer to my own experience. For more than 25 years, I practice techniques that lead to the experience of alternative states of consciousness, and I also spend a significant share of my time in nature, together with my horses and dogs. I owe the largest part of my “quality of life” (the “intangible” aspects of it, such as peace of mind, emotional balance, health, inspiration, energy level, optimism, etc.) to these two experiences, which, for me, can be translated into two types of values, or mindsets:

1. Perceiving ourselves, and living our lives as part of something bigger, of a nurturing, gentle and protective cosmos, of a higher, all-encompassing consciousness and energy;
2. Harvesting the benefits of alternative states of consciousness, of those liminal states (meditation, hypnagogia, dreaming, etc.) through which we enrich our knowledge about the world, and about ourselves, we discover new meanings to reality and “the facts of life,” as well as we further enable our sentiments of communion with all life, and gratitude for being part of the grand journey of sentience.

With regards to the first point, I recently came across an observation from philosopher David Abram about shamans who, in the context of indigenous communities, used to live at the border of the village. This position facilitates his role as *“an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants, but from the human community back to the local earth,”* as Abram explains, and as the author continues by saying that *“the medicine person’s primary allegiance, then, is not to the human community, but to the earthly web of relations in which that community is embedded—it is from this that his or her power to alleviate human illness derives—and this sets the local magician apart from other persons.”*

⁸ Abram, David—*The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books Edition, 2017

This is a crucial observation about the role of the shaman, the one who stands as the community's sage, the medicine man/woman, and the compass of the community. We can conclude that the shaman owes a large share of his/her wisdom to the ability to connect to the consciousness of the web of life, to understand the messages that are conveyed through other types of language than the human one, and to render their meaning to the human community.

Philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade⁹ made similar points when referring to the shaman's ability to understand the behaviour and even the language of animals, an ability that signifies the shaman *"re-establishes the state from illo tempore, from the mythical¹⁰ times, when the fracture between the human and the animals had not yet taken place."* Eliade continues the same logic, by providing the example of the *tungus¹¹* shaman who, *"during the shamanic trance, knows the language of the whole Nature."*

Concerning the second point, about harvesting the benefits of alternative states of consciousness, as Christian de Quincey has observed, *"our indigenous ancestors have practiced ASCs for millennia and, in doing so, have found ways to avoid or overcome the consequences of split-brains. In alternative states of consciousness, the divisions between thinking and feeling are transcended,"* resulting in what de Quincey has termed *"feeling our thinking."* As thinking remains "embodied," there is no disconnect between the neocortex and the limbic system of the brain or, we could say, when we feel our thinking, we are "thinking" with the *whole* body, not just the brain. Furthermore, the aim of the pre-conquest consciousness is to optimise feelings of well-being in the community.

To substantiate the previous affirmation that I made about alternative states of consciousness as facilitating creativity, problem-solving, or better decision-making, as well as sentiments of hope, solace, joy, peace, and many more positive ones, I share below several testimonials from participants in active dreaming¹² sessions that I led in the recent years:

⁹ Eliade, Mircea—*Șamanismul și tehnicile arhaice ale extazului*, Humanitas, 2017.

¹⁰ See the *mythical mutation of consciousness* framed by Jean Gebser.

¹¹ Member of an indigenous people of central and southeastern Siberia.

¹² Active Dreaming is a practice framed by Robert Moss, which taps into the experience of the alternative states of consciousness associated with (day)dreaming/lucid dreaming.

- *My first experience with active dreaming was insightful, enlightening and peaceful. It allowed me to become aware of, and give meaning to, some old and recurrent “stuff” that was stored in my mind for several years.*
- *Active dreaming helped me slow down, focus, reconnect with myself, listen to my body, and to the universe around me. It helped me remember long forgotten dreams...*
- *Each time I participated in an active dreaming session, I received “responses” to questions that concerned me at that time.*

Evolved Consciousness?

Arthur Koestler, even though rendering a pessimistic view on the future shaped by humankind, he still highlights an evolutionary pattern in nature, that he terms “*draw back to leap forward*”, and which consists of “*undoing and re-doing—i.e., an evolutionary retreat from specialised adult forms of bodily structure and behaviour, to an earlier or more primitive (but also more plastic and less committed stage), followed by a sudden advance in a new direction.*” This, the author notices, is a “*favourite gambit in the grand strategy of the evolutionary process,*” by which nature avoided the “*dead ends,*” and he provides examples from several species that benefitted from the *draw back to leap* process. Alberto Villoldo enforces this assumption by saying that when an extinction event is in progress, then *evolution pushes the accelerator.*

As I see it, we may seize the opportunity of this evolutionary process, especially in relation to the evolution of knowledge, where, as Koestler observed, consolidation led to increased rigidity, and in the dead end of overspecialisation. As the author maintains, “*eventually there is a crisis and a new breakthrough out of the blind alley.*” At the same time, he draws attention to the fact that “*the new theoretical structure which emerges from the breakthrough is not built on top of the previous edifice; it branches out from the point where progress has gone wrong.*”

My interpretation of this statement is that the renewal, the rebirth that we seek, might play out in totally different ways compared with what we know and acknowledge as “*right,*”

nowadays. Once again, it seems that we face a grand opportunity, and we need to explore it by employing more of the capabilities of our brains.

Jean Gebser heralded the *integral* mutation of consciousness, according to which the *strong sense of separation* loosens, and differences fade into the whole, and “*all previous structures are alive in the new mutation.*” De Quincey re-enforces Gebser’s position by saying that “*we can evolve beyond reason and when we do so we do not obliterate the benefits we gained from reason.*” This implies embracing “the Mystic’s Gift,” given that “*mystic knowing includes, while transcending, both reason and somatic feeling.*”

Jane Goodall¹³ stated in her talk at Davos 2024 that three “things” might get us through the current crises: *nature, innovation, and the human spirit*. By “nature,” she meant, of course, nature’s inherent ability to restore and regenerate, by “innovation,” she meant, for example, the technologies that we already produce to store and offset greenhouse gas emissions or generate renewable energy, and by the “human spirit,” she meant our ability to tackle apparently impossible challenges, as proven by some events in history.

There are global trends nowadays that attempt to deal with the current situation, yet they do so by employing the same materialistic worldview. For example, the “de-growth” or “beyond GDP” paradigms position themselves in contrast to the previous theories and public policies, but they have not yet been substantiated by effective measures and roadmaps. Thus, “nature-based solutions,” even though rightfully re-acknowledging the paramount role of biodiversity, natural capital, and the place of the human as part of a bigger ecosystem (instead of the human-centric view), lack the implementation mechanisms, as many of the operational aspects contradict the current economic paradigms. Finally, the wave of innovative technologies, which are rapidly emerging gain speed at the expense of an incomplete assessment of their actual capacities to mitigate the current climate crises, and of their negative impacts.

In my view, it looks like we are trying to turn “problem consciousness” into a “solution consciousness,” by completely obliterating the evolution that such a process entails.

¹³ English primatologist and anthropologist, having worked extensively on conservation and animal welfare.

Instead, I propose we consider an approach that combines the *letting go* suggested by de Quincey,¹⁴ and the conscious pursuit of the evolutionary path, at individual level. Both would imply assuming a “receptive” awareness, opening to the unfolding of the evolution of consciousness at the level of the “web of life,” and both can be enhanced by practices that lead to alternative states of consciousness. As de Quincey emphasizes, “*changes in consciousness can accelerate growth of new neural connections,*” according to the principle of *downward causation* suggested by Eric M. Weiss.¹⁵

Consequently, let’s not blame the crises on the brain, and instead let us consciously tap into the potential of our prefrontal cortex, the part of our new brain engaged in meditative and transcendental experiences. In the view of Alberto Villoldo, we can complement ASCs with the right nutrition, and exercise, to literally “power up our brain,” and hence support neurogenesis and neuroplasticity.

Let us look forward to an era of wisdom.

¹⁴ Christian de Quincey—*BlindSpots: 21 Good Reasons to Think Before You Talk*, Park Street Press, 2015

¹⁵ Eric M. Weiss—*The Long Trajectory: The Metaphysics of Reincarnation and Life after Death*, iUniverse, 2012