

Consciousness and Looking-Glass Science

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INTRODUCTION

With reference to the apparent chasm between scientific research and consciousness research, Christian de Quincey opens the chapter *Radical Science*¹ by sharing the view of his colleague, Dr. Martin Schwartz², who maintained that it was *easier* to access and test objective, scientific data, than subjective, private spiritual experiences.

What does this mean? Is it *easier* indeed? De Quincey argues that the perception of the easiness is merely culturally conditioned as, for example “understanding a voltmeter” may not be easy in a non-Western culture, while “observing and understanding subtle energies” may not be easy for our societies. Moreover, I would say that essentially what scientific research did for us, or what we managed to *achieve* through science, is a false sense of *safety* induced by the process of introducing, and relying on an *external benchmark or point of reference* that has been proven through means and methods created by us.

The gain brought by scientific research is that it can provide reliable and precise data (about the objective physical world), an unmovable landmark, on which we usually can rely unconditionally. Nevertheless, when science fails us, it does so in face of the *unpredictable*. On the other hand, consciousness research, would embrace the unpredictable, or what Nassim Nicholas Taleb metaphorically titles “the Black Swan³,” describing the extreme impact of rare and unpredictable outlier events (*i.e.*, as well as the human tendency to find simplistic explanations for these events, retrospectively).

¹ de Quincey, Christian—*Radical Knowing*, Park Street Press, 2005

² At that time, research scientist at the University of Virginia

³ Taleb, Nassim Nicholas—*The Black Swan. The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, Random House, 2007

The cosmos and all events are at their core characterised by unpredictability, constant change, and transformation, evolution, and an *inner* dynamic that allows for adaptability, resilience, and the ability to thrive. Hence, to perform consciousness research, and eventually what de Quincey titles “radical science,” means recognising and embracing our position as part of the sentient, intelligent, and unpredictable universe, and start embedding the subjective explorations of the “interior world of consciousness.”

The planetary ecosystem is currently coping with global warming, high levels of GHG⁴ emissions, and the depletion of natural resources. Science fails us in this context, as we are not able to predict how these changes will impact Earth on medium- and long-run, and how the planet will self-regulate⁵ to cope and manage these conditions. Then, in the field of medicine, for example, we consider that it is *easier* to take a pill and benefit from instant or quick fix to an illness, yet our body’s enzymes do not recognize the substances in the pill, and struggle to cope with them, and eliminate them, at the expense of other organs⁶.

On the contrary, Polynesian navigators, called “waymakers,” were following their destination guided by the movements of birds, ocean currents, and the position of the stars. The tribes on the isles of Andaman from India⁷ saved themselves from the tsunami in 2004 by moving from the shores to the hills, at least two weeks before the disaster happened. Robert Moss is arguing that they not only read the signs of warning from nature, but they also had premonitory dreams, and decided to act at the level of the entire community. Then, with regards to the above health-related examples, there is a huge difference between healing and *mainstream medicine*, and I shall delve more on this topic later in the essay.

HOW TO PROCEED?

The first step towards a science of consciousness is, according to de Quincey, to expand the current scientific methodology consisting of a combination of sensory empiricism and

⁴ Greenhouse gases, which encompass seven categories of gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, or nitrous oxide.

⁵ The *Gaia hypothesis* (introduced by James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis) maintains that Earth and its biological systems behave as a single entity, which has self-regulatory feedback loops that keep the conditions on the planet within boundaries that are favourable for life.

⁶ M.D. Shinya, Hiromi—*The Enzyme Factor*, Millichap Books, 2022

⁷ Moss, Robert—*The Secret History of Dreaming*, New World Library, 2008

rational analysis, and relying on the “three Ms—materialism, mechanism, and measurement.” Nevertheless, to achieve “radical science,” we do not need to wander too far from the core of the scientific method, as the “POR—Procedure, Observation, and Report”—approach can be applied both to current science (i.e., third-person, measurable, objects), and to first-person subjective, as well as second person intersubjective experiences. As de Quincey is highlighting, the POR methodology encompasses “all three investigative perspectives of objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity,” given that:

- *Procedure* sets the protocols for conducting the investigation, and it represents a third-person objective framework;
- *Observation*, as a first-person subjective event, leads to collecting “research” data that show up in experience;
- *Report* consists of communicating about the findings to a community of peers, for other researchers to further replicate and test the experiment, thus representing a second-person intersubjective endeavour.

To provide one example about how the POR method can be applied in consciousness research, I shall refer to the “Dream Tracking” approach proposed by Robert Moss⁸ within the practice of active dreaming. The procedure consists of the following steps:

1. One person from the group volunteers to share a dream.
2. The same person communicates to the group her / his intentions when asking the others to act as “trackers,” by answering two questions:
 - a. What do you want to know (more about the dream)?
 - b. What do you intend to do, inside the dream?
3. The rest of the group is ready to *enter* the storyline of the dream.
4. The entire group enters a state of meditation, animated by the sound of the shamanic drum or by sounds of nature.
5. The *owner* of the dream re-enters her / his own dream, while the other members of the group step into the storyline of the dream, and let it unfold in a unique manner for each of them.

⁸ Moss, Robert—*The Practice of Active Dreaming: A Manual for Dream Teachers, Level One*, Copyright 2003-2017 Robert Moss.

6. Upon *returning* from the alternative state of consciousness, each person from the group takes notes of the information gathered.
7. Then, each person shares the information with the group, by stating "... In my dream of your dream ..."
8. Finally, dreamer and trackers discuss the *action* that the dreamer will take within the next days, to bring the awareness and insight of the dream into everyday life, and to harvest the gains stemming from the new insights.

The POR method is identifiable in this case by an existing "Procedure," i.e., dream tracking, then "Observation" is involved in steps 4, 5, and 6, while "Report" is ensured in steps 7 and 8. As a practice aiming to experience and study alternative states of consciousness, active dreaming is contributing to consciousness research by providing procedures that lead to observation, and then sharing of findings within one-to-one or group sessions.

While expanding the debate around "radical science," de Quincey argues that intuition and other forms of knowing that are considered by mainstream science as irrational are, instead, "extra-rational," beyond reason. Instead of rational analysis, and language, intuition and extra-rational forms of knowing are better reported by art, poetry, music or dance. In this regard, "dream theatre," another *method* of the active dreaming practice, involves the enactment of a brief theatre show based on the dream of one of the participants. He or she tells the dream, and then chooses people from the group to play specific roles within the *performance* (e.g., humans, animals, trees, forest, or even objects). Then, after each person learns the *script*, the play is rehearsed, and then performed in its final version, for the entire group, which becomes the audience.

Similar to dream tracking, the *dream theatre*, besides awakening strong emotions among all participants, it brings to the surface new insights, as while the performance unfolds, both the dream *owner* and the other participants are uncovering and / or discovering fresh angles to the initial story.

SCIENCE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

In setting the foundations for radical science, de Quincey proposes the shift from "plate-glass science to **looking-glass science**," given that, to undergo consciousness research, the

knower becomes the known, and there is no separation between subject and object, as “only consciousness can study consciousness.” In short, Plate-Glass Science assumes a separation between the experiencing subject and the data being investigated—as if the researcher were shielded behind a thick plate of glass. In contrast, Looking-Glass Science assumes that such separation is not even possible, given that consciousness is studying itself—as if in a mirror.

While presenting the opposite features of the criteria used by the two types of science, de Quincey is referring, among others, to the dichotomy between “fear and trust,” which leads us to what I mentioned at the beginning of the essay about our attitude in front of the unpredictable cosmos, of the dynamic and processes inherent to all existence.

To highlight the fundamental differences between Plate-Glass Science, and Looking-Glass Science, de Quincey defines, by opposition, the six criteria employed by each of them, as follows:

1. *Objectivity*, for observation only, versus *Subjectivity*, for observation coupled with participation;
2. *Measurement/Quantity*, for certainty, versus *Engagement/Quality*, for informative discernment;
3. *Mechanism*, for causal explanations, versus *Meaning*, for understanding patterns of connection;
4. *Prediction*, for control, versus *Growth*, for enrichment;
5. *Control*, as underlying motivation, versus *Transformation (i.e., of experienced values)*, as natural unfolding of the investigator’s potentials.

Essentially, Looking-Glass Science alone is capable of sustaining consciousness research, as in this case, “the knower is now trying to know the knower!” Consciousness is not an object, hence Plate-Glass Science fails, by attempting to use the same principle of subject—object separation. True consciousness research involves and requires consciousness *directly* knowing itself. This could be via rigorous meditation practices and/or via intersubjective direct sharing of meaning (between two or more “holons” of consciousness).

To substantiate my outline of the six criteria, proposed by de Quincey for the “looking-glass science,” I am referring to a recent example of healing assisted by homeopathy, for the benefit of my mare, Laponia. A few years ago, she had an accident, and she almost got drowned in an area filled with reeds and water, near our farm. Since she is visually impaired, she got scared and accidentally got into the water. Fortunately, after two hours of joint efforts from Laponia, veterinarian, firefighters, and myself, we managed to get her out of the water, and Laponia bounced back to good health, without any apparent consequences. Nevertheless, six months after the accident, she started to suddenly and frantically circle in her box, without any apparent reason, within episodes that lasted from one hour to almost four. Walking her outside was the only way to calm her down, and gradually bring her back to the natural state of balance.

I spoke with several veterinary doctors, but their diagnoses and allopathic treatments did not bring resolution for Laponia’s problems. Consequently, I broadened the search, and I managed to get a telemedicine session with a “holistic vet” from the United Kingdom, a lady who is extensively employing homeopathy for healing animals. The healing *journey* that us three went through together—the vet, Laponia, and myself—is, in my opinion, on one hand, an example of integrating multiple perspectives (objectivity, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity), and, on the other hand, an example of how *looking-glass science* can be implicitly applied, as the healing of Laponia, in its unfolding, informed me about the nature and dynamic of my own consciousness:

1. The process involves my **subjectivity**, as I need to be “the spokesperson” of my mare, and the vet is asking me questions about her behaviour, emotions, reactions, or expressions. Consequently, I am constantly observing **my** feelings, and thoughts in the face of her health issues. The observation coupled with participation has, in this case at least a twofold role, *i.e.*, to investigate her feelings as well as my emotions / reactions during the episodes, and to inform decisions about the next steps in her treatment.
2. My complete **engagement** is required, as I am keeping a journal with the aim of rendering and structuring the information about the dynamic of my own consciousness, throughout Laponia’s healing journey. For example, this refers to how my feelings and thoughts are shifting from fear and deep concern, to

relief, and optimism, as the episodes are receding. Moreover, I am permanently communicating with Laponia, and reflecting on our exchange of information and emotions.

3. Then, through in-depth discussions with the vet, I am uncovering and communicating new intuitions, which are leading to new **meaning**. By discerning patterns within my own consciousness such as, for example, reluctance to go through the repetitive episodes with Laponia, I am *re-checking* my commitment to her healing, or, by recognising my (bits of) scepticism, I am *re-stating* my intention to stick to the healing journey.
4. At present, after almost one year of **growth** for all parties involved, Laponia has regained her balance, and the episodes of panic attack, driven by her central nervous system, and triggered by events that brought back the past trauma (e.g., heavy rain, strong wind, sudden change of temperature), are very rare and short. From the point of view of my own consciousness, I can testify that I *outgrew* my initial fear, and anger / revolt, by *letting go* to the process, and to the new state of play that gradually emerged.
5. After being part of Laponia's natural process of healing, *a new version of me emerged* as well, as the **transformation** took place for all of us involved. In my particular case, I came out feeling *lighter*, and more confident in my skills *as horseperson* that can take care of *the herd*, by relying extensively on "extra-rational" ways of knowing.
6. Eventually, by **trusting** Laponia's life force, and the wisdom of the sentient universe that brought the solution to our challenges, I could contribute myself to the fortunate outcome. My consciousness interpreted the reality of Laponia's episodes as *uncontrollable* or *out of control*, yet I needed to accept this apparent *chaos*, engage with it while assisting her and providing the homeopathic remedies, in order to then to be capable of looking and *moving* beyond it.

EPILOGUE

Wolfgang Pauli,⁹ Austrian theoretical physicist, and pioneer of quantum physics, confessed that dreams were “his secret laboratory,¹⁰” where he received and tested his best ideas, and where he was encouraged to move beyond existing paradigms in science. Of course, “looking-glass science” has already happened in practice, across various domains of knowledge, or spirituality, although not as science, *per se*. Now it is time to move beyond, and fully embrace its principles, into a radical shift, that would allow a fully-fledge consciousness, as well as *consciousness-driven* research.

⁹ Pauli is known for the “effect” that bears his name, the yet unexplained phenomenon according to which his presence in science laboratories would often lead to machines catching fire or exploding.

¹⁰ Quoted by Robert Moss.