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Exploring the Boundaries of Experience and Self

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This was one slick conference! Plenary lectures, workshops, two concurrent, rapid-fire series of talks, poster presentations, supplies of excellent coffee and wine — all ran like clockwork thanks to the hard work of the organizers (**Mike Beaton, Guy Saunders and Max Velmans**). What about the content? Well, a more apt conference title I quite often felt, particularly as talks were succeeded by questions, might have been *Demonstrating Ambiguities of Language and Meaning Used in Relation to Experience and Self*. Let me explain.

The introductory lecture by biologist **Brian Goodwin** set the scene. He remarked that use of language makes different demands on speakers and hearers. It's easiest for speakers to use the *same* sound for everything they want to refer to — after all, they already know what they mean; for hearers it is easiest if there's a completely different sound for each referent. So some sort of compromise must be reached. Apparently a 'phase shift' occurs as these opposing demands compete, resulting in the emergence of language with moderate ambiguity. And the shift is characterised by word frequencies which show a power law distribution — one that is observed in real languages (termed Zipf's law). He then went on to suggest that systems for reading and controlling genomes are analogous to languages, in that they are about conveying meaning and show similar frequency

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distributions to language — but that was a side issue from the conference's point of view.

Most of the talks I heard (with two concurrent sessions, you had to be choosy) were indeed about describing boundaries or lack of boundaries — between selves and societies, consciousness and its unconscious underpinnings, bodies and minds, minds and environments, emotions and cognitions for example. But speakers generally had to spend a lot of time first establishing what they meant by terms they were using. Each knew what they themselves meant — if my own experience was typical, I should qualify the 'knew' with 'more or less' — but conveying it to others was a problem. Plenary lecturers had twice as long as the rest of us to explain themselves, but even stars like **Shaun Gallagher** or **Dan Zahavi** had no language which everyone in their audiences could follow with ease. Maybe they found it a struggle to understand one another at times.

It was hard to explore boundaries in selves, I felt, when there was no automatic understanding of the meaning of language used in relation to those selves. Of course some speakers might have taken the view, had the question been explicitly raised, that there is no boundary between language and experience or self, so explorations of self and the language used to describe it are essentially equivalent. But I suspect they would have been in a minority.

Not all talks, however, were fuzzy (although any perceived 'fuzziness' may often have been down to my own inadequate understanding of languages or concepts — the boundaries and origins of 'fuzz' are as problematic as any of those discussed!). Three in particular stuck in my mind, one for each day of the conference. First, **Gethin Hughes** described how he has found that a conscious choice *not to* act is preceded by similar neural activity to that famously discovered by Benjamin Libet, which precedes a choice *to* act. This finding puts almost the final nail in the coffin of Libet's conception that maybe we have 'free won't', even if we don't have 'free will'. It doesn't settle the whole 'free will' issue of course, but does close a door on one particular possibility.

The next day, **Valerie Gray Hardcastle** gave a characteristically lucid account¹ of precisely why the popular story relating aggressivity directly to testosterone levels is wrong. By implication all similar, simplistic stories should be regarded as suspect until proved otherwise.

[1] When Chris Nunn wrote these words he had no idea that Professor Hardcastle had been invited to become senior editor of this journal, and so in one sense his 'boss' — A.F.

On the final day, the plenary talk was given by **Alan Wallace** who told us of his clear conviction that consciousness studies require Jamesian introspection if they are to progress, and this implies a need for trained cadres of introspectors — the Buddhist meditation traditions suggesting how they might be trained. ‘Great! We should really get on with this programme,’ was the immediate reaction I shared with my neighbours at the talk. Trouble was, Wallace backed up his argument with an historical analysis that might have been lifted straight from *1066 and All That*² — wicked, dogmatic pope once locked up Galileo; pope-like scientific establishment now suppresses Jamesian sensitivity. Not a picture likely to find much favour with historians! The rhetoric was certainly great, but the substance . . .? Accusations of being blinded by dogma can, it appears, cut several ways.

Then there was a session early on that took us into an ethical grey area, I thought. It was billed as a ‘workshop’, conducted by an experienced group leader from the Esalen Institute; one which would enable ‘deepest contact with one’s own internal experience . . . and that of other people.’ I was a bit surprised, therefore when she launched straight into what was clearly a patter designed to induce light hypnosis — in my clinical psychiatry days, I occasionally used identical techniques. It was all very pleasant and relaxing; our leader’s voice became ever clearer and more bell-like as the session progressed. When I subsequently pointed out to her what she’d been doing, her reply was along the lines ‘it may have been *like* hypnosis, but it wasn’t *really* hypnosis because the aim was quite different.’ I’m sure she sincerely believed that. The trouble with hypnotic patters is that they, too, cut both ways; suggestions made to listeners equally impact on their originators. And, in medicine at least, it is regarded as distinctly ‘iffy’ to try to hypnotize someone without first obtaining their explicit consent, whatever one’s personal beliefs about the value of the process.

So what was achieved by the conference as a whole? One could take the view that useful, shared meanings may never emerge from all the conflicting or unclear word usages. In that case, persistence along these lines is likely eventually to provoke a reaction manifesting in a neo-Behaviourism of some sort. Allan Wallace has a clear proposal for avoiding this outcome. But it’s one that, if adopted, could prove to be built on sand — rather like the psychoanalysis that had such a prominent place in America even at the height of the Behaviourist era;

[2] A popular satire on British school history as taught in the first half of the twentieth century, with every event and individual caricatured in black-and-white terms as either a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing.

and which provides one of many counter-examples to Wallace's historical thesis. Carl Jung, whose interest in Eastern, introspectionist philosophies matched Wallace's and, it's worth noting, was shared by some scientific 'popes' of the time (notably Erwin Schrödinger and Wolfgang Pauli), warned half a century ago: 'If we now try to cover our nakedness with the gorgeous trappings of the east ... we would be playing our own history false.'

On the other hand, there's another possibility, which I hope for myself. It's clear that consciousness studies is an infant discipline. All of us can agree on that, at least. And a necessary precursor to the emergence of useful language in babies is a 'babbling' stage when all sorts of, often apparently incoherent, vocalisations are made. The conference can be seen as embodying this very necessary and useful stage in the development of our discipline. At present, it is hard to discern what overall form the 'useful language' will eventually take, let alone many of its details. Indeed, maybe more than one language will be needed — that would be all right, provided there was shared understanding of the contexts within which each should be used. A 'Brian Goodwin' phase shift could occur unpredictably at any time and crystallize language(s), provided people do in fact persist with meetings of this type along with related activities. But, until it happens, we just have to keep on talking and trying to understand one another.