

Monthly Musings for February 2018

Neuromania

Dear Alan, In my latest Guardian Weekly 19-25 January 2018 p.36 in a book review of “A New Map of Wonders” by Caspar Henderson (Granta 364 pp) I read “In Lamia, published in 1820, John Keats expressed the fear that Newtonian optics would ‘unweave the rainbow’. In 1949 the critic Lionel Trilling warned of the ‘reductive spectre’ of psychoanalysis that he thought ‘haunts our culture’. Nowadays Trilling’s spectre has been replaced by what the writer and retired medical physician Raymond Tallis has identified as contemporary culture’s propensity toward ‘neuromania,’ the belief that neuroscientific explanations for consciousness can fully account for all human experience and endeavour.

The author Caspar Henderson wants to re-enchaut the world, but not at the expense of scientific explanations of it. He wants to ‘inspire and share curiosity and wonder’ and to use ‘philosophy, history, art, religion, science and technology in search of a better appreciation of both the things we wonder at and the nature of wonder itself’. Half the molecules in every raindrop may be older than the sun.”

This reminds me of a discussion group I attended on the humanities and science when Dr. Alan Gijbers, a physician, brought along Walt Whitman’s poem “The Learn’d Astronomer” written in 1865, published in “Leaves of Grass” 1881 -1882.

*When I heard the learn’d astronomer
When the proofs, the figures were ranged in columns before me
When I was shown the charts and diagrams to add, divide and measure them
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture room
How soon unaccountably I became tired”
He went outside and breathed “the mystical moist night air” and
“look’d up in perfect silence at the stars”*

I was reminded of the Psalm ‘When I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained, what is man that thou art mindful of him or the son of man that thou visitest him.’”

Caspar Henderson’s book is trying to bridge science and wonder.

Louise Joy

Ordinary-Extraordinary.

I am sitting down at a table in a hotel. There is a T.V. on. Scene after scene resplendent with colours appear on the screen. Then something ordinary-extraordinary is happening. At my back is another T.V. with different scenes, and it is being seen at the same time.

I am startled, bewildered. How could it be happening? I haven’t got eyes in the back of my head as well as in the front of my head.

I turn my attention solely to the T.V. in front of me. Now I am only seeing that T.V. I keep staring at the T.V. to check if I will get to see the other T.V. at my back at the same time. But it never appears.

I sigh with relief. I must have been hallucinating or fantasising.

Perhaps I had better see a psychiatrist.

But, wait ! Wait! There is much more to the story than this.

Whilst I am still looking at the T.V. in front of me, I am turning my attention to where my friends are seeing my head. But there is no head to be seen. Nor is there anything or things in its place. It's an Emptiness, yet so extraordinary, for it is seeing the T.V. in front of me, and the one at the back of me at the same time.

Now, this Emptiness is doing some reading. It's in a book entitled, "ATHEIST SPIRITUALITY". The author is Andre Comte-Sponville.

"It is rare and marvellous to experience, at one and the same time, mystery and self-evidence, plenitude and simplicity, unity and eternity, silence and serenity, acceptance and independence." Fortunately for me the experience is not rare, it is an ordinary-extraordinary everyday experience. Colin Wilson, a noted novelist and new existentialist philosopher, has something of great significance to say on imagination and memory.

"It is as if through memory and imagination that we can be in two places at the one time.

Wilson illustrates this with a picture of a man sitting beside a fire in a warm room, looking through the window at the driving snow falling outside. Without leaving the room, he can travel through the storm to meet a friend or to grasp an idea that lies recorded in a book in a library miles away. What is important here is that the journey through the snow is not just imaginary; it is real."

As I am writing this article, I am imagining going on a holiday to Portland, Victoria. I am home in Grovedale, Victoria, now hopping in the car, now travelling along the road with other cars, seeing buildings and trees slipping through me, and the road opening and closing.

This is real and it is all being seen by the Emptiness. The scenes being imagined are not seeing themselves, they are being seen by a mysterious reality. Mysterious because no words can describe it. Yet it is revealing itself to me as I write these words. It is doing so as I am looking outwards and inwards at the same time.

Yes! How ordinary-extraordinary is life!

Doug Lloyd.

Following a morning meeting

Following our dialogue this morning on the nature of the self and various Buddhist approaches to the question, I was pondering the 'I Am' business. What did Jesus mean when He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6)?

Well that is usually understood to be Jesus referring to himself. I think it is worth considering the possibility that what he really said was:

'I Am' **is** the way, 'I Am' **is** the truth and 'I Am' **is** life.

And then he might have added,

And so am I,

And so are you.

This might have been his way of showing how to come upon one's true identity.

Alan Mann

Paeon of the Sort-Uncertain

Tend as if born for this
 Breathed to breathe equation,
 Self-wake to infinite context
 Knowing duality-defying appreciation

“Duality defying appreciation?”
 “No! *Duality-defying* appreciation!”
 Tend, if leaking tears for this
 Own-growing co-creation

Love's a letting go
 letting flow
 ooze, pour or shine
 it's not mine
 it is its own
 holding tight
 in the lightness
 of its might
 none's but one
 fathomless ones'
 inmost kind*

*Counterpoint/Refrain: a certain thing of letting go

Mal Mitchell

Thomas Metzinger on Douglas Harding

(Thomas Metzinger is a German philosopher and professor of theoretical philosophy at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz. [Wikipedia](#))

I was listening to Thomas Metzinger in dialogue with Sam Harris when he used a term I'd only previously heard from the lips of Krishnamurti. I then discovered that Metzinger had given a talk to the Krishnamurti Foundation at Ojai and in my search for more information I came across his interview by Michael Taft during which he talks about the work of Douglas Harding thereby revealing that he shares my interest in both Harding and Krishnamurti and, no doubt, sees the relevance of their respective work to one another. Metzinger explains the impact of Douglas on his current understanding. I have transcribed the relevant sections for my own reference and the Sydney group. I include the link to the full dialogue. There could be a few glitches but I've checked against the audio and it's pretty accurate. I have recently been looking at scientific scotoma as a result of reading Oliver Sacks views on the subject and I was thinking that headlessness might prove to be another example of the scientific community awakening to a blind spot some long years after the event, when Metzinger turned up.

Alan Mann

Deconstructing Yourself Podcast. Michael Taft interviews Thomas Metzinger.

Extracts covering content relating to the work of Douglas Harding. The full podcast at: <https://soundcloud.com/michael-taft-5/dy-012-consciousness-spirituality-and-intellectual-honesty-with-guest-thomas-metzinger>

At about 56 minutes into the tape.

THOMAS METZINGER. Thirty years ago I ran into Douglas Harding. I thought that's cool, and highly original and forgot all about it. You know, the headless way — and in the last four weeks it came back into my life and I have been devouring all his writings and apart from the very strong metaphysical claims that he himself is God I think this is an absolutely fantastic phenomenologist. He has made extremely fine-grained and valuable observations about phenomenology and he has actually discovered original and new routes for practise. And one way, one way which you have probably tried it too is to meditate or go for a walk with open eyes and try to attend, not to the fact that there is scenery and you are seeing it, but that there is no head. That actually there is a panoramic view ... doesn't know a boundary, there is a body but this is unbroken it is one big expanse and what is directed at it is not Michael it is a quality of pure awareness that is seeing it all.

Now after I read Harding again the last four weeks and tried to practise this a little bit and while I'm far away from understanding it fully I ask myself what is the difference between looking in the headless way, seeing out of emptiness, selflessly, very undramatically and that moment when you lose it and look into the world like you normally look into it when you are unaware and running around — what is the difference actually — and I thought it might have something to do with virtual reality and that interesting concept of immersion. There is a phenomenology of being immersed, for instance in a visual scene and that is the average, the normal way of running around immersed, thinking you are a knowing thinking self in a visual world as you walk around in it, that's being immersed in the brain's what actually happens when you attend to the fact that there is no head there and that is what is it Douglas Harding has really discovered and what is so helpful and I think it has something to do with the notch of your arrow* the notch of Tsin Chen's arrow of visual attention because if you attend to the origin of the transpersonal perspective you realise there is no point of origin there. The idea of an origin is empty, there is no seeing self which you normally hallucinate when you have your ordinary perspective and you think there is a head there and I'm looking out of it. This is a model the brain creates of a seeing self that knows visual objects and what Harding has discovered I think is that if you attend to this obvious and simple fact there is nothing there. There is no head which is being seen but just this panoramic, unified field of vision, maybe some glasses and maybe some edges of your face but it is all in that panoramic expanse you dissolve into your own self. Suddenly what is seen is awareness itself and not this little seeing entity that somehow identifies with the perspective of the arrow of attention. Can you make any sense of this? Or does it sound strange.

MICHAEL TAFT. No, I think you are absolutely on point. The headless practice is very clever because, as you have mentioned it is something that is a really simple way to do something that is fairly advanced, in deeper mindfulness practice you can notice this representation your brain is always making it is like a 3D model of the world around you all the time that is actually visual, a very subtle visual....

THOMAS METZINGER. Yes, with closed eyes you mean?

MICHAEL TAFT. Well, even, everyone's doing it with their eyes open also, but yes, it is very noticeable when your eyes are closed. You move your head and notice that some part of your brain is tracking what part of the room you must be looking at ...that model. And so a subset of that visual model is the model of your self doing it, your body in that space and there are many ways to

sort of put a crowbar into that crack and so open it up so the model collapses and a lot of them are really technical and quite difficult but what Harding has discovered is a really, really easy way to do it. And very effective.

THOMAS METZINGER. Well, I have rediscovered this for the second time in my life and I am still experimenting with it and the interesting thing of course is the introceptive body feelings. What about that is there an internal perspective into the internal body landscape? Do things work differently there?

MICHAEL TAFT. I don't think they do. In my experience body sensation without an internal three dimensional representation all takes place in a pile it is all body sensation but it is not mapped out in the shape of the body. Instead that requires the same kind of representation where there is a 3D model in the mind.

And here follows an exchange on the nature of proprioception before Metzinger gets back on to his Harding discoveries.

After his critical observation about Harding's metaphysics Metzinger, later in this interview, makes his own rather challenging metaphysical statements about the nature of meditation. I will include in next month's musings.

Scotoma

I am reading Oliver Sacks, book, *The River of Consciousness*. I came across a chapter heading 'Scotoma: Forgetting and Neglect in Science' in which Sacks provides a number of examples of discoveries which were subsequently abandoned or overlooked only to be rediscovered some time later and often after very lengthy periods of forgetting.

In 1670 John Mayo's discovery of what we now call oxygen was swept aside by the phlogiston theory which was finally disproved by Lavoisier in 1780s. Drawing on his own experience he mentions patients with migraine reporting 'geometrical spectra' and hallucinatory visions yet there was nothing about these effects in current medical literature. He had to go back to the 1860s and a book by a Victorian physician, Edward Liveing which in turn referred him to a paper by the astronomer Herschel written in 1858 which described these unusual states of consciousness, 'geometrical spectra and hallucinatory visions,' in great detail.

Gilles de Tourette's syndrome seems to have disappeared from between 1907 when the English translation of his book describing the condition was published, reappearing in the late 1960 when Sacks himself became interested in the symptoms and when methods of dealing with it became known. Another personal example the author provides involves the sense that, following a climbing accident, the damaged leg no longer felt part of his body. His surgeon could not explain this loss of proprioception and thought Sacks' leg must be a unique case. Sacks could not believe there were no other examples and went in search of them. He had to go back as far as the American civil war to find an account by Silas Wier Mitchell a neurologist working in Philadelphia with amputees. Other examples include the work of Gregor Mendel on genetics and the discovery of DNA as early as 1944 by Oswald Avery. He rounds off with the example of Aristarchus who came up with a heliocentric picture of the universe which although accepted in his time was turned around by Ptolemy in the first century CE and suffered scotoma for the next 1400 years until turned back again by Copernicus.

A lot of these examples are to do with perception and I think we have an interesting case of scotoma in the delayed reactions to our late friend Douglas Harding. Although Harding himself claimed that his work was strictly scientific, up to now it has been recognised largely by spiritually inclined organisations. His breakthrough technique of revealing the immediacy of our first, as opposed to our second nature, has been largely ignored for the past 50 years and, in some cases ridiculed by the exclusively scientific mindset, for example, Hofstadter (see his reaction to Harding in the Hofstadter & Dennett book *The Mind's I*). There are now a number of contemporary philosophers and scientists, for example, Susan Blackmore and Sam Harris, who acknowledge the significance of Harding's methods and refer to it in their work. And we can now add Metzinger to the list.

One of the characteristics of scientific scotoma is that it often comes to an end when an explanation of the mystery that gave rise to it is discovered, or if a cure for the complaint is found. In the case of Harding the experiments he designed are now seen as highly relevant as Western philosophy turns to phenomenological approaches in enquiring into consciousness and the nature of self. I imagine Buddhists will wonder why it took us so long.

Alan Mann