

# WEAVING VOICES

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Now we have begun the second half of our year, I am pleased to present the theme for the next few months:

## ***SOUL***

Yep, that's it! Sounds simple but as we all know "soul" is simply a mythological way of talking about a great mystery. We have many words to point us to that mystery: psyche, subjective psyche, objective psyche, soul, spirit, unconscious, imagination, anima, animus. These words are used a lot and our Society is founded on the reality of soul but what are we talking about? It may be difficult to *be* soulful, but perhaps even more difficult to *become* conscious as a soul-being. And would anyone recognize such a being today?

To begin our discourse, I am sending you an article of my own which demonstrates a disturbing and perhaps fatal trend within the most culturally influential fields today: neuroscience, modern philosophy and evolutionary psychology. They are together mounting an unassailable attack on the very notion of soul, seeking to erase it even from our modern vocabulary, which is why I title my article: *Newspeak* taken from George Orwell's *1984*.

In my view we cannot overcome this trend with a frontal assault but we can follow the hint Jung gave us as he discussed his dream:

*It was night in some unknown place, and I was making slow and painful headway against a mighty wind...I had my hands cupped around a tiny light which threatened to go out in any moment. Everything depended on my keeping this little light alive.*

In Wolfgang Giegerich's view, that little light is a two-fold treasure bequeathed to us from Jung's labours: the concept of individuality and the concept of soul.

Share some aspect of your own little light with us; share something about the the task of carrying your own light.

You can send your own submission (any length and style) for August.

Cheers, John Woodcock, Ph.D.

**NEWSPEAK**

**by**

**John C. Woodcock Ph.D.**

**(2009)**

*It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. Of course the great wastage is in the verbs and adjectives, but there are hundreds of nouns that can be got rid of as well... You haven't a real appreciation of Newspeak, Winston,' he said almost sadly... Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.*

(Orwell. 1984)

In 2007, TIME magazine published a special edition on the brain: *The Brain: A User's Guide*.

Various recognized experts in the fields of brain research and consciousness were interviewed and so the articles explored the latest findings, theories and difficulties surrounding the “mind-body” problem, or how consciousness and the brain are related.

Much of the discussion focuses on the scientific breakthroughs made possible by MRI scans of the brain. Further discussions use the amassing body of evidence from these increasingly sensitive and precise measurements in order to develop theories of consciousness, or mind, or us as seemingly self-aware beings.

These articles, though not comprehensive or exhaustive, and intended for a general audience do show the emergence of a growing consensus amongst foremost researchers concerning the nature and provenance of consciousness and therefore us, as mental beings. We are in the process of forming a new set of collective representations about us and our bodies, and this set is taking hold of our *imagination*s fast (if I may use that word any more-and there is doubt that I will be able to). We are quickly becoming accustomed or habituated to seeing ourselves a certain way and we may soon become that certain way.

MRI scans, along with more invasive investigations show conclusively how much consciousness and the brain are tied together, to use a loose term for a moment. As Steven Pinker says, “... consciousness can be pushed around by physical manipulations.” (62)

He cites electrical stimulation, chemicals and radical surgeries as examples of interventions that manipulate consciousness. Physical death means as far as anyone can know, death of consciousness. Even out-of-body experiences can be manipulated by stimulating the appropriate areas of the brain. Every activity of consciousness is rapidly being connected to a physical area of the brain to the extent that Pinker can claim that, “cognitive scientists can almost read people’s thoughts from the blood flow in their brains.” (62)

From these incontestable facts a dominant theory has emerged: consciousness is an emergent property of biology! This theory is shared universally by all experts cited by Pinker in his article:

Colin McGinn: “Nevertheless, consciousness is surely a natural biological product as devoid of the *otherworldly* as digestion...” (62)

Michael Gazzaniga: “Consciousness is an emergent property and not a process in and of itself. Our cognitive capacities reflect distributed processes throughout the brain.” (65)

Bernard Baars: “the topic of consciousness is much like sex in the Victorian age. Scientifically sex is just another part of biology...” (65)

Antonio Damasio: “All the natural history required to understand consciousness is now readily available in evolutionary biology and psychology.” (66):

Daniel Dennett, as paraphrased by Pinker: “Anything you would do to understand consciousness—like finding out what wavelengths make people see green... - boils down to information processing in the brain...” (69)

This theory of mental process emerging from physical ones has of course been around before brain research really accelerated with the MRI technology but now it seems almost universally accepted amongst experts, almost a habit of thought, a common sense starting point to all further examination of consciousness and its relation to the brain.

Thus, we are collectively thinking of ourselves (our consciousness thinking about itself and its origins) as biological products, our provenance lies exclusively in the physical or biological domains. Therefore the processes of biology are the processes of consciousness. For example, when biological processes come to an end so does consciousness. If biological processes are determined by evolutionary principles (such as survival, adaptation, competition etc.) then so is consciousness.

This way of thinking about ourselves and others is thus becoming a collective representation and for many people it is already so.

Although Pinker gives greatest weight to these researchers of the brain and its processes, he does give a nod to an understandable hesitation on the part of many “nonscientists” to think of themselves that way. But Pinker’s nod is only for the sake of an easy dismissal of such complaints. He says for example that some people (apparently not worth naming alongside the experts that he is aligned with) see the Hard Problem of consciousness as an opportunity to “sneak the soul back in” (69). Note the pejorative term “sneak”. These anonymous people

are sneaky. He dismisses such attempts as nothing more than a renaming of the Hard Problem: the mystery of consciousness becomes the mystery of the soul and we are none the wiser.

In this kind of easy dismissal Pinker joins the official narrative which eschews any version of a God of the Gaps i.e. any attempt to fill our present gaps in knowledge with an unnecessary obfuscating term like god, or soul or similar untestable idea. Instead he shows his allegiance to an unassailable optimism of modern researchers. As Colin McGinn puts it, "why is it (consciousness) so hard to tame scientifically? The answer, I suggest, lies not in the stars (god of the gaps), but in ourselves; our brains have not evolved with the necessary equipment to resolve this mystery." (62)

We can hear the resounding optimistic "yet" coursing through his argument. We don't need god because we only have to wait until our brains or our knowledge can fill in those temporary gaps.

In a small token of recognition Pinker mentions one (and only one) author who holds arguments counter to the prevailing one that he, Pinker and a host of others hold dearly. But he does so only to dismiss it again, almost casually as if the counter argument does not even really warrant such a waste of ink. The author is Tom Wolfe who wrote an essay: *Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died* (1996).

This essay may be seen as succinct summary and critique of the new neurosciences and their theoretical forays into the theory of consciousness. He begins with:

*Brain imaging was invented for medical diagnosis. But its far greater importance is that it may very well confirm, in ways too precise to be disputed, certain theories about "the mind," "the self," "the soul," and "free will" that are already devoutly believed in by scholars in what is now the hottest field in the academic world, neuroscience.*

He goes on to identify the central issue that neuroscience is concerned with today:

*We now live in an age in which science is a court from which there is no appeal. And the issue this time around, at the end of the twentieth century, is not the evolution of the species, which can seem a remote business, but the nature of our own precious inner selves.*

He addresses the same theory of consciousness that Pinker espouses in his article: the theory that asserts consciousness is a product of brain processes. He examines the rippling effect of this theory out from the specialty of neuroscience into the wider worlds of politics, psychiatry, education, sociology and so on. He gives many examples of what the

consequences already are when we begin to regard one another as pre-determined biological entities in all respects. That is to say, Wolfe provides us with an early glimpse of what lies in store for us if the dominant theory of consciousness provided by neuroscience becomes a collective representation:

*Eventually, as brain imaging is refined, the picture may become as clear and complete as those see-through exhibitions, at auto shows, of the inner workings of the internal combustion engine. At that point it may become obvious to everyone that all we are looking at is a piece of machinery, an analog chemical computer, that processes information from the environment. "All," since you can look and look and you will not find any ghostly self inside, or any mind, or any soul.*

*Thereupon, in the year 2006 or 2026, some new Nietzsche will step forward to announce: "The self is dead" – except that being prone to the poetic, like Nietzsche I, he will probably say: "The soul is dead." He will say that he is merely bringing the news, the news of the greatest event of the millennium: "The soul, that last refuge of values, is dead, because educated people no longer believe it exists." Unless the assurances of the Wilsons and the Dennetts and the Dawkinses also start rippling out, the lurid carnival that will ensue may make the phrase "the total eclipse of all values" seem tame.*

Wolfe ends with an apocalyptic vision of science finally turning on itself with its own skepticism:

*I suddenly had a picture of the entire astonishing edifice collapsing and modern man plunging headlong back into the primordial ooze. He's floundering, slobbering about, gulping for air, frantically treading ooze, when he feels something huge and smooth swim beneath him and boost him up, like some almighty dolphin. He can't see it, but he's much impressed. He names it God.*

That may be but Pinker acknowledges none of Wolfe's examples and counter arguments. He off-handedly dismisses the entire essay with the comment that Wolfe has it backwards, that biology offers a far sounder basis for morality than Wolfe's "unproven dogma of an immortal soul." Far from agreeing with Wolfe's prognosis of a future in which the phrase "the total collapse of values" will seem tame, Pinker offers what seems to me a naïve argument in an attempt to gain further support for his own dogma of biology first-

consciousness second. In so doing he inadvertently invokes a word that has long belonged to the province of the soul: He says (70):

*Yet once we realize that our own consciousness is a product of our brains and that other people have brains like ours, a denial of other people's sentience becomes ludicrous... The undeniable fact that we are all made of the same flesh makes it impossible to deny our common capacity to **suffer** (my emphasis).*

Wolfe went to considerable trouble in his essay, the same one that Pinker dismisses, to demonstrate that in *fact*, a term Pinker loves, people are *not* behaving the way Pinker wishes they would, when they learn about their biological pre-determinism. On the contrary they are coming up with ways to *dehumanize* one another with alarming frequency:

*The male of the human species is genetically hardwired to be polygamous, i.e., unfaithful to his legal mate. Any magazine-reading male gets the picture soon enough. (Three million years of evolution made me do it!) Women lust after male celebrities, because they are genetically hardwired to sense that alpha males will take better care of their offspring. (I'm just a lifeguard in the gene pool, honey.) Teenage girls are genetically hardwired to be promiscuous and are as helpless to stop themselves as dogs in the park. (The school provides the condoms.) Most murders are the result of genetically hardwired compulsions. (Convicts can read, too, and they report to the prison psychiatrist: "Something came over me...and then the knife went in.")*

Somehow Pinker's sunny theory of the genesis of morality sinks into the morass when confronted with such undeniable *facts*!

Pinker is quick to identify and eschew Wolfe's "dogma" of an immortal soul but it does seem easy to identify the other fellow's dogma while remaining blind to one's own. The theory of consciousness that states that consciousness emerges from matter persists in the face of a difficulty that is recognized by neuroscience as a formidable one. How DO physical processes lead to mental ones? Neuroscience has no answer but blithely proceeds anyway on the optimistic basis that if not now, we soon will know (no god of the gaps, remember). So this difficulty far from being seen as an insurmountable obstacle to the theory, is simply set aside as more evidence amasses showing a indubitable connection between mental and physical states. In other words, when a possible contraindication to the theory arises it is simply put aside and the theory proceeds unmodified in any way. As Colin McGinn says:

*The paradox of the mind-body problem is that the explanatory causes of consciousness in the brain are not discoverable by inspecting the brain, and introspection cannot reveal the rootedness of consciousness in brain tissue.... Nevertheless, consciousness is surely a natural biological product... (62)*

Right from the outset conceptual difficulties are announced and then dismissed. Only those findings that support the theory are let in. Nothing can challenge such a “theory” which appears more and more like, well, a dogma: a belief system that is unprovable. Once such a habit of thought is entrenched it tends to assimilate new facts to itself and excludes any facts that challenge it. I think we can observe this process in the current “theory” of consciousness.

If a dogmatic point of view is holding people in thrall we may gain some insight into the phenomenon but studying its history. There is famous example of the early 20<sup>th</sup> C. which illustrates this habit of thought and its power to enthrall: Freud’s theory of seduction. He made a pioneering step of examining (unconscious) mental states in order to find causes for otherwise inexplicable physical states (such as hysterical blindness etc.)

Freud could not accept what his own clinical expertise was telling him. Mental states are causing physical ones, i.e. the mental state is prior and the physical is secondary. Instead, his theory of neurosis and his developmental theory posit a physical cause prior to the observed mental state, which admittedly is still prior to the physical symptom in the adult. At first he proposed concrete sexual assault on the child as the physical cause. This step alienated him professionally for many years so he tried another form of the seduction theory which spoke of sexual fantasy (his version of the oedipal myth for example) that lies darkly in the child’s unconscious mind. This theory seems at first to be friendlier to the view that mental states can be ontologically prior to physical ones until we read his account of how these childhood fantasies come about:

*In inquiring into the origin of incest dread it could be expected that here also is the choice between possible explanations of a sociological, biological, and psychological nature in which the psychological motives might have to be considered as representative of biological forces.*

(Freud 1919, 206)

He then appeals to Darwin's explanation which he calls a historic explanation. (Ibid 207)

Drawing from current studies of apes and believing Darwin's account of the origin of mankind, Freud concocts a story of the genesis of the incest taboo:

*Let us now envisage the scene of such a totem meal and let us embellish it further with a few probable features that could not be adequately considered before...*

*One day the expelled brothers . . . slew and ate the father . . . Of course these cannibal savages ate their victim . . . The totem feast, which is perhaps mankind's first celebration, would be the repetition and commemoration of this memorable, criminal act, with which so many things began, social organization, moral restrictions and religion.*

(Ibid 231ff)

When Freud could no longer locate the cause of adult neurosis in physical childhood trauma he reached into the deep past, armed with Darwin's vision of our evolution and "found" a physical trauma which could cause the mental state of the neurotic (presence of forbidden desires etc.)

Like modern neuroscience, Freud proposed his theory and made the facts fit, ignoring other equally plausible theories such as the one that could have accounted easily for his clinical findings: mental states are prior to physical ones. Again like modern neuroscience, theoretical distortions are introduced and then ignored so that the dogma may succeed. For example how can a physical trauma that putatively occurred millennia ago affect the mental state of a modern person. Freud's answer is through the mechanism of inherited memory. But how well can a concept of inherited memory (a mental state) fit with a purely biological account of our origins?

We can go even further back than Freud, before Darwin and discover that a movement towards the dogma of "physical first, then mental" was emerging in the use of language, following Descartes' famous division between material objects of the world and the immaterial subject (consciousness). This division immediately caused problems since animals and plants were placed on the side of matter yet were clearly different from rocks and

minerals. A further division emerged between *animate* matter and *inanimate* matter in the late 18<sup>th</sup> C.

Prior to the Cartesian division, matter was experienced as an indivisible whole called life, or even existence. Material existence had a mental and physical aspect. Our ancestors did not think about those aspects in the way of opposites, as we do today. So the later division into animate and inanimate matter, or as we would say today, living tissue and corpse is a very uncomfortable one that has led to the predicament of neuroscience which is forced to ask the contorted question: how does a mental state arise from living tissue, when hidden, unexamined in the question is the answer: *living tissue!* The concept of *living* tissue (neurons) can only mean a reference to a totality of mental and physical states, or else the word “living” means next to nothing, as C.S. Lewis (1967) has shown so eloquently.

So scientists worried about how mental states can possibly emerge from purely physical processes seem to be asking how a mental state arises from something that is already a unity of mental and physical states i.e. living tissue.

The only way to resolve this conceptual tangle is by examining the history of the division between mental and physical states and seeing how the division was forced with many people feeling the strain and ultimately becomes an impossible one unless of course we are prepared to abandon the word Life altogether by reducing it to a mere abstraction.

Now we are at the point where we can inquire if there might be another discernible movement within this dogma that we are biological entities only that have this emergent property called consciousness which has a quality of fleetingness, “ a maelstrom of events distributed across the brain” (Pinker, 62). As I have shown this dogma is strengthening even in the face of conceptual confusion and dismissing of any counter arguments or contrary facts. To put it another way, if a habit of thought is in ascendancy, what gives it strength and endurance, if not reason and argument?

I think there is a discernible movement within the debate and I think that it is this movement that is providing the energy (I better not say “life”) to the dogma. This is where we come to Newspeak.

According to Pinker the least controversial feature of the problem of consciousness according to neuroscience is “the idea that our thoughts, sensations, joys and aches consist entirely of physiological activity in the tissues of the brain. Consciousness does not reside in an ethereal soul that *uses* the brain like a PDA; consciousness *is* the activity of the brain.” (62) This is a succinct expression of the dogma.

Within this expression is a clear dismissal of words such as soul as having any reference beyond a material one.

Modern theories can and do become collective representations. Newton’s theory of gravity is a good example. We now perceive objects falling passively subject to gravitational forces whereas once they were perceived as actively seeking (falling or rising), ever more eagerly (what we now call accelerating) their desire’s fulfillment or natural place relative to the centre of the universe.

Words purportedly having an intangible reference will have no place in the new dogma and will be taken out of the theoretical language altogether. Here is an example of the Newspeak that is already in place. Keep in mind that the speaker is talking about you and me, and indeed, himself:

*Dreams are reactions to random nervous system stimuli, which the brain "interprets" as bizarre images and other sensory hallucinations. The activation-synthesis hypothesis assumes that dreams are as meaningful as they can be under the adverse working conditions of the brain in REM sleep. The reason that dream content often seems disoriented or bizarre is because the activated brain-mind does its best to attribute meaning to the internally generated signals of the brain.*

Nowhere to be seen is the pronoun “I”. We now use “brain-mind”. Even the word “interpret” which refers to an intangible mental process is in quotes to show that we must read it as an asif. For people such as Francis Crick (whose quote this is) dreams hold no meaning at all and simply function to remove unwanted memories. There are of course resistance movements to this theory of dreams as well as to the dismissal of soul, imagination, self and a host of other words referring to intangible meaning but they pale

before the onslaught of MRI scans and the avalanche of evidence showing that just about every mental state is tied to some aspect of the brain.

The theory moves from a theory to a collective representation when ordinary people begin to think of themselves and others in the way the dogma describes, as brains and stimuli. This thinking slips into the unconscious (should I say “automatic”) functioning and we begin to perceive the world that way. Far from Pinker’s belief that deep knowledge of our biological roots will open the door to deeper empathy of our neighbour’s suffering, we face the prospect of a world of brains bumping against other brains. To gain a vivid glimpse of such a world I can think of no better example than C.S. Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength*. Perhaps a passage from that sublime fiction will give the flavour of what may await us if the dominant theory of consciousness becomes a collective representation (354-355):

*If you reflect for a moment, said Frost, you will see that your question has no meaning except on the level of the crudest popular thought. Friendship is a chemical phenomenon; so is hatred. Both of them presuppose organisms of our own type. The first step towards intercourse with the macrobes is the realisation that one must go outside the whole world of our subjective emotions. It is only as you begin to do so that you discover how much of what you mistook for your thoughts was merely a by-product of your blood and nervous tissues... You are to conceive the species as an animal which has discovered how to simplify nutrition and locomotion to such a point that the old complex organs and the old body that contained them are no longer necessary. That large body is therefore to disappear. Only a tenth part of it will be needed to support the brain. The individual is to become all head. The human race is to become all Technocracy.*

There are some hopeful signs from within the field of neuroscience, where the dogma is held a little at arm’s length, where some concessions are made towards the mystery of consciousness and its relationship with matter. In the same TIME magazine edition, dedicated to the brain, there is an essay by Scott Haig M.D. It is a sensitive but unsparing portrayal of the last days of a man with terminal cancer which had invaded his brain, replacing much of it with tumour tissue. Against all expectations, his consciousness returned briefly and he could say his goodbyes. Haig was shocked because as a physician he knew the brain just could not be functioning in a way to support speech or even coherence—as he says, “Where that gray stuff grows (the tumour), the brain is just not there.” Yet, the patient spoke coherently to his family before dying.

Haig goes on to theorize:

*The mind is a uniquely personal domain of thought, dreams, and countless other things, like the will, faith and hope. These fine things are as real as rocks and water, but, like the mind, weightless and invisible, maybe even timeless.*

Such brave assertions in the face of the dogma may not be enough to alter the collective representations of the future, maybe not enough to avert Lewis' or Wolfe's glimpse of possible futures but they are enough to stir the hearts of other resonant souls and that is where I find a realistic hope of a different future from the one offered by the dogma. But how can such a different future arise and find its way into public discourse, finally becoming a collective representation?

In my book *Transformation of the World* I outline the sequence of steps that develop the experience of an individual into a collective representation:

- The individual effort in which an individual's imagination experiences an aspect of an emerging future.
- The individual becomes a mouthpiece of this future (artist, teacher, author, leader etc)
- The willingness on the part of others to see the future the same way the individual does (e.g. by accepting an artist's work).
- Through habit what the group is willing to perceive *becomes* the new world!

We can see this sequence appearing in connection with the dogma I describe above:

Darwin gives us his picture of our origins: the material world appears first, then unconscious life and finally consciousness as a late product of matter

Many take up his picture of the emergence of consciousness from matter and enshrine it in our educational system etc.

Now this picture is so habitually accepted that we have come to perceive the world that way: as a material object that somehow produced human consciousness as an epiphenomenon or emergent property.

There are many authors, artists etc. who, like Thomas Wolfe and C.S. Lewis give us a glimpse of what horrors await us if the dogma succeeds in becoming a collective representation. Since we are still in a time of transition, or as some would say, chaos, we are

in a position to ask if there are other possible futures emerging in the imagination of individuals which could also become a collective representation of ourselves and of the world. In fact there are many and we can get a good sense of this by watching the mass media in which there is an uncompromising war going on in the domain of competing ideas of our future. It is taking place mainly in politics and economics since power and money are the engines driving our choices today. There is no more dialogue, thoughtful discussion or conversation among people today in these domains. Instead we find a “winner takes all” competition in which participants strive to define the issue their way and to eliminate alternative voices as quickly and brutally as possible.

I see in this pervasive dogfight of competing narratives an accelerating competition between individuals each seeking to influence the next set of collective representations. We all seem to believe that individuals can make a decisive contribution to the formation of our future, in flagrant contradiction to the prevailing picture of evolution which describes the emerging future with no reference to the actions of individuals at all.

But the domains of money and power come into play at step two of the sequence I outlined above. To get a glimpse of other emerging possible futures we need to explore step one a little more closely. Where are these combatants in the media getting their ideas? To be sure many are getting their ideas from someone else (Step 2) but a few are developing their ideas from within their own imagination (Step 1). It is not easy to trace ideas circulating in the market place back to the individuals who “gave birth” to the idea, but it is possible.

In fact I have done so in the case of two ideas that quickly became collective representations, one in the world of public relations and the *other* in the world of mathematics and computer science (see my essay: *From Imagination to Reality*). In each case we can relatively easily see how an original experience in the imagination of an individual is taken up by others and quickly becomes a habit of thought and a commonly perceived reality.

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