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Blinded by the Light

Christian de Quincey sees light as a metaphor for consciousness. He posits a scale of consciousness running from total darkness to cosmic enlightenment. As he sees it, philosophers seem to be stuck on the binary distinction between darkness and light, psychologists focus on various levels between dim and bright in ordinary human consciousness, and people with a spiritual bent tend to yearn for a consciousness so brilliant that all fine distinctions are lost in the glare.

This is fair enough until we meet the bootstrap problem. We need consciousness to study consciousness. An inexorable recursion starts with some elementary act of consciousness such as the assertion “I think therefore I am” and rolls on to nirvana. Our logical faculties are powerless to stop the juggernaut. To revert to a liquid metaphor, we are immersed in consciousness. Dan Dennett has coined a nice pair of words for our predicament. Left alone, each of us drowns in the autophenomenology of our own consciousness, and only a heterophenomenologist can save us by mapping the horizons of our subjective worlds from outside. This rescues enough logic to give science a foothold and explain what can be explained.

The explanation leaves the big vision of the light metaphor untouched. For a transcendentalist whose enlightenment admits no externality, the entirety of creation, the whole shebang, is a single brilliant nexus of hyperconsciousness in which our everyday personal lights are mere shadows, just waiting for the day they dissolve in the radiance. Anyone who has been ravished by such a revelation will find it hard to take the scientific explanation of this or that feature of everyday consciousness very seriously. It will seem like mere stamp collecting.

Hard as it is, the interpersonal science of personal worlds is easy enough in principle. We can study with arbitrary exactitude the logic, physics, chemistry and biology of cerebral neuronets and predict the topology of subjective worlds with all the precision we have come to expect from modern big-budget science. We shall doubtless learn to map forms of consciousness and treat aberrations of awareness so reliably that our former methods of thought control will seem like shamanistic medicine by comparison. Yet a hard problem will remain.

Each one of us performs acts of consciousness every day. Anything and everything we do wilfully or deliberately may be seen as an act of consciousness. Each such act is accompanied by an acting self that forms an inner horizon to the subjective world in which the act is located and has meaning. To a heterophenomenologist, the acting self may be regarded as a logical dangler to the act. If consciousness is a process that takes actors from state to state via their acts, the sheer existence of actors with autophenomenologies is a hard problem. The hard problem for the transcendentalist with a revelation of cosmic hyperconsciousness is one blindingly obvious loose end. But meaning is not the problem, *contra de Quincey*.