

The Infinite Searchlight

Barrington J. Bayley

"The materialist view," the radio lecturer said, "is that no entities exist in the universe other than entities as they are understood by the science of physics. The only major obstacle to this view lies in the problem posed by the experience of consciousness. Opponents of materialism are able, with justification, to point to the absence of any convincing physical description of consciousness, and will claim that it is impossible to give consciousness such a description. This objection has never been enough to overthrow the materialist school, however, for the reason that in ascribing consciousness to a non-physical agency the non-materialist then puts himself in the position of having to explain how such an agency interacts with a physical brain. This he has never been able to do.

"On examination the brain is found to be a physical apparatus, just as a radio receiver, for instance, is a physical apparatus. The comparison is a striking one. An intelligent visitor from another planet, on hearing speech and music bearing all the hallmarks of conscious activity coming from a radio set, might decide to examine the set to discover their source. He would very likely conclude that the set could not, by itself, have been responsible for such a high level of intelligibility. If he were of a materialist persuasion, he would also reject the notion of a non-physical 'soul' dwelling within the radio. Instead, he would infer that the apparatus was merely a receiver, amplifying signals transmitted from elsewhere

"Should we take a leaf from our imaginary alien's book? Could the brain be no more than a receiver, tuned, so to speak, to a 'beam of consciousness' directed from an external source? If so, where, and what, is the transmitter?

"This is a concept which, oddly enough the materialist is better able to handle than the non-materialist, for if the transmission is itself physical in nature, there is only one source we can reasonably look to. The entity that acts as transmitter can only be the brain's overall environment, radiating diffuse informational signals which our sensory organs—the brain's 'antennae'—pick up. The brain amplifies and focuses these signals, concentrating them into a focal point much as a lens or concave mirror will focus diffuse sunlight into an intense spot. This 'intense spot' is what we call individual consciousness...."

The two beings, far off, who were monitoring the broadcast lecture, as they had monitored much taking place on the Earth planet during the last three thousand million years, turned to regard one another.

"How close he has come to the truth," said one, his speech a nanosecond hum. In reply the other emitted a similar nanosecond burst. "Except that the real truth is so much simpler. Ascribing consciousness to the general environment is ingenious, but unnecessary."

"He is far too cautious to entertain the idea of an artificial transmitter, of course. Think how long it took us to arrive at the facts in our own case. Four thousand million years."

"Do you remember that we once undertook a calculation along the lines of his premise, to determine whether the quality of consciousness, even though it is non-physical, could arise from the collection and collation of environmental data?"

"Yes, I remember it well. We found that consciousness could arise in that way, but only if the items of data to be processed were infinite in number."

"So putting it beyond the bounds of possibility."

Those who conversed had the appearance of craggy masses, partly with a dull corrugated sheen, partly

twinkling, partly containing patches of electron haze. They hovered in the void, seemingly with the help of dark, curved wings, whose function was not, however, concerned with flight but with collecting sensory data. To human eyes they would not have seemed alive at all, for they had evolved not on a planetary surface but in the interior of a dense dust cloud. They were not even made of CHON, that blend of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen which was the basic substance of the Earth biosystem, but instead were composed of metallic ions.

Their consciousness was more intense and voluminous than human consciousness. They communicated with one another in a comprehensive, multidimensional talk which recapitulated vast ranges of fact, and which could only be suggested by, rather than rendered into, human speech; and every utterance of which, however great its content, took place in exactly one nanosecond of time.

The place where they had evolved, and which they now inhabited, was a dark winding cloud where dust trails made endless caves and tortuous canyons. From out of that dust they had been precipitated, provoked into being by an evolutionary impulse immensely more powerful than the corresponding impulse they had imposed on the Earth planet. During the million million years of their existence they had constructed, out of the dust, three pieces of apparatus. One of these floated nearby: the transmitter which provided all Earth brains, animal and human, with consciousness.

One of the entities emitted another nanosecond hum. "It would be interesting if the lecturer could be transported here and have the consciousness transmitter explained to him. What would be his feelings?"

"It may be imagined that his first thought would be similar to our own in like circumstances," the other rejoindered. "He would find it strange to think that he would lose consciousness should he step out of the beam. He would then ask: is the machine a generator, as well as a transmitter, of consciousness?"

"And we would then answer: no, it is not. The generation of awareness is impossible, whether by artificial or natural means. We would explain that we built the transmitter to test the thesis that our own brains are also receivers, illuminated by a beam of consciousness transmitted from elsewhere."

"We would explain that we devised a means to draw off a portion of the quality of awareness active in our own brains, and to project it to the Earth planet in diffuse form."

"It was interesting to watch the chemicals on the planetary surface react even to the weak, diffused beam. Within aeons, only, they formed themselves into brains capable of focusing the irradiation into localized feelings of self."

The two metallic beings stayed close together, transmitting interleaved chains of nanosecond bursts to one another, recapitulating familiar facts as was their comforting habit. The quality of their thought was careful and rigorous. They knew that the universe was a physical system, and that physical systems could not give rise to anything nonphysical. The consciousness beam was, indeed, a physical force; but there was an element in it, that very element which was vital to the experience of self-awareness, that could not be described in physical terms. This was the element they called the infinity factor. It could only be described as nonphysical; it was an anomaly, and they knew it could not have originated anywhere in the universe.

Suddenly one of the metallic beings paused in the exchange, and interjected a new item.

"Did you suffer a derangement of consciousness just then?"

"Yes," answered his companion.

A short distance away from the consciousness transmitter (known as the Earth machine, in their parlance)

floated the two other pieces of apparatus they had constructed during their existence. One was really an adjunct to the Earth machine: it was the monitoring device with which they had watched the progress of the Earth experiment. The other had been constructed much later, a bare two thousand million years ago. It was an instrument for detecting and measuring that much stronger beam they called "the primary beam", though they did not believe it was in any real sense primary: the consciousness beam for which their own brains were receivers, and which came from such an immense distance that they were unable to locate its source.

The latter of the two beings to speak drifted towards the primary beam meter. But before he could examine its dials the aberration recurred, and was much stronger.

Wings wheeling in the void; distorted awareness drawn out into exaggerated forms; bodies arcing, losing control.

The Earth transmitter continued functioning smoothly, automatically adjusting itself when the kink was relayed to it. When the fit was over, however, the entities paid no attention to the machine. They gathered round the primary beam meter.

"That was a significant jolt in the beam," one nanoseconded. "The perturbations are becoming more frequent."

"There can be no doubt now that the transmitter of the beam is beginning to malfunction."

"Perhaps it is no longer tended."

The two metallic beings—there had only ever been two of them—were silent for a while. Then they again began to converse, in steady nanosecond stitches back and forth, recapitulating almost the whole history of their thought together, listing the bleak facts of their knowledge. The knowledge that, but for the primary beam and the staged-down version of it they had arranged, the whole universe was empty of awareness, in so far as it was within their observational range.

"Some conscious intelligence must have arranged for the transmission of the primary beam. From where does that intelligence derive *its* awareness?"

"It could not conceivably be a natural phenomenon. It must act as the receiver for yet another beam. One whose source is probably unknown to it, as it, in turn, is unknown to us."

"And behind that?"

"The same."

"And so on."

"An endless chain with no origin."

"An endlessly relayed searchlight with no emitting source."

"If an impossible phenomenon exists, there can be no other explanation for it than that it comes from infinity; in other words that it has no cause. Consciousness is an impossible phenomenon. It must come from infinity."

With that theorem, their knowledge concerning their own nature came to an end. They had established that consciousness was a contradiction in a purely material universe. And indeed, consciousness existed, but without ever having been created. It was a stratagem, a trick, an endless series lacking a first term.

Although it might, in the Earth planet, possess a last term.

"An even more severe perturbation is beginning to manifest itself," announced the entity nearest the monitor. "I believe the transmitter is on the verge of a breakdown."

They braced themselves, but to no avail. Wings wheeling in the void; mad brains arcing, contorted beyond the parameters of sanity; awareness forced into aspects of unnatural distortion, required to view reality from exaggerated viewpoints.

But eventually the beam came through clear and strong and a more normal mental state resumed. Later, however, it was discovered that one of the beings, during his arcings and threshings, had fallen against the Earth machine and had accidentally switched off. On Earth, all brains, animal and human, had gone out.

There seemed little reason to reactivate the transmitter; the Earth experiment had served its purpose long ago. Over a fairly short span of time life on Earth slid back to the mindless levels of self-perpetuating organics: the viral, bacteriological and primitive vegetable levels. The atmospheric mix adjusted itself accordingly; and as the blankness of eternity resumed its endless course, the planet joined its billions of brethren in familiar oblivion.