

Still Trapped in Transcendence. Coherence vs. the Lure of Elsewhere

Barbara Maria Stafford
University of Chicago

"Whatever has unity--be it an individual, an army, or the cosmos--it is by virtue of the One and yet the latter neither inhabits nor creates the world and does not share in the properties of any of its creatures."
(Plotinus)

"If humanity is to survive and avoid new catastrophes, then the the global political order has to be accompanied by a sincere and mutual respect among the various spheres of civilization, culture, nations, or continents, and by honest efforts on their part to seek and find the values or basic moral imperatives they have in common, and to build them into the foundations of their coexistence in this globally connected world."
(Vaclav Havel)

We live in a paradoxical age. Advocates of convergence vie with proponents of trans-everthing. While telepresence, bio-engineering, and nanotechnology revel in the tortuous process of putting alien things together, robotics, virtual reality, transgenic mutation, transglobal communication, and data transfer pursue a perpetually receding ideal. This Janus-faced orientation--caught between fusion and withdrawal, proximity and elsewhere-- is at once ancient and modern. It also instantiates a meta- condition. Everything has become deeply inter-and intra-referential: uncannily about and, yet, elusively beyond itself. If, as a species, we once possessed a common sense, already by the twentieth century it was being dispersed through diffuse and increasingly immaterial distribution systems in the form of print, radio, film, television, and, now, electronic media.

It seems agreed that, today, knowledge is less about totalities and more about microstructures. Think of the fascination for found items: the impromptu collecting of the flotsam of daily life, the gathering of stray or discarded ephemera, the assembling of weird, but mundane, miscellanies encouraged by questing seekers trawling the Internet. Joseph Cornell was an early specialist in this chance-driven pocket surrealism. He imaginatively compiled and creatively filed trivia that appears arcane to us but was ordinary at the time: a bird house, medicine chest, and pillbox, or a coin-operated contraption with a tantalizing peep-hole from some penny arcade opening vistas onto a capriccio of stamps, wine glasses, and marbles. Cornell, in crafting snug boxes and shaded habitats--evocative

of nests, burrows, grottoes, and hideaways--manages to recapture the centering secret spaces of childhood for distracted adults. Mysterious and alluring, these secluded domains revealed a focussing "doorway, a pathway to the infinite, and anything was possible."

What I find significant about the recent incarnation of the lifelong collector-- smitten by the lyricism of litter--is not so much the construction and deconstruction of peripheral phenomena as the fundamental trait of positioning. The ongoing cognitive process of connecting what feels real inside of us to an alien external world involves imploding and exploding tendencies. This pair of intertwined kinetic and epistemological motions are versions of the same behavioral problem. What is the relation of my intimate, innermost being to the greater public outside? How do separate individual selves cohere into collective social behavior?

Evolutionary biology has shown that a single generation has often gotten caught by unforeseen environmental circumstances forcing it to jump, or innovate, on the spot rather than gradually adapt. This ubiquity of improvisation in human interaction -- the capacity for performing amazing leaps beyond the recessed haven of the private into the huge and unfamiliar-- prompts other questions. To what degree does our discovery of structure in the world also depend on the brain's initiation of responses on its own? How do segregated and distributed mental processes, occurring in parallel at multiple sites and always involving a vast number of neurons, bootstrap themselves, as if by magic, into a higher altitude.

The mystery of amplification incarnated in grouping, synchronization, and flexible binding operations across constellations of non-contiguous cells is at the core of an emergent and richly associative model of human cognition as simultaneously embodied and extended. Consciousness originates in the local, in the familiar comforting matrix of the biological organism, but it is also an outpouring coloring outer events. Think of a dynamic self-organizing brain that is constantly configuring and transfiguring itself and the world. As Steven Pinker argues, our mechanisms of perception go to a lot of trouble to ensure that what we see corresponds to what is usually out there. But the "intelligent eye" does not just mimetically analyze shape and motion, it leaps beyond sensory evidence to infer what is not visible.

Considered within such a vaulting mental system, all perceptions, choices, actions, and representations widen our interior landscape. They seek external attachments while remaining rooted in the background pattern of an autopoietic cortical system, one that continually generates internal

content. This means that the process of subjective experiences is somehow identical with a sequence of physical states. We live our lives sheltered within this schema of intertwined thought and self-maintaining organismal functions. Apparently no single entity coordinates this bewilderingly complicated organization, and no one understands why. All thinking, as Wallace Stevens wrote, gestures towards the bare-bone abstract while what it "ought to find is normal life, insight into the commonplace, reconciliation with [the flow of] everyday reality."

Biology, then, undergirds the ancient combinatorics of analogy: our bent towards mental travel and the assembly of many different kinds of realities. The primal prefix, trans--entangled with multidimensional aspirations to connect--functions epistemologically and ontologically like the arch of a bridge. But this linking device-in-the-middle--conjoining things that are segregated, divided, or on the other side-- has proved notoriously difficult to limit linguistically and philosophically merely to the self-effacing role of span. Indeed, this essay argues that what had been a modest, comparative tool for associating countless ambiguous, competitive, and otherwise excluded ideas or practices has, itself, increasingly become ostentatiously projective. Its rhetorical function of discovering relationships has shifted from playing an intermediary role to idealizing an abstraction rooted in nothing. Transcendence-- as unfathomable hyper-extension-- is without visible above or below, without hierarchy or focus, and without authority or gender. This disembodied projection of the rootless self into an inaccessible domain is, ironically, accompanied not by the coming forth of the longed for, encompassing totality but by its distancing, and by the isolation and marginalization of everything else.

Fascination with directionality and mind-world correspondence has long characterized an animate universe, one in which the seer infers from the buried past to the looming future or otherwise conjures hidden, remote, and diffuse things up to the surface. Getting as close to, and as far away as possible, from terrestrial reality presupposes a porous space crisscrossed by operative forces. In the reckoning realm of the mantic, obsessed with sniffing out the unattainable and tracing the indistinct, meaning is discovered or invented by the intuiting searcher using the imagination to climb to distant spheres. This mental stretching, it seems, derives from our neural systems constrained by hard-wiring to assume a priori that the world is continuous and coherent to the point where we prefer a consistent illusion to an inconsistent, but realistic, perception.

The cognitive drive to over-reach oneself and control ambiguous or faraway phenomena engendered two types of divinatory practices (intuitive/rhapsodic and inductive/technical) among early humans. These simultaneously broadening rituals and integrating strategies produced an embryonic transcendental knowledge. They uncovered a cloud of affinities joining lowly mortals below to the immortal gods reigning above. What, in myth and fable, had been an effusive, even a shamanistic, epistemology-- rooted in keen animal sensing coupled to an intense supernatural questing-- subsequently became intellectualized and allegorized within western systematic philosophy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the metaphysical turn taken by a Gnostic-inflected late neoplatonism. It is these sophistic philosophers of the Cave, not the Jena romantics who avidly read them, who first located God and everything else deeply worthwhile beyond the world, thus rendering them infinitely desirable but radically and evasively out-of-reach. This polar logic points to an immaterial totality while collapsing all earthly things into a vanishing material point.

Consider, for example, how a finer mental feeling and a nuanced receptivity to esoteric gradations is necessary for the apprehension of Plotinus' (b. 240 A.D.) hovering unparticipated unity. This unseizable, borderless, incorporeal concordance-- which is neither immanence nor pantheism-- resembles the elusive digital information pervading today's universe. Both possess a logical ubiquity and an apophatic irresistibility that elevates, transports, and enthralls the viewer. More melting plenitude than stable entity, the neoplatonic unitive element sublimely radiates and levitates. Neoplatonism thus marks an important shift from positive to negative transfer, from the heightening unity of identity with difference to the enigmatic withdrawal or flowing away of the perfect Form as it maddeningly resists incorporation. Like the computational generation of symbols--a silent reckoning that juggles and manipulates primal bits-- this concentrated center eternally processes emanations that escape sullyng merger with the sensuous plurality of matter.

Consider, too, Plotinus' *Enneads*. This collection of 54 treatises, arranged by his student Porphyry according to their topics into six gatherings, chart the upward progress of the transmigrating demiurgic Intellect. It soars through the mounting grades of virtue and knowledge until reaching the zenith where it becomes sublimed into the One. Conversely, the ordinary human mind can only be temporarily elevated and partially joined to the incomprehensible Forms. In its common or natural state it is unable to embrace all possible objects in a single intuition. Hence oppositions must be artificially overcome, violently redirected, pole-vaulted --not linked.

Witness the growing use of mechanical ploys in late antiquity: theurgic practices, purificatory rites, coercive magic, but, above all, conjunctive "apparatus" to deliver the soul "from the truly leaden world of generation, and produce an uncurbed flight."

It is Plotinus' thaumaturgical followers of the fourth and fifth centuries, however, who are especially pertinent for understanding the "spiritual" turn taken by contemporary information theory. Of rhapsodic computationalism it might be said that the search-engine user is always unifying an elusive something in the hope of attaining that ecstatic state where he is "alone with the alone," i.e., a "God over all" fused with the data. Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus-gave an influential polarizing twist to Plotinus mathematized Neoplatonism. In their Gnostic-laced writings, the fusion of the cipher One with the many resulted not from a rational, if ineffable, coherence of dyads with monad but from a sort of trompe l'oeil sorcery or magical illusionism. This instrumentalized sleight-of-hand was a result of the marriage between popular religion and sophistic philosophy, rife with mysterious operations and incantatory devices.

I want to argue that the contemporary fascination with vanishing vectors represents the latest link in a lengthening neoplatonic chain. This oppositional, spatialized theo-aesthetics--whereby, as Shelley lamented, "the One remains, the many change and pass"--received its peculiarly modern inflection with the romantics. The antinomian surge and plunge of allegory--famously schematized in the works of the post-Kantians Novalis, Fichte, and Friedrich Schlegel--simultaneously tends towards two extremes, neither of which are wholly attainable or knowable. Both worldly and otherworldly, these unseizable autonomous energies move either towards maximal expansion--currently, we would say towards global dispersion--or towards maximum concentration --that is, towards a nano-degree of compaction or contextless isolation. How do we make or find any coherence in the face of all this beyondness?

Surprisingly, even Hegel offered no model for synthesis. The Phenomenology of Spirit shows him as firmly planted in the romantic camp. Emphasizing the importance of activity, Hegel praised the value of an unfurling process rather than the final, total work. Human production is extolled as that which cannot ever be completely realized. Importantly, the impossibility of completion is tied to psychological factors, to the belief that the pouring out of one's inner substance benefits others. The externalization of an individual's creative life in tangible form thus becomes identified with the irrevocable loss of an ideal personal coherence. The contraction of absolute self-

absorption--like neoplatonism's concentrated center in an expanding sphere-- dissolves and is transformed into its opposite, the alien realities of myriad others.

Then and now, --whether mapped as explosion or implosion-- the rapturous trans-experience eludes integration. Gyorgy Kepes was in accord with the romantic sublimers when he argued, in the *Language of Vision* (1944), that the resolution of the world's discrete components into a coherent whole depended on the use of an optical technology before which material reality receded. With the advent of digital physics-- proposing that those strange and insubstantial quantum wavicles along with quarks, gravity, black holes, and everything else in the fabric of reality are made of nothing but 1s and 0s-- life itself is becoming identified with disembodied information. This hypothesis extends to the proposition that the universe might be the ultimate computer run on bits.

Binary computation looks like a theological process from this perspective: demonstrating that everything is a derived simulation coming from an eternally self-emptying source. Recall as well the language of infinite expansion and maximal contraction, the simultaneous endlessness and fragmentation invoked by massively computer-driven genetic research. At current rates of compression, we are told, the entire 3 billion digits of our DNA can be downloaded onto 4 CDs. The 3-gigabyte genome sequence codes the human body as a lengthening twist of numbers. Computational science has become the new metaphysics: transforming biology's tangled mass of plants and animal flesh into mystical software that can extend unimpeded into the empty spaces of the cosmos. As with late neoplatonism, no immediate relation of the human to the divine is possible. More importantly, in this abstract, spread-sheet system nothing but the logic of the link relates one individual to another. The rules of the game of life, or a programmed mutability, moves us from one condition to the next.

While contemporary, digitally-inflected rhetoric makes it appear as if these machine-driven, supra-connective processes work primarily horizontally (across cyberspace, between species, among coexisting nations), I want to argue that they remain infused by ecstatic longings for an impossible verticality. Hyperlinked diffusion and relentlessly focussed micro-fragmentation are by-now familiar attempts to fill up the yawning gap between multiplying uncertain ends and arbitrary means. This gulf stretches between the swarm of incoherences we have actually engineered and those elusive, unmediated coherences-- hovering atop negative theology's unfolding ladder of shadowy presences-- that we still long to attain. The romantic desire to transcend and unite all existing

discourses also resulted in its endgame claim to be radically distinct from them in the absoluteness of self-identity. Human self-orientation, today, seems marked not by hierarchy but by homelessness.

What to do? Perhaps we can only understand coherence, like the enigma of consciousness, if we treat it not as a distant and static ideal but as a proximate variable. Life's former constants are becoming relativized. As a result, persistent patterns of perception and conception are unravelling. Darwin already recognized that supposedly fixed species changed over long periods. Today, geneticists's discovery of the mitochondrial Eve--or the theory that all the world's people are descendants of a small group of anatomically modern humans --suggests that different populations existing in diverse areas around the world exhibit different degrees of variation as a consequence of being descended from a single female who lived in Africa between 100,000-200,000 years ago.

It now seems long ago that Einstein proved space and time fluctuate with respect to one another. The discovery of variable gravity further demonstrates that not all objects in the universe must fall to earth, as Newton had postulated. Physicists are catching the shadows of quantum objects, those ephemeral forms of our world whose shape alters with their trajectory: a drop of water, a bouncing ball, or a spinning electron. . On a grander scale, plate tectonics is manifesting the constant slippages and shifts realigning our planet's crust. Computing has enabled labile fluids to turn into robust building materials. And intricacy is supplanting complexity in an emerging aesthetic of folded, interwoven, and layered forms influenced by digital and genetic engineering.

If overcoming our earthbound perspective corresponds to an expansionist desire rooted in the era of classical physics, then getting together physically at the same moment and in the same place seems to be a need consonant with today's linking science of networks. More is being simultaneously compressed into smaller and smaller units of time and space. Even apparently monadic processes lead secret lives as swarming generative systems: A-Life, genetic algorithms, fractals, cellular automata, parallel computational agents, neural networks.

Similarly, the old substance-thought dualism of western rationalist philosophy is being re-choreographed to emphasize that the prime fact of human existence is the mutable and mortal body. A fruitful line of inquiry being opened by the new mind studies points to the important role played by a cognitive unconscious as well as a cognitive consciousness.

The method of "contrastive phenomenology" allows for the testing of unconscious routines (for example, in two-channel experiments) "believed to be involved in all mental tasks, though they seem to lack the unity, coherence, and accessibility of conscious experiences."

Gerald Edelman, too, has demonstrated that memory is not a storehouse set apart from the ongoing pick-up of information. Rather, previous memories and the current categorizing activities of the brain are continually being correlated to yield primary consciousness as a "remembered present." This attempt to heal the mind-body schism is wonderfully enacted in David Cronenberg's film, *Spider* (2003). It persuasively conjures up a schizophrenic man who realizes that his bizarre recollections are not the truth but a web he has spun to allow himself to live. These redirected scenes-- done to hide or reveal past events from himself--overlap his construction of the present. As his psyche unravels, memory is shown to be not a distinctive faculty, removed from ordinary perception, but an associational "created reality."

Our individual sense of psychic coherence, then, seems to depend not just on those "aware" moments when we pay attention to one thing rather than another, but on largely automatic nervous system directives regulating homeostatic, visceral, and motor-kinetic processes that go on whether we notice them or not. This coordinating rush of bodily representations pertaining to the organism's maintenance and preservation ground the knowing self in its biological milieu. The highly complex somatic proprioceptive system, for example, provides a fine-grained relational registration of the perceiver's position, movement, limb disposition, balance, and other corporeal properties that feed into self-consciousness. Conversely, introspective phenomena such as feelings have had their roles rescripted, in the words of Antonio Damasio, "to keep the conditions of life in mind and to make the condition of life count in the organization of behavior."

A striking result of the ceaseless calibrations occurring between the unobtrusive and salient operations of the mind is that they produce an integrated sensory field. What we experience in sense perception is a presentation of the world that swiftly knits together information from all modalities. Because of cross-modal collaboration, then, the deep invisible flow of the unconscious does not interrupt, but bends, the higher watchful stream. Such a spatializing, body-centered frame of reference suggests that the epistemological problem of perceiver continuity has come almost full circle. Neuronal synchronists, at least, no longer assume we experience the world in a fragmented or ruptured manner. They have moved away from late neoplatonism's radical divorce of the

unthinkable from the thinkable as well as from the romantics' neoplatonic-inflected account of irony as a challenge to harmonious order.

They have also distanced themselves from Plato's dualism of separate multiple selves to approach once again Aristotle's concept of an embodied mind. That scientia de anima founded by the ancient master --with the help of myriad later commentators -- avoided the pitfall of positing a transcendent, "inorganic" reason divorced from any integral union with the organic "vegetative" and "sensitive" soul. In stark contrast, the immaterial Cartesian soul of modern secular philosophy was secreted inside a material body-machine, disconnected from the life functions of growth, nourishment, and reproduction.

As John Cage argued in A Year from Monday--his tribute to the theories of Ananda Coomaraswamy--our view of nature's "manner of operation" changes with advances in the sciences. Considering Baar's hypothesis of a variable consciousness, Damasio's demonstration of the indispensable contribution of joy and sorrow to the brain's regulatory activity, and Rodolfo Llinas' advocacy of the ILN (the intralaminar nuclei lodged deep within each thalamic egg) which, together with the reticular nucleus, is able to generate a regular wave form about forty times per second whose coherent oscillations possibly serve to coordinate and "bind" specific areas of the cortex into unified cognition) we stand again at the threshold of a venerable "science of the soul."

Unlike bionics--dedicated to the technical enhancement of the body and the seamless merger of man with mechanism-- Aristotle's self-changing and self-aware form of life contains no hard division between physiology and psychology. This opportunity to rejoin vitality and cognition non-linearly reminds us that computers running artificial neural networks may yet evolve pattern-recognizing skills. But the cycling back and forth between the mind visible to itself and that which remains invisible, between a coherent and an incoherent reentrant loop, evades even the most advanced silicon sensorium.

Walter Benjamin, in describing the compulsive collector, gets at this kaleidoscopic need to make impromptu assemblages out of many different kinds of reality:

"Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, the scatter, in which the things of the world are found. . . . The collector . . . brings together what belongs together . . . by keeping in mind their affinities."

Consider as well Robert Adam's sumptuous neoclassical interiors (Syon House, Kenwood, and Luton Hoo) where the unified style of the compositional scheme is not transcendently total but patterned and coordinated. From the coved ceiling with its universe of stucco work to the Axminster carpet under foot echoing the swags and garlands above, to the vista of doors and their symmetrical surrounds, to the sculpted chimney piece with its cast-iron grates--this bold designer created a reverberating microcosm. An elegant, self-effacing background architecture--containing anonymous mass-producible elements-- undergirds the overt organization of the decorative surface. Simultaneously autonomous and personal, the geometric compositional system permeates everything from the grand porticoed facade to the smallest organic finial on a cabinet. Yet it does not relieve the viewer from the obligation to piece this wealth of detail together into a coherent inlay.