



The Oceanic Metaphor: Meaning Equivalence (M.E.), Probability Theory, and the Virtual Simulation Hypothesis of Consciousness

David Christopher Lane

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Perhaps the study of consciousness has an inherent limitation, similar in import to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics or Gödel's incompleteness theorem in mathematics. Perhaps we are like seasoned travelers on a Mobius strip in quest of the "other" side of the band who after long and arduous circular travels come to realize that no matter what route we take we will always only be touching the same surface. If this is so, then a specialized version of Niels Bohr's complementarity may be an instructive insight for us as we venture forth: "In any given situation, the use of certain classical concepts excludes the simultaneous meaningful application of other classical concepts." In the study of consciousness it appears we may have to confront an epistemological complementarity where any objective study (via third person analysis) of qualia must by necessity lose in translation a fundamental feature of the very phenomenon under inspection. Conversely, any purely subjective endeavor to explore consciousness must by its very act forego any attempt to maximally objectify what is experienced, lest the experience itself be lost in attempting to exteriorize that which is de facto interior. To mistake a wave (and what it brings forth) with the totality of the ocean is like confusing a state of awareness (and its implications) with the ultimate reality of all that exists. A broken down melody is, to quote one distinguished musician, no longer a melody. Similarly a broken down consciousness is no longer itself and therein lies the present conundrum in consciousness studies. My own hunch is that the most fruitful avenue for the scientific study of awareness is to fully exhaust a physical explanation of it first. This does not mean, of course, that such an endeavor will be successful or that consciousness is merely the result of a neural net, but only that if our efforts fail we will be left with a most interesting remainder which in itself will be highly instructive about the nature of self-reflective awareness. More precisely, unless we fully option a materialist approach, we run the very real risk of prematurely championing something as spiritual when, in fact, given better instrumentation and technical prowess it may well have been the result of subtle neuronal discharges. I don't say this lightly as I know from my own personal experience how increasingly advanced diagnostic methods can unearth hitherto hidden physical variables.

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