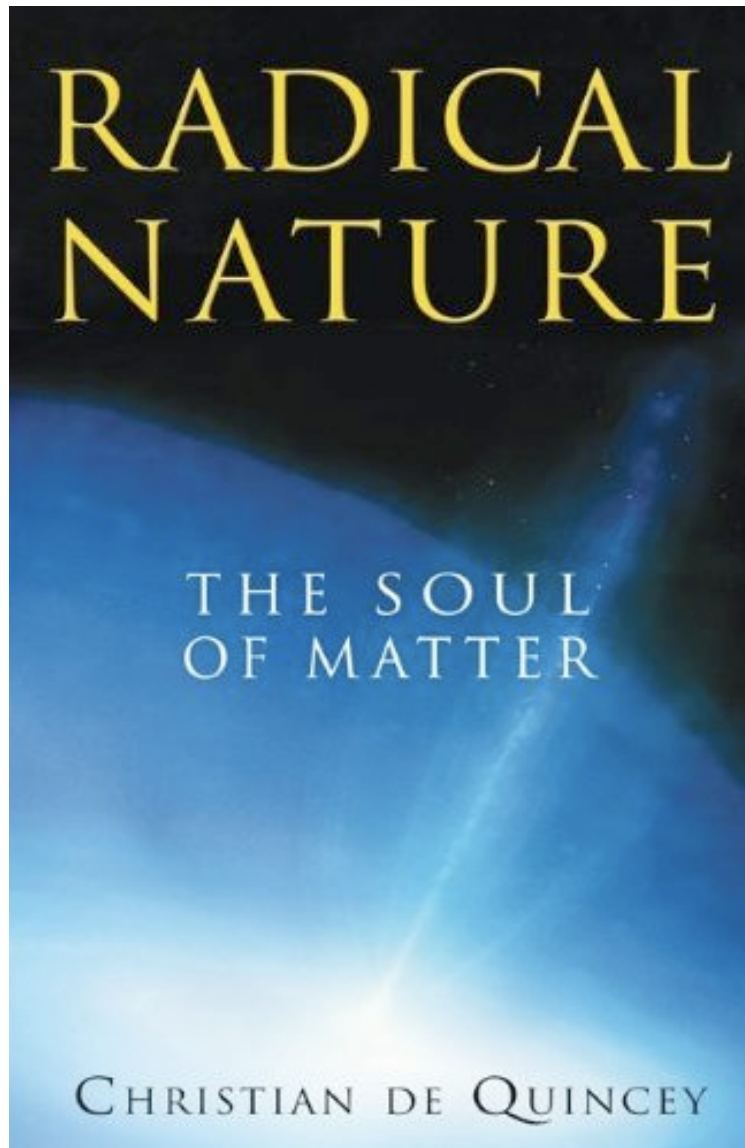


A Mind of Its Own



Consciousness All the Way Down

The great American psychologist William James had just finished a lecture on the nature of reality when a little old lady approached him. “Excuse me, Professor,” she said, “but I’m afraid you’ve got it all wrong. The world is really supported on the back of a great big turtle.”

The venerable professor, being a gentleman, decided to humor the woman: “Tell me, then, what is holding the turtle up?”

Quick as a flash, the old lady snapped back: “Another turtle, of course.”

“And what’s supporting *that* turtle?” James asked, trying gently to get her to see her mistake. The conversation went on like this for another round or two until the little old lady interrupted with a noticeable tremor of exasperation:

“Save your breath, sonny. It’s turtles all the way down.”

At least so the story goes. True or not, the “turtle” incident illustrates a fundamental intuition we all share about the nature of reality: Something can’t come from *nothing*. *Something* must “go all the way down” or all the way back. Even the Big Bang must have had some kind of “fuse” (religions, of course, say it was God).

James was teaching around the turn of the last century, but the little old lady’s point still carries force. In the modern-day version, turtles are replaced by consciousness. The question now is not what is holding the world up, but where did mind or consciousness come from? In a purely physical universe, the existence of mind is a profound puzzle. And if we are to believe the standard scientific view on this, then mind emerged from wholly mindless matter. But just *how* this occurred remains a complete mystery. In fact, in his book *Radical Nature*, philosophy professor Christian de Quincey says it couldn’t happen without a miracle. And miracles have no place in science. Instead, he says, our

best option is to revive the old lady's insight and proclaim that "consciousness goes all the way down." Mind has always existed in the universe. Cosmos—the world of Nature—has a mind of its own.

Dr. de Quincey talks about his controversial ideas on the nature of Nature.

Q: Why do we need yet one more book on consciousness or the environmental problem?

CdeQ: I'm an Irishman, so I'll be true to form and answer your question with one of my own: What's the greatest mystery facing every person on the planet? Ultimately, it's some version of the age-old "Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?" And these questions, which lie at the heart of all philosophy and religion, can be summed up as: "How do I fit in?" How do we humans (with our rich interior lives of emotions, feelings, imaginations, and ideas) fit into the world around us—a world that is supposed to be made up of physical mindless, soulless atoms and energy? That's a *scientific* question. And, so far, no one has produced a satisfactory explanation.

We lack an explanation because our questions already assume something quite disturbing. We assume we are split from Nature. We assume that humans are somehow special, that we have minds or souls while the rest of nature doesn't. Some of us draw the "soul line" at higher animals, some of us draw it at living organisms, but few of us draw no line at all. Ask yourself: Are rocks conscious? Do animals or plants have souls? Have you ever wondered whether worms or insects might feel pain or pleasure? Can trees feel anything at all? Your answers will reveal where you are likely to draw the line.

In philosophy, it is called the "consciousness cut." Where, in the great unfolding of evolution, did consciousness first appear? In contemporary philosophy and science the cut-off is usually made at brains—if not human brains

then the brains of higher mammals. Only creatures with highly developed brains or nervous systems possess consciousness, so the scientific story goes.

So, to answer your question directly: Because of our assumed “specialness,” because of the deep fissure between humans and the rest of Nature, because of the mind-body split, we need a new understanding of how we—ensouled, embodied humans—fit into the world of Nature. Our current worldview, based on the materialist philosophy of modern science, presents us with a stark and alienating vision of a world that is intrinsically devoid of meaning, of purpose, of value—a world without a mind of its own, a world without soul. And this worldview has had dramatic and catastrophic consequences for our environment, for countless species of animals and plants, and for the eco-systems that sustain us all. To be more specific, here’s an outline of just some of those consequences.

Our environment is being rapidly destroyed. We are right now experiencing a widespread, global crisis of unprecedented proportions: for example, climate disruption, global warming, and vanishing rainforests, along with their precious biodiversity. We are now in the midst of the sixth major species extinction since life began on our planet. According to some experts, fully fifty-percent of species currently alive will have disappeared by the end of this century.

Through science and engineering, our civilization has developed awesome technologies of destruction (some intentional, some not). Potent nuclear and biological weapons threaten the survival of our species, and much of the rest of Nature.

People are alienated from Nature. To grasp just how divorced we are from the natural world, imagine trying to find your way home from another town, or even just across town, using only natural landmarks (without following maps or street signs). How sensitive and attuned are you to the natural landscape in

which you live? How much has been blocked out, even obliterated, by the constructed environment of tarmac, concrete and steel?

Such alienation leads to all kinds of personal and social problems—for example, people feeling split from their own bodies and from other people, often unable to integrate their emotions and feelings with their rational minds, often becoming (or at least believing themselves to be) some kind of social misfit. How many people feel at home in their own bodies, feel comfortable at work, with their families, or with strangers? Millions struggle to search for meaning in a meaningless universe.

Q: So, where do we look for answers—in science, religion, philosophy?

CdeQ: Unfortunately, modern science and philosophy are the major source of the problem: Their basic story or worldview is “materialism”—the world is made up of “dead atoms.” According to science, human consciousness “emerged” from dead, insentient matter. Nature itself is without any intrinsic meaning, value, or purpose because it has no consciousness. For science, there is no spirit in nature. Humans are thus at odds with the rest of the world: We are intelligent, nature is dumb. By an accident of nature, we are special.

However, science may be seriously mistaken when it asserts that consciousness is a product of complex brains, and that the rest of vital nature is a product of mindless, purposeless, unfeeling evolution. *We may not be so special.*

And, as for religion, conventional doctrines promise a reward in some afterlife. They do not teach us to look for meaning in Nature. God is supernatural, transcendent, above and beyond the world. Yet we are all conscious beings, aching for meaning. We want meaning in *this* life. How many people wondered about God or prayer in the face of the 9/11 catastrophe?

For many forms of religion we are special by divine fiat. God gave us souls, so that we may survive and transcend the inevitable corruption of the flesh. Human consciousness, spirit, or soul is separate from the physical body, and the path to meaning and salvation is through prayer to a remote, transcendent God. Attention is focused elsewhere, either toward the heavens or toward priests, rabbis, or mullahs.

But the path to the sacred may not be through priests or churches. In my experience, the sacred is all around us in Nature—for example, in watching a sunset, playing with animals, walking through a forest or on a beach, swimming in the ocean, climbing a mountain, planting flowers or vegetables, filling our lungs with fresh air, smelling the mulch of rich nourishing soil, dancing through crackling autumn leaves, comforting an injured pet, embracing a loved one, or holding the hand of a dying parent. The most direct way to God, I believe, is through touching and *feeling* the Earth and its inhabitants—being open to the expression of spirit in the most ordinary, as well as in the most awesome, events of daily life. The way to meaning in our lives is by reconnecting with the world of Nature—through exuberant participation or through the stillness of meditation, just *being present* and *listening*. And when we do so, we hear, we feel, and we learn: *We are not alone—we are not uniquely special.*

For the most part, neither mainstream science nor conventional religion recognizes that humans are not essentially different from the rest of Nature. Both regard matter and the world of Nature as “dumb.” Both assert that human beings are somehow special and stand apart from nature because, they say, only human beings—or at least creatures with brains and nervous systems—have consciousness or souls. On the contrary, I say, consciousness goes all the way down.

Q: How did you become interested in consciousness?

CdeQ: I first became fascinated with consciousness as a seven or eight year old kid in Ireland. The trigger event was discovering an entry on “evolution” in my father’s tattered encyclopedia. An old line drawing of a dinosaur caught my attention: Not only was I descended from my parents, grandparents, great grandparents, and so on, but the entire human race evolved from some ape-like ancestors, who came from even more primitive mammals, who came from reptiles, who came from amphibians, who came from fishes, who came from jellyfishes, who came from clumps of cells, all the way down to bacteria-like single-celled “infusoria,” as they were called in the encyclopedia (which tells you how old it was).

I spoke the word aloud, enjoying the onomatopoeia—“e-v-o-l-u-t-i-o-n.” It sounded like a great unfolding, a rolling out of hidden forms, now mimicked in the way my tongue uncurled from the roof of my mouth.

But something else even more astounding grabbed me. Not only was I mesmerized by images of descending species culminating in this young fella sitting there at that moment reading a big, dusty old book. Somehow, that stupendous unfolding managed to produce the ability to *look back and contemplate the process of evolution itself*. Somehow, somewhere along the line, evolution had become aware of itself.

At what stage did evolution produce consciousness? I had no answers. The encyclopedia gave no clues, and my parents and teachers, it seemed, could hardly understand my questions. They spoke to me of “souls” and “God’s mysterious ways,” and I was left wondering and unsatisfied because, as far as I could make out, they were telling me only humans had souls. But such religious “explanations” did not fit what I had learned from the encyclopedia, nor what I experienced for myself. No, whatever “consciousness” or “soul” was, it was not unique to humans—but how far back did it go?

I grew up puzzled. Not that such questions burned in my thoughts every day; but from time to time I would think back on those dinosaurs and infusoria and wonder about evolution, wonder about the feelings and thoughts pulsing through me and other creatures.

Q: In what way is nature "radical"?

CdeQ: By “radical,” I mean a view of Nature and matter radically different from the standard view in physics and Western philosophy; I mean intrinsically *sentient* Nature and matter. “Radical” comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning “root,” the foundation or source of something. Etymologically, “radical” is related to “radial,” which means branching out in all directions from a common center or root, and to “radiant,” which means, variously, filled with light, shining, sending out rays of light, emanating from a source, manifesting well-being, wholeness, pleasure or love. “Radical Nature,” therefore, implies Nature that is sentient to its roots, composed of matter that *feels* something of the nature of wholeness and love all the way down, and that radiates, or moves itself, from the depths of its own being.

French Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin suggested something similar in his concept of “radial energy,” which he proposed was the *interior* source of universal attraction and love between all elements of the cosmos, pulling them toward increased complexity (contrasted with “tangential energy,” the energy physicists work with, pulling in the direction of chaos and entropy).

As I mentioned earlier, the standard scientific view of nature is that it is composed of “dead matter”—so that even living systems are ultimately composed of unfeeling, purposeless, meaningless atoms embedded in equally unfeeling, purposeless, and meaningless fields of force. I challenge this materialist view, and claim that not only is it incoherent but that it is also very dangerous.

We humans are not so special. Yet, often we think we are. Human specialness lies at the core of our civilization's dominant stories. In the grand narratives we tell ourselves trying to make some sense that we are here at all—in our cosmologies, in our scientific and religious worldviews—humans are typically the central characters.

But humans (or even animals) are not the only creatures with minds. The entire world of nature tingles with consciousness. Nature literally has a mind of its own. Nature feels and responds to our presence.

Q: What do you mean by "consciousness all the way down?"

CdeQ: Consciousness is not produced by brains. In fact you don't even need a brain to have a mind. All animals, all plants, even bacteria have something we would call "mind." I'm saying that all bodies of any kind—all matter—has consciousness "all the way down" to atoms and beyond to quarks, or quanta or whatever lies at the root of physical reality. In this view, all of nature, all bodies—from atoms to humans—tingle with the spark of spirit.

But this is an uncommon view, called "panpsychism," presenting a radical and controversial account of the relationship between bodies and minds, between matter and soul. True, the nature of mind or consciousness remains a deep mystery for science and philosophy. But success at healing the mind-body split so characteristic of our age depends, I believe, more on a revised understanding of the nature of *matter*.

The new view I'm proposing is that matter feels, matter is sentient, matter has experience, matter is adventurous—it probes and directs its way through the long, winding path of evolution. From its first appearance after the Big Bang—from the first atom, molecule, and cell—to the magnificence and glory of the human brain, the great unfolding of evolution is literally the story the universe is telling to itself. The cosmos is enacting the greatest epic drama imaginable. Truly,

it is the greatest story ever told. And we are just one of the storytellers. In the evolution of the cosmos, matter itself is the prime storyteller.

Q: What is "panpsychism"? How is it different from other philosophies?

CdeQ: Panpsychism (what I call “radical naturalism”) tells us that matter itself, from the very start (the Big Bang, perhaps) arrived on the scene already tingling with consciousness. Consciousness is not something separate from matter (which is what dualism tells us), nor is it produced by matter in the form of brains or nervous systems (as materialism insists). In panpsychism, matter—all matter—has its own interiority, an ability to feel, to have a point of view, and the ability to move itself from within. In everyday street-speak, we might say, “matter has a mind of its own.” In its most primitive form matter is (and always was) sentient, “alive.”

This, then, is the new story of the universe and the “stuff” it is made of. If we are to feel at home in the cosmos, to be open to the full inflowing and outpouring of its profound creativity, if we are not to feel isolated and alienated from the full symphony of cosmic matter—both as distant as the far horizon of time, and as near as the flesh of our own bodies—we need a new cosmology story. We need a new way to envision our relationship to the full panorama of the crawling, burrowing, swimming, gliding, flying, circulating, flowing, rooted, and embedded Earth. We need to be and to feel, as well as to think and believe, differently about Nature.

Q: Is this a new idea? Or have other philosophers said something similar?

CdeQ: Actually it is a very ancient idea. Perhaps it is the oldest worldview, predating Plato and the ancient Greeks. In my book, I've traced the lineage of

panpsychism back to before the birth of philosophy—to the ancient tradition of shamanism, in fact. And then I show how throughout history to the present day there have always been some great philosophers who shared this view. The philosophy of materialism that dominates our world today is, by comparison, a late arrival—a kind of detour that has run its course.

Q: How has materialism run its course?

CdeQ: Modern science and philosophy are completely in the dark about consciousness. They cannot even begin to explain how consciousness could emerge from the brain. Materialists just claim it as a given “fact”; it’s supposed to be obvious. But it is not at all obvious. In fact, science is utterly at a loss to explain how this could happen. Actually, for materialism to be true it would require a miracle! Getting spirit-like consciousness from the physical brain would be a miracle. And a miracle is exactly what materialism denies is possible. That’s a real dilemma. As soon as science begins to pay attention to consciousness it runs into a dead end. It draws a blank.

Q: But doesn't mind or consciousness arise from the immense complexity of the brain?

CdeQ: That's what most scientists would like us to believe. But they cannot explain how it could possibly happen. When pressed, they say, "We don't have all the facts just yet. One day we will, and when that day arrives *then* we can give you the full explanation." In the meantime it's “just obvious.” But that's not science, that's not knowledge. It's "promissory materialism." They would like us to believe their promise that one day they will have "all the facts" that will then explain the mystery. But asking us to believe without the evidence is "faith" not science.

Q: Yes, but science is always progressing and gaining more knowledge. Isn't it possible that one day they will have "all the facts"?

CdeQ: I don't think so. And here's why (I'll try not to get too technical): According to scientific materialism all of reality is ultimately physical. Reality is objective—wholly and thoroughly. If so, the challenge facing science is to explain how it could be possible—even in principle—for a wholly objective reality to suddenly (or even gradually) make the jump to an entirely different kind of reality. That's where the miracle is required: the jump from a wholly objective reality to a reality that now contains consciousness or subjectivity. It's the jump from an utterly cold, lifeless, unfeeling, and unknown universe to one that now possesses creatures that sparkle with life, with feeling, with consciousness. What could possibly account for that “reality jump”?

In philosophy, we call it the “ontological gap” between two radically different kinds of reality. No amount of complex feedback loops in the brain or nervous system can make that jump because all those loops in the brain are themselves still objective—they can be observed, they can be measured, they are physical. Consciousness is notoriously non-physical (you cannot observe or measure it). In short, you cannot get subjectivity (a state of reality with feeling and sentience) from a state of reality that didn't have the slightest trace of consciousness to begin with. You can't get something from nothing, as James' little old lady was at pains to point out. If you begin with “dead” matter, it stays dead.

Q: Can you express that more simply, in a metaphor lay people could understand?

CdeQ: Philosopher Colin McGinn put it this way: “Somehow, we feel, the water of the physical brain is turned into the wine of consciousness, but we draw a total blank on the nature of this conversion. . . . The mind-body problem is the problem of understanding how the miracle is wrought.”

Q: So what? Why should anyone other than philosophers care about the mind-body problem? What difference does it all make in real life?

CdeQ: I think it makes a big difference. Award-winning novelist Daniel Quinn once said that we don't just tell our stories we *enact* them. In other words, we live our stories, and we change the world accordingly. In my book, I make the point that all our worldviews, philosophies, cosmologies, mythologies, and so on, are nothing but stories (despite their fancy names). They are ways we have of telling ourselves who we are, how we came to be, and where we're going. We tell ourselves these grand stories to make some sense that we are here at all. But we don't just *tell* these stories. We live them, enact them.

So, today, where the dominant story is scientific materialism, we live in a world where Nature is believed to be made up of "dead" stuff, of lifeless atoms and molecules. Nature has no consciousness, no feelings, no intrinsic value, meaning, or purpose. And so we relate to Nature without sufficient respect for its sacredness. We plunder and rape and exploit it, and the consequences are not at all pretty. We have looming crises in ecology, in social systems, and in our personal lives as we struggle to make sense and meaning out of a world that we are told is made up of cold, lifeless, mindless, meaningless stuff. In such a world, all life—including human life and consciousness—is just a fluke, an accident. This is an alarming story, and it has drastic consequences.

Let me read the opening passage from the first chapter of *Radical Nature*. The words are from Bertrand Russell, one of the most respected and influential philosophers of our time:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.

This may be the most terrifying story ever told—nevertheless, it is the one we are born into. It expresses the terrible poetry of a meaningless universe, rolling along chaotic channels of chance, blind and without purpose, sometimes accidentally throwing up the magnificence and beauty of natural and human creations, but inevitably destined to pull all our glories asunder and leave no trace, no indication that we ever lived, that our lonely planet once bristled and buzzed with colorful life and reached out to the stars. It is all for nothing.

Such is the plot and substance of modern science boiled down to its bare essentials, a legacy from the founders of the modern worldview, such as Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Newton, and Darwin.

Even if we have faith in a deeper spiritual dimension, somewhere in our nested system of beliefs that story lurks, ready to rob our visions and our dreams, our loves and our passions of any meaning, of any validity beyond the scripted directions of a blind, unconscious, purposeless plot maker. If something in our experience stirs and reacts to this with disbelief, even with a question, it is surely worth paying attention to because the possibility that that story is wrong or incomplete has far-reaching consequences.

What if that sweeping materialist vision leaves something out? What if there is something other than an “accidental collocation of atoms” at work in the universe? What if, for instance, the experience or consciousness that contemplated the world and discovered the atoms was itself real? What if the ability of “collocated atoms” to purposefully turn around and direct their gaze to reflect on themselves was more than “accidental”? What if consciousness participates in the way the world works? What if consciousness can dance with the atoms and give them form and direction? What if the atoms themselves choreograph their own dance? What then?

In *Radical Nature*, I explore an alternative story—one where the atoms do choreograph their own dance—a worldview that tells us consciousness matters and that matter is conscious.

Q: What's the one key message you would like readers to take away from your book?

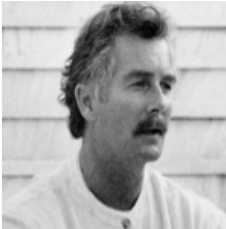
CdeQ: Nature is sacred, inherently divine. As the ancient philosopher Thales said, “Nature is full of gods.” Today, we might say it is full of God, full of spirit, full of consciousness. Nature literally carries the wisdom of the world, a symphony of relationships among all its forms. Nature constantly “speaks” to us, and feels and responds to our stories. Simply breathing in rhythm with the world around us can be a potent form of prayer. We can open our hearts and pray to the “god of small things,” for God lives in pebbles and stones, in plants and insects, in the cells of our bodies, in molecules and in atoms. And by connecting with the God of small things, we can discover this is the same as “the god of all things,” great or small. Yes, God is in the heavens, but God is also in the finest grain of sand.

I don't believe we need priests or churches to connect us with some transcendent, supernatural God. In the religion of Nature—of a natural God—priests become shamans, the whole Earth becomes our church, and the vast cosmos our cathedral. In nature spirituality, the role of “priests” is not to be an intermediary between Heaven and Earth. Rather, they are guides teaching us to listen to the sacred language of Nature—helping us open our minds and bodies to the messages rippling through the world of plants and animals, rocks and wind, oceans and forests, mountains and deserts, back yards and front porches.

We need to develop a deep respect for Nature because it is the source of everything we are. Like us, all of Nature has a mind of its own. And this is because matter is not at all what we normally think it to be. Matter is not dead

stuff. *Matter feels*. The very stuff of our bodies, the very stuff of the Earth tingles with its own sentience. It is time for us as a worldwide community to rediscover the soul of matter, to honor and respect the flesh of the Earth, to pay attention to the meaning, purpose, and value embedded in the world beneath our feet and above our heads. Maybe then, we will save ourselves from the otherwise inevitable ecological and civilizational collapse that faces us within our lifetime. I think we can do it. But first we have to learn to listen . . .

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