

Reflections on Deacon's **Incomplete Nature**

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Hi Terry,

First off, I want to thank you for bringing this work to my attention – it's been a rewarding expedition... In what follows I'll meander through some comments on a few of the many issues that he (and you) have raised here for me.

I managed to work slowly through the book over about a month's time. Even with my keen interest in his subject (systems theory > theoretical biology) over now *four* very full decades (since Maturana & Varela's **Autopoiesis and Cognition**), Deacon's writing style leans to a sort of dense and tangled conceptuality that demanded sustained concentration in modest doses for me to follow. This is decidedly *not* a book for "general readers." The same was true, it must be noted, for Maturana & Varela – the issues here are "intellectual" ones, for sure.

There is an appealing mix of hopeful intellectual enthusiasm and the requisite scientific modesty in the tone of the book. However, while there is little doubt that Deacon is making a significant contribution to a budding new field – "biosemiotics¹," exactly how that's going to play out is impossible to say at this point. Whether his "autogenic theory" will stand remains to be seen. It is at this point an interesting *gedanken* that may be a harbinger of the new ways of thinking required to develop a scientific address to the extraordinary complexity of living things (and perhaps even extending to the kinds of subjectivity they experience).

A key part of what makes Deacon's argument appealing (especially to us fans of Buddhism, I suspect) is the way in which he develops the idea of *absence* as a key organizing feature of both life and mind. The resonance here with the "emptiness of self-existence" in Buddhism is undeniable and richly developed in terms of thermodynamics. It strikes me as entirely plausible that this road may be traveled in the future to a fully formalized theory.

Deacon's "morphodynamic" and "teleodynamic" systems are nicely elaborated and enrich my amateur efforts at thinking through many of these same issues in terms of the complex algebras (inspired by systems philosopher Kent Palmer – who has been writing for several decades about how two coupled complex (? = morphodynamic) systems comprise a hypercomplex (? = teleodynamic) system). It still seems possible, as I first proposed at ISSSEEM in 2008, that complex dynamics characterize the OUTER scale domain, and hypercomplex ("quaternionic") dynamics the INNER.

What then of the INNERMOST? Might Deacon's teleodynamic systems reach into the INNERMOST via "absence itself?" My proposal for a definition of the difference between non-living and living systems was based on the difference between the dynamics that characterize the first two orders of the complex algebras. It still remains to be seen if *third order octonionic* dynamics will shed any *truly useful* light on the subject of the INNERMOST.

Meanwhile, I find Deacon's "theory of consciousness" suggested in the latter chapters of the book to be unconvincingly circular – he simply asserts what he aims to establish. My guess at this point is that

¹ Good short intro at the Wikipedia entry.

biosemiotics – with substantive contributions from Deacon – may well open up a new way forward to healing the Cartesian schizophrenia of the Western mind. However, I suspect something else altogether will be required to put “the nature of mind” (as the root of “subjectivity” and “consciousness”) on a scientific footing.

I think it’s important to stress that Deacon’s work is aimed primarily at a rigorous scientific definition of difference between non-living and living matter. Thus the leap to mind is already a stretch for him. The leap to the emergent dynamics of *human civilization* discussed in Integral Theory is even more of a stretch. Thus the conversation in your Beyond Awakening interview struck me as having something of an absent grounding: Deacon seems sympathetic to the direction of Integral Theory, but not really prepared to comment critically upon it.

About a half hour into the interview, in the course of framing a question for Terrence, you commented on “the luminous quality known in high spiritual states.” Setting aside the fact that this quality applies in *all* states, a key feature of the “luminosity” the Tibetans speak of here is sometimes missed. What they are referring to is the *knowing as itself “luminous”* – in somewhat the same sense as when we refer to something “shedding light” on a subject. In other words, the referent is the knowing, not anything known.

And yes, it seems to me likely that to consider “consciousness” as an emergent is to concretize it inappropriately. However, that would not necessarily mean that emergence is “more fundamental than consciousness.” Rather, simply, emergence is inherently temporal whereas consciousness is not. Emergence is a feature of phenomena that we observe in time domains where sequencing of before and after is meaningful. In “consciousness itself” that kind of sequencing is *not* meaningful – hence our capacity to observe directly the emptiness of (the conventional sense of) time. Perhaps more consistent with our esotericist leanings, we could see all this simply the other way around: emergent phenomena taking place *in time* are progressively *revealing* or *embodying* deeper and wider levels of embrace of the infinite potentiality that is the timeless itself.

“Higher intersubjectivity” is, I’m convinced, constitutive of rigpa. Most of us and our fellow humans have made it to “*sapiens sapiens*” – “second order sentience” as Deacon calls it – the capacity for a self-reflective awareness recognizing that we are aware. However, my sense is that rigpa (NOTE: in the meaning here of the word that is unique to the literature of Dzogchen) is a *third order sentience* – a vivid awareness/recognition (of the inherently miraculous quality) of our capacity for reflective awareness itself – “being being being” as you say. Thus, in rigpa, it seems to me, we enter directly into “the communion of saints” – the “company of the wise” that is *satsang*.

If this is the case, then we can know fairly directly “what we experience individually” in *this kind of higher order sentience* that is rigpa – a marked diminution of the sense of individuality itself *and* a growing conviction in the *All Good* Nature of Reality that is the matrix of experience. Thus it strikes me that some of Deacon’s worried reflections here – that this larger self “will have no soul” – are simply based in ordinary fears of the necessary loss of individuality that is part and parcel of the spiritual process. Yes, “moral horrors” remain, but I see them on TV daily and I seriously doubt the situation would be made worse if more beings were established in rigpa.

Here at the Yoga Science Foundation, we see all this talk of emergence in terms of the infinite All Good potentiality of the INNERMOST. Exactly *how* emergence happens is the key issue. I’m currently awaiting the arrival here in Ukiah of a young Austrian man (Wolfgang Lukas) who is just finishing his PhD in

physics at the Large Hadron Collider. I met him last year at SAND and he and I have been having a dense mentoring sort of e-communication since. He wants to shift careers into some sort of “contemplative neuroscience. We’ve sponsored his attendance at the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness meeting a few months ago, and the European Symposium on Contemplative Studies last week. (I’ll be turning him onto Deacon, for sure – thanks again!) Next week we’ll be continuing a conversation I’ve been having on-line with several other SANDies for months – specifically a couple of very smart Stanford grads – specifically about the INNERMOST. We know there is a vast scale domain there, and it seems to have features suggestive of a sort of “source condition” (a “prior condition” even, speaking in terms of *time*) – however “absent” it may appear, it is rather strikingly dharmakaya-like. Terrence asks, “how can something that is not be causal in the world?” The esotericist replies, because it lies in a “causal domain.” OK, but what more can be said about it, *scientifically speaking*?

I’m tempted to say that deep consideration of the INNERMOST is what has been “missing in science,” but that’s not strictly speaking correct -- this is the arena of “grand unification” and “quantum gravity” after all. It’s just that it remains at present an area where science still does not feel anything much can yet be said with any degree of scientific certainty.

Meanwhile, in the Dzogchen view, the three kayas are all “co-arising” and simultaneous in every moment – one of the “energies” of the Dharmakaya is the Play of manifestation – and thus it may turn out to be impossible to make a certain determination as to which is “emerging” from which... Thus, consciousness and the world are “co-emergent” and neither consciousness nor emergence is “itself” “primary.”

My sense is that whereas Deacon’s work sheds light on the mechanics of processes taking place in time and may turn out to be an important scientific advance, my interest remains on how this all relates to what there is of reality that is not “in time.” Thus I think he’s right when he comments, “science has a long way to go” in this regard.

(Note: Michel Bitbol has argued – I think importantly – in his 2008 paper “Is Consciousness Primary?” <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/4007/> that a) the cases made for consciousness as material emergent all fail but that b) we need not (and perhaps must not) reify any substitute as “consciousness.” My impression is that he is here updating the classical Madyamaka Prasangika *philosophy*. The Dzogchen view, in contrast, is *not philosophic* but rather what we might call *trans-philosophic*: based on direct realization of an inherently *trans-conceptual* condition that is rigpa. Thus, Dzogchen can sound, when put into words, as though it is tending to fall into the Madymaka trap of *reifying* the dharmakaya as “luminous,” “cognitive,” “All Good,” etc... Words!)