

Rene Descartes has been called a “pure” philosopher, focused primarily on reason and its outcomes. He and others like Maciavelli, Hobbs and Bacon helped usher in what we call Modernity, which introduced a new definition of man’s nature.

Fundamentally, Descartes had a low opinion of philosophy. He said “philosophy gives the means by which one can speak plausibly on all matters and win the admiration of the less learned”. Despite the work of the best minds over centuries, “not one of its problems is not subject to disagreement”. He concluded the best minds had failed to find the truth, but if one applied the mind well, we could all find truth through reason.

In his seminal work, Discourse on Method, he set himself apart from the classicist who preceded him. The Discourse on Method established a methodological process by which to discover the truth. He felt that if this process were used there would be nothing “so distant” or “so hidden” that it could not be discerned. In short, his operating principle was to accept nothing until it could be proven.

The first principle of truth that Descartes discovered has become common in our cultural parlance: “cogito ergo sum”, “I think, therefore I am”. In his efforts to not accept anything that he did not know to be true, he pretended that anything that was in his mind was no more true than what had come to him in dreams. Based on this analysis, he realized that the thinker (himself) of such thoughts must be something real, even if what he thought was not. He reasoned that while he could pretend he had no body, he could no longer pretend that he did not exist.

He concluded that the thinking mind, the I, needed nothing else to exist, that the mind and body were distinct from each other. Descartes, then, is the originator of the mind/body split. I feel perfectly comfortable then, blaming him for our current state of affairs. This notion that the mind is separate from the body has been raised to an undue level in western thought and in my not so humble opinion, has caused undue difficulties in regard to “truth” and our sense of the world, and most importantly, our sense of ourselves.

We’ve all heard of the placebo effect. The placebo effect is so prevalent, it must be accounted for in any scientific study of treatment. The placebo effect is the measurable, seen, or felt improvement in health that can not be attributed to medication or treatment.

The power of a person's beliefs and hopes can have a significant biochemical effect. Sensory experience and thoughts can affect neurochemistry. And the body's neurochemical system can affect other biochemical systems, including the hormonal and immune systems.

Some studies have shown for example, that placebos are effective in 50 or 60 percent of test subjects with conditions such as pain, depression, some forms of heart ailment, gastric ulcers and other stomach complaints.

There is something going on here that the mind, rational thought and science does not understand. My favorite reference for examples of something going on that science doesn't understand is the User Illusion, by Tor Norrestrand (Denmark's leading science writer). The back cover says: "the user illusion...title comes from the language of computer design and refers to the simplistic mental image most of us have of our PCs. Consciousness is our illusion of ourselves".

When we press a letter on our keyboard, we can easily believe that same letter is being placed on our computer screen. It's an illusion, because something much more complex is really going on. That complexity is not anything I as a user really need to know. My only concern is that the computer helps me put in writing what I'm trying to say.

Norrestrand says that the exact same illusion occurs regarding consciousness. What we are conscious of is not what's really happening. "During any given second, we consciously process only sixteen of eleven million bits of information our senses pass on to our brains. In other words, the conscious part of us receives much less information than the unconscious part. "We should trust our hunches and pursue our intuitions because they are closer to reality than the perceived reality of consciousness", Norrestrand tells us.

"The content of our consciousness is already processed and reduced, put into context....a mass of sensory information has been discarded before conscious awareness occurs...we experience sensation as an immediate, direct sensation of the surface of things, but sensation is really the result of a process that gives depth to the sensory data experienced". "The trick consciousness pulls is to combine two widely different approaches to the world: one approach concerns the stimuli we sense from the outside world; the other concerns the image we have in order to explain these experiences."

He tells us that we don't really experience things themselves, only a simulation of them. The mind tricks the "I" into believing its getting the raw data, when in fact, it's really getting a simulation, an interpretation of reality. These interpretations of reality can be tremendously helpful. And they can also be frightenly inaccurate.

We all know that things can appear different under different lighting schemes. We tend to lose the ability to distinguish color when it gets dark. But I've read, fire-engines appear the same exact color whether it's seen during the day or at night. The brain converts what the eye actually sees into useful information the conscious "I" may need to make an emergency decision.

This thing called consciousness is a tricky business. Consciousness is a wonderful thing, but it, like any tool can be over-used or mis-used. You've all heard Maslow's popular saying: "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail". This is the problem with consciousness. We want to believe, certainly often act as if, only that which we have conscious awareness of, is the only thing that exists, is the only thing that is real.

I want to argue, that simply is not the case. I have come to believe that consciousness is something that has come into being through evolution. As we evolved into human form, we at some point developed a sense of an identifiable self. And with it came the creation of egos. And with egos came a sense of “I”. Every since, that “I” has wanted to be in charge.

Modernity, the Enlightenment, Descartes, pushed us over the edge into a belief that the conscious “I” is all that matters. With modernity, it seems, we lost our sense of “me”. The “me” that processes the eleven million bits of information in any given second. The me that is aware of all those sensations or data points of information, that then gets processed into what we call “reality”.

I take the position that the “me” is and always has been a part of us. That “me”, is what has gotten us to where we are today. The poorer versions of me have gone extinct. From our earliest days as ameba’s or however we began, there has been a “me” to help us navigate our environment. We somehow learned to lean into what was good and to avoid the dangerous and the bad. And because of that ability we survived.

But I fear, we have moved away from paying attention to what got us here. We’ve placed all our marbles in the basket of the ego, the “I” that wants desperately to be in charge, to control all the outcomes so we can appear confident, successful, right. That part of us that is more concerned with the external, appearance and judgment, than it is with what’s internal and real. So we lie to ourselves, make up stories, put on our public face in order to gratify the ego. Our egos seem largely unable, or unwilling to deal with inner inconsistencies, the demons that haunt us, our shadow side.

I am not suggesting that we should somehow get rid of our ego selves, even if we could. I am suggesting, however, that we not lose sight of the fact that there is another part of us, another important part of us, that has access to a tremendous amount of information, bits of data if you will. Data that has always been useful, valuable in fact, data that helps us survive.

But we have to tune into a different channel in order to hear its messages. How do you know who to love? We don’t make conscious choices about who to fall in love with. We do however, make choices about who the better mate might be---that’s a fundamentally different decision. Where does the information come from that lets us know we love this person and not that one?

I believe our bodies are telling us something when out of all the people at the airport, we notice only a small number of them—everyone else is just a blur. I believe something in us, recognizes something in that person who stands out—even if they stand out for a “bad” reason. Maybe its chemical, pheromones or something. Maybe something deep inside of us is connecting with something deep inside of them. I believe the inner “me” recognizes something in their inner “me”.

There may in fact be an entire system by which the inner “me” operates. A system that affects perception, feelings, thoughts, even health. The ancient Chinese art of acupuncture is built on the belief in an identifiable flow of energy along meridians. They manipulate thin needles inserted into acupuncture points to correct imbalances in the flow of chi, prana, life force. While western science can find no such meridians, they none-the-less acknowledge some veracity of the treatment. The National Institutes of Health endorses its use for some conditions.

The theory behind acupuncture aligns neatly with the theory of energy flow that comes out of Hinduism and Buddhism and is based on the notion of chakras. Chakra are believed to be centers of the body from which a person can collect energy. They are connected to major organs or glands that govern other body parts. Chakras correspond to vital points in the physical body but are generally understood as being part of what’s called the "subtle body" which cannot be found when an autopsy I performed.

I believe the English language captures ancient knowledge of the chakras in our everyday language. This knowledge is captured in some of the idioms we use. The phrase “my mind’s eye” correlates with the chakra in the forehead, the third eye. “Gut feeling” reflects information we gain through the chakra in the solar plexus. My “heart of hearts” reflects our true selves. “Fire in the Belly” confirms a deep commitment or desire. “Lost in thought” means we’ve lost connection with our body and are floating in our heads.

Hinduism talks about Atman, the god within. Maybe, there is something more to this than just a concept. Maybe the divine, faith, and/or that which is spiritual truly resides within each of us. Maybe that’s where the notion of “inherent” worth and dignity comes from. Maybe there is good reason we say you need to “look deep inside yourself” for genuine answers.

Maybe, when we can sufficiently quiet ourselves, we can tune into another dimension, a dimension of knowledge, awareness, well-being, a connection to the all. Maybe then we can recognize that we’ve got peace like a river in our souls.

May it be.