**Sounding the life of Stones.**

You would rightly wonder why I would make the clearly absurd claim that stones in some way take part in ‘consciousness’! They clearly do not in our dualist ontological atomic schema in any obvious way…..yet….maybe while we know the work of the imagination brings them into relation and life, maybe there is also some reasons for thinking that resonance and relation are shared properties…... My work in sensory anthropology has led me to explore some strange areas of theory and their related practices. My current work will give some idea of this, this is the HARK-Listening Research Project.

I am currently working with artists and musicians in interesting acoustic spaces to explore the sensory aspects of experience and interpretation. What we are exploring is the way people connect their sensory and thereby aesthetic experience (pleasure, curiosity, beauty) through experiences of light, dark, shape, co-presence, absence, all related through and immersed in sound/silence by articulating and sharing interpretive schema. This creates value and significance, cognitively from perceptions, but falls short of being the signification of meanings. So this is a liminal zone of tacit bodily ‘knowledge’, which even when expressed in words is highly metaphoric and symbolic. These metaphors as clusters of shared responses we have also charted in relation to sound/music. An interesting reference here is to the work of Dacher Keltner (Univ of California) and Jonathan Haidt (NY Univ.) in 2003 they published work showing that ‘even mild awe can change our attitudes and behavior. For example people who watched a nature video that elicited awe, rather than other positive emotions such as happiness or pride, were subsequently more ethical, more generous, and described themselves as feeling more connected to people in general. Gazing at tall eucalyptus trees left others more likely to help someone who stumbled in front of them (Marchant. J. 2019. New Scientist. The Collection. 2nd Ed.). Here we can see the link between the aesthetic and the ethical being dranmatised. For example in stimulating peoples’ interest in climate change and sustainability it may be a valid and independent and complementary approach with didactic explanations to mobilise these deep connections with the world.

To create these possibilities I design and create acoustic explorations with my HARK Collective (Sax, cello, guitar, voices) in a Silo which has an extraordinary 25-30 second echo/resonance. We perform and create semi-improvised art-works in which others (students and children) can 'find their voice’ with others in relation, by bringing their instruments or just their bodies. Stones have played an interesting part in this work. We occupy a space between learning and therapy that is playful (ludic) and intentionally without intention, purpose, utility or even relevance (all of which of course emerge in the process of embodied enactment).

I began a piece of work last year, by considering, by analogy with the light from stars, how the property of this material world (stone/rock etc) might be sensed. imagined and expressed. Stones/rocks have many qualities many of them sensory and in particular have different densities and different resonant frequencies. At fundamental level geological structures are actually very long processes. Stone/rock is a instantiation of a set of relations of energy below matter. These relations at a quantum level suggest the holding together of what appears hard, solid, impermeable, by relations of energy and these relations are themselves curious being ‘entangled’ being in spacetime dynamically in relation an not static. Can stones ‘disclose’ their resonant sound qualities over time?

So I set out to gather and to ‘sound’ all types of geological rocks of Scotland. I did this by gathering them with my colleagues in Environmental Science (Dalradian Mylonite, Torridonian sandstone. Gneiss, Quartzite etc etc). Then we considered their densities and resonance. I then constructed a Lithophone (a musical instrument made from hanging the stones, drilling them and striking them with different instruments). I decided not to ‘tune’ the stones but to use there natural tonality where it existed. I then invited a Swiss percussionist to create a piece of sound art in collaboration with a digital-acoustic composer who would record the striking in real time and respond to the sound digitally and return it to the percussionist. This way an improvised exploratory conversation was created. The audience (60) sat in a circle surrounded by very good speakers. The piece is very interesting and I attach it for you to listen to.

So here we now are whereby stones have entered our sensory world of perception and cognition in interesting ways. This confers no ‘consciousness’ upon them of course except in the sense that they are brought into a participative relation with our being-in-the-world. One could say that their reality is now bound up with ours. We re still in the mode of sensory experience and imagination (sense-making). Here there is no basis for my claim about any qualities of the stones that might relate to the nature of their reality.

But what if we now return to some fundamental theoretical questions about the problems of materialism and our binary ‘mind-matter’schema - the problem of consciousness and experience. What does this suggest to us about our perceptual relationships to the material world, in this case the example of stones? There is some interesting literature on this matter.The philosopher Galen Strawson in his "Consciousness and its Place in Nature –Does physicalism entail panpsychism?” has taken up this question. He argues cogently that there are no materialist, evolutionary or emergence theories that can explain consciousness. He argues that monism (that mind and matter are one) is a better explanation that dualism, of matter and mind. There is a big surrounding literature on the subject as you can imagine. Some of it goes towards the quantum physics area and that itself is very interesting especially around the issue of what is called ‘entanglement’ of particles. The conceptual and imaginative problems are considerable - we do have real problems getting our heads around a fluid spacetime where all is process. So stones are held together by energy in spacetime, their relational aspects of their intrinsic nature entail entanglement. This is an imaginative contrast to their solidity, hardness, endurance and their symbolic monumental uses in the creation of our built environment, a good example of the connection with their resonance would be the stones of Silvacane  and example of how Cistercian abbeys create surface, volume, space precisely for polyphonic music. So resonance in the human body is also critical and developed in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and their is a resonance in the sounded density of stone….can this be linked or grounded by any more than just our projection and imagination?

There is a sound philosophical lineage for Stawson’s cliams  particularly from A N Whitehead’s major work "Process Philosophy", running through Bertrand Russell, then Raymond Tallis who is a key figure. His two recent books ‘Logos’, and ‘Seeing Ourselves’ move inexorably towards the monist/panpsychist position. In neurology we have the interesting work "The Master and HIs Emissary” by Iain Gilchrist which examines  the bi-cameral nature of our brains and makes very fascinating relationships between those distinctive capacities and aspects (parts to whole, details to value etc). In the mysticism applications we have the work of Ken Wilber in “The Religion of Tomorrow” a major work on comparative spirituality. A writer, Maggie Ross has recently published two volumes on “Silence’, ‘deep mind’ and ‘beholding’ which is central to the sound/video music work we are doing in HARK.

So we have:

1. The HARK project exploring phenomenologically aspects of sensory experience, using sound, space etc (and material objects such as stones).

2. Theorising our findings from HARK events; how bodily resonance (sense) moves from perceptual modes towards more cognitive interpretation (sense-making) through ‘perceptual transfigurations’ when sensing ‘as’ allows for metaphor and symbol formation in sense-making – in Lacanian terms the way in which the registers of the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary relate to each other.

3. An emergent relevant finding that relates to how we engage with the natural world in a co-creative way, how the sensory gives rise to the aesthetic, which gives rise to a transfigurative shift in the mode of knowing to an ethical posture of engagement.

4. And finally a question which is whether our work can be linked to a monist interpretation of the mind-matter question.

So that is why I make provocative absurd suggestions about stones!

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