The Mind:
Keep Calm and Carry On

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."
George Bernard Shaw

It's an interesting time for heretics. When John H. Mercer warned of greenhouse effects, climate change and the West Antarctic rapid deglaciation threat in the January 1978 issue of *Nature*, he was forcefully challenged and derided by his peers. Today, we watch the inevitable unfold with a general attitude that seems closer to resigned cynicism than panic: certainly it was "somebody's" job to anticipate and prevent this crisis – however now it's too late to do anything about it, so in due time we expect to be officially told how to deal with the consequences [1, 2].

The study of consciousness is a little bit like that: we all have it, we all use it, but somehow "it's somebody's job" to tell us what it is, or what it is allowed to do. And since the academic canon has little to say about transpersonal experiences, remote viewing, telepathy or distant healing, such nonlocal phenomena must be "impossible" even when experienced personally: they are not allowed to become part of our personal world view, and they are not, under any circumstances, permitted to contribute to any scholarly definition of consciousness – at least not in the Western hemisphere.

As James Lake's article in this issue clearly demonstrates, the scientific consensus on the nature of consciousness (or on the best methodological approaches available to investigate it) is as consistent as the six blind men's classic description of the elephant in their midst. The real problem, however, is not the lack of scientific agreement: it is the fact that this is not *perceived* as a problem or major crisis, in the same way that lack of agreement on the relative superiority of multiverse over supersymmetry theories creates billion-dollar ripples in the physics community, keeping the world's attention fixated on the Large Hadron Collider [3].

Will the latest NIH venture, the newly funded Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies (BRAIN) initiative, or its European equivalent, the Human Brain Project, bring us closer to an understanding of the mind? Despite the lavish resources and attention, the real answer is probably "no" – simply because what these two projects set out to do is "map the circuits of the brain, measure the fluctuating patterns of electrical and chemical activity flowing within those circuits, and understand how their interplay creates our unique cognitive and

behavioral capabilities" [4]; and "build a completely new information computing technology infrastructure for neuroscience and for brain-related research in medicine and computing, catalysing a global collaborative effort to understand the human brain and its diseases and ultimately to emulate its computational capabilities" [5]. These are practical and ambitious goals, undisputedly: but embedded within each of these exploratory journeys is a fundamental assumption about its final destination – namely, that the activity of the brain generates our mental experience. The lure of Big Data is evident behind these research agendas: as we SPECT and sequence our way deeper and deeper into the brain's structure, the promise of thousands of publishable, statistically significant correlations is almost palpable. Why agonize over big, difficult questions when small, low-hanging answers are so readily available? And thus the best and the brightest seem poised to embark on this – the great Brain Mapping moon shot defining their generation – except for the fact that a few inconvenient observations have been left behind. And without allowing that evidence of nonlocal conscious phenomena, whatever we conclude about the mind/brain equivalence will be but a shadow of the truth.

To repeat, this is not a crisis. It will never be a crisis – because consciousness is not perceived as a tool of progress, the way physics and biology are; it is not to be deconstructed, tested and improved, like our other machines. It is as useful to the palette of the Western technological entrepreneur as an elephant's tail – a nice accessory for cocktail conversations, but ultimately rather a nuisance to wear to the party. Under the circumstances, to bring in the whole elephant would be social catastrophe.

And yet in any crowd there are, still, unreasonable individuals. Whether we choose to acknowledge this hidden crisis and accept its far-reaching consequences, whether we recognize the true parameters of Consciousness as well as its unparalleled capabilities, and whether we let this understanding transform who we are as a civilization, will probably depend on a handful of people with the means and the ambition to chase such impossible goals – not on the common sense of the scientific community, which is trained to respect common etiquette and belief systems.

Is it inevitable that one day we collectively recognize the mind as a technological resource? If the past century is any indication, the answer is clearly "no". We have an exquisite capacity to avoid obvious truths when they interfere with our way of life, and such a reinterpretation of physics (not to mention psychology) would be the ultimate upheaval. What seems inevitable is in fact our increasing dependence on material technologies, no matter the cost and no matter the compromises. To go against that tide would require a singular brand of heretic.

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References

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