

EXCERPTS FROM A CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN DOUG WALTERS AND STEVE  
TALIAFERRO

DOUG WALTERS

We fascinate ourselves with "others" whose senses, sizes, shapes, and so on are different. This includes giants, gnomes, mermaids, fairies, pygmies, natives and so on, but also includes state-like left and right libertarian paranoia scenarios in which THEY (some unnamed others, underground, in the sky, etc.) create in excess.

Others do this via romantic love, Eros, or attaching self-fascination to another person.

As human beings, we all have ROUGHLY similar abilities to know and change the universe in different ways. These ways are determined by the range of our senses, our size, shape, physiology and so on.

From our hands to our voices to more basically BEING, more or less alive and dead, we change the universe in all of these times and places.

One of the most persistent subjects I've pursued over SEVERAL years is this fascination with others in this way. Along with this is the how delirium is related to this fascination, and how certain themes within psychotic states also involve this sort of fascination to the point of self-immolation, often using THE STATE as an agent of violence against THEMSELVES.

At the same time, it's also clear that most of us, as individuals, vary in our relative strengths and weaknesses to know and change the universe in different ways.

Most of us are strong in changing the universe in certain ways, and not so strong in other ways.

These strengths and weaknesses are not only naturally, environmentally, or ecologically relative and determined, but also socially or culturally negotiated.

Our individual strength in relation to nature is always cultural and social in that we play it. Each of our individual strengths and weaknesses are usually strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis some particular ethos or Cause of a culture we are participating in and invested in.

STEVE TALIAFERRO

What is a strength in one culture, may be a weakness in another, and the other way around. Right?

DOUG

Right, and disability is the main cultural divide. It's thought of by so many in society as a limit to participation in the NORMAL - and not as a question of DIVERSITY.

There are many roles into which those with disabilities are cast. There the role of perpetual children, as objects to be pitied, as menaces or threats to society, as sick persons, as burdens to society, and so on, and there other roles like being ugly and sexless, being incompetent, there's being cursed by God, or as being gifts or test given by God, and all of this is in addition to their role as freaks of nature.

Now when it comes to SYNCRETIC SCIENTISTS, many actually PLAY their disability. They do this because they have learned that their disability leads some to see their ability in certain areas. This enhances their element of reciprocity and their ability to give.

From this fact, it seems clear that the cultural groups we participate in and are invested in not only USE and ALLOW some of our knowledge and abilities to shine, but that they also may LIMIT our knowledge and abilities as well.

This has been one of my main concerns for the past five years or so.

STEVE

So cultures aren't only creating traits, skills and abilities they value and then pressuring members of these cultures to CONFORM to them in order to make them function in certain ways. They're also trying to DAMPEN those who would improve and lead.

DOUG

This is especially so regarding mnemonic abilities.

Universities are funded havens of disability, spaces of economic isolation of the negative things the disabled syncretic scientists are supposed to pose.

But let's step back and be a bit clearer here.

What Dr. Blair meant to say is not that CULTURES utilize, ignore or help you forget anything.

Cultures themselves don't actually behave, need, want, and so on. It's better to say that some, and maybe even a majority of PERSONS WITHIN particular cultural groups utilize certain abilities of those who participate in these groups and some don't.

STEVE

So even though we feel the need to talk about cultures or cultural groups as needing, wanting, behaving and so on, these groups themselves

actually don't do this?

DOUG

Right. You see, even though social scientists like me seem compelled by our own professional and other cultural groups to describe groups as individual human beings, they clearly are not. We really need to watch and actually curb our tendency to do this.

STEVE

Before social science you studied philosophy, right?

DOUG

I started college by studying psychology, first clinical and then experimental psychology, but I just had too many questions or issues and this led me to philosophy and from there into anthropology. One of the biggest frustrations of my years studying philosophy was the widely accepted idea that there was human experience, and we all know what IT'S LIKE to be human, and then there is non-human, species specific experience which we do not know WHAT IT'S LIKE. Like many questions in psychology that led me to philosophy I was really put off and disappointed with the wide acceptance of the notion that it was LIKE anything to be this or that kind of animal. There was something in anthropology that let me keep my frustration with this and sort of come back into science where I felt comfortable.

STEVE

What do you think of Carlos Casteñeda?

DOUG

In what sense?

STEVE

I mean, his approach to animal experience, the way he depicts relations spirits or spirit possession in his first book *The Teachings of*

*Don Juan.*

DOUG

You know, I first read that book years after having pored through nearly a library full of ethnographic works, and a lot of this was on subject directly related to those Casteñeda addresses in that story and, I have to say, if I would have experimented with ways to write a story based on my knowledge at that time, I hope I would've been able to approximate what's there in terms of representing, consolidating some big, universal themes.

STEVE

And, do you have any opinion on it's validity as an ethnographic account? Is it made up, or true, or based on a real series of encounters...?

DOUG

I dunno. I'm not sure what it would matter to him as a scientist, per se... Or to me, for that matter. But I can very well understand how it matters to some.

STEVE

Is that your answer?

DOUG

Sure, let's go with it. Let's talk about what you are doing in the Hallucinatory Beings Lab. Maybe to start off is the question what ARE they, these beings you work with?

STEVE

Well, okay, so now that it's my turn, let me just start by making something clear that I seem to always have to make clear.

Hallucinatory beings, as WE work with them, are not just persons, places or things that individuals hallucinate. They're also KINDS OF beings that have often been hallucinated by very many individuals, often again and again over long periods of historical time, and these

beings have a place in not just story and myth, but also in the practice of science, syncretic or not. One thing they all have in COMMON is a relation to altered forms of perception, whether enhanced, diminished or just unusually human in some way.

DOUG

So the synbedevels you work with in your lab are NOT hallucinations, per se?

STEVE

No wait, I didn't say that. But what I WILL say to maybe further clarify things is that OUR synbedevels are first and foremost syncretic hallucinatory beings. They're actively combined by syncretic scientists and actively studied as they develop. The big project we are working on now involves a sort of theme of such synbedevels, if you will, all based on the hallucinatory beings in Charles Dickens' story *A Christmas Carol*. In this story you find a whole host of such beings, from Young Scrooge, to the Ghosts, to the Future Cratchets, and so on. Each of these hallucinatory beings has been made into a synbedevel by our lab, and we are actively engaged in experiments with them.

Doug

You mentioned Young Scrooge, but is OLD Scrooge HIMSELF a synbedevel as well?

STEVE

Not for OUR lab.

DOUG

But for another one...? Really? Which one?

STEVE

Sorry, I can't discuss that. Some projects are either proprietary or classified.

DOUG

Which one is it in the case of Old Scrooge himself?

STEVE

I can't say.

DOUG

Does that mean you don't KNOW, or that you're not at liberty to make it known?

STEVE

Is there a difference?

DOUG

Right. Maybe not.

So what else is there your lab is doing?

STEVE

Many of the projects either can't or can't EASILY be laid out, but I CAN at least give you a a range of subjects we're covering.

DOUG

Sure.

STEVE

To start, there's vibration. That's a big one, de-emphasizing electrical flow and emphasizing vibration within living organisms. Sounds kind of mundane and kooky, but it's really not.

Then there are a series of things related to this, among other things, like proteomic expression, what makes cell processes quote "turn on and turn off."

DOUG

I understand you're also working on things that I started years ago like the relationships between dementia and dreaming, studying delirium and dementia together, and even on such things as optics, telescopes and microscopy, right?

STEVE

Yes, it's all integral to what we do, and we thank you.

DOUG

No problem. Now what about studying INDIVIDUALS as opposed to individuals as representatives of groups, like is being done in

the Mnemonic Beings Lab? Are you doing that?

STEVE

We do that in relation more to our study of how our syncretic scientist synbedevels employ our other synbedevels, like how one of our syncretic scientists works with hallucinatory beings such as gnomes, or snakes and the like. There we study individual healing abilities, individual observational abilities in sensing details, affinities, tendencies.

We study individual imitative abilities and tendencies too. Those who have relatively exceptional abilities in these areas we refer to as KRFs, short for Knowers/ Rememberers/ Feelers, three things we refuse to separate.

DOUG

In what kinds of settings do you employ them, the Knowers/ Rememberers/Feelers, KRFs?

STEVE

Well, as you know, in many cultures, from professional cultures, to those of religious, civic and hobby groups, or others, some individuals actively utilize or, on the other hand, get others to ignore KRFs who are also participating in these cultures.

In using or abusing the KRFs in different ways, these individuals within a cultural group compel OTHER people within the group to affirm one origin, one nature, one set of beliefs and so on. They do this by employing history, economics, psychology, storytelling, infotainment, and even anthropology itself. They use these to rationally compel those who participate in the culture to deny the essentially syncretic nature of that cultural group, and make outsiders of those who break this taboo.

Now IN CONTRAST TO this behavior, the kinds of beings we develop here in the Syncretic Beings Labs are both ADMITTEDLY and ENTHUSIASTICALLY syncretic in nature.



They work AGAINST the kinds of force that certain individuals within particular cultures use to limit the knowledge and ability of the KRFs.

DOUG

I myself have often observed that such individuals, like your KRFs, break the rule or secret but, at the same time, they respect it in breaking it within culturally acceptable syncretic boundaries.

STEVE

That's right. Our syncretic beings are not the focus of any particular individual's needs within a culture.

Instead, they're meant to span different forms of human experience, elicit the right questions and answers. They're meant to help us all remember the syncretic nature of the universe that we, as a species, have been helped by those individuals, AND NOT BY CULTURES, to forget, right.

This is the reason why the SBL uses the term syncretic "beings" and not syncretic, human, "beliefs" or "systems." Anthropology has consistently shown that while we humans see and treat other humans, animals, plants and the wide variety of other organisms in our world as beings, that we describe them as similar to ourselves (even when describing how they are different), we also universally see and treat OTHER entities such as gods, spirits, systems, emotions, sentiments, forms of violence, and so on as beings with human-like needs and motivations.

DOUG

Let me read from something your lab put out in print. You write: "Unlike these culturally driven, categorized entities we treat as beings, the beings that are being created at SBL are engineered to be "anthropomorphically resistant." What does SBL mean by that, "anthropomorphically resistant?"

STEVE

What we mean is that the beings SBL creates or employs don't lend themselves to being understood or employed as other beings by individuals in any particular culture. Instead, our beings serve as means towards self-knowledge or memory. They're meant to serve as MEANS FOR acting in your own way, according to your own strengths and weaknesses, in spite of ways any of the various cultural sentinels or censors you live with and are invested in try to compel you act.

When it comes to many of these areas where one can expand this kind of self knowledge, it means acting in some culturally marginal but accepted way in spite of sentinels and sensors. While many want to say this is bad for a cultural group, we've found this kind of resistance is often much more of an advantage to that culture than any kind of harmful force.

DOUG

Still, being the one's playing this role has to make things hard for the KRFs.

STEVE

Yes, it does. But we've also found something interesting in that while KRFs are often attributed with a certain cowardice they also seem to possess certain strengths, maybe in understanding fear you gain this strength? I dunno.

DOUG

I think many who study the anthropology of the syncretic for long enough will be led to the question of how it is that these other ways of successfully altering or miming persons, places and things we see in these KRFs, actually WORK, even though these ways are not derived from or being explained by science.

STEVE

I think most people would generally respond to that question by admitting there's SOMETHING going on in such cases, but then say that it's either something not worth explaining or that it's actually NOT working and just a trick, or due to belief or whatever.

DOUG

Even though it's not generally put in such way, so many anthropologists seem to think that if everyone BELIEVES something, then it has a social function, it has a purpose, and some kind of value, in that it alleviates fear and gives those who believe it a sense of control over things they are not actually controlling as well as they could be.

STEVE

Right, and then another answer to such cases is to say that at some time someone HAPPENED UPON a successful way of dealing with something and it has never been explained, but just done and used for ages without understanding it in any SCIENTIFIC way.

DOUG

Right, I've always seen a certain oddness in that kind of response because it often assumes that scientific understanding and practice is about UNDERSTANDING CAUSES, but this is not really the case in most scientific work today.

STEVE

EXACTLY, in the end, as it's practiced in most places, the work of science and what this work produces has more to do with method, a way of doing things, and less a search for some deeper truth or reality.

DOUG

Much of science today is more of a group

ethos or Cause than a way of being, like many people describe culture. As a Cause, science contrasts itself with non-empirical and irrational Causes that dominate certain cultures that are quite often religious, political or popular cultures.

#### STEVE

The real Cause is too often funding and career ambitions, but that's not our direct concern, so...

When syncretic scientists are studied in anthropology and other areas, the role of fear seems to be persistent feature.

The two main ideas are that, one, syncretic scientists somehow work through either scaring people into states that make them conform to some sort of mythical or superstitious way of behaving and explaining things or, two, the things syncretic scientists do to help others avoid and alleviate fear are things that make people affirm they're right.

It's from this you get the term "witch-doctor," two terms that seem to be contradictory, bad and good, but are one and the same. I think the witch-doctor MIGHT be one of the most common tropes in popular cultural depictions of other cultures, where we see a group behaving in unusually fear driven ways, irrationally reacting to something that the outside observers of it can rationally, and non-religiously understand.

There's always the idea in there somewhere that while syncretic scientists are fear driven, humorous or embarrassing, science itself is cool, calm and collected.

While some people would say religion is a key factor in science, that there are historical reasons there, I'm not really dealing with that, although I know you dealt with that. I have found that some kinds of Christianity, especially

through their ideas of belief and spirit, are actively involved in fear alleviation and protection. This active alleviation and protection are actually keys to its syncretic work. This is most obvious when you see saint figures beings used, for example, but also in many other less concrete ways. It's really not a surprise that anthropologists working in syncretic, missionary or colonial environments might come to depict as "native" what was Christian syncretic or being described as such for the purposes of communication.

Related to the idea of the alleviation of fear is the work of placebos. It's the idea that placebos work through some mysterious method that shows the human body is capable of healing itself, getting better or staying healthy on its own in ways that can't be explained.

The sugar pill is said, by many who have thought through it, to either: (a) provide a certain comfort that helps in this bodily process of self-maintenance, or (b) does nothing at all but provide a means for making the methods of science do what they need to do in a mathematical and rational way. In the first case, the fear of the person is alleviated, and in the second the fear of those SCIENTISTS vis-a-vis their own professional cultures is alleviated. In the discussion around placebos, belief is a CAUSE.

I think it would be helpful here to look at a scene from Derek Jarman's film Wittgenstein and then go from there into what I mean by saying that when it come to placebos, belief is a Cause.

In one scene, Wittgenstein explains that there is no strange, ethereal THOUGHT BEHIND what we say, but that we are still in some way compelled to say there is and insist on its existence. I would say here that this notion we

are compelled to defend, of thoughts being mysteriously behind what we say, is a kind of secret that we all KNOW to be true, but are not allowed to SAY so. Instead of affirming no thought there, we act out in ways that seem to more strongly support the secret. We make the thought behind what we say into a sort of Cause. These are the ways, the performances, that Wittgenstein mocks.

Now in the same way, I would say, when we say belief makes the placebo work, belief is just like the thought behind a word that Wittgenstein is mocking. The fact that there is no belief behind anything that works is a public secret that we all KNOW to be true, but are not allowed to SAY is true. So, instead, we act out even more to affirm this notion of belief in order to more strongly support the secret of it. We make belief into a Cause.

This acting out is what we call spirits, processes, illnesses and the like. This acting out works to secrete the materiality of the spirits, the working processes, or the performances of illness, its recovery, or alleviation.

From this, we have to affirm that the PERSONS giving and taking placebos actually CHANGE THE UNIVERSE, and not belief.

Is there a case where you could not say that something works because in some sense you believe it works? If not, following Wittgenstein, while we are compelled to say all changes in the universe are based on belief, to really do science you would have to be willing to see that saying this is not intrinsically necessary to doing science and that saying this might be standing in the way of science. This is perhaps the biggest challenge of not only our lab, but the other labs here as well.

DOUG

While when it comes to syncretic scientists, anthropologists have misplaced their focus on the myth, symbols, and signs and collective

sentiments, they HAVE, however, created a rather large and impressive body of knowledge of what are called folk taxonomies.

While this work on folk taxonomies is very important in approaching syncretic scientists, one of the mistakes with it has been to downplay, or undervalue, to SUBORDINATE the value of this knowledge in understanding syncretic scientists. In order to understand syncretic scientists, you need to understand syncretic scientists THEMSELVES--not just what they do, their practices--but understand their ongoing syncretic activity in relation to taxonomies. You need to see that much of this activity is quite different and more specialized than the common taxonomies found in the general population.

In the way one might come to understand a small society like the Finns via folk taxonomies in a small Finnish village, one would NOT be able to understand their scientists and artists by this alone.

What the scientists and artists do is related to who they are as persons, and how this affects what they do and how they do it.

While in science there is self-fascination, this doesn't usually lead to creativity as it does in art. But, then again, this doesn't mean that this self-fascination, this wonder or imagination, is not playing a role. It means that it is mostly being excluded from their professional work.

By way of confession, I have to admit I myself lack the syncretic drive to learn taxonomies.

STEVE

When it comes to many scientists, I'd go even further to say that many are not engaged in any kind of self-fascination with some idea. It's more like they're careerists engaged in a self-fascination with fame or power.

DOUG

On the other hand, the activity of syncretic scientists is too often confined to or confined by religious pursuits or philosophy.

STEVE

I'd go so far to say we are KEENLY aware of that. This is one of the key concerns of SBL. It's something we always keep in mind.

You wrote somewhere, I have it here, that "We do not really understand how science (or scientists) fit into the sacred."

DOUG

Yes, that's right.

STEVE

I'd say SBL is an ongoing investigation of where they DO fit in.

In my lab we start with the fact that medical science involves the sacred and proceed with the idea that ALL science does.

DOUG

The sacred is that which is set apart, has two sides, a positive and a negative side. Likewise, the secret has two sides.

Public secrets are known and not talked about (or even talked about it as BEING a secret). But while they're not talked about, they're often PERFORMED or ACTED OUT in ways other than talking. To a certain extent, the lives of scientists are led in a realm of the "public sacred." Their public personas as "SCIENTISTS" are masks for their publicly secret INDIVIDUAL personas acted out in roles like the nerd or geek, full of fantasy, mythology and abnormality, giftedness, and so on.

STEVE

Right, both sciences and their scientists are



publicly sacred, both are base AND elevated, and scientists perform this in ways that both increase and maintain their power, and at the same time make them vulnerable.

DoUG

Among anthropologists, the sacred has been linked to fear. This notion has served as another way of talking about the role of fear in cultural groups and at the same time has been touted as some basic standard of religions around the world.

STEVE

From your time in Nigeria.

DOUG

My time with ROBIN HORTON in Nigeria.

STEVE

Yes, with Robin Horton. What I took from this is that anthropology has been wrong in placing syncretic scientists in the role of religious figures and categorizing what they do as religion, instead of depicting them as those who know, feel and remember.