

# ARE ROCKS

CHRISTIAN DE QUINCEY

"It just doesn't feel right," she protested, unhappy at the suggestion that perhaps rocks don't have consciousness. She looked genuinely troubled as I held up the stone.

"My job, as a philosophy teacher, is to get students to 'think outside the box,' to become more conscious of *how* they think. This is not supposed to be an exercise in *what* to think; it is not about finding 'right' ideas." I rubbed the rounded stone between my hands, feeling the paradox of its cool warmth.

"Donna," I said, "I'm not asking you to change any particular belief about rocks. If you think rocks or stones are conscious, that's fine." Though silently I wondered why it seemed to matter so much to her that lumps of granite pulsed with what she called "vibrations." In my experience, rocks—immobile, inert, unresponsive, hard, and cold—are the very epitome of something that's thoroughly nonconscious. Of course, I could be wrong. But how could we ever tell for sure?

"The issue isn't whether rocks really do or do not have consciousness," I went on, unconsciously stroking the stone against my chin, searching for the best words. "There really isn't any decisive way to know. There's no conclusive test for consciousness." I hesitated, knowing there's no kind of test at all.

"Whether or not rocks, or anything else, have consciousness is a scientific issue, and as things stand, science cannot

even begin to answer the question."

"But scientists would laugh at the idea of rock-consciousness," another student blurted out as a question, "wouldn't they?"

"Yes, I do believe most of them would," I agreed, and went on to explain how that's a good example of a metaphysical prejudice masquerading as scientific knowledge. "Without having the faintest idea how to test such a belief, most scientists I know would

insist that the idea of rock-consciousness is absurd."

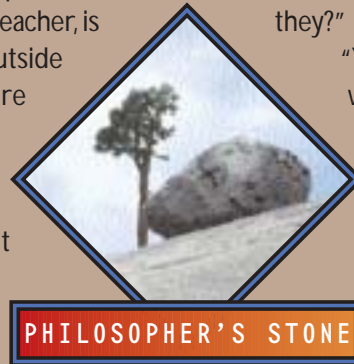
"It's like 'believe first, ask questions later,'" the student mumbled to her neighbor.

"That's not science, it's scientism," I offered, still agreeing. "It's bad science. It's confusing the 'how' with the 'what'—the process of thinking with the contents of thinking."

I could see that this last statement drew blank looks, so I tried to explain.

"What you've just identified about so-called scientific thinking about rocks serves as a good example of where I'd like you to focus your own awareness." A rustle echoed around the room as students shifted in their seats.

"Notice how these scientists (whoever they are) engage in a form of thinking we might call 'jumping to conclusions'. They believe that only creatures with brains could have consciousness, and since rocks don't have brains, therefore rocks couldn't have consciousness. That kind of think-



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ing is called a syllogism. And it's quite valid as stated. Yes, if it's true that only brains have consciousness, then the conclusion logically follows: rocks don't have consciousness. But that's a philosophical conclusion, not a scientific one. Science works by testing the 'ifs' using experiments that yield tangible evidence. And there's no tangible evidence for consciousness—not in rocks, and not in human beings either.

"Even philosophically, the conclusion hinges on the truth or accuracy of the initial premise: 'Only creatures with brains have consciousness.' Is that really true? The second premise, 'rocks don't have brains,' is not a problem. Plenty of people, including scientists, have split open rocks and nobody has ever seen a brain inside.

"But for the conclusion 'rocks can't be conscious' to be true, both premises would have to be true. And we simply do not know whether the first premise 'only brains have consciousness' is true. To believe so in advance of testing the hypothesis is scientism, not science."

Looking at the sea of faces, I could see I'd completely lost them by now. How could I make the point more clearly?

"What I'm trying to get at here is that science is about discovering what the actual world is really like, whereas philosophy is about exploring possible worlds. Science is interested in whether brains actually produce consciousness (and whether rocks really, actually, do have consciousness or not); philosophy is interested in, for example, whether it's possible that consciousness could exist without brains, or if it's possible that rocks could

exist with or without consciousness."

I was still struggling. So I turned to Donna again.

"When I asked you to think of something that didn't have consciousness, I suggested a rock might be a good example of such a thing. But you didn't agree because you felt uncomfortable. It didn't feel right, you said. You may indeed be correct: Perhaps rocks do have consciousness. But I'd like you now to be open to the possibility that either you may be mistaken, or that in some other world it's possible that rocks don't have consciousness. You don't even have to give up your belief; I'd just like you to entertain the possibility. Can you do that?"

She squirmed a little in her chair, and after a long silence, her face strained from some internal struggle, said "No. I just don't believe it's possible."

"Why wouldn't it be possible?" I asked, trying to hide a growing impatience.

"Because it just doesn't feel right," she said. We'd come full circle.

I searched frantically for a new tack. The clock was hungrily devouring the minutes, as the hands inched their way toward 9:45.

"Maybe it doesn't 'feel right' to scientists to consider the possibility of rocks having consciousness. You would feel one thing; they'd feel the exact opposite. Who'd be right? How would we decide?"

Donna thought for a moment: "Well maybe there's no 'right'," she came back. "Maybe we'd both be right in our own way."

I'd lost.

But I couldn't let it alone. "How could the same thing—our rock—both have consciousness and not have conscious-

ness at the same time? That's a contradiction. It doesn't make sense. It's incoherent."

My frustration was beginning to show now, as the pitch of my voice climbed an octave. But her *coup de grace* was about to come:

"According to your logic, maybe. That's 'either/or' thinking. In my way of thinking it's 'both/and'."

At that point I finally gave up. I realized the truth staring me in the face.

"Then we can't communicate," I said. "We can't understand each other. If you are talking from a world where you believe both/and logic applies to contradictory statements, then I have no way of making rational sense of what you say. In my world, some statements do require understanding in either/or terms. The same thing (a rock) cannot be both in one state (conscious) and its exact opposite (nonconscious) at the same time. All meaning breaks down for me at that point."

Capitalizing on her winning hand, she threw out, "Only if you are looking for meaning through reason and logic."

Bingo! That's it. Maybe I had an opening after all.

"That's precisely what I am looking for," I said with a sense of desperation tinged with a flicker of hope. "We are communicating through language, which is the expression of concepts. And for concepts to hang together coherently—to make sense—we have to honor the rules of rationality and logic. I'm looking for conceptual coherence. I'm not saying that whatever fits together rationally is necessarily true in the actual world (after all, there's no reason whatsoever that reality should fit our concepts). I'm saying that for me to understand what you say about the world, I need to hear ideas that fit together coherently. And contradictory statements cancel each other out; they do not fit."

Was I finally getting a foothold? I won-

dered. The ticking of the clock picked its way through the silence as I waited for her response.

"Well, if you want me to just think that it's possible for a rock to be nonconscious, okay. I can do that. But it still doesn't feel right, and I don't believe it's true."

I was back in the driver's seat. "That's all I wanted from the start: for you to engage in a thought experiment. That's what philosophy is. Now you're beginning to think like a philosopher."

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After class, when the last student had left, I sat there with the stone between my hands, resting it on my lap. I fingered its smooth curves, emptying my mind of all the day's thoughts, absent-mindedly concentrating on the heft and solidity of the rock. Three or four billion years ago, this fragment of planet had been spewed out by some fire-breathing volcano. It cooled, and found its place among the Earth's earliest ancestors. Some rocks got digested and transformed by primitive bacteria, and entered the stream of living systems. Others, like this one, remained as they had been for millions—for billions—of years. There was something very special about such an ancient, almost eternal, object. If only I could see the eons of changes it weathered, recorded somehow in its elements. I closed my eyes and held the stone lightly, feeling for its almost imperceptible grooves. For a moment, fleetingly, I could have sworn it carried a silent message . . .



CHRISTIAN DE QUINCEY, PhD, is managing editor of *Shift*, and a professor of consciousness studies at John F. Kennedy University. He is author of the award-winning book

*Radical Nature: Rediscovering the Soul of Matter* (Invisible Cities Press, 2002). 