Good News: You Are Not Your Brain!

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The above title appeared as an eye-catching headline in March 2012 over an article in the *Huffington Post*, the online newspaper. It was co-authored by Deepak Chopra, M.D., and Dr Rudolph Tanzi, Professor of Neurology at Harvard Medical School. Acknowledging that we live in a golden age of brain research that is brilliantly mapping and decoding neural circuitry, they nevertheless questioned the 'overreach' which, they say, has led 99 per cent of neuroscientists to assume that we *are* our brains. 'In this scheme, the brain is in charge, having evolved to control certain fixed behaviours… We are flooded with articles and books reinforcing the same assumption: the brain is using you, not the other way around.'

Both authors are renowned for their championing of an opposing view: that the mind itself shapes material reality, including the brain, and that we do not have to submit to the neural patterns linked with conditions such as depression, addictions, and phobias. 'It's very good news that you are not your brain', Chopra and Tanzi write, 'because when your mind finds its true power, the result is healing, inspiration, insight, self-awareness, discovery, curiosity, and quantum leaps in personal growth… The real glory of human existence is the mind, not the brain that serves it.'

More than three decades ago, in the middle of a journalistic career writing mainly about science and medicine, I was introduced to reflective practices by doctors who had seen the benefits these brought both in the clinical setting and in their own wellbeing. The essence, as I learned it, was to make positive choices in thought and feeling, enabling one to bypass and gradually displace unhelpful mental habits. Meditation on these lines worked for me: from being an ego-driven candidate for an early coronary (ironic in a medical correspondent), I quite quickly found myself to be much less needy. The greater inner security that I enjoyed translated into a much more sustainable style of working, as well as generally improved relationships.

Science has, of course, been telling us for years about the profound effects of our thoughts, feelings and attitudes on the body, including the brain and the immune system. The special implications of the discoveries surrounding brain plasticity were explored in detail by Canadian psychiatrist Norman Doidge in his 2007 best-seller, *The Brain that Changes Itself*.[1] A *New York Times* reviewer commented: 'The power of positive thinking finally gains scientific credibility. Mind-bending, miracle-making, reality-busting stuff…with implications for all human beings, not to mention human culture, human learning and human history.'

Experience has also taught me, however, that although the practice of positive mental states can bring quick and useful gains, sustaining those benefits over time is often not so easy. A mismatch may develop between a positive self-image, for example, held in conscious awareness, and self-doubt arising from actual everyday life experiences. Over time, if disillusionment sets in, there can be a 'rebound' into even more profound negativity. 'Happiness', I once heard an old Anglican lay preacher declare, 'is no laughing matter.'

Which is why I have come to the view that an incipient revolution in our ways of understanding ourselves and the world that is both cognitive and experiential in nature may be of great importance to our futures. It draws on studies from several different fields supporting the understanding that there is a mind-like quality to existence that is more fundamental than the physical realm and that is also essentially unifying in character – it frees us from the sense of separation we usually experience in the physical world. If this is right, our failure to acknowledge it is a distortion in the lens with which we see life, likely to produce suffering no matter how hard we may try to think and feel otherwise.

Some proponents of the new paradigm have named it post-materialist science, and set out their case in a manifesto drawn up at an international meeting held in Tucson, Arizona, on February 7-9, 2014.[2] The scholars and researchers involved pay tribute to the success of scientific methods based on materialistic philosophy, in increasing our understanding of nature and in bringing greater control through advances in technology. They maintain however that the nearly absolute dominance of materialism – the idea that matter is the only reality, and the mind nothing but the physical activity of the brain – has seriously constricted the sciences, especially hampering the study of mind, consciousness and spirituality. The materialistic focus, they say, cannot account for an ever-increasing body of empirical findings in the field.

These include 'psi phenomena' – studies indicating that we can sometimes receive meaningful information without the use of ordinary senses, and in ways that transcend the usual constraints of space and time. In addition, a considerable body of literature has developed describing heightened mental functions, often profoundly spiritual, both in coma and in the so-called 'Near-Death Experience' (NDE) following cardiac arrest. Such phenomena are far from new, but have tended to be regarded as anecdotal oddities because the materialistic tide has been so strong.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of eminent individuals argued for the existence of a realm of consciousness beyond the brain. A notable example was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, co-founder in the 1880s of the College of Psychic Studies, whose beliefs were reflected in an assertion by Dr Watson that 'Holmes knows the value of throwing his brain out of action.' However, several mediums he championed were later unmasked as frauds. In the same era, the philosopher and psychologist William James, a founding member of the American Society for Psychical research, argued that each of us is a soul existing in a spiritual realm, and that it is the soul that determines our behaviours in the physical world.

However, the post-war decades saw an ever-increasing dominance of materialistic assumptions in popular as well as professional opinion and beliefs, even though Einstein and several of his contemporaries had demonstrated that time, space and the material world were not the clockwork machinery described by classical physics. It is possible that the disasters brought about by Nazi and Stalinist ideologies contributed to the trend towards embracing secularism and consumerism. These seemed to offer more secure standpoints than any kind of group ideals. To the extent that religion kept some of its authority, it was more as a source of individual and social support than as a coherent philosophy. Materialism ruled.

The theory of 'conscious realism'

Now, however, as Chopra and Tanzi have argued, the tide may be turning. They draw special encouragement from a 'flawless' 2008 article[3] in which Donald D. Hoffman, professor of cognitive sciences at the University of California, Irvine, proposes a radical solution to a question which he says has troubled philosophers at least since the time of Plato, and now troubles scientists: what is the relationship between consciousness and biology?

Despite substantial efforts by many researchers, Hoffman says, 'we still have no scientific theory of how brain activity can create, or be, conscious experience. This is troubling, since we have a large body of correlations between brain activity and consciousness, correlations normally assumed to entail that brain activity creates conscious experience.' His paper explores a solution that starts with the converse assumption, that 'these correlations arise because consciousness creates brain activity, and indeed creates all objects and properties of the physical world.'

One aspect of Hoffman's theory likens the mechanisms of consciousness to the complex array of voltages and magnetic fields, which carry, encode and delete information at the heart of a computer. The ordinary user does not need to know anything about this complexity and in most circumstances would be thoroughly confused if they were made apparent. Instead, to delete a file, for example, we just need to know how to drag an icon into the recycle bin. 'Hiding causal complexity helps the user to quickly and easily delete a file, create a new one, modify an illustration, or format a disk, without distraction by a myriad of causal details.'

There is no resemblance between properties of the icon – a pattern of pixels on the display – and the actual properties of the file. Nor does moving the file icon as such cause deletion of the file. Icons have no causal power within the computer. They are nonetheless useful because they provide us with simple signals as to how to trigger appropriate, but hidden, causal chains inside the computer.

In the same way, according to Hoffman's proposal, we construct everyday objects such as tables, chairs – and even the moon – as 'icons' in our perception each time we look, as conscious observers. This does not mean there is no real world independent of the observer. 'There is a reality independent of my perceptions,' he writes, 'and my perceptions must be a useful guide to that reality.'

However, contrary to the 'physicalist' understanding of the world that dominates our thinking, this independent reality 'consists of dynamical systems of conscious agents, not dynamical systems of unconscious matter… Consciousness is fundamental. It is not a latecomer in the evolutionary history of the universe, arising from complex interactions of unconscious matter and fields. Consciousness is first; matter and fields depend on it for their very existence.'

In this broader aspect of the theory, which he calls 'conscious realism', all objects are mind-dependent. Perception is not objective reporting, but active construction. The physical world

of space-time, objects, matter and so on is a friendly 'user interface' between any particular observer and the deeper reality.

The theory offers a possible solution to why the mind-body problem has been such a persistent puzzle. We may have confused cause – our consciousness– with effect – our relationship with the material 'icons' surrounding us, including the body. It is as though we have been playing a giant game of virtual tennis, for example, and forgot that neither the players nor the ball are literal representations of reality, but an interface with the computer that holds the rules of the game.

Similarly, 'brains do not cause consciousness; consciousness creates brains as dramatically simplified icons for a realm far more complex, a realm of interacting conscious agents.'
This is a very counter-intuitive idea, given that human brains are considered to be the most complex objects in the universe, but information technology has been showing us how to store more and more information on less and less in material terms. Perhaps it is not unimaginable that in the complete absence of matter, in a realm of Mind alone (or of a substrate much more subtle than the material realm), vastly more information might be available.

Hoffman's theory still requires us to take seriously the material representations of consciousness. 'The point of the icons is to inform your behaviour in your niche. Creatures that do not take their well-adapted icons seriously have a pathetic habit of going extinct.' The icon of a train thundering down a track, for example, 'usefully informs your behaviours, including such laudable behaviours as staying off train-track icons'.

But the theory holds that treating objects as if they are permanent - a convenient skill that only develops in children at about nine months of age - is illusory. 'Something continues to exist when the child stops observing, but that something is not the physical object that the child sees when it observes. That something is, instead, a complex dynamical system of conscious agents that triggers the child to create a physical-object icon when the child interacts with that system.'

The theory does not claim that everything we see is unreal, but says instead that all sensory perceptions are real in the sense that headaches are real: they exist, and are observer-dependent. They exist so long as they are experienced.

Hoffman anticipates the growth of a science of conscious realism, with mathematically defined laws describing the dynamics of conscious agents. He hopes this will provide a richer and more comprehensive framework within which to accommodate and build on currently established 'physicalist' scientific models and laws, though some might be superseded.

Consciousness as ultimate reality

My brief summary here of Hoffman's 34-page paper will probably raise numerous questions, if not immediate objections, in the reader's mind. He anticipates many of these, however, and although I found his reasoning hard to take in at first, successive readings have led me to

believe the theory may be a significant step towards establishing a new, ultimately more explanatory, science-based paradigm of mind and matter.

As Chopra and Tanzi point out, it has proved impossible to construct a theory of the mind based on material objects that somehow became conscious. Brain activity is not remotely the same as thinking, feeling or seeing.

In *The Brain That Changes Itself*, Norman Doidge writes, 'While we have yet to understand *how* thoughts change brain structure, it is now clear that they do.' By putting consciousness first, Hoffman's theory removes that mystery. The brain does not change itself; it is a 'user interface', put in place by consciousness, and constantly changed by consciousness.

Hoffman points out that the theory is consistent with some interpretations of quantum physics, which claim that definite physical properties of a system do not exist prior to being observed.

It also offers a context in which to place the NDE and related phenomena. Advances in resuscitation techniques have brought thousands of such cases into the literature, but the materialist scientific worldview cannot accommodate these accounts. They remain controversial, despite painstaking studies such as that headed by the Dutch cardiologist Pim Van Lommel, reported in *The Lancet* in 2001[4] and subsequently the subject of an award-winning book.[5]

If consciousness is fundamental, and the material world, including the brain, is a construction of consciousness, it ceases to be surprising that consciousness continues when it separates from the brain. A feature of many NDEs, in fact, is that the experiencer reports a huge expansion of consciousness. Van Lommel describes it as having access to 'a deep knowledge and wisdom, with indescribable clarity and insight.'

'It seemed as if time and distance didn't exist. I was everywhere at once, and sometimes my attention was focused on something and I was there too,' one subject in his study said.

A blissful component is also commonly, although not always, described, linked to a sense of connectedness and complete freedom from fear. 'Enveloped by light, people experience total acceptance and unconditional love', says Van Lommel. One NDE-experiencer reported, 'I think death is a really nasty, bad lie.' Another commented that after returning to everyday consciousness within the body, 'a single loving thought would let me be part of the whole again.'

Van Lommel's study involved 344 heart patients who had clinically died some for five minutes or longer before being resuscitated. Around a fifth reported some ongoing experience after the medical monitors had pronounced them to be dead, and half of those reported an awareness that they were 'dead'.

This means that four out of five patients in the series reported no such experience. Why would that be, if consciousness is indeed continuous? A possible explanation is that altered states,

whether experienced in deep sleep, under anaesthesia, or in death, do not always become imprinted on the memory for later recall.

Hoffman's proposal that the brain is a kind of filter, a construct of consciousness enabling us to manage ourselves in the game of life, is supported by some dramatic personal accounts from scientists who have undergone loss of brain function themselves.

In his best-selling book *Proof of Heaven,*[6] Dr Eben Alexander, an eminent neurosurgeon, describes his recollections of a week-long coma caused by a rare form of bacterial meningitis. 'I was encountering the reality of a world of consciousness that existed completely free of the limitations of my physical brain', he says. 'My experience showed me that the death of the body and the brain are not the end of consciousness.'

He felt desperate to communicate what he had learned as soon he recovered his everyday faculties. Love and compassion, he writes, 'are far more than the abstractions many of us believe them to be. They are real. They are concrete. And they make up the very fabric of the spiritual realm.

Love is, without a doubt, the basis of everything… the reality of realities, the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist, and no remotely accurate understanding of who and what we are can be achieved by anyone who does not know it, and embody it in all their actions.

We have the ability to recover our connection with that idyllic realm. We just forget that we do, because during the brain-based, physical portion of our existence, our brain blocks out, or veils, that larger cosmic background, just as the sun's light blocks the stars from view each morning… We can only see what our brain's filter allows through.'

Dr Jill Bolte Taylor, a brain scientist who suffered a haemorrhage in her left hemisphere, also, on recovery, felt a passion to communicate the *expanded* consciousness and connectedness she felt as she lost her normal faculties. She describes the experience in her 2008 book *My Stroke of Insight*[7] and in a dramatic TED talk in which she recalls feeling: 'I am the life-force power of the universe. I am the life-force power of the 50 trillion beautiful molecular geniuses that make up my form, at one with all that is.'[8]

In similar vein, Anita Moorjani has related in *Dying To Be Me*[9], and also in a TED talk,[10] how she went into a state of super-awareness during a coma brought on by end-stage lymphoma. 'It felt as though I had 360 degree peripheral vision… It was as if I had expanded beyond my body,' she says. 'I was aware of my physical body – I could see it lying there on the hospital bed – but I was no longer attached to that body. It felt as though I could be everywhere at the same time. Wherever I put my awareness, there I was.'

She felt as though connected to everybody, including the doctors and nurses as well as relatives. 'When we're not expressing in our physical bodies, you and I and all of us are expressions of the same consciousness. That's what it felt like.' On regaining consciousness, she improved so rapidly that she left hospital within weeks, with the cancer completely disappeared.

As with so many others who have gone beyond the brain in this way, her life was never to be the same again. Moorjani puts it like this:

> *Imagine that we are in a totally darkened warehouse, that's pitch-black. You can't see anything. But in your hand, you hold a little flashlight, with which you navigate your way through the dark. Everything you see in the warehouse is only what you see with the beam of the flashlight.*
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> *Imagine one day, big floodlights go on, so the whole warehouse is illuminated, and you realise it's huge, and lined with shelves and shelves and shelves of all kinds of different things. Imagine the lights go off again. Although all you can see is from the beam of the one flashlight, at least you now know there is so much more that exists simultaneously and alongside the things that you can see. The beam of the flashlight is your awareness. It becomes your reality, what you experience. We would have a very different world if we changed our awareness.*

Moorjani said the experience taught her that the most important thing to focus our awareness on is love. 'One of the reasons I got cancer is that I didn't love myself. When we love ourselves, we value ourselves. When we value ourselves, we teach people how to treat us. When you love yourself, you find no need to control or bully other people, nor do you allow other people to control or bully you… and the more you love yourself, the more love you have to give other people.'

US academics who have used psychedelic drugs to explore the deep psyche have reached conclusions consistent with the consciousness-based paradigm. In a major review of this field,[11] Christopher M. Bache, Professor of Religious Studies at Youngstown State University, Ohio, writes of a session in which he came to the following realisation: 'Matter is nothing more than the canvas that mind paints upon. It has no capacity to act apart from the animating presence of consciousness and is completely passive to the direction of consciousness. Therefore, whatever our experience is in spacetime reality, we must have the courage to sit still and face the fact that we are experiencing nothing but the manifestation of our own consciousness.'

The meditation practice and lifestyle I have followed over the past 33 years entails a 'dying alive' to the limited identities embraced by the ego, and this does take courage. Through the time-honoured spiritual journey of reducing and gradually letting go of worldly desires, one is able to experience the joy of self-transcendence, and an increasing sense of alignment with a higher power.

I am grateful to the scientists who are pushing forward the frontiers of understanding as described in this article. The emerging paradigm gives a rationale to my experience that was denied to me by my previous materialistic outlook.

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