



Excerpt from Christopher Naughton's forthcoming book *America's Next Great Awakening: A New American Revolution in Consciousness*

THE LAST GREAT MYSTERY

Once viewed with extreme skepticism and deemed beneath the notice of respectable scientists, consciousness has become a significant area of research, albeit a contentious one. It is widely considered the “last great mystery of science.”

THE ‘HARD PROBLEM’

The nomenclature has changed, but the controversy remains.

The prevailing consensus in neuroscience has been that consciousness is an emergent property of the brain and its metabolism. The dominant scientific view is that when the brain dies, the mind and consciousness of the being to whom that brain belonged ceases to exist. In other words, without a brain there can be no consciousness.

However, there is far less unanimity about such conclusions, even within the scientific community. The failure of science to explain how the brain generates consciousness has been called ‘the Hard Problem’ a term coined in 1994 by Australian philosopher David Chalmers. There are a growing number of voices who suggest that “some of the deepest assumptions of modern biology need to be reexamined— particularly the unproven belief that consciousness is derived from the brain, is confined to it and perishes with bodily death.” Dossey, *One Mind*, p. 113 Neuroscientist Mario Beauregard suggests “the brain is not the mind; it is an organ suitable for connecting a mind to the rest of the universe.”

The contrast of these opposing views has naturally given rise to animosity as well as an exchange of disparaging epithets— from allegations of “pseudo-scientific quackery” to retorts of “fundamentalist scientific materialism.”

One early outlier regarding the genesis of consciousness is Dr. Peter Fenwick, a British neuropsychiatrist and neurophysiologist. Fenwick has been studying the human brain,

consciousness and the phenomenon of the near death experience (NDE) for more than fifty years. Initially highly skeptical of NDEs and related phenomena, Fenwick began to take the matter more seriously after reading Raymond Moody's *Life after Life*. One of his own patients later described a near-death experience very similar to that of Moody's subjects. ^{ibid.}

In Fenwick's view, the brain does not create or produce consciousness. Rather, it filters it. As odd as this idea might seem at first, there are some analogies that bring the concept into sharper focus. For example, the eye filters and interprets only a very small sliver of the electromagnetic spectrum and the ear registers only a narrow range of sonic frequencies. Similarly, according to Fenwick, the brain filters and perceives only a tiny part of the cosmos' intrinsic "consciousness."^{ibid.} Deepak Chopra has echoed those sentiments, claiming "your visual perception is restricted to less than 1% of the electromagnetic spectrum, and your acoustic access is less than 1% of the sound spectrum — so what we experience through our five senses is less than 1% of what's happening out there."

Fenwick's research lead him to suggest that consciousness persists irrespective of death. It exists independently and outside of the brain as an inherent property of the universe itself, like dark matter and dark energy or gravity. Ironically, according to Fenwick, "only in death can we be fully conscious." This is reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's sentiment that "a man is not completely born until he is dead."

As one might expect, Fenwick's suppositions have been met with choruses of jeers by many in mainstream science. Dr. Susan Blackmore, a psychologist, TED lecturer and writer who's been researching consciousness for decades, said back in 2004 that Fenwick's "dishonest reporting" presented "a completely unworkable and mysterious theory... dress[ing] it up in the trappings of real science with beliefs that are rejected by the majority of scientists." Former Catholic seminarian turned Yogananda student turned atheist Robert Todd Carroll (*The Skeptic's Dictionary*) asserted that Fenwick "made metaphysical assumptions and dismissed possible psychological and physiological explanations for near-death experiences."

But Fenwick is hardly alone in his hypotheses.

TO THE MOON AND BACK

He was the sixth man to walk on the moon.

On his return trip to earth Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell, while looking out of the window of his space capsule, had a full-blown mystical experience. "He described it as a palpable feeling of unity with the universe," says former colleague Dr. Dean Radin, PhD.

“That’s a little bit unexpected for an MIT trained scientist, jet pilot and astronaut. All his training and experience were completely dependent on science and technology. Yet he had a classical mystical experience. Not surprisingly, he became curious about what the experience was, and how we could understand it from a scientific perspective.”

In 1973, several years after his lunar journey, Mitchell founded The Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) as the intersection of science and profound human experience “exploring the frontiers of consciousness.” Its chief scientist today is Radin, who believes consciousness is the underlying building block of the physical universe. In his view, it is the future of science: “Scientific materialism is quite robust... and very effective for learning certain objective aspects of reality. But materialism doesn't cover the whole territory. Consciousness will be placed front and center, rather than relegated to the far fringe as a meaningless epiphenomenon, which until recently has been a basic tenet of academic psychology and the neurosciences.”

Engaging in such research for decades, Radin has attempted to demonstrate the convergence of what have been called psychic and mystical experiences into the scientific worldview by carefully considering the wisdom of esoteric traditions.^{<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sensorium/201803/real-magic>} “We will begin to view reality in a more comprehensive way, one that will more easily accommodate commonly reported experiences that have been dismissed as merely ‘anomalous,’ or worse, as ‘woo-woo.’”

Radin’s series of studies at IONS in the late 1990s and early 2000s suggest the existence of what biogeochemist Vladimir Vernadsky and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin termed a “noosphere”— a planetary “sphere of thought and reason” encompassing the earth that has emerged through evolution, constituted by the interaction of human minds. Radin’s tested precognition and intuition studies, using both calming and disconcerting photos in double-blind conditions, suggesting we know something before it occurs.

Radin has taken that concept further, citing Princeton University’s Global Consciousness Project (GCP) in his work. The GCP’s placement and usage of random number generators throughout the world appear to shift well beyond their near 50/50 “coin flipping” average in wake of major worldwide events. ^{Cite?} Immediately prior to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, random number generator(s) spiked. GCP’s after-analysis indicate the possibility that humans not only access a collective unconscious, but possess some degree of precognition. Though the findings have aroused controversy, the project’s director Roger Nelson explains “[w]e do interconnect, we interact, we’re not isolated. My consciousness... and yours, extend out into the world, and they intermix. We’re a little like neurons, in a

giant brain... . Supporters and skeptics alike have referred to the aim of the GCP as being analogous to detecting “a great disturbance in the Force.

Skeptics? There are more than a few. The aforementioned Robert Todd Carroll, *The Skeptic's Report's* Claus Larsen and others find problems in GCP's methodology and claim that it is jumping to conclusions. They characterize GCP's findings as “pseudoscience.” *Skeptics News's* Wally Hartshorn says the people behind GCP may mean well but their assertion of collective consciousness connection is faulty “because they're humans, and humans are very good at seeing connections—even when there is no connection to be seen.”

TAKING THE NON-LOCAL

“Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain.” - Aldous Huxley

For years he walked the halls of the hospitals where he worked as a medical doctor, hearing people praying for the recovery of their loved ones. An agnostic, it unnerved him: “frankly it would make me uncomfortable, so I moved on as quickly as possible.” He even resisted a case where a man with terminal lung cancer not only survived but was restored to complete health when the only therapy the patient received was prayer.

When early studies produced data showing a positive impact for prayer on healing, Larry Dossey, M.D., knew it was time to change how he served his patients. It prompted him to write *Healing Words* and *Prayer Is Good Medicine* asserting that prayer is a valid and vital healing tool.

That was decades ago. Since then Dossey has done a deep dive not only into the connection between prayer and healing but the nature of consciousness itself. Dossey's hypothesis is that all individual minds are part of an infinite, collective dimension of consciousness. He calls it the One Mind. This state, one which we can all access, explains phenomena as diverse as epiphanies, creative breakthroughs, premonitions of danger or disaster, near-death experiences, communication with other species and with the dead, reincarnation, the movement of herds, flocks and schools, and remote healing as well.

Dossey views the brain as a filtering agent or “reducing valve.” That notion borrows heavily from William James' Transmission Model in which the brain is seen as a limiting organ and Aldous Huxley's hypothesis in *The Doors of Perception*: “to make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet.” Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*,

^{p. 6.} As astrophysicist David Darling observes in his book *Soul Search* “we are conscious not because of the brain, but in spite of it.”

In the late 1980s as he was writing his book *Recovery of the Soul*, Dossey coined the term “non-local mind.” The premise is that consciousness is not generated by or relegated to the locality of a physical brain. The non-local mind, Dossey asserts, appears to be infinite in space-time, resembling the age old concept of the soul, hence the title of the book. “If we are to have a ghost of a chance of understanding the One Mind and the relationship between mind and brain, we are going to have to think non-locally, not locally. Otherwise we will be forever chasing problems that simply don’t apply in a nonlocal world.”

MORE PRIMARY THAN MATTER

Although he may have generated the phrase “non-local mind” that now yields more than 1.5 million links on Google, Dossey realized the foundational concept is not new. A group of physicists emerged in the 20th century and began looking at energy and matter differently than earlier scientists. By the 1930s, shortly after Quantum physics had been introduced to the world of science, these physicists broke from Newton’s perspective that matter was separate from energy. Max Planck, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist was among the first to dissent from the materialistic perspective saying “I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness... [e]verything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness.”

Around the same time, physicist, astronomer and mathematician (not to mention agnostic) Sir James Jeans wrote “the Universe begins to look like a great thought instead of a great machine. Mind no longer appears to be an accidental intruder into the realm of matter... we ought rather hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter.” In the same vein, Sir Arthur Eddington, a man of similar pedigree who explained Einstein's theory of general relativity to the English-speaking world said “it is very difficult for the matter-of-fact physicist to accept the view that the substratum of *everything* is of mental character.”

Renowned Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger went further: “[t]he total number of minds in the universe is one. In fact, consciousness is a singularity phasing within all beings.” The concept suggests that the apparent multiplicity of minds is an illusion— that there is only one mind, or one consciousness, that expresses itself in a myriad of ways. “Consciousness cannot be accounted for in physical terms,” Schrödinger said, “for consciousness is absolutely fundamental. It cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else”.

Other quantum physicists have more or less concurred: Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Eugene Wigner, David Bohm, Danah Zohar and Fred Alan Wolf each in their own way found that consciousness is *not* an epiphenomenon of the brain. Some of them went so far as to say that it is *more primary than matter*. It's worth pointing out that is what many spiritual traditions have been saying for thousands of years. oday even the likes of a Sam Harris— both neuroscientist and atheist—is saying roughly the same thing: there is “[n]othing about a brain studied at any scale (spatial or temporal) [that] even suggests that it might harbor consciousness.”

RALPH KRAMDEN IS NOT IN THE BOX

“The day science begins to study non-physical phenomena, it will make more progress in one decade than in all the previous centuries of its existence.” - Tesla

I remember my father and brother laughing uproariously watching Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden in *The Honeymooners* television series in the 1960s. The comedy originally aired in the 1950's as Americans were just beginning to settle into the reality of a television screen delivering stories— in black and white, of course— into their living rooms every night.

One can only wonder what the initial response must have been to those first introduced to the phenomenon of television. Here were live human beings whose image, voice and every nuance were “broadcast” into the homes of millions. Somewhere, remotely, the action was captured in a studio and then those images were transmitted, invisibly, across hundreds of miles. Something that we take for granted today, those in the 1950s must have marveled at the miracle of the sight of those early transmissions. To the uninitiated, young children and some in third world countries not familiar with radio or television, upon seeing the images wondered if the actors were “little people” living inside the television set itself!

As amusing as that might sound, the television analogy is finding its way into serious discussions about the nature of consciousness. On one hand, the majority of scientists believe it is self-evident that a physical process within the brain produces consciousness, in much the same way that a generator produces electricity. Therefore, if consciousness is a by-product of brain activity, there can be no genuine out-of-body experiences or conscious survival of death. Both consciousness and experience are confined to the brain and must die when the brain dies.

Yet other scientists, equally credentialed, do not concur. According to British journalist and author Graham Hancock, who writes extensively on altered states of consciousness, these other scientists see the brain less like that of a generator and liken it more to the

relationship between a television signal/wave and a television set. The set "tunes into" the signal, a metaphor in this case for consciousness. When the physical television set is destroyed—that is, dead—the signal still continues. "True, if certain areas of the brain [are] damaged, certain areas of consciousness are compromised," says Hancock. "But this does not prove that those areas of the brain generate the relevant areas of consciousness. If one were to damage certain areas of a TV set, the picture would deteriorate or vanish but the TV signal would remain intact. Nothing in the present state of knowledge of neuroscience rules this revolutionary possibility out."

How the mind and brain actually interface with one another remains a mystery. How can the brain make consciousness? What if consciousness isn't stuck inside our heads? If our brains don't produce our consciousness, does it exist independently of our bodies? Could we actually be interconnected at some level? Could our consciousness survive when our body dies? Could we all have psychic or telepathic abilities?

"What seems obvious and self-evident to one generation may not seem so to the next," offers Hancock. "For hundreds of years it was obvious and self-evident to the greatest human minds that the sun moved around the earth—one need only look to the sky, they said, to see the truth of this proposition. Indeed those who maintained the revolutionary view that the earth moved around the sun [such as Giordano Bruno], faced the Inquisition and death by burning at the stake. Yet as it turned out the revolutionaries were right and orthodoxy was terribly wrong."

As these theories evolve and become more widely investigated if not accepted by the mainstream, might science be moving to a place where the mystics have already been? Carl Jung observed, "it is almost an absurd prejudice to suppose that existence can only be physical. As a matter of fact, the only form of existence of which we have immediate knowledge is psychic. We might as well say, on the contrary, that physical existence is a mere inference, since we know of matter only in so far as we perceive psychic images mediated by the senses." The inclination of a growing number of serious investigators claim the brain processes sensory stimuli and affects the content of consciousness, but it does not "make" consciousness any more than a TV set makes the image it displays.

Ralph Kramden, Gleason's beloved blue collar bus driver may exclaim that he wants to send his wife Alice "to the moon." But it doesn't mean he's doing so inside the box.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

"I am here for one reason. I am a celebrity, you see."

With those words John Cleese, longtime member of the British comedic troupe Monty Python and key writer of Python classics *The Life of Brian*, *The Holy Grail* and others, introduced himself to the Charlottesville, Virginia crowd. They were attending the 2018 Tom Tom Festival highlighting The University of Virginia's Division of Perceptual Studies' (DOPS) research on *Is There Life After Death?* Cleese, moderating the panel, added "I'm also here because I'm fascinated by what these guys do and I think they are dealing with the most interesting things you can deal with."

Founded by Thomas Jefferson, the University of Virginia has a storied history. Jefferson considered it one of his three greatest accomplishments, more so than being the nation's third president. One reason for its legacy has flown largely under the radar, one you'd likely not suspect: the passionate, scientific and data-driven pursuit of understanding near death experiences, out of body experiences and the possibility of reincarnation. For over fifty years, psychiatrist Ian Stevenson, M.D. worked for UVA's School of Medicine. He chaired its Psychiatry Department for ten of those years, founding the Department of Personality Studies in 1967, which evolved into the present-day DOPS in 2004. Stevenson passed away in 2007.

In his lifetime, Stevenson engaged in compelling studies as reflected in his publications *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (1974), *Where Reincarnation and Biology Intersect* (1997) and his 2002 presentation *Scientific Evidence for Reincarnation*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbWMEWubrko> Stevenson's exhaustive body of work examines the lives of children who speak of previous lives and families, only to have those stories borne out.^{Cite} He conducted studies of young children with birthmarks or birth defects where it had been later discovered to correlate to wounds or death blows that were suggestive of a previous incarnation.^{Cite}

To Stevenson, recognizing the possibility of reincarnation meant considering the persistence of consciousness: "[w]e cannot imagine reincarnation without the corollary belief that minds are associated with bodies during our familiar life, but are also independent of bodies to the extent of being fully separable from them and surviving the death of their associated body [and at some later time becoming associated with another body]." Current Director of DOPS, Jim Tucker, M.D., opines "while this may seem to be an astounding statement— that memories, emotions, and physical injuries can carry over from one life to the next— the evidence, I think, leads us to that conclusion."

At the end of his life Dr. Stevenson said that his biggest regret was not that his critics dismissed his work but that they did so without even bothering to read it. But those

skeptics who made the effort to examine his research often admitted that Stevenson's 2000+ case studies followed the scientific method rigorously, providing the most compelling evidence of reincarnation ever presented. In 1975, *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, acknowledged Stevenson saying "[i]n regard to reincarnation he has painstakingly and unemotionally collected a detailed series of cases... in which the evidence is difficult to explain on any other grounds... . He has placed on record a large amount of data that cannot be ignored."

In that vein, today's DOPS program continues the scientific pursuit of the non-locality of consciousness. "Is it possible that our mind or consciousness survives bodily death?" asks neurobehavioral scientist and former DOPS director Bruce Greyson, M.D. "There is a wide range of human experiences that suggest that is exactly the case." Greyson observes that "NDEs occur to us when we are on the threshold of death and therefore they may suggest what happens to us after death." He describes countless NDE cases of "thinking more clearly than ever while your heart is stopped and there is no blood flowing to your brain. Looking down and seeing your body on an operating table and noticing unexpected details that your surgeon later verifies for you. Meeting deceased loved ones, family and friends, that you thought were still alive. And meeting deceased people you do not know, but later recognize from family photos." Greyson concludes that "each case is unique, but they all share some features: enhanced mental functioning, seeing more vividly, creating more vivid memories when your brain is seriously impaired— suggesting a part of us survives death. Now what part is that? And how is that possible? It seems to defy common sense. And yet it happens."

Even if Stevenson's and DOPS' studies cannot be dispositively proven now, they have opened up a conversation that questions a body of scientific conclusions once thought closed. "I hope whatever comes of this is that people are curious," says Cleese, "because many people in the scientific community don't have a theory so they simply say it couldn't have happened. Which is not seriously impressive."

At the same Charlottesville conference, an audience member prompted the DOPS panel to go beyond science and weigh into the philosophical asking "if there is life after death, what is the point of physical life itself?" Demurring, one panelist pointed at Cleese saying "why not ask him? He wrote and starred in *The Meaning of Life!*"

WARNING: IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Psychologist Susan Jane Blackmore, referenced earlier in this chapter, has been studying NDEs, OOBES and the subject of consciousness for decades. In 2018 along with the help of

her daughter Emily Troscianko, she published the third edition of her book *Consciousness: An Introduction*. Blackmore experienced a life-changing event in 1970 before terms such as near death or out of body experiences was part of philosophical or scientific lexicons. “At the time I called it astral projection because that was the only name I had for it. Later I realized that I had experienced the tunnel, the wonderful light, an OBE that lasted several hours, a difficult decision to return and, finally, a mystical experience which is very difficult to describe in ordinary words... to dismiss the experience as ‘just imagination’ would be impossible.”

But after a few years of “careful experiments” in what had been an attempt to refute scientific materialism, Blackmore changed her mind. “I found no psychic phenomena—only wishful thinking, self-deception, experimental error and, occasionally, fraud. I became a sceptic.” Becoming a member of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (formerly the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal or CSICOP), Blackmore later wrote *Dying to Live* (1993), *In Search of the Light* (1996) and *The Meme Machine* (1999, with a foreword written by Richard Dawkins). Her work is often cited by atheists and some scientists as proof that the near-death experience results from a “dying brain.” Skeptics also argue her work disproves the existence of spirit and the afterlife. “It is no wonder that we like to deny death,” states Blackmore. “Whole religions are based on that denial. Turn to religion and you may be assured of eternal life... this comforting thought conflicts with science. Science tells us that death is the end and, as so often, finds itself opposing religion.”

But if you think Dr. Susan Blackmore is wholly for or against you, you might be wrong.

After publication of her three aforementioned books, Blackmore later clarified her position. “I have not claimed that any of my work proves the Dying Brain Hypothesis. In fact no amount of research ever could, [but] we can account for all the major features of the NDE without recourse to such ideas as a spirit, a soul, or life after death.” She also backed off her comments on religion, no longer referring to it in Dawkins-like term as a “virus of the mind” and seeing some benefit in religious worship.

A Zen practitioner for several decades, the heart of Blackmore’s practice is the idea of letting go, of non-attachment and of the ‘no-self.’ “The idea is not that there is no self at all, but that the self is not what we commonly think it is... [a]s happens with many NDEers, my experiences and my research have taken away the fear of death, not because I am convinced that ‘I’ will carry on after this body dies, but because I know there is no one to die, and never was.” ^{Ibid.} Her most recent edition of *Consciousness: An Introduction* states that “you may find that once-solid boundaries between the real and unreal, or the self and other, or humans

and other animals or robots, or you right now and someone in a coma, begin to look less solid.” Sounding very much like Benjamin Franklin as he neared death, Blackmore muses “as for what happens next— each of us will eventually get our own one chance to find out.”

Blackmore notes that since she originally wrote her seminal book in 2003, there have been numerous developments in the understanding of self. “Not only are more philosophers learning about neuroscience and bringing these two disciplines closer together, but research in another previously fringe area— meditation— has provided surprising insights. From brain scans of long-term meditators, we can see how attentional mechanisms change after long training and how possibly the claim that [the] self drops out may be grounded in visible brain changes.” Quoting from a wide range of consciousness commentators, from Daniel Dennett to Dean Radin, Blackmore echoes other scientists in the latest iteration of her tome saying “consciousness is...perhaps the most exciting mystery we can delve into... we do know that when people really struggle with the topic, they find that their own experience, and their sense of self, change in the process. Warning: studying consciousness will change your life.” ^C

MERGING RIVERS

“The Kingdom of Heaven is really a metaphor for a state of consciousness.” -Cynthia Bourgeault

Even Dr. Fenwick, who has bucked mainstream science on the study of consciousness, confesses “[t]he plain fact is that none of us understands these phenomena. As for the soul and life after death, they are still open questions, though I myself suspect that NDEs are part of the same continuum as mystical experiences.” He maintains those questions should only spur us on in our scientific investigation.

In the early 1990s, shortly after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, the Dalai Lama aimed to bridge ancient spiritual practices and modern findings in biology, cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience in an effort to reveal the human mind’s capacity to transcend its own fundamental flaws. “Buddhism and science are not conflicting perspectives on the world, but rather differing approaches to the same end: seeking the truth. In Buddhist training, it is essential to investigate reality, and science offers its own ways to go about this investigation. While the purposes of science may differ from those of Buddhism, both ways of searching for truth expand our knowledge and understanding.” When asked what would happen if his religious views conflicted with valid scientific discovery, the Dalai Lama responded by saying his beliefs would have to change. In his book *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality* he says “if scientific analysis were conclusively to demonstrate certain claims in Buddhism to be false, then we must accept the findings of

science and abandon those claims.” His words echo those of Gandhi who said “I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality.”

In the aftermath of his infamous debates with Richard Dawkins in the early 2000s, Deepak Chopra claimed that “without screaming that the sky is falling down, one can say that two broad rivers of human experience have run into each other. One river carries science and objective observation of the world. The other river carries subjective experience and our craving for meaning, beauty, love, and truth. There is no reason why these two rivers need to be separated, and what we are seeing... is a merging. Within a generation there will be accepted theories that integrate the world ‘out there’ with the world ‘in here.’”

Are we moving to a time where the sacred is open to science... and science is open to the sacred? Is this convergence the future we are remembering?