

## Can Consciousness Exist Outside the Brain?

By Ryan Ashton

The answer depends on who you ask. According to mainstream scientific opinion, the answer is “no”: human consciousness is nothing more than an emergent byproduct of the physical brain and nervous system, and therefore cannot extend beyond the grey matter inside the head. This dominant view of the mind is known as *materialistic* because it ties consciousness completely to the material processes of the brain, and therefore makes consciousness utterly dependent on, and limited by, the functioning of the brain. While this materialistic view has dominated cognitive research throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a growing body of research that is beginning to lead some prominent researchers to answer, tentatively, “yes” to the above question.

In their 2007 book, *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, professors Edward F. Kelly and Emily W. Kelly et. al. from the Department of Psychiatric Medicine at the University of Virginia argue that research on both normal and paranormal activities of human consciousness are so profoundly incompatible with materialistic models of consciousness that “reductive materialism is not only incomplete but false.” Examples of paranormal activities cited in the book include psi phenomena (e.g. extrasensory perception and psycho kinesis), extreme psychophysiological influence (e.g. the placebo effect), and cases of out-of-body experiences (e.g. near death experiences). These paranormal phenomena are argued to be well documented and far from easily dismissed as poorly researched. Edward Kelly writes in the introduction to the volume, “Sufficient high-quality evidence has long since been available, we believe, to demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt the existence of the basic ‘paranormal’ phenomena, at least for those willing to study that evidence with an open mind.” The existence of this evidence severely challenges the materialist model of mind and, therefore, begs for a more suitable explanation—one in which the mind can operate beyond the boundaries of the brain.

In addition to the paranormal, even normal features of consciousness like memory are argued to be problematic for the materialist model. Edward Kelly continues to write in chapter one, “Generations of psychologists and neurobiologists have taken it as axiomatic that all memories must exist in the form of ‘traces,’ physical changes produced in the brain by experience, but there has been little progress toward scientific consensus on the details of these mechanisms despite many decades of intensive research.” Findings such as these lead the authors, therefore, to suggest an alternative approach to psychology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that may better account for the researched data. The “new” model they propose, incidentally, is not really that new at all.

The authors propose a model that directly descends from the work of F.W.H. Myers and William James, both of whom first proposed their ideas well over 100 years ago. The authors contend that the ideas of Myers and James were never disproven by critics, but rather ignored. Edward Kelly forcefully observes on behalf of the authors of *Irreducible Mind*, “In our opinion,

the most systematic, comprehensive, and determined empirical assault on the mind-body problem ever carried out in the suggested spirit, during the entire long history of psychology, is summarized in F.W.H. Myers's undeservedly neglected two-volume work *Human Personality* [published 1903]." Kelly elsewhere indicates that this work and its ideas were neglected primarily because of the widespread embrace of materialism in the psychological community throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is his intention to revive interest in models of consciousness that operate outside of materialist limitations.

The models proposed by Myers, James, and now Kelly and Kelly et. al. are known as "transmission" or "filter" models of consciousness. The transmission or filter models postulate that consciousness may broadly exist as a sort of large field, stream or pool from which particular instances of human consciousness can then be transmitted or filtered into the physical, first-person experience by the human brain. A metaphor proposed by James suggests that the brain might function analogously to an optical device, such as a lens or prism, whereby undifferentiated light can enter the device from one side and exit the device systematically filtered, reduced, focused, redirected, etc. This model of consciousness contrasts the materialist model because it posits that consciousness is not *caused* or *produced* by the brain; rather, it supposes that consciousness exists independent of the brain, but is nevertheless sensitive to how the brain might mold or separate consciousness into distinct forms and patterns. The advantages of transmission or filter models is that they preserve the standard view that alterations in the brain correlate with alterations in conscious experience (e.g. that psychotropic drugs, brain injuries, etc. alter consciousness) while also providing a plausible model for explaining paradoxical features of consciousness such as those considered "paranormal."

Naturally, the proposal of a broader, somewhat collective form of consciousness that we cannot directly see or touch, which is also fundamentally independent of the brain and body, is likely uncomfortable to those trained in materialist models of reality. However, the growing volumes of research pointing to the existence of paranormal phenomena combined with the problems of explaining apparently "normal" feats of consciousness force researchers to explore beyond the confines of materialist thinking. This task may or may not be taken up by 21<sup>st</sup> century researchers, but it seems unmistakable that the possibility of consciousness existing as a phenomenon independent of the brain is both fascinating and exciting. Edward Kelly points out, "There are many lifetimes' worth of exciting and important science to be done here, work unlikely to be undertaken by persons immured in the current mainstream consensus." From this statement, it can be inferred that the sort of research Kelly envisions may depend on subsequent generations of researchers who are less committed to materialist models of the mind to push the science of consciousness forward. As agents of consciousness ourselves, we have a vested interest in whether our minds can exist outside the boundaries of our brains; whatever model eventually pans out, the implications that follow will directly impact our understanding and experience of ourselves.