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COMMENTARIES ON DEEPAK CHOPRA AND MENAS KAFATOS' BOOK, "YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE"; 2017, HARMONY BOOKS.

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YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE

Deepak Chopra & Menas Kafatos

Harmony Books, New York 2017

Reviewed by Allan Combs

It is a pleasure to introduce this set of brief commentaries on *You Are the Universe*.

I have to say, the one thing I did not expect to find in this book is a wonderfully clear explanation of up-to-date ideas about cosmology, quantum physics, and the nature of the universe. I am reminded of a delightful little book my father brought home when I was a child, and which I read cover to cover several times by the time I completed Middle School ("Junior High" we called it in those days). The title of the book was *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, by Lincoln Barnett, published in 1948. I later learned that it was acclaimed by Einstein himself. I still get a warm feeling recalling the simple drawings of fast-moving trains and beams of light illustrated in those pages. It was, in fact, an enormously popular book in the mid 20th century, explaining so many new and utterly fascinating ideas in such clear English that even a Middle Schooler could understand and be captivated by them. I was one of those Middle Schoolers. Reading Chopra and Kafatos' *You Are the Universe*, I again recalled that book, and again found myself entranced by the excitement and romance of discovering an entire cosmos that had in so many ways been previously unknown to me, and to so many others.

Now let me digress.

For reasons I don't pretend to understand, I have always been fascinated by the history of ideas. No consequential theory or great idea appears without predecessors, and they in turn have their own stories of origin that reach back and back indefinitely. One thinks of the origins of life on Earth itself, now said possibly to extend back over four billion years. The actual origins may be even older, emerging in the first complex patterns of energy in the early universe.

The authors of this remarkable book claim that we human beings are integral to the fabric of the cosmos, thus positioning us, along with other conscious beings, and in a deeper sense consciousness itself, as an undergirding feature of the universe, and thus of reality itself. This way of thinking arises now, in our scientific age, hand-in-hand with the claim of many contemporary physicists that consciousness, in the form of *observation*, is basic to any understanding of reality. A strange notion on first glance, but said to be required at the subatomic level for the "collapse of the wave function," or in other words the translation ("collapse") of the abstract Schrödinger wave equation into a real-world event as an energy wave such as light, or a subatomic particle. For this to occur, it is said that the wave must be "observed." There has been much discussion as to whether the observation must in fact be made by a conscious being, or if a computer with a camera or other recording device can do the trick. But the drift of contemporary conversation is toward the notion that at some point someone (or some consciousness) has to actually see or hear something for the collapse to be real. This is the famous parable of Schrödinger's cat, which is captured in an indefinite space between life and death until someone opens the lid on the cat box and looks in to see the cat's real state of affairs.

Most contemporary physicists agree that at some level a conscious observation is essential for pinning down reality into an observable and workable form. Thus, in 1995 physicist John Wheeler observed, “In some strange sense we live in a participatory universe.” At about this same time philosopher Henryk Skolimowski carried the participatory universe idea into philosophy on a grand scale with his 1994 book, *The Participatory Mind: A New Theory of Mind and of the Universe*.

Wheeler is said to have stated, “Nothing exists until it is observed!” It is difficult to pin down the actual source of this quote, but it is consistent with other comments by him. Following his line of thinking Robert Lanza and Bob Berman’s remarkable 2009 book, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe*, carried this idea forward in a series of clear and forceful arguments. To emphasize the power of this thinking they wrote, “Wheeler’s theory says that any pre-life Earth would have existed in an indefinite state, like Schrödinger’s cat” (p. 91). Lanza and Berman’s book was read widely, and for this and his other work, Lanza was included in the 2014 TIME 100 list of the most influential people in the world. In *Biocentrism*, Lanza and Berman point out again and again that everything we know about the universe is intimately entangled with conscious experience. At first glance, this may appear simply a latter-day version of Bishop Berkeley’s idealism, but for these contemporary thinkers it is inexorably tied into quantum uncertainty, and the collapse of the wave function.

So much for one of the great curiosities of modern quantum physics. What Chopra and Kafatos do in *You are the Universe*, however, is much more. They show us the true depth and power that resonates hidden within these ideas when they are taken seriously, and not treated as another roadside attraction of the postmodern scientific world. More than that, they connect them to some of the great ancient philosophical and spiritual traditions of humankind. A full discussion of this latter side of their project would warrant a whole book, if not a whole library in itself. So I will simply say, congratulations gentlemen!

Appendix 1 On Qualia Science

In this appendix the authors develop an entire theory of consciousness grounded in an understanding of qualia. It is fascinating, and it may be correct. I make no judgment, and I feel that a detailed review and critique of the theory would only detract from the principle message of the book that is laid out on the main body of writing. For those interested in a more detailed review, however, please read Shelli Joye’s commentary in this collection.

References

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