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YOU ARE THE UNIVERSE

Deepak Chopra & Menas Kafatos
Harmony Books, New York 2017
Reviewed by Stanley Krippner

In this remarkable book, Deepak Chopra and Menas Kafatos have proposed a unique paradigm for understanding the cosmos, namely that the reader is the universe. The text is challenging but flows nicely, and the examples clarify some of the denser concepts. The authors present what they consider “the biggest and most baffling riddles that face science today,” and provide answers based on their assumption that ours is a “participatory universe,” one that “depends for its very existence on human beings.” This universe is living, conscious, and evolving – and fits no existing standard model, whether quantum or biblical, being more in tandem with the poet Tagore’s phrase, “the human universe.” Right from the beginning, this pronouncement may sound dogmatic to some readers, especially when Chopra and Kafatos tell them that “this is the truth.” They provide answers to their nine riddles toward the end of the book, and so I will share my reflections on each, rather than to repeat their elegant solutions.

The first riddle the authors tackle is “What came before the Big Bang?” They use analogies, colorful terms such as “foamy,” and biblical verses like “the earth was without form, and void” to explain their statement that there is “no problem having the universe come out of the quantum vacuum.” They also propose an alternative, the Bondi-Gold-Hoyle “steady state” theory, but do not mention that Hoyle drastically modified this theory in 1996. They do discuss Penrose and Smolin’s proposal that “information” as the source of post-chaos order, and string theory’s focus on “vibrations,” as being the common state.

The second riddle asks, “Why does the universe fit together so perfectly?” In physics, this is often called the “fine tuning” problem, and in folklore this is called “creation mythology.” From my perspective, so-called “creation science” is more a myth than a science because it posits divine intervention. Chopra and Kafatos are careful to separate it from the “anthropic principle,” which has no religious agenda, but tabulates the remarkable coincidences and confluences that made life possible, stretching “fine tuning” beyond its limits, and making it one of the “biggest embarrassments of physics.” The authors find a way out of this embarrassment by evoking “self-organization,” in which each new layer or creation must regulate the prior layer. They could have expanded upon this hypothesis by noting that the human body is far from perfect; vision is unduly complicated, and the various “layers” of the brain do not always work in synchrony.

“Where did it come from?” is the third riddle. This remarkable chapter begins with the statement, “For eternally and always there is only now, one and the same now; the present is the only thing that has no end.” Before attempting to guess what sage or guru made this pronouncement, we are told that the author was Erwin Schrödinger, a quantum physicist. Chopra and Kafatos answer their question by deconstructing time, inferring that the question – as stated – is basically meaningless. The quantum field is outside the commonsense notion of time, and

when a particle emerges from the field, it has no history. They rephrase their question to “Where did time come from?” and give it a human answer, an answer given in various stories told by humans using their minds and brains. However, one of their examples errs: They claim that “neurologists know that the episodes of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep do not last more than a few seconds or few minutes. Actually, some periods of REM sleep last half an hour or more, and the amount of time for most dream activities roughly corresponds to the duration of occurrence in waking time.

Chopra and Kafatos ask, “What is the universe made of?” and describe the “striptease act” that started with Democritus’s atom, and proceeded to tinier and more basic particles. This is reminiscent of the philosopher Alan Watts’ “hide and seek God,” a Nature that will not easily yield tangible secrets. The authors cite another philosopher, Ruth Kastner, who makes the comparison with Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire Cat, whose body slowly fades away leaving only its grin. Some cosmologists depend more upon inference than experimentation, hypothesizing that “dark matter and energy” make up most of the universe’s “stuff.” This provides an opening for describing the “observer problem.” Before anything can be measured, it must be observed and in classical physics, something observed is still present when the observation stops. In the quantum world, observation can modify or even create what is being observed; hence the universe is made of what we want it to show us. To go a step further, the universe is not really made up of “stuff,” but of possibilities that turn into “stuff.”

The next question, “Is there design in the universe?” has been dogmatically answered by members of the “intelligent design” and “creation science” crowd. However, scientists do not hesitate to use such similar words as “form,” “structure,” or “pattern” when they describe the beak of a parrot’s bill, a gigantic crystal, or a microbe. Doubling back to an earlier question, Chopra and Kafatos state “If the universe is totally random and with no purpose, all possibility of finding design will fail.” However, for me the authors’ logic misses a step; each snowflake has what a human observer would call a unique design or form. It is the human observer that attributes this form to a snowflake, thus the implied “purpose” rests more at the micro than at the macro level. On another topic, in applying design to evolution, it is correctly pointed out that Darwin never used the term “survival of the fittest.” In fact, he detested it.

The sixth puzzle posed by Chopra and Kafatos, “Is the Quantum World linked to everyday life?” is essential. The subtitle of their book asks “why it matters?” and this chapter starts to provide the reasons. The way we live our lives depends upon what is “real.” In the Europe of the Middle Ages, reality was defined by the church, and the faithful molded their behavior in ways that would prevent them from the fires of Hell. Quantum theory determines the behavior of those mathematicians and physicists who study it, but what relevance does it have to others? It was once thought that whether light travelled as waves or particles depended on how light was observed. But Archibald Wheeler proposed that light is undefined until observation takes place. This and similar proposals undermined the assumption that the brain renders reality. Perception is relative; we do not see or hear certain things because, at some level of consciousness, we

really do not want to. Romans died because they ignored the warning signs that Vesuvius was about to erupt. Many German Jews refused to leave their homes despite Hitler's determination to destroy them, as announced in *Mein Kampf*. Many spouses do not leave abusive partners despite their proclamations that they intend to beat and/or kill them. These examples are not offered by the authors of this book, nor are they entirely consistent with the material in this chapter, but they illustrate the folly of human omniscience, and it conforms to the authors' insistence that we project ourselves into everything that we experience.

"Do we live in a conscious universe?" has long been a topic of speculation. Chopra and Kafatos point out that an affirmative answer solves a variety of other problems. All living creatures participate in cosmic consciousness, as do all inert objects. The brain does not produce the mind because both are traceable to cosmic consciousness. "Out there" and "in there" are not viable concepts because there is consciousness everywhere in the universe. However, the so-called "beauty" of these answers is tainted by the author's failure to – at this point – redefine "cosmic consciousness." Readers need to know what they are buying into by accepting these answers. The authors write that "When we talk about it, consciousness needs to be clear, reasonable, and believable" – but they do not always live up to this injunction. In the study of consciousness, the "easy problem" is to understand how the brain processes information. The "hard problem" is to answer why people have subjective experiences. This is a re-statement of the "mind-body" (or "mind-matter") problem that has been around for centuries in Western philosophy. It has not been problematic in Eastern philosophy where "mind" and "matter" were not subjected to the same separation.

Question eight reads, "How did life first begin?" The authors claim that life is a "major inconvenience" for physicists because it contains purpose, meaning, direction, and goals – something organic chemicals do not. (This statement is somewhat at odds with the previous attribution of consciousness to inert as well as living objects.) For me, this was one of the most interesting chapters in the book. Chopra and Kafatos present a number of viable theories and then dismiss them, just as beauty contest contestants are gradually eliminated. The survivor is "vacuum energy," but even this elegant theory has its flaws. The roles of entropy, of photosynthesis, and of "biofields" are considered but do not explain how "life came from life." But perhaps that mantra is incorrect; perhaps life came from non-life. Indeed, why was life needed at all? The authors observe that the planet was sufficient without it. They introduce the role of "purpose" and this turns out to be the refrain of much of the rest of the book.

"Does the brain create the mind?" This question has already been discussed and we know the authors' answer. The brain is the most complex object in the known universe, and is a key player in what the reader of this book now knows is a "participatory universe." As a result, Chopra and Kafatos debunk proponents of the brain-creating-mind thesis, ranging from quantum theory, complexity theory, computer modelling theory, to the zombie hypothesis. They do not deny the importance of creativity, but propose that the mind is creative because the cosmos is creative, and a person's mind is inextricably linked to cosmic mind. In some ways, the authors' advice

resembles the existential stance of Jean-Paul Sartre, who advised his students and readers to make decisions as if the fate of the world depended upon what they intended to do.

One of the many values of this book is its citation of books, plays, songs, and poems. In asking how one embraces one's cosmic self, the authors provide Walt Whitman's exuberant proclamation that "Every atom belonging to me belongs to you." For Chopra and Kafatos, mind has been present in and beyond all time and all places. The building blocks of nature have no intrinsic properties without an observer, and the brain is not the source of that observer. A major outcome of this paradigm is that we experience the world through choice. Really? Tell that to the victims of the Holocaust, the Inquisition, the Cambodian Killing Fields, and the various famines, epidemics, earthquakes, floods, forest fires, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis that have beset humans (and other animals) over the millennia. When the authors ask their readers to develop their "cosmic selves," they are focusing on a privileged minority of the world's population. If they mean to relate their "participatory universe" into daily life, they need to be more inclusive. When they admit that there are some things "we can't choose to change," Chopra and Kafatos include "gravity, the hardness of rocks, and the solidity of a brick wall." But that is only the beginning. In all fairness, the authors note that human history is filled with "untold horrors of war and violence," then note that "our brains are also set up for Buddhist meditation, Quaker pacifism, and mystical ecstasy." But the latter gives little solace to the former.

On a very different note, the authors omit mentioning the elephant in the room – anomalous phenomena, such as reported telepathy, precognition, psychokinesis, remote viewing, and purported memories of former lives. The closest they come is a quotation from Wolfgang Pauli who wrote, "In the science of the future reality will neither be 'psychic' nor 'physical' but sometimes both and sometimes neither." Pauli was a collaborator with Carl Jung on a book discussing synchronicity, and followed the parapsychological experiments at J. B. Rhine's Duke University laboratory. Also, there are a few references to "nonlocality" in the final chapter. Perhaps the authors thought that the mere mention of parapsychology would discredit their book in the eyes of many colleagues who, otherwise, would give it a fair hearing.

Chopra and Kafatos end their book by returning to the topic of qualia. They write, "With qualia you can change your perceptions -- or not. With qualia you can alter reality – or not." They write that, "It's the glue that holds the five senses together" (there are at least a dozen senses, but the description still fits.) The brain registers sensations, thoughts, feelings, images, and other qualia. And because they are subjective, they undermine the objectivity of modern science. Because they are inevitably meaningful, they destroy the notion of meaningless nature. Finally, only a science based on subjectivity is reliable, because qualia are the true building blocks of reality. "Objective" measurements, they write, are "snapshots" – glimpses of the flow of reality.

What do the authors project into the future? They claim that the most amazing of human traits is our awareness of being aware. "If we want to take the next leap forward in our evolution, the only map is the one we create for ourselves, in our own consciousness." So far, so good. But

Darwin emphasized love and cooperation as evolutionary forces, collaborative ventures barely hinted at in Chopra and Kafatos' road map. Walt Whitman's vision was much closer to this evolutionary path.

The authors' proposed science of the future need not fret about the "mind-body" problem. "Mind and matter are different states of the same thing" and "what happens in our bodies is also happening in the universe." Oneness, or "monism," is the basic trait of reality, not separation. "In some forms of monism, everything in existence is part of the body of God." The authors provide a useful check list of "what separation feels like," and "what being real feels like." These lists are not only guidelines for a future science, but could initiate a spiritual practice for the reader and, in time, serve as a guidebook (or self-help book) for individuals or groups wanting to connect with their cosmic selves, to see through illusions, and for tuning-in to a conscious universe. As a result, the science of the future is qualia-based, and posits that consciousness is fundamental, the ground of existence, and without cause. Every cell mirrors the cosmos, and behaves like the universe itself.

To "discover" one's cosmic self, as advised in the book's subtitle, will not be an immediate outcome of this intriguing read.. For neophytes, it requires a new way of thinking, a new way of feeling, and a new way of being. However, readers will be aided by the well-crafted chapters, the helpful examples, and the bits of humor that permeate the pages. Those who undertake this journey will find it to be a worthwhile venture.