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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 Simon Senzon

It is rare that a book comes along with a balance of spiritual wisdom and scientific credibility while offering a completely new perspective on reality. Chopra and Kafatos' *You are the Universe*, does so. It is a refreshing book. There are three parts to this review, praise, criticism, and suggestions.

### *The Praise*

I found this book engaging and rewarding on many levels. The authors tackle some of the most complex ideas and theories ever encountered and make them accessible to the reader. (Most of the time.) The analogies were useful, especially in relaying complex physics, such as Einstein's theories of time and gravity, the origins of the universe, quantum physics, as well as dark matter and dark energy. The relativity initiated by Einstein was integrated throughout the text.

One of the central insights from the book was the observation that the quantum revolution from 100 years ago and the weirdness associated with it, has yet to permeate our culture, our science, and our worldviews. They argue that the quantum realm may be understood as a field of potential energy outside of time and space, and that because it acts mind-like it is essentially a field of consciousness. These types of insights from physics, along with several other observations from the wisdom traditions and consciousness studies, point to a new view of humanity's place in the cosmos. We are the universe.

Their argument develops from several points. I will address some of them. First, they assert, along with several of the pioneers of the quantum era, that because the particle collapses from the quantum wave in the presence of an observer (in experimental circumstances), we cannot escape the observation that the "observer is woven into the very fabric of reality." Further, they state, "atoms and subatomic particles... turn out to possess no intrinsic properties without an observer." To build on this insight, they point to the underlying unity of the universe as one quantum wave that is everywhere at the same time, and from which matter emerges.

As matter (each particle) emerges from the underlying wave, space and time come with it. They write, "subatomic particles bring space and time with them." This is considered a state change or a phase transition, and may explain the origins of the universe as well as the moment to moment appearance of everything from trees to tables. They write, "A quantum change of state is the basic act of creation." In this use of creation, they are pointing to a cosmic mind choosing to become manifest as an intrinsic property of reality itself.

They build upon several other cosmic mysteries to support this argument such as; the experimental observation that photons of light seem to choose their pathway through a plant during photosynthesis, as well as the near-miraculous levels of fine-tuning the universe undergoes to remain in complementary balance (matter and antimatter) and suitable for living systems and human life (like the fine structure constant, which allows for the sun's radiation to

penetrate our atmosphere). Drawing upon these types of insights, they assert that “cosmic mind drives every event and gives it a purpose.” For example, if electrons respond to thought, and if photons choose their pathway through a plant, they surmise, the very fabric of space, time, and energy, is conscious. Thus, rather than mind emerging with the complexity of matter; consciousness is always there like the wetness of water.

Their approach is important because it uses the insights of the pioneering quantum physicists as a point of departure for humans to be in the world in a new way. They do this in several ways; by accepting that the universe itself behaves in a mind-like way on all scales from balancing complementarity to self-organizing matter, to evolution of form; to the insight that neurologically mediated perception dictates what the universe *is* in a uniquely human way; and that our bodies and nervous systems are not only interacting with the quantum realm in every moment, but that our very perception and hence the apprehension of qualia makes it, in the words of Tagore, a human universe.

They conclude that we cannot know if the universe is objectively there apart from our observation and interaction with it, because even if it is, it would be impenetrable without a nervous system to perceive it, as far as we know. For example, they note that photons do not have any inherent luminosity beyond the perception of the nervous system. Thus, they take the role of the observer to a new level by asserting that everything we know is mediated through mind and brain. The cosmos itself is a construction of the human brain.

Chopra and Kafatos link the perspective of nondual oneness espoused by the highest wisdom traditions to the wholeness of the cosmos. By doing so, they go beyond the classic texts in this field such as Capra’s *Tao of Physics*, and Zukav’s *Dancing Wu Li Masters*. This is because they integrate the quantum weirdness, the latest physics, and consciousness studies (qualia), with the wisdom traditions. They also include several integral perspectives such as first, second, and third person perspectives, the importance of states, the inherent value of subjectivity, as well as the unique domain of mutual resonance between individuals. Their partial inclusion of some integral approaches will be discussed in the suggestion section below.

The book is truly enactive. It describes a conscious universe whereby each human being changes the universe in each moment because it is what we are. “We project ourselves into everything we experience, not just by observing but by participating in the reality that emerges.”

By centering their discussion of the human universe on the role of the nervous system in perception and ideation, they suggest that a deep understanding of all these things transforms one’s worldview. For example, by suggesting that the way particles emerge from the wave is similar to how thoughts emerge, they suggest, “The human mind matches the cosmic mind.” The act of awareness is the universe becoming aware of itself. The deep levels of awareness that may emerge from such profound insights could be deepened further with spiritual practices.

They also include the relativistic insights about time as a rationale to interact with time differently. This moment is all there is. The flow of time is an illusion. Thus time and space are eternal and boundless. “We live in an unbounded state of consciousness that we call the universe.”

All in all, the book offers an important step forward in explicitly confronting the limits of physicalism, materialism, and the banishment of consciousness from public and scientific discourse. They offer a perspective on being that is both integrative and enlightening.

Taken together, the transformative power of these observations leads to a new lifestyle. "Leaving the quantum world out of your lifestyle is the same as leaving out your brain." They conclude, "The universe is consciousness itself. Until that conclusion is accepted, reality's message hasn't been completely heard."

### **The Criticism**

For all of the wonderful analogies explaining very difficult concepts, there are several jumps in logic that the text does not support. There are several instances where the reader is taken for granted. For example, they jump from scientific observations to personal experiences, and assume the reader is making the same leap.

These connections between human and cosmos, and back again don't always work. For example, information can survive in your brain even after a coma, so that may imply a cyclic universe, whereby constants and laws of nature may be passed on from one universe's death to the birth of the next. Or, that information may survive a black hole. Another example as noted above, is that the random emergence of a thought like, "I want to eat lasagna," is linked to the emergence of a particle from the wave. These relationships may indeed be valid, but I think the jumps from the structure of the universe to personal experience needs a more nuanced unpacking.

At a more basic level, anyone who has read Chopra's work for the last thirty years (and I have – *The Return of Merlin* was one of my favorites), expects that he will describe consciousness and the oneness of creation from a Vedantic perspective. And yet, the discussion of oneness doesn't really emerge until part two, which is two-thirds of the way into the text. In the preface, they note the perspective "I am everything," or "I am the universe" was discovered by Vedic sages "by diving deep into their own awareness," but it is not an important part of the main argument, which emphasizes the mysteries of science.

It is obvious that this argument style was developed to bring the newer reader along, however, it comes across as a bit disingenuous to the more well-informed Chopra reader. By making the reader wait for 203 pages before really getting into the spiritual aspects of the text, gives the overall argument an artificial quality because the well-informed reader knows it is coming, and that this is a foundation for that. This artificial quality of argumentation was obviously not their intent, but without being explicit from the outset, the overall approach is weakened. If they came out and explained this from the start, it would have added more credibility to the argument. For example, they could have stated something like, "We come to these facts about the structure of reality from the spiritual viewpoint of nondualism with consciousness as the ground of being for all of reality. Hence, when we look to the many facts that point to a field-like and mind-like structure to matter, time, and life, mediated through the nervous system, we see scientific support for these ancient truths. In this book, we will build a case for why we feel these are the same." Instead, they build the case, mention the wisdom traditions as an aside, and then make it central

in the final chapters. They are using the science as a sort of koan, which might work for some readers, but not all.

This leads to another critique of the text. The interior observation of oneness is not the same as the physics observation that the universe has an underlying unity. By asserting so, the authors commit a category error, or the equating of one category or level, such as interior experience with observations of the physical universe. The category error was coined by Ryle in his attempt to address the problems with the “ghost in the machine.” He defined it like this: a man could tour Cambridge University, view all of the buildings, libraries, and dormitories and then ask, “Where is the University?” It is a mistake of one category for another.

Chopra and Kafatos’ argument is more complex. They argue that since matter, time, and energy all emerged from the underlying field of consciousness, the lines between interior and exterior, subjective and objective disappear. That argument leaves the reader with the uneasy sense that something is being missed because there is truth and accuracy in their observations, but something more is needed.

The nondual oneness of the wisdom traditions was also described by some of the pioneering physicists, and is almost impossible to adequately explain. And yet, as Wilber noted in his compilation of the mystical writings of the physicists, none of them equated these levels. Instead, they describe consciousness as fundamental, or the observer as essential, but they did not say that the feeling state of oneness is the same as the quantum oneness of complementary particles. Chopra and Kafatos do. They don’t differentiate the mind-like behavior of the universe, the deep structures, and consciousness.

They do however describe consciousness in at least two ways – as a field and as a non-local mind, which is the womb of manifest reality. This conflation of field and consciousness, interior and exterior, subjective and objective is inherent in some of the other problems I will address in the next section.

### **The Suggestions**

At the heart of this very interesting book about nonduality, daily life, and the underlying structures of reality, is a subtle dualism that seems to embrace subjectivity over objectivity, consciousness over matter, and higher states of consciousness over all other states. I don’t think this was always the authors’ intent, but it does come across as the perspective of the text. Many of these issues could be dealt with by integrating a more explicit integral approach informed by the works of Gebser, Wilber, and developmental approaches in general. In this way, the central arguments of the book could be made more complete, deeper, and even more evolutionary.

#### *Gebser’s Aperspectival Structure*

At the end of the book, Chopra and Kafatos write,

“In the end, we’ve been telling you about a hidden reality. It wasn’t hidden intentionally or for mischievous purposes. The mind forged its own manacles, and it would take the history of the world to explain why and how.”

I think it would have helped a great deal if they dedicated a chapter at the start of the book to tell the why and the how of that history. I recommend that such a chapter start with Gebser for several important reasons: he was a cultural historian who was a contemporary of the pioneers of quantum theory, he described the developments of perspectives over the course of history, and he coined a description of the move from third person perspective thinking to fourth, or what he referred to as the integral-aperspectival structure of consciousness.

Gebser examined language, art, science, architecture, poetry, social practices, and religion as they mutated over the course of human history (mainly Western). He proposed that human history demonstrates five mutations of the structures of consciousness from Archaic (early humans), to Magic (starting with Stone Age Paleolithic humans), to Mythic (starting around 10,000 years ago) to the Rational-perspectival structure (starting around 2,500 BCE), and the Integral-aperspectival structure (starting around 1900).

Each structure of consciousness was characterized by myriad practices, beliefs, social structures, art, and science and each had a distinct perspective on time and space. For example, the Mythic structure viewed time in terms of "temporicity" as in, "long ago and far away..." and space as 2-dimensional, such as the medieval tapestry art or Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The Mental-rational structure is characterized by the introduction of 3-dimensional perspective such as in Renaissance architecture and the use of rationality. Three dimensions entered human consciousness for the first time. This was an advance in the human capacity to utilize perspectives. The Magic and Mythic structures were pre-perspectival. Gebser referred to the Mental Structure with the term "ratio," to split up, divide, and generally bring one's own point of view to the world. Personal point of view emerged with this structure.

By integrating Gebser, their argument would be more coherent because the evolution of consciousness he described is congruent with their perspective. This is important because it would help them to reign in their seeming bias against objective science. For example, they write about mainstream science, "the universe didn't become mindless with the stroke of a pen; this was a collective decision made at the outset of modern science." By understanding Gebser's work, it becomes obvious that there was no collective decision, it was a gradual mutation of consciousness, which it turns out was necessary in order to develop to the next structure.

According to Gebser, another transformation occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, which was a mutation from the mental-rational perspective to an integral aperspectival structure, one that includes a 4<sup>th</sup> person perspective, and integrates time into daily consciousness. Chopra and Kafatos' book describes some of the elements of this structure.

Gebser was a contemporary of the pioneers of quantum theory, and he integrated their insights as representative of this new structure of consciousness. Gebser writes, "The various theories of relativity by Einstein as well as the quantum theory of Planck have altered our perceptions and estimations of the world in a manner comparable only to the changes wrought in earlier, less mentalized ages by the great men of wisdom." He goes on to explain how the abstractions of these new men of wisdom superseded the three-dimensionality of the previous era. He writes, "This supersession of three-dimensionality is the decisive aspect. The incorporation of 'time'

into three-dimensional space altered this space, thereby altering the structure of our reality.” This new view of time is one of the hallmarks of a new 4<sup>th</sup> person perspective integrated into everyday life. Time was now viewed as an intensity rather than a quantity.

Gebser hypothesized that the findings of the physicists in terms of wave mechanics, complementarity, and the uncertainty principle forced the mental-rational structure to mutate because it was not adequate.

### *Developmental Structures*

Gebser’s structures of consciousness in human history are reminiscent of the more recent field of developmental structuralism initiated by Piaget and Baldwin. From this perspective, the development of perspective of humans during their lifespan, is similar to the development of perspective in human history. Children develop a first person perspective of the egotistical self around age 3, they later develop the ability to take on a second person perspective, and later into the young adult years, the ability to include a third-person perspective. The fourth person perspective, which is a hallmark of Gebser’s integral structure, is characteristic of more recent approaches to the world from postmodernism to pluralism, and has permeated the culture in various ways, albeit not in the depth that Gebser or Chopra and Kafatos describe.

This view of human development based on empirical research in several fields from moral development to cognitive and self-development, would be useful to the arguments in the book. It would help the authors shift away from the dualistic stance of science vs. spirituality.

For example, Chopra and Kafatos equate paradigm with worldview, and refer to Science and Spirituality as two different worldviews. From a developmental and structural perspective, paradigms arise from worldviews. Also, science and spirituality have many different ways they may be viewed based on the ability of the individual to utilize more perspectives or less perspectives.

This would only add to their arguments. For example, they write, “Subjectivity doesn’t fit the scientific method.” Consciousness and spirituality and subjectivity don’t necessarily fit within science when viewed strictly from the mental-rational structure, but it could be reconciled with science from more complex perspectives. Chopra and Kafatos were certainly aware of this because they reference the integration of science and spirit from the pioneers of the quantum era. But they don’t make this explicit, which leads to a confusing presentation. They are saying one thing about science, and then quoting scientists who say the other. By offering a developmental perspective, they can easily reconcile such discrepancies.

This approach would also move their discussion away from the dualistic stance, where only two choices are available – that the world is conscious, or it is not. While I understand their stance, and am certainly sympathetic to it, they seem to throw out the baby with the bathwater. They write, “Do humans exist on our planet as winners in a cosmic game of roulette, overcoming incredibly small odds of finding the right universe? Or do we exist because we fit into the hidden scheme of nature? Most people answer according to their worldview, which can be religious, scientific, or a blurry hybrid of the two.” Their stance on worldviews could be broadened to include the literature on adult human development and this would allow for both/and.

If indeed the onset of the quantum era was a transformation of consciousness like similar developments of previous ages, then it would seem like a natural progression for these insights to take hold into daily consciousness. Their book is a wake-up call in that regard. They need to offer a rope-ladder to the physicalists. Developmental research does so.

### *Perspectives*

They do introduce the importance of perspectives and include what they call, 3<sup>rd</sup> party consciousness, 2<sup>nd</sup> party consciousness, and 1<sup>st</sup> party consciousness. This is essential, especially when they write, "no pronouns should play favorites." Except, from reading the book, you get the distinct impression that the subjective perspective, the "I," is their favorite, especially when they expand the "I" to the entire universe and create a blurry view of objectivity. They acknowledge that subjective and objective are interwoven, but their reliance on qualia as the measure of what is real leads to an overreliance on perception.

To untie this knot, it would be helpful for them to integrate Wilber. One of Wilber's contributions to human knowledge is that perspectives are what reality is made of. This is an important insight because perspective is prior to perception and qualia.

Thus understanding the evolution of perspective as a quality of the purpose driven cosmos, adds a great deal to understanding the worldview Chopra and Kafatos describe. It also provides a methodology to analyze other elements of the book.

### *Quadrants*

Wilber differentiated eight primordial perspectives as the interior and exterior of the inside and outside of the personal and collective. This differentiation is Wilber's attempt to map the domains of the oneness into four quadrants. Rather than dismiss all distinctions because of the blurriness that emerges when an observer is taken into account at the basis of reality, Wilber integrated 4 domains of truth. He proposes that each domain has its own inherent value, an interior and exterior, which comprises 8 basic perspectives that any sentient being may take.

This approach offers some very powerful methods to better make sense of the statements at the heart of Chopra and Kafatos' book. For example, decision making is akin to quantum behavior. The structure of the neurons all the way down to their electrons and quarks, and the underlying potential wave energy that those emerge from, can be distinguished as the view from the 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective. The objective side. The form or field. The decision, the feeling, is the view from the 1<sup>st</sup> person perspective.

They write, "Because qualia are subjective they directly attack the objectivity of modern science. – moreover, because experience is meaningful, qualia attack the model of random, meaningless nature." When we take a developmental stance, we see that humans make meaning as the ability to take more perspectives develops. Including the value of subjectivity and qualia is at least a 4<sup>th</sup> person perspective and possibly a 5<sup>th</sup> person perspective. So yes, it is an attack on the



randomness of the strict 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective, but it does not diminish the value of that perspective when viewed *from* that perspective.

They write, “Once you grasp what the options are, it is clear that terms like *objective* and *subjective* no longer apply. Outer life and inner life move as one. Daily activity is still individual – you are the specific person who wakes up, starts the car, and goes to work – but the consciousness that creates reality is universal.” This articulation of the oneness is powerful. When viewed through a map that still allows for the value and validity of both/and, I feel it has more value.

### *Idealism*

Lastly, they equate their viewpoint that consciousness is the ground of being as “idealism.” I think this is important because it is a difficult position to maintain. In terms of Western philosophy, they acknowledge that Berkeley was right, “to be is to be perceived,” and then they take a very Kantian approach to reality. According to Kant, we can only know reality through the structures of mind. We can never know the thing-in-itself. This stance was combated by the German Idealists, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling. They viewed the world and cosmos as spirit evolving and waking up to itself. So you could know the thing-in-itself through the self as nature. According to Wilber, one of the reasons the philosophy of the idealists did not work, was that there was no injunction, no concrete practice to bring it forth, to enact it.

Even though Chopra and Kafatos describe a new paradigm, the injunction they offer is a contemplative understanding of the science and behavior of the cosmos, which can be deepened through practices. Their argument rests on idealism, which relies on mind. They write, “By perceiving your life as a multidimensional series of quantum events, that’s what it becomes.” Living *as* the universe is the practice.

### Conclusion

Perhaps if they integrate their two views of consciousness as field and consciousness, they would have a more sustainable system. Wilber did something like this by offering Eros and Agape as the form and field of the Kosmos. Eros is the evolutionary impulse pushing it forward and Agape is the field pulling it higher to new perspectives and complexities. In this way, we as the universe have more than a contemplative practice but also a map and an embrace of every level, as well as a way to bring forth reality in each moment.