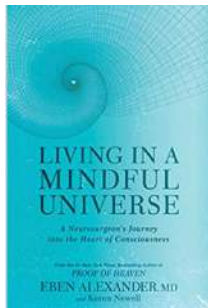


Book reviews

David A. Bennahum, MD, and Jack Coulehan, MD, Book Review Editors



Living in a Mindful Universe: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Heart of Consciousness

by Eben Alexander, MD, and
Karen Newell
Rodell Books, 288 pages

Reviewed by Jack Coulehan, MD
(ΑΩΑ, University of Pittsburgh, 1969)

In 2008, Dr. Eben Alexander (ΑΩΑ, Duke University School of Medicine, 1980) contracted a severe form of meningoencephalitis that left him in a deep coma for a week, after which he made a surprising and complete recovery. While comatose, he experienced a “fantastic odyssey” that “seemed to have lasted months or years, an elaborate journey into many layers of higher dimensions.”^{pxiv} As a neurosurgeon, he knew that his neocortex had shut down, so his brain should have been “incapable of creating or processing anything even remotely close”^{pxv} to what he had experienced. Nonetheless, it happened. Alexander described his remarkable odyssey in the bestselling book *Proof of Heaven* (2012), co-written with Karen Newell.

Living in a Mindful Universe tells the tale of Dr. Alexander's subsequent quest to understand the meaning of his near-death experience and its implications for human life and consciousness. This engaging book, also co-authored by Newell, explores miraculous cures, the power of prayer, psi-phenomena, and after-death communication, as well as more “orthodox” topics like meditation and mindfulness. His overall conclusion is that “the mindful universe in which we live is self-aware, and learning, and evolving.”^{p240} Our brains do not create consciousness, but rather serve as conduits through which we access a universal consciousness.

In Chapter 2, “A Hard Problem, Indeed,” Alexander addresses what philosophers and neuroscientists term the “hard problem of consciousness” (HPC). Stated simply, it is the question of how it is possible that biochemical reactions and electric impulses in the brain generate the rich inner world of personal awareness—the conscious self. Scientists tend to set that question aside, claiming that consciousness must arise as an epiphenomenon of the brain's extraordinary complexity. Perhaps, but if consciousness arises from biochemistry, it implies a radical change in our understanding of the components of the “material” universe. There is nothing in quantum field theory or in science at any other level that remotely allows for the emergence of self. In the quantum world, consciousness

appears to evoke “matter” (i.e., particles) into existence from an underlying field, rather than the reverse. To quote the textbook *Foundational Concepts of Neuroscience*, “As for the mysterious experiential quality of consciousness, perhaps this capacity is a fundamental aspect of reality—as central as matter, energy, space, and time—one that manifests in given particular configurations of matter and energy, such as what occurs in living organisms.”¹ The author recommends pursuing a program of further research, “while maintaining a broadened stance, including questioning the metaphysical framework itself.”¹

From this perspective, the “reducing valve, or filter” hypothesis^{p22} seems as plausible as the “brain creates mind” hypothesis. The former holds that neural complexity allows us to access an independently existing universal consciousness. The latter holds that neural complexity itself creates subjectivity. Given either hypothesis, human consciousness in its ordinary form cannot exist without a brain in good working order. However, if self-awareness results from the brain accessing what Alexander calls “Primordial Consciousness,” other striking implications would ensue. For example, near-death experiences might not simply be neurological phenomena caused by anoxia, but rather have some sort of external reality.

HPC is too often ignored or minimized in medicine, and as Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”² However, in the rest of the book, Dr. Alexander takes an uncritical approach to examining a wide array of phenomena with various possible explanations and attributing them all to the existence of a “self-aware” universe. On almost every page, I want to tell the author, “Slow down! Think this through more carefully. Don't jump to conclusions.”

In Chapter 7, “The Power of Prayer,” Alexander describes an incident that occurred at a meeting of alternative medicine therapists. The author felt sick and began to cough, noting to another participant that he was coming down with the flu. A woman asked him to lie down, while a group gathered around him, murmuring prayers and directing “healing energy” in his direction. The symptoms immediately resolved. Alexander interprets this outcome as an example of the power of prayer. But what about the placebo effect? Extensive research has shown the power and near universality of placebo therapy (as Alexander himself points out on pages 216–217), but he evidently discounts it with regard to his own symptoms.

In another example of the power of prayer, the author tells the story of an obstetrician who prayed over a patient with a severe postpartum hemorrhage. The patient

was rushed to the operating room but coded before the bleeding could be stopped. While initial resuscitation was unsuccessful, after the team “called Alison back” with prayer, her circulation was restored, and a hysterectomy performed. This may have been an answered prayer, as Alexander believes, though a delayed response to transfused blood and fluids in an otherwise young, healthy woman is a more physiological explanation.

Chapter 15, “Mind Over Matter,” presents the case of Anita, a woman suffering from lymphoma. Comatose and hours away from death, she had a vivid near-death experience in which she chose to return to life. When she woke up, “the lemon-size tumors throughout her entire lymphatic system began to shrink.” Within two weeks the lymphoma had completely resolved. Alexander presents the case as an example of mind over matter, i.e., Anita chose life and, therefore, was cured. But what about the millions of lymphoma sufferers who are not cured? Does that mean they choose to die? Or weren’t they given the choice? If so, why Anita? I don’t question the fact that well-documented inexplicable cures do occur, but they are very rare.³

Living in a Mindful Universe is full of interesting stories and colorful characters. The book deals with topics that will assure it a wide audience. I’m sympathetic to the author’s quest for deep meaning in his experience and would love to believe that we live in a mindful, self-aware universe, but I’m afraid this book provides little evidence to support the hypothesis.

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