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The flights of fancy that may unlock the secrets of our brains

A bit of me usually dies when I hear a student say he wants to study philosophy

Sathnam Sanghera

When I read, in *New Scientist* magazine, that the University of Sussex was opening a new centre dedicated to “consciousness studies” my initial reaction was: Mickey Mouse degree. In a world in which British colleges offer students courses in everything from “Individual Studies” to “Beauty”, “Sport and Exercise Science” to “Media & Cultural Studies”, “Game and Toy Engineering” to “Brewing and Distilling”, a degree in the art of staying awake seemed a logical development.

But when I read more about the new Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science — to draw side-splitting parallels between the subject matter and the inability of students to get out of bed — it became clear the idea was far from ludicrous. If anything, a British centre for consciousness — there are similar centres at the University of Arizona and at the Australian National University — is a fascinating and exciting prospect. Which may seem a surprising assertion when the questions that the centre aims to address — such as “What does it mean to be aware of one’s self and one’s world?” and “What does it mean to have an inner life?” and “Is one person’s experience of the colour red the same as someone else’s?” — sound disconcertingly philosophical.

Indeed, a bit of me dies whenever young people say that they want to study philosophy at university. There is a naive view that three years spent pondering questions such as “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” and “Why are we here?” will help you to understand the meaning of life, when the truth is that philosophy is the most whimsical and self indulgent of academic pursuits, raising more questions than answers and too often being an exercise in intellectual showing off for those involved.

However, consciousness studies appears to offer the prospect of examining the meaning of life with the possibility of discovering real answers. You see, what it is, basically, is an interdisciplinary approach that brings together psychology, neuroscience, psychiatry, informatics, computer science and artificial intelligence, and while it examines seemingly enervating questions such as “How does human consciousness represent the world?” and “Where do the boundaries of the mind and the external world begin?”, it uses science, brain-scanners, computer algorithms and so forth, to come up with scientific answers.

Take the question “What is consciousness?”, for example. Whereas a philosopher could spend two or three hours wittering on the theme without getting anywhere, consciousness studies would come at it from a physiological angle: it is known, for example, that you can lose large parts of the cerebellum and still enjoy conscious experience, but that if you lose small parts of the brain, say parts of the thalamus, you lose consciousness completely. Is it possible, therefore, through neuroscience, to find a specific part of the brain that creates human consciousness?

There are many areas of human experience that could be illuminated by such an approach: synaesthesia, anxiety, amnesia, post-traumatic brain damage, vegetative state. Consciousness studies could also revolutionise the understanding of severe mental illness.

One of the reasons conditions such as schizophrenia are so stigmatised, why donations to mental health charities are so low, is that it is still hard to demonstrate, scientifically, that they are diseases. Even in the 21st century, psychiatric disorders are diagnosed on the basis of symptoms presented in a clinic, and the subjective opinion of a psychiatrist. And while, at various points through history, mental illness has been blamed on the Devil, masturbation, character weakness, bad mothering, understanding remains highly unsophisticated.

But new fields such as consciousness studies, improving communication in particular between psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience, could change all that. It is now possible to see what is happening inside the human mind, and it may be possible soon to identify specific biomarkers for specific psychiatric disorders — for bipolar depression, for instance, to become as simple to diagnose as diabetes.

As Anil Seth, co-director of the Sackler Centre for Consciousness Science at the University of Sussex, said recently: “By thinking of psychiatric disorders as disturbances of conscious experience, and trying to understand

the mechanisms that might generate particular patterns you see, you have a new way to diagnose and treat them.”

If I was 18 and looking for a course, I'd sign up straight away — if I could get myself out of bed.

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