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4 Amazing Facts Suggesting the Mind Can Exist Independent of the Brain

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"Is Consciousness Produced by the Brain?" by Br...



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Are you just a physical entity, ultimately reducible to the physical entity known as your brain? Is that organ—a bundle of neurons weighing about three pounds—the source of all your thoughts, feelings, and any illusion you may have of a “soul” or a “spirit”?

I recently finished reading a 600-plus-page book by a group of academic psychiatrists, psychologists, and philosophers, called [Irreducible Mind](#), that argues exactly the opposite. The book presents a huge body of evidence from scientific studies of psychokinesis, split personalities, psychic healing, near-death experiences, and other phenomena that seems to constitute powerful proof that, while the mind and the brain obviously interact, the former is not reducible to the latter and there are circumstances where consciousness clearly exists and functions independently of the brain.

Irreducible Mind is a subversive endeavor, swimming against the tide of about a century of scientific reductionism (though not, it should be stressed, in quantum physics) that says all phenomena, including your most delicate or exalted sentiments, are ultimately physical. The book has definitely had some impact; googling the title gets almost two million results, and though published back in 2007 it keeps selling well on Amazon.

One of the coauthors is [Bruce Greyson](#), a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia and leading researcher of near-death experiences. A few months ago a [video](#) surfaced of a lecture Greyson gave in India in 2011. It’s about an hour long, fascinating, and seems to point to even more dramatic findings since *Irreducible Mind* was published seven years ago.

Greyson presents four lines of evidence for the mind as an independent entity, which I've taken the trouble to summarize, and they could be an eye-opener. First he gives this caveat:

The evidence that I'm going to discuss...is derived entirely from scientific research. But I do not want to give you the impression that this evidence is...accepted by Western scientists. In fact, most Western scientists are completely unaware that this evidence even exists.

1. Lucidity in the last moments

A person has a disorder such as a brain tumor or Alzheimer's. Mental functioning declines severely, and the person eventually dies. Isn't that proof that the brain determines consciousness?

It might be, except that there have been numerous cases over the past 250 years in which people with such disorders regained full, lucid mental functioning in the last minutes, hours, or even days before death, including full awareness of their own and others' identity. It has happened, Greyson says, in cases where the person's brain had "deteriorated to an irreversible degree" according to evidence from brain scans and autopsies.

Greyson says that, while such cases are rare, 83 of them have been mentioned in the Western medical literature. He cites examples of the phenomenon, including one reported by a psychologist in Iceland about an 81-year-old woman with Alzheimer's. The woman had

been demented for a long time and was living in a nursing home. Her family took turns visiting her even though she didn't recognize them and hadn't spoken to them for a year. On one occasion, her son Leiter [?] was sitting at her bedside, working on a crossword puzzle. Suddenly she looked up at him. She looked at him directly in the face and said, "My son Leiter, I'm going to recite a verse for you." She then recited a poem clearly and loudly. She then lay back on her pillow and remained quiet until she died.

Greyson goes on to say that there

is no known physiological mechanism for this phenomenon. It is indeed rare, but the fact that it happens at all has no explanation in terms of how the brain functions. It is as if the damaged brain prevents the person from thinking and communicating, but then as the brain finally begins to die, consciousness is released from [its] grasp....

2. Advanced mind, minimal brain

Stranger still, there are people walking around who have full, normal mental functioning—sometimes even on a high intellectual level—while not having much of a brain.

Greyson starts with a case published in 2007 where a young girl

underwent surgery after she was injured and knocked unconscious in an automobile accident. An X-ray of her head just before surgery revealed that she had no cerebral cortex at all; she had just a brain stem inside her skull. And when the surgeon opened up her skull to operate, that is exactly what he found: just a brain stem with no cerebral cortex.

Greyson goes on to explain that the brain stem cannot perform "higher cognitive functions like thinking, perceiving, making decisions, and so on." That can only be done in the cerebral cortex—which this young girl now lacked. And yet, even though she "should have been completely unable to formulate any thought of any kind," she was actually a high school honors student and was accepted by Smith College.

John Lorber was a British neurologist who specialized in children with hydrocephalus, known as water on the brain. The condition, Greyson says,

usually lead[s] to blindness, seizures, mental retardation, paralysis, and if it's not treated, to death. However, Lorber described dozens of children, and eventually some adults, who had severe hydrocephalus but seemed to lead normal lives. In fact, in a sample of children in whom the cerebral spinal fluid filled up 95% of their skull, leaving virtually no space for any brain tissue, half of them had IQs greater than 100.

Thirty years ago [an article on Lorber's work](#) was published in the prestigious journal *Science* with the title—hyperbolic, but not completely—"Is Your Brain Really Necessary?"

Starting at 27:20 in the video, Greyson shows two brain scans—one of a normal brain, one of a brain with severe hydrocephalus. It's a striking difference. But it turns out the latter scan is the brain of a graduate student in mathematics at Cambridge University with an IQ of 126.

3. NDEs: Rich consciousness when there shouldn't be any

Greyson then turns to his specialty, near-death experiences (NDEs). He notes that he's investigated almost a thousand cases, many of which occurred during clinical death or deep anesthesia when there should be no brain functioning. Yet people who return from these states report vivid, unforgettable,

transcendent, life-changing experiences.

But how do we know these aren't just subjective experiences that occur while the person is losing or regaining consciousness? One way we know, says Greyson, is through the OBE (out-of-body experience) phenomenon. In many NDE cases the person reports leaving the body, hovering (incorporeally) in the operating room, and seeing what's going on (often before entering a more mystical realm). If some of these people were to give accurate observations—even though in a state of clinical death or deep anesthesia at the time—wouldn't it mean that their consciousness, their mind, had been functioning independently of their inanimate brain?

Well, they do give such observations, and they've been giving them for decades. Greyson offers an example from 1982 where:

the American cardiologist Michael Sabom published a study in which he asked near-death experiencers who had reported leaving their bodies during cardiopulmonary resuscitation to describe in detail what they had seen. He also asked a matched group of seasoned cardiac patients to imagine watching their resuscitations and to try to describe it from a third-person perspective. Eighty percent of the matched group who did not have near-death experiences made major errors in their descriptions. None of the near-death experiencers made any errors, and 19 percent of them described specific idiosyncratic and unexpected events that happened during their resuscitation.

And what about bringing back accurate information from the mystical realm itself? There are many of those cases, too. Greyson cites one reported by an American pediatrician, Dr. K. M. Dale, in which a nine-year-old boy with meningitis who hovered near death for 36 hours reported seeing deceased relatives, including his sister Teresa. His parents were upset because Teresa—as far as they knew—was perfectly healthy and going to college in another state. The father called—and found out Teresa had died that night in a car accident.

In another case Greyson mentions, renowned Swiss-American psychiatrist [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#) reported about a girl who

had a near-death experience during heart surgery and later said she had met her brother, although as far as she knew she never had a brother. Her father, moved by this vivid account, acknowledged that her parents had in fact had a son who had died before she had been born, and they never mentioned him to her.

4. Remembrance of lives past

A child starts talking about a past life, giving very specific details about a place, people, and events that were part of it. Researchers go to the place, often a remote village, and find that the child's account completely matches the reality. Or the researchers may take the child with them, who accurately identifies people and locations he or she could not possibly have known about.

If this were to happen, it would indicate that minds can journey from one bodily frame to another, and are not yoked to, or produced by, a particular brain. Well, this too happens a lot. Greyson's group at the University of Virginia has studied over 2500 such cases.

Most of the cases—not all—occur in societies that believe in rebirth, particularly India. In 60 percent of the cases, the past life ended (at the average age of 33) in an accident or a violent attack.

The findings Greyson cites, starting at 49:30, are remarkable, and this is only a sampling:

these children often exhibit unusual personality traits, likes and dislikes, that are incompatible with their present lives. For example, some of these children recall a past life of the opposite gender, and they want to dress and play like someone of the opposite gender. A child born to a Hindu family may recall a past life as a Muslim, and he will reject the food his mother cooks because it was not prepared in the Muslim manner....

Some of these children exhibit unusual skills that they have not been taught, and indeed that no one in their village knows. For example, a child may be able to play a musical instrument without being taught.... We have studied children in Sri Lanka in villages where only the Tamil language is spoken, and yet the child can converse in Sinhalese.

Closer to home, in a Christian context where there was no belief in reincarnation, Greyson (58:50) describes the case of a boy born in Louisiana, James Leininger, who recalled being shot down as a pilot 60 years earlier in World War II. The boy eventually remembered the name of his aircraft carrier, the make of his plane, the fact that he was shot down over Iwo Jima, and the name of his best friend and fellow pilot, Jack Larson. In brief, his father investigated, and it all checked out—including locating the sister of the boy's previous incarnation, a pilot named James Huston.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." So Hamlet tells his friend in Shakespeare's play. He could have been one of today's cutting-edge researchers addressing a colleague still stuck in the old physicalist paradigm.

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