
“In my end is my beginning.” Questions … and more questions about the status of self in the age of neuroscience.

With apologies to T.S. Eliot, I shall start this review at the end of Sangeetha Menon’s book, for the essence of her book is captured in these closing words: “Is there a core-self somehow hidden and which master-controls the living self through the body and the brain? Is that pure consciousness? Is the existence of pure consciousness unhindered by the birth and death of the body?” These are profoundly challenging questions, and they serve to establish here at the opening of my review the rich area of human experience that Menon has chosen to explore. She is to be congratulated for raising her head above the parapet in the general consideration of neuroscience, self, and consciousness to which her book is directed, and to stand up for those core values including free will and the recognition of our potential to embrace higher, perhaps transcendent, realms of being that dignify humanity.

Questions are good … and indeed Menon asks many questions in the course of her writing. What about answers? Well, expecting answers to these questions may be overly simplistic. Menon’s final words that follow the above questions (“A short response is that the core-self is beyond the binary of birth and death of the body, and it is the central key to resolve the puzzle of consciousness”) assert a strong position—that our understanding of self can never be complete if our horizons extend only to the brain and body. Indeed, the very asking of the questions seems to be a stylistic device that Menon uses throughout the book to imply her own position. The questions are her answers: There is a core-self which master-controls ‘us,’ and this core is pure consciousness, which actually does exist beyond the physicality that arises and decays in birth and death.

The end is in the beginning since these are essentially the questions that launch Menon’s enquiry. Already on page 2 she writes that “Self is the puzzle for twenty-first century biology,” and page 5 includes a list of 26 questions that distil the book’s substance. Would we not expect answers by the book’s close? Here is the reason why I have commenced my review in this fashion. It seems to me that the reason why Menon closes with questions, is that it is the appropriate, perhaps gentle, way of reminding those whose horizons seem to...
end with the physicality of embodied consciousness that there is more to us than that. There is a mystery at the core of our being. It is not available to even the most sophisticated external instrumentation, and yet ignoring or denying it carries consequences.

The fundamental question that interests me concerns the approaches we adopt in engaging with the wealth of research into the nature of consciousness—especially the dominant strand deriving from cognitive neuroscience—whilst remaining faithful, as it were, to that mystery at the core of being. Is the person who lives and breathes that mystery condemned to be on the outside of the coterie of those who see themselves at the forefront in the challenge to understand the nature of consciousness? This I believe is the subtext of Menon’s book. As she writes, “All through the discussion, I underline the importance of considering brain-self interrelations, and also of separating the fleeting self of the cognitive and social sciences from the core-self that is deeply ontological” (p. 5). By “deeply ontological” she seems to be emphasizing that the core-self is “un-ideated” and “non-located” (p. 4), meaning that its presence cannot be detected by the methods of neuroscience. And here is the nub, for it remains unclear as to how a research-based approach might substantiate Menon’s proposals about a core-self that is not dependent on a physical base. I would argue that we need greater clarity here. Indeed, let me put this more strongly: I believe that this—in the more general sense of articulating the epistemological basis whereby we might satisfactorily demonstrate the value of mystical ideas that do not fit into the dominant physicalist paradigm—is the greatest challenge to which we as transpersonal psychologists are called at this point in our discipline’s development.

Let me briefly say more about this challenge before returning to Menon’s work. The notion that spirituality has a role in relation to psychology is no longer the challenge that it was in the early years of the transpersonal movement. However, I have argued that transpersonal psychology remains the only sub-discipline of psychology that can engage with spiritual and mystical traditions on terms that do not squeeze those traditions’ core values and ontological convictions out from any dialogue. The huge explosion of research into mindfulness and its applications, for example, rarely acknowledges the broader context of the role mindfulness might play in an individual’s journey to developing wisdom, attaining more enriching states of being, and engaging with non-physical realms. Whilst this is not the place to go into detail, it is important to acknowledge the deleterious consequences of such emaciation of spiritual and mystical notions for individuals and for our culture more generally.

Menon’s approach is one way of redressing the balance. She endeavours to engage with those who espouse a purely physicalist worldview seemingly on their own terms. By embedding her notions of the core-self and the spiritual perspective that ensues from it in the context of a wealth of neurocognitive research into self and consciousness, she gives the impression that those notions might be evaluated by the criteria of cognitive neuroscience. However, I am not so sure that this particular strategy is the most appropriate. Menon’s book includes valuable overviews of many of the avenues that cognitive neuroscientists have explored in
attempting to understand the role of brain systems in relation to self and consciousness. And she emphasizes what appears to be lacking:

At some point we will have to greet the idea that knowledge of causal connections is trivial as far as the ontology of consciousness is concerned. Otherwise, in spite of amazing neurobiological developments, as persons, we will stay where we started. Inadequate and parochial problematization of consciousness, without considering its ontological nature, will lead to inadequate conceptualization. Such conceptual frameworks might very well throw light on certain biological and cultural traits. However, to believe that the door will open to show the true nature of consciousness is doubtful. (p. 55)

I very much share Menon’s view, and applaud the way she confronts the generally received wisdom that consciousness is to be understood within the confines of a physicalist ontology. The generally-agreed approach within cognitive neuroscience by-passes the so-called hard problem of consciousness (i.e., how physical processes may relate to phenomenal experience) and simply assumes that more of the same will solve the problem. As Crick and Koch express it, “It appears fruitless to approach this problem head-on. Instead, we are attempting to find the neural correlate(s) of consciousness (NCC), in the hope that when we can explain the NCC in causal terms, this will make the problem of qualia clearer” (Crick & Koch, 2003, p. 119). Are “hopes” enough however? And might it not be the case that addressing the hard problem could provide a more appropriate context within which neuroscientific data should be viewed?

As I have already illustrated, Menon’s approach proposes an extra ingredient that needs to be incorporated within our view of self and consciousness, namely the core-self that is pure consciousness. The problem here is that there is no evidence that would, I think, convince those who hold sway in the areas of research she reviews. How could there be, given the non-physical nature of that extra ingredient as conceptualized here? Indeed, the crucial question, I feel, concerns establishing the line of reasoning that might be expected to lead in the direction of incorporating such constructs in the neurocognitive narrative. This is a question about the way we bridge disciplinary boundaries, and is, I believe, critical to the challenge Menon is addressing. In my view her book would have benefitted from more consideration of such epistemological matters.

Again and again in the book, Menon gives a fine review of relevant research, raising poignant questions. But these questions are simply followed by assertions that introducing this core-self answers the questions: (p. 101: “The puzzle is solved only when it is conceded that the core-self is not another experiential … feel alongside taste, smell, etc., but an ontologically different entity,” p. 104: “In order for cognitive processes to be embodied in bodily experiences and actions, and for interactions with the environment, firstly a core self-sense is to be conceptualized;” p. 107: “The minimal self has to be a core, ontic self that could be described as non-structured, non-intentional, substantive, pure consciousness.”). These phrases, “… it is conceded that…,” “… is to be conceptualized …,” “… has to be…” are problematic, for much has to be taken on trust. I wanted Menon to go further; I felt that she could
have developed the ideas, which she asserts are needed, in greater detail. And she does not really grapple with this issue about which lines of evidence might support the proposal of a core-self that exists in some sense beyond the brain.

To be sure there will be many (especially amongst the audience of this review) who rejoice in Menon’s liberating perspective. I have already indicated that I count myself amongst this group. But in reviewing the book I have to ask this key question: Within which scholarly tradition(s) should the arguments be contextualized? In my view, Menon’s perspective brings a refreshing addition to the narrative that arises from the cognitive and brain science, but crucially her ideas cannot be substantiated from those areas. On several occasions, she draws on material in the traditions associated with Vedanta, and it seems clear that the key notions of a core-self and pure consciousness derive substantively from her knowledge and practice of these traditions. It is a great shame therefore that nowhere in the book is the Vedantic material elaborated. We have brief allusions only.

The strength of transpersonal psychology and its contemporary importance lies in its capacity to integrate across scholarly divides. This is where I would situate Menon’s book: it is clear that she is fully at home in two scholarly areas—cognitive neuroscience and Vedanta—which gives her an authoritative voice. I feel that she could have built a richer integration had she developed the input from the latter further. Again, it is not that I would have the book be something the author had not set out to achieve—that would be unjust. It is that the arguments she builds seem to be lacking without a more substantive base.

To follow further this point of criticism I would have to raise a concern over the treatment of ideas having roots in Vedanta. There is, for example, a large literature critical of any notion of pure consciousness. Where is Menon’s reply? What about contemporary scholarship into Vedanta—if a work such as this is going to build the kind of bridges that I for one would very much like to see, then the author must engage with the scholarly treatment of the material drawn from spiritual and mystical traditions just as she engages critically with the theories of cognitive neuroscientists.

And, given the context, I would like to have seen a further consideration discussed. Menon criticises the view advanced by most cognitive psychologists today that there is no coherent and continuing self, that self is a narrative constructed from moment to moment (e.g., Bruner, 1997; Dennett, 1991; Gazzaniga, 2013). By contrast, Menon asserts the continuity of self: “Experience itself is influenced by the continuity of the experiencer as a continuing self .... The self is not a point of awareness that exists for a moment...” (p. 172). Now, those with an understanding of the historical roots of Buddhism will know that this debate is not new; notions of the impermanence of self (or perhaps better expressed—the impermanence of the immediate sense of ‘I’) is one of the divergences that led to Buddhism arising as a tradition separated from its Hindu backdrop. It would have been stimulating to see this modern tension contextualized against the Hindu-Buddhist background (especially since the Buddhist view is one that has influenced some key thinkers in contemporary psychology).
Menon articulates her view forcefully:

I would think that this [the view that there is no continuous self] is a dangerous and exceedingly superficial view ... a serious blunder to commit if one is interested in the character of the person, and deeply philosophical views such as freedom and moral choices. I will not attribute the finer values of human pursuit such as freedom and universal love to a fleeting self .... But in absolute terms these are values that can only originate from the 'core-self', which is the seat of the body-sense and the self-sense. (p. 173)

I certainly agree, and again congratulate Menon on flying her colours with a flourish. But the Hindu-Buddhist backdrop could have been instructive here. After all, a great tradition such as Buddhism never abandoned the value of moral choices. It would, I feel, have been instructive to chart the course taken when momentariness was asserted over continuity; embedding the contemporary debate in the context of such a background could enlighten us.

As it stands, Menon’s position is open to challenge. One of the authors whose views Menon addresses in this context is Metzinger (2009) who has argued forcefully that there is no-one within ‘us,’ as it were. And the evidence from cognitive studies such as those of Gazzaniga (2013) and Wegner (2002) is compelling. Weighed against this we have a series of questions posed by Menon:

Is the brain being taken to be the grand organ that masterminds one’s mind, mental life and experiences? Is the singular attention on brain, at the cost of dumping the self, on overrated position? Would considering the brain not as the lone, grand organ but as a ‘mediating organ’ be a plausible option? (p. 101)

Again, I am sympathetic to Menon’s perspective here, but I would like to have seen more substantial argument. There is little doubt that Metzinger’s answers to the above would be “yes, no, and no;” and I suspect that Menon’s are “no, yes, and yes.” But couldn’t there be more nuanced positions, and how does Menon’s position accommodate the empirical data? Similarly when addressing the plasticity of the brain, she challenges the universally held view amongst those taking a biological perspective that the brain is a self-organising structure (under environmental influence) when she asserts that “There is something that ‘tells’ the brain to change according to altering conditions” (p. 132). How do we know? Again, it is not that I wish to deny Menon’s convictions—on the contrary, I want to see them leading to influential dialogue and not being casually dismissed by those who argue that the empirical data cannot support the view of something beyond the brain.

Ultimately, in Menon’s scheme the core-self holds the strings. “The core-self is the adherent base of all subjective experiences, that shines up our discrete states of mind and body, giving immediate knowledge and awareness” (p. 134). Yet there are a number of paradoxes: The core-self is the “deep organic self” (p. 194) but it is non-embodied—how do we reconcile its organic nature with its being non-embodied? The core-self is at the root of our character, yet it is pure consciousness—how do we reconcile the contentlessness with the core
patterning of character? These are not paradoxes that can be addressed from the context of psychology and neuroscience. They are aspects of the mystery at the core of our being that is explored in the discourse of mysticism and religion.

Again, I return to the fundamental challenge—the challenge for transpersonal psychology—that of recognizing the complementarity of mysticism and scientific psychology, and drawing on both to build a rigorously-researched extended science of being. Menon’s exploration of the self in relation to cognitive neuroscience is a timely and worthy contribution to meeting the challenge.

I say ‘timely’ since re-evaluating what we mean by ‘self’ and the values we ascribe to personhood seems to me to be overdue. Menon uses a plethora of adjectives to specify the nature of self in its many guises: we have “spiritual self,” “experiential self,” “minimal self,” “extended self,” “lasting self,” and “deeply placed self” in Chapter 1 alone! And maybe this itself reflects a problem: self is the proverbial elephant that eludes full description without a higher overview. I believe transpersonal psychology is the discipline that can provide that overview, and works such as this book certainly move us in the right direction. Menon’s measured and illuminating reviews of key topics at the forefront of contemporary neurocognitive science show the value that can be added when notions of a core, integrative self are introduced. The evidence for such a ‘higher’ dimension of self is not to be found within the remit of “brass instrument psychology” (even when James’s characterization is updated to include PET, fMRI and the like). It is only when authors like Menon pose deeper questions about meaning, the refinement of emotions, and our sense of agency that the inadequacy of the current cognitive orientation in psychology is highlighted.

And I refer to ‘extended science’ not only to mean that we should incorporate a rich and diverse range of methodologies in our quest to understand spiritual and transpersonal issues (Anderson & Braud, 2011), but also to recognize the moral impact of scientific theorizing. For example, a view of consciousness which holds that it is essentially limited to physical computing power—whether in brains or super computers—is not only a wild extrapolation on the basis of inadequate data but also an insidious assault on humanity’s long-cherished values. Where data alone are inadequate to generate a water-tight model, scientists promoting extended science will incorporate moral and other spiritual implications in their speculations. Menon’s work exemplifies such a responsible approach, and should be on the reading list for anyone genuinely interested in a transpersonal approach that engages constructively with the science of consciousness.

REFERENCES


Editor's Note: As a tribute to scholarly dialogue, watch for a response by the author (Sangeetha Menon) in the next issue of the Journal

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