



One Mind: how our individual mind is part of a greater consciousness and why it matters¹

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*“The overall number of minds is just one.....In truth there is only one mind.”
~ Erwin Schrödinger² Nobel Prize in Physics, 1933*

One of the most persistent activities in history is the effort to parse mind.

Thus in the twentieth century we were introduced to several subdivisions of mind, such as the conscious, the preconscious, the subconscious, the unconscious, the collective conscious, and the collective unconscious. This progressive atomisation of consciousness is considered limitless by many contemporary observers within science. For them, “atomisation” is not a metaphor but a literal truth: consciousness is atoms. As Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA unambiguously stated, “A person’s mental activities are entirely due to the behavior of nerve cells, glial cells, and the atoms, ions, and molecules that make up and influence them.”³

The perspective of the One Mind looks at consciousness through the other end of the telescope. In this concept, the One Mind is not a subdivision of consciousness, but the overarching, inclusive dimension to which all the mental components of all individual minds — past, present, and future — belong. I capitalise the One Mind to distinguish it from the single, one mind that each individual appears to possess.

An Ancient Concept

The idea of the One Mind is ancient. The esoteric sides of all the major religions recognise that our individual consciousness is subsumed and nourished by an infinite, absolute, divine, or cosmic source, and is ultimately one with it.⁴ Samkhya, one of the oldest philosophical systems of India, promoted the concept of the Akashic records, a compendium of information and knowledge encoded in a non-physical plane of existence, which later interpreters likened to the Mind of God.⁵ ⁶ The Upanishads, India’s sacred scriptures that date to the middle of the first millennium BC, proclaim *tat tvam asi*, “thou art that”: the human and the infinite divine are one. Similarly from the Christian tradition, the words of Jesus: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21, KJV), and Jesus’ words, “Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?” (John 10:34, KJV). And as the eponymous sage Hermes Trismegistus said centuries earlier, “There is nothing more divine than mind, nothing more potent in its operation, nothing more apt to unite men to gods, and gods to men.”⁷

The theme of trans-individual consciousness is an unbroken thread in the West. As Plato (427-347 BC) has Aristophanes say in his *Symposium*, “[T]his becoming one instead of two, was the very expression of [humanity’s] ancient need. And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love.”⁸ William Butler Yeats (1865-1939): “[T]he borders of our minds are

ever shifting, and...many minds can flow into one another...and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.”⁹ And as Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), the Beat novelist, poet and author of *On The Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, glimpsed, “Devoid of space/ Is the mind of grace.”¹⁰

Emerson and I

I collided with the concept of the One Mind when I was sixteen years old. The event is seared in my memory. I stumbled, quite by accident, onto a paperback copy of the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), the American transcendentalist philosopher. The discovery occurred one evening in Evans Corner Drug, the teen hangout in tiny Groesbeck, Texas, the town nearest our farm. The big draw for teens was the soda fountain. The Emerson book was in one of those revolving wire display racks. Emerson seemed quite out of place among the cheap westerns and mystery novels, but I was somehow drawn to him. Mindlessly opening the book to page one, these words gobsmailed me: “There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent.”¹¹

That was just a warm-up. Emerson’s essay “The Over-soul” also clobbered me. The Over-soul, Emerson said, is “that Unity... within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other....” He explained, “We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.”¹²

I lost touch with Emerson during my university, medical school, and post-graduate training. He was drowned out by the materialistic worldview with which I was dragooned, as were all the young people of my generation who pursued a career in medicine. No other approaches were tolerated in my heavily scientific education. A smug triumphalism was in the air. Who needed Emerson and over-souls when Theories of Everything based in physics seemed within reach?

Although for several years I gave my heart to the physically based views of mind and consciousness, I continued to carry Emerson somewhere deep inside. Looking back, I believe my early exposure to him helped immunise me against completely capitulating to the materialistic pseudo-explanations of mind and consciousness. The immunity would prove to be life-long. Not that Emerson was solely responsible for my evolving views; it's just that he was the original irritant in the oyster around which something grew.

Becoming Someone Else

In Western cultures we have become so obsessed with the cult of the individual and the self that we have blinded ourselves to how the One Mind manifests in everyday life. Let's look at a dramatic example.

On January 2, 2007, Wesley Autrey, a 50-year-old, African-American construction worker and Navy veteran, was waiting for a subway train in Manhattan with his two young daughters at around 12:45 PM. As Autrey stood there, he was unaware that he was about to become involved in a sequence of events that would change his life, and which would reveal profound truths about the nature of the human mind. He noticed a young man, Cameron Hollopeter, 20, having a seizure. The man managed to get to his feet, but stumbled from the platform onto the tracks between the two rails. Autrey saw the lights of an approaching train and made an instant decision. He jumped onto the tracks, thinking he would have time to drag Hollopeter away. Realising this was impossible, he covered Hollopeter's body with his own and pressed him down in a drainage ditch about a foot deep between the tracks. The train operator tried to stop and the brakes screeched, but by the time he could do so five cars had passed over the two men. It was a close call; the cars were so close to Autrey they smudged grease on his blue knit cap.

Hollopeter, a student at the New York Film Academy, was taken to hospital, but sustained only bumps and bruises. Autrey refused medical help because, he said, nothing was wrong.

Why did Autrey do it? He told *The New York Times*, "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right."¹³ He said further that, as a construction worker, he was used to working in confined spaces, and that his judgment in this case proved to be "pretty right."¹⁴

Why would one person willingly risk or sacrifice his or her life for another? The answer might seem obvious: because he or she simply cares and has empathy or love for the person in need. But that answer is not good enough for evolutionary biologists, who want to know what purpose is served by the caring, empathy, and love. What does the individual gain by acting on these feelings? According to the tenets of evolutionary biology, we are genetically programmed to act in ways that insure our survival and reproduction. Our empathic acts, therefore, might extend to those closest to us who share our genes — our siblings, children, our kinship group — because helping them helps us genetically in the long run. Or we might extend empathy toward our tribe or social unit, because we might one day need them to reciprocate. In this light, actions like Wesley Autrey's are biological heresy. He was not remotely connected with Cameron Hollopeter, not racially, socially, occupationally, or culturally. Autrey's genes would not have benefited if he died saving the young white man. So, according to evolutionary biology, Wesley Autrey should have stayed on the subway platform and let Cameron Hollopeter shift for himself.

Joseph Campbell, the great mythologist, was interested in why people perform selfless acts. He was influenced by the views of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). Campbell observed, "There's [a] wonderful question Schopenhauer asked. How is it that an individual can so participate in the danger and pain of another that, forgetting his own self-protection, he moves spontaneously to the other's rescue, even at the cost of his own life?" Schopenhauer believed that self-sacrifice for another occurs because the

rescuer realises that he or she and the individual in need are one. At the decisive moment, the sense of separation is totally overcome. The danger to the needy person becomes that of the rescuer. The prior sense of separateness is simply a function of the way we experience things in space and time: we may *appear* separate and often *feel* separate, but the separation is not fundamental. Because we experience ourselves as one with the person in need, when we risk our life to save them we are essentially saving ourselves.

Campbell elaborated, "Now, that spontaneous compassion, I think, would jump culture lines. If you were to see someone of a totally alien world — even a person or a race or nation that you had no sympathy for — the recognition of a common human identity would spark a response. And the ultimate reference of mythology is to that single entity, which is the human being as human."¹⁵

I have never heard of a rescuer inquiring whether the person in immediate need is Tory or Labour, Democrat or Republican, whether pro-choice or anti-abortion, how they stand on global climate change, or whether they favour allopathic medicine or homeopathy. The reaction to another human in need leapfrogs these issues in favour of a human-to-human response. Schopenhauer realised this. As he wrote in his 1840 book *On the Basis of Morality*, "Universal compassion is the only guarantee of morality."¹⁶ He elaborated, "My own true inner being actually exists in every living creature as truly and immediately as known to my consciousness only in myself. This realisation, for which the standard formula is in Sanskrit *tat tvam asi*, is the ground of compassion upon which all true, that is to say unselfish, virtue rests and whose expression is in every good deed."¹⁷

I'm willing to bet that Wesley Autrey never read a scrap of Campbell or Schopenhauer. He didn't have to. And that's the point. When he covered Cameron Hollopeter in the path of an oncoming train, he was defying all instincts for perpetuating his genes. He was in the embrace of the One Mind that binds us all, the unity so clearly glimpsed by luminaries such as Campbell and Schopenhauer. At the decisive moment, from the One-Mind perspective of consciousness, Wesley Autrey was Cameron Hollopeter.

The Downed Chopper

I have long been fascinated by why the Wesley Autreys of the world do what they do. This is not just philosophical curiosity.

I served as a battalion surgeon in Vietnam in 1968-69 in the boonies, beyond anything as fancy as the MASH units popularised in the famous TV series. My world was a sandbag- and barbed wire-protected primitive aid station with minimal equipment, and helicopter missions to aid wounded troops. I was involved in several Autrey-like moments in which I had to make an immediate decision about putting my life on the line for young men in need.

One day in October 1969, a helicopter crashed not far from my forward battalion aid station. I ran to the crash site. When I arrived, the upside-down chopper was ringed by a group of soldiers at a safe distance, because of the expectation that it would explode. The pilot was still conscious, but was trapped in the wreckage and was moaning in pain. Without thinking, I began shoveling sand from the door of the inverted aircraft, entered, and cut the seat belts trapping the pilot. One of my medical crew joined me, and we maneuvered the pilot from the wreckage and carried him to safety. To this day the smell of jet fuel pouring from the ruptured fuel tanks remains a vivid memory, but fortunately the aircraft did not explode. I started an I.V. on the pilot, gave him morphine for his pain, and put him on a med-evac helicopter that flew him to a medical facility for further attention.

Similar incidents marked my time in the war, which I've described elsewhere.¹⁸

When I returned to the U. S., I was amazed on looking back. Before going to Vietnam, I swore I would never take risks, out of respect for my family and those who cared about me. But whenever instances like the crashed helicopter arose, these

resolutions evaporated like morning mist in the jungle. It was as if they never existed. There was no careful deliberation during these decisive moments, no weighing of consequences, just action.

I wondered why I did it. I never considered myself a risk-taker. As a physician, I was taught always to be in control to the extent possible, to leave nothing to chance, to apply critical reasoning in every situation. What had happened?

I remember the day, about a year after my return from Vietnam, when in random readings I stumbled onto Schopenhauer's description — how at the crucial moment the rescuer's consciousness fuses with that of the person in need, how separateness dissolves and individuality is set aside, how division is overcome and oneness becomes real. I knew in a heartbeat that this was the explanation for my irrational, risky behaviour in the war zone. It was as if a veil had been lifted. This was an epiphany, a forceful revelation of adamant clarity, an insight into a troubling period in my life I had not been able to fathom. For me, in Vietnam the One Mind had been made flesh. It was a priceless gift for which I still tremble in gratitude.

“Everything There was to Know”

A premise of the One Mind is that we have potential access to an unlimited field of information by virtue of membership in an unbounded domain of consciousness. This can be a shocking realization.

When developmental psychologist Joseph Chilton Pearce was in his early thirties, teaching humanities in a college, he was engrossed in theology and the psychology of Carl Jung. Pearce describes himself as “obsessed” by the nature of the God-human relationship, and his reading on the subject was extensive. One morning as he was preparing for an early class, his five-year-old son came into his room, sat down on the edge of the bed, and launched into a twenty-minute discourse on the nature of God and man. “He spoke in perfect, publishable sentences,” Pearce writes, “without pause or haste, and in a flat monotone. He used complex theological terminology and told me, it seemed, everything there was to know. As I listened, astonished, the hair rose on my neck; I felt goose bumps, and, finally, tears streamed down my face. I was in the midst of the uncanny, the inexplicable. My son's ride to kindergarten arrived, horn blowing, and he got up and left. I was unnerved and arrived late to my class. What I had heard was awesome, but too vast and far beyond any concept I had had to that point. The gap was so great I could remember almost no details and little of the broad panorama he had presented. My son had no recollection of the event.”¹⁹

Pearce's interpretation was that his son, a bright, normal child, had undergone a “savant episode,” responding to a field of information that he could not have acquired. “Terms such as telepathy are misleading,” Pearce adds. “He wasn't picking up his materials from me. I hadn't acquired anything like what he described and would, in fact, be in my mid-fifties and involved in meditation before I did. Pearce alludes to the morphogenetic fields hypothesised by British biologist Rupert Sheldrake as carriers or progenitors of this kind of knowing.²⁰ “Just as the standard intelligences...mathematical, musical, and so on...are carried as ‘fields of potential’ available to all brain-minds, experience in general also congregates as ‘fields.’ The more any phenomenon or experience is repeated, individually or within a society, the stronger its field-effect.”²¹ Pearce suggests that his son had come into the influence of Pearce's field of concern and the larger ancient field of theological and psychological inquiry. “My son's theological discourse was not random but squarely in keeping with my own passionate pursuits,” he says. “Children, as Carl Jung observed, live in the shadow of their parents, and my son and I had a close rapport to begin with. Note that my son's report was direct and clear, like a savant's report....”²²

Empathy Rising

Perhaps we are learning how to reclaim our forgotten citizenship in the One Mind. As author Jeremy Rifkin puts it in *The Empathic*

Civilisation, “A new science is emerging whose operating principles and assumptions are more compatible with network ways of thinking. The old science views nature as objects; the new science views nature as relationships. The old science is characterised by detachment, expropriation, dissection, and reduction; the new science is characterised by engagement, replenishment, integration, and holism. The old science is committed to making nature productive; the new science to making nature sustainable. The old science seeks power over nature; the new science seeks partnership with nature. The old science puts a premium on autonomy from nature; the new science on reparticipation with nature.”²³

The power of the One Mind resides in the fact that it does not need to be created. The collective One Mind does not need to be tweeted or face-booked into being. It already *is* — an overarching dimension of consciousness of which we are *already* a part. We have simply forgotten our belongingness, trading our oneness for the illusion of isolated individuality, that insidious, erroneous belief that personhood is *all* we are. Once we cease believing we are a coin with only one side, we shall wonder how we could have deceived ourselves so thoroughly for so long.

The ultimate argument for the One Mind, however, is the *nonlocality* of consciousness, for which there is increasing empirical evidence.^{24, 25} (“Nonlocal mind” is a term I coined in my book *Recovering the Soul* in 1989 to express a spatially and temporally infinite aspect of our consciousness.²⁶) This means that individual minds cannot be just individual, because they are not confined or localised to specific points in space, such as brains or bodies, nor to specific points in time, such as the present. Nonlocal minds are *infinite* with respect to space and time, because a limited nonlocality is a contradiction in terms. And because they are boundless and therefore boundaryless, the separateness of minds is an illusion. Since individual minds cannot be put in a box (or brain) and walled off from one another, all minds must come together in some sense to form a single mind.

Throughout history, many individuals, including eminent scientists, have

glimpsed this fact. This includes Nobel physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who proclaimed in the epigraph, “There is only one mind,” and the distinguished physicist David Bohm, who asserted, “Deep down the consciousness of mankind is one.”

Survival

Physician-researcher Lewis Thomas (1913-1993), who for many years directed research at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, was concerned about the headwaters of wisdom that lay upstream from science. He sensed we are losing our way and was not afraid to say so. He believed that the limitations of our minds constitute a kind of planetary emergency. As he put it, “We need to know more.... We now know that we cannot do this any longer by searching our minds, for there is not enough there to search.... We need science, more and better science, not for its technology, not for leisure, not even for health or longevity, but for the *hope of wisdom* which our kind of culture must acquire *for its survival* [italics added].”²⁷

Survival. This is a threatening concept our society does not wish to face. Having scraped by the Cold War without a nuclear exchange, many thought smooth sailing lay ahead, but now we know better. The problems we face are systemic and metastatic. They may not be as dramatic as nuclear horror, but they are equally deadly. They involve the gradual degradation and deterioration of our world because of the way we choose to behave, abetted by unremitting greed, a paralysis of will, the clouding of vision, and wilful ignorance toward the rigorous kind of science that Thomas cherished. As a people, we seem to be seriously impaired. It is as if we have suffered a culture-wide stroke that has damaged the higher centres that control our ability to reason and act in rational ways.

What will see us through? There is increasing talk that we must engineer our way out of the problems posed by

global climate change, environmental destruction, pollution, poverty, hunger, overpopulation, desertification, water scarcity, species collapse, and so on. Maybe. But as Thomas implied, something beyond today's science is needed: "the hope of wisdom."

What kind of wisdom? Surely it involves the awareness that we are an inseparable part of life on Earth, for without this perception it is unclear whether we can muster the will to make the choices that are required to survive. We know intellectually that we cannot secede from nature. This is hardly news; it has been the keystone message of environmental science for a century. Yet the colossal importance of this insight is broadly denied. It is clear that, in addition to factual knowledge, we need something that can stir our blood and connect us with something beyond our me-centered selves. We need more skin in the game.

This is why the One Mind is vital. If all individual minds are united via the One Mind, for which there is impressive evidence, it follows that at some level we are intimately connected with one another and with all sentient life. This realisation makes possible a recalibration of the self-oriented Golden Rule, from "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," to "Be kind to others, because in some sense they are you" — Wesley Autry writ large. The task of the great wisdom traditions throughout history has been to transform this awareness from an intellectual concept into a felt certainty that is so real that it makes a difference in how we live our lives.

The realisation of the One Mind carries us beyond the isolation and frustration of the separate individual struggling against impossible odds. Life becomes more than a weary journey from the cradle to the crematorium. A felt unity with all other minds conveys renewed meaning, purpose and possibility, and a sense of the sacredness of all things.

We are nearly there. The "hope of wisdom" that Thomas prized is within our reach, and much of the "more and better science" he called for already exists. It has surfaced in the form of evidence for a unifying, nonlocal, universal form of consciousness.

Physicist Menas Kafatos and science historian Robert Nadeau of George Mason University assert that, if we are to survive the challenges that we confront us as a species whose future is in jeopardy, we will have to acquire "a profound sense of identification with the other that operates at the deepest levels of our emotional lives...a spiritual pattern that could function as the basis for a global human ethos. Central to this vision would be a cosmos rippling with tension evolving out of itself endless examples of the awe and wonder of its seamlessly interconnected life."²⁸

I believe the One Mind can be a doorway to this seamless interconnectedness and a reprieve from the division, bitterness, selfishness, greed, and destruction that threaten to engulf our world — from which, beyond a certain point, there may be no escape.

Identifying with the highest expressions of human consciousness can clear our vision, prevent the hardening of our moral and ethical arteries, and inspire us to action. These are not ordinary times. Boldness is required, including boldness in how we think about who we are, our origins and destiny, and what we are capable of. The One Mind is not a philosophical plaything to be contemplated at leisure. Urgency is afoot.

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