

The Brain as Filter: On Removing the Stuffing from the Keyhole

[We are] Peeping Toms at the keyhole of eternity. But at least we can try to take the stuffing out of the keyhole, which blocks even our limited view.

—Arthur Koestler, *Janus: A Summing Up*¹

Our sense organs and our brain operate as an intricate kind of filter which limits and directs the mind's clairvoyant powers, so that under normal conditions attention is concentrated on just those objects or situations that are of biological importance for the survival of the organism and its species . . . As a rule, it would seem, the mind rejects ideas coming from another mind as the body rejects grafts coming from another body.²

—Cyril Burt (1883-1971)
Professor of Psychology
University College, London

Our body has two life-sustaining filters, the liver and kidneys. Our five-pound liver traps toxins and other substances that enter the body and neutralizes them in quick order. When it is functioning at peak capacity, it can filter two quarts of blood a minute. Our fist-sized kidneys also are sophisticated filters. Each day they process approximately 200 quarts of blood, reabsorbing valuable elements and filtering out around two quarts of wastes and extra water, eliminating them via the ureters and bladder. But perhaps the body's most efficient filter goes largely unnoticed: our brain.

In his book *The Doors of Perception*, which helped galvanize the countercul-

ture of the 1960s, novelist Aldous Huxley wrote, "[E]ach one of us is potentially Mind at Large. But in so far as we are animals, our business at all costs is to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this particular planet."³

Huxley, like Henri Bergson, Ferdinand Schiller, William James, and others before him, believed the brain functions as a filter, normally shutting out perceptions, memories, and thoughts that are not necessary for the survival and reproduction of the organism. Rather than *producing* consciousness, these observers believed the brain largely *eliminates* it, diminishing what consciousness is capable of revealing to us. As astrophysicist David Darling says in his book *Soul Search*, we are conscious not because of the brain, but despite it.⁴

Frederic W. H. Myers (1843-1901), the British classical scholar, poet, and philosopher, advanced a sophisticated filter theory of brain function that was endorsed by his friend and colleague William James, the Harvard physician and psychologist who is widely considered the founder of American psychology. James, with his superb capacity for metaphor, suggested that the brain acts as a lens or prism that filters, reduces, redirects, or otherwise alters incoming light in a systematic fashion.⁵ But James didn't consider lenses or prisms as the ultimate metaphor for the brain. As University of Virginia psychologist and

consciousness researcher Edward F. Kelly states in his analysis of Myers' views, "Subsequent advocates of transmission or filter models have tended naturally to update this basic picture with reference to emerging technologies such as radio and television" that serve as the filter instead of lenses or prisms.⁶

UNSTUFFING THE KEYHOLE

Throughout history people have used an astonishing variety of methods to overcome the brain's filter and increase the "measly trickle" of awareness that results. Poets and artists are among those who have tried most ingeniously to clear the keyhole.

James Merrill, Pulitzer winner and one of the greatest American poets of the 20th century, used a Ouija board for this purpose, assisted by his long-time friend David Jackson. "The board goes along at a smart clip, perhaps 600 words an hour," Merrill reported. By this means Merrill would communicate, he said, with dead friends and spirits "in another world." The messages would be transcribed letter by letter, then Merrill would edit and rewrite the transcriptions. Asked if he could have written his great poems without the help of the board, he replied, "It would seem not." How did the process work? "[T]he point . . . [is] to be always of two minds," Merrill explained. "You could think of the board as a delaying mechanism. It spaces out, into time and language, what might have come to a saint or a lunatic in one blinding ZAP. Considering the amount of detail and my own limitations, it

must have been the most workable method . . . [It has] made me think twice about the imagination . . . Victor Hugo said of *his* voices that they were like his own mental powers multiplied by five.”⁷

Some artists simply surrender to the unconscious and trust it to cleanse the filter and maximize their creativity. A notable example is the famous French psychic Hélène Smith, whose real name was Catherine-Elise Müller (1861-1929). During the last two decades of her life, Smith devoted much of her time to painting. Eventually, her art attracted significant attention, including that of André Breton and the surrealists. Most of her paintings are on Christian themes. Philosopher Michael Grosso considers her work “well-composed, smoothly executed with defined images that exude a surreal religiosity that compares favorably with the paintings of Frida Kahlo.”⁸ Others consider her art in the tradition of inspired religious painters such as William Blake.⁹ At her death in 1929, the Geneva Art Museum sponsored a retrospective of her work.¹⁰ Here’s how she said she did it:

On the days when I am to paint I am always roused very early – generally between five and six in the morning—by three loud knocks at my bed. I open my eyes and see my bedroom brightly illuminated, and immediately understand that I have to stand up and work. I dress myself in the beautiful iridescent light, and wait a few moments, sitting in my armchair, until the feeling comes that I have to work. It never delays. All at once I stand up and walk to the picture. When about two steps before it I feel a strange sensation, and probably fall asleep at the same moment. I know, later on, that I must have slept because I notice that my fingers are covered with different colors, and I do not remember at all to have used them.¹¹

The legendary poet William Butler Yeats used an unusual method of increasing “the measly trickle,” resulting in some of the most inspired poetry and prose of the 20th century. In *A Vision*, he declared that his recent “poetry has gained in self-possession and power.”¹² Yeats stated that he owed this change in his work to “an incredible experience” that took place on October 4, 1917, when his wife, Georgie

Hyde-Lees, surprised him by attempting automatic writing. As Grosso describes the scene, “Profound and exciting utterances came forth, and an unknown writer (or writers) said: ‘We have come to give you metaphors for poetry.’ Thus, commenced an extraordinary partnership in creativity that Yeats pursued with his wife for three years . . . [T]he . . . script was the product of a joint effort, transcending them both, who were more like secretaries to the psychological entity whom they jointly produced.” A total of some 50 copybooks of automatic script were produced, which Yeats mined in producing some of his most majestic works.⁸

OUTSIDER ART

Some of the most dramatic examples of the use of altered states of awareness to bypass the brain’s filter mechanism are seen in so-called “outsider art,” which includes “the work of children, primitives, the incarcerated, the elderly, folk art, *art brut*, psychotic art, and generally all forms of art and image-making produced by the untaught, the culturally deprived, the isolated, and the marginalized.”¹³

An outstanding example is Adolf Wölfli (1864-1930), who was an institutionalized paranoid schizophrenic for most of his life. Growing up in poverty, abused both physically and sexually as a child and orphaned at age ten, Wölfli was given to violent acts and sexual aggression. He spent much of life in solitary confinement in the Waldau Clinic in Bern, Switzerland, a psychiatric hospital.

In 1899, while hospitalized, he spontaneously began to write and draw. Walter Morgenthaler, a doctor at the Waldau Clinic, recognized the uniqueness and quality of Wölfli’s drawings and wrote a book about him in 1921, which first brought him to the attention of the art world.

Wölfli’s output was huge. As philosopher Michael Grosso reports, “From 1908 to 1930 he worked on a massive narrative . . . a mixture of authentic personal history and cosmic fantasy, a carefully unified whole, woven together with prose poetry, illustrations, and musical compositions. This mentally incompetent madman left behind him 45 volumes, 16 notebooks, altogether 25,000 packed pages, along with hundreds of drawings that now hang next to the work of Paul Klee in Switzerland.”⁸

His accomplishment is even more astonishing, considering his access to only the barest essentials. He would often trade small works with visitors to obtain pencils, paper, and other materials. Morgenthaler:

Every Monday morning Wölfli is given a new pencil and two large sheets of unprinted newsprint. The pencil is used up in two days; then he has to make do with the stubs he has saved or with whatever he can beg off someone else. He often writes with pieces only five to seven millimetres long and even with the broken-off points of lead, which he handles deftly, holding them between his fingernails. He carefully collects packing paper and any other paper he can get from the guards and patients in his area; otherwise he would run out of paper before the next Sunday night. At Christmas the house gives him a box of coloured pencils, which lasts him two or three weeks at the most.⁸

Wölfli incorporated an idiosyncratic musical notation into his art. This started as a purely decorative effort, but later evolved into real compositions that he would play on a trumpet he made out of paper. His musical works evoked wide interest. Professional recordings have been produced commercially, and free downloads are available.¹⁴

The French Surrealist André Breton described Wölfli’s work as “one of the three or four most important oeuvres of the twentieth century.”¹⁵

Wölfli said he had no idea how he did it. Somehow, this amazing man, under the most meager conditions, managed to increase the brain’s “measly trickle” to a raging torrent.

VOICES AND GUIDES

Some individuals describe what in today’s terminology might be called personal assistants or coaches that guide one’s decisions invisibly, from behind the curtains of consciousness, helping the individual to overcome the everyday strictures imposed by the brain-filter.

Socrates was guided throughout his life by a daimon, an intelligent inner voice, in matters large and small. “What makes Socrates so extraordinary is that he seems to have perfectly fused his conscious critical intellect with his subliminal daimon,” says Grosso. “In the vast majority of human

beings, the two are almost always thoroughly disjointed and disconnected, often at great emotional and spiritual cost.”⁸

The daimon or inner guide sometimes has a voice of its own, as in the case of Joan of Arc, the virgin teenager who led France in its struggle against England in the Hundred Years War. Joan was guided by subliminal messages and voices throughout her brief life. These were sometimes associated with lights and visions of the saints. The voices began to speak to her at age thirteen, telling her to pray and go to church. Eventually, they nudged her to save France, and provided her with advice on military strategy and tactics. She could summon the voices with prayer. They kept her company during the court proceedings when her accusers charged her with witchcraft. They even predicted the exact time of her death.

An intelligence that is more profound than the rational, individual self appears to await us if we learn to access it. Sometimes it seems to meet us halfway, in the form of guides, daimons, voices. In other instances, as with Merrill and Yeats, the informants are more impersonal.

This fusion of the individual mind with a greater intelligence is often experienced as an inspiration that lifts the individual above the immediate concerns of ordinary existence. Integrity of purpose becomes more important than life itself. Thus, Socrates asserted that death and martyrdom are not a bad thing. When Joan temporarily recanted her mission, her voices urged her to recant her recantation. Earthly affairs and life itself were important, but they were trumped by higher values, meaning, and purpose, as revealed by the greater intelligence.

I am not suggesting that everyone who hears voices and claims a direct line to higher wisdom has accessed a valid depot of information. Mental illness is real. I am suggesting, however, that claimants such as Merrill and Yeats should be listened to.

Where have the voices gone? Apparently they are still around, should we care to listen. In a survey in the 1980s of 375 college students focusing on auditory hallucinations, 71% reported they had experienced vocal hallucinations in waking life. Thirty percent reported auditory hallucinations as they were drifting off to sleep, and 14% reported vocal hallucinations as they were waking up. Almost 40%

had heard their name called while outdoors. Eleven percent heard their name being called from the back seat of their car, while a similar percentage said they had heard God speak “as a real voice.”¹⁶

The fact that the term “hallucination” is used in questionnaires such as these indicates the engrained skepticism in our culture toward these matters. Creative individuals such as Merrill and Yeats, however, are not concerned with the way in which researchers describe the source of their inspiration. Call it Factor X, for all they care. Is their experience real or imaginary? Does it originate in their unconscious or from another dimension? They do not struggle with such questions. What matters is that the filter has become porous, the reducing valve has been opened wide, and the mealy trickle has become a flood.

The higher intelligence so diligently sought by creative individuals is not an encrypted information bank that is accessible by only a few. Any password will do. An entry method such as voices and Ouija boards may seem jejune or even repellent to some individuals, who may prefer instead the simple experience of reverie, a sunset, a line from Emily Dickinson or the final sizzling chord of The Beatles’ “Hey Jude.” Entry to a higher intelligence is not exclusive. In it, elitism does not apply.

Nor is the experience confined to poets and artists. Scientists also frequent this domain, and when they do they often speak of a source of creativity and insight that lies beyond their individual capacities. The eminent German physicist and philosopher Baron Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker understood this, saying, “[In any great discovery] we find the often disturbing and happy experience: ‘It is not I; I have not done this.’ Still, in a certain way it is I – yet not the ego . . . but . . . a more comprehensive self.”¹⁷

NEGATIVE HALLUCINATIONS

Why is it so difficult for some individuals even to entertain the possibility of a higher intelligence that might transcend the workings of the physical brain, while others see it as self-evident? A hallucination is an experience involving the perception of something not present. It’s a perception without a stimulus. But there’s a flip side to hallucinations that philosopher Stephen E. Braude calls a “negative hallucination,” an experience in which

something present is not perceived.¹⁸ Negative hallucinations are quite common. We call them blind spots.

An example is the well-known video of someone in a gorilla suit walking across a basketball court as the ball is being passed between the players. Viewers are instructed to keep their eye on the ball. The majority of individuals seeing the video for the first time are blind to the gorilla, although it is in plain sight.

I’ll never forget my experience in viewing this video for the first time. When the video ended, we viewers were asked, “How many of you saw the gorilla?” I hadn’t a clue what the question even meant. A gorilla? Then, the video was replayed, and there was the gorilla slowly striding across the basketball court, plain as day. (Try it for yourself, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjG698U2Mvo> – but because you’re in on the trick, it won’t be a fair trial.) Psychologist Daniel Simons, who with colleague Chris Chabris invented the experiment, says, “Normally people can’t believe that they missed it. On occasion, they’ve accused us of switching the video. The intuition that we would notice [the gorilla] makes it jarring for people to realize they didn’t.”^{19,20}

Negative hallucinations can be harmful, even lethal. An example Simons gives is texting while driving, which, evidence shows, is more dangerous than driving drunk.²¹ The texter can’t see her limitations, although she is *living* them.

A gorilla on a basketball court is so incongruous we screen it out of our visual experience. Just so, for many individuals a magnificent dimension of intelligence operating beyond the physical brain and body is so unlikely that it is never suspected and never sensed. Because its existence is considered impossible, any evidence to the contrary must be bogus, and anyone who claims otherwise must be delusional. At this point the brain-filter has kicked in, and negative hallucinations have become the norm.

Examples abound in the prickly debate about the nature of consciousness. Consider the following comment of materialist philosopher John Searle, of the University of California, Berkeley:

Consciousness . . . is a biological feature of human and certain animal brains. It is caused by neurobiological processes and is as much a part of

the natural biological order as any other biological features such as photosynthesis, digestion, or mitosis . . . [Any other] world view is not an option Anyone who has had even a modicum of scientific education after about 1920 should find nothing at all contentious or controversial in what I have just said [emphasis added].²²

Theoretical astrophysicist and author David Lindley also sees nothing beyond our material self. He asserts:

We humans are just crumbs of organic matter clinging to the surface of one tiny rock. Cosmically, we are no more significant than mold on a shower curtain.²³

I find breathtaking the unyielding certainty and presumptuousness in statements of this sort. I suggest that in both instances negative hallucinations and selective blindness may be working. It is the sort of thing described by the spiritual teacher Ram Das: "When a pickpocket looks at a saint, all he sees is pockets."²⁴ Just so, when a materialist looks at humans, all he sees is matter.

CONCRETIZATION

There are no sure-fire formulas for loosening of the brain's filter function. Even when props and aids are used, as with Merrell and Yeats, access remains what it always has been—a matter of *being*, not *doing*. One sets an intention, then ushers the conscious mind out of the way. That is why the most spectacular manifestations of the overcoming of the brain's restrictions—revelations, epiphanies, creativity, discovery—occur when the discursive, striving, rational mind has been bypassed through reverie, meditation, dreams, or some other nonactivity. Muscular, aggressive, ego-oriented approaches do not work. Selfish entry—trying to access a higher intelligence in order to *get* something—is akin to burglary. Alarms get triggered, and the delivery system shuts down. One approaches the higher dimensions respectfully, acknowledging a source of wisdom and intelligence greater than one's own. One then waits patiently, and is grateful for what is given.

This process thrives on uncertainty, unpredictability, and freedom. It is open to possibilities of an endless variety. The sur-

est way to doom a fruitful outcome is to concretize the methods of entry, turning them into a rigid formula.

This is the curse of our age. When something is shown to be effective in any domain of life, Web sites and bestsellers erupt overnight that reduce the process to a few easy steps or a one-week plan, often with a money-back guarantee and celebrity endorsements.

Concretization is an attempt to reduce uncertainty, which we abhor. But when we concretize something, we close it off to life, and it ceases to unfold in life-affirming ways. In our attention-deficit culture, we want a sure thing now. We are suckers for approaches that squeeze the life from things. When they disappoint, as they invariably do, we move on to the *Next Big Thing*.

A current example of concretization is yoga, which evolved in ancient India as a discipline for obtaining spiritual insight and tranquility. We have narrowed it down to a form of exercise that has become wildly popular. An effort is now underway to make it an Olympic sport. In one proposal, each yogi would have three minutes to do seven poses, five of which would be mandatory. They would be graded by a panel of judges on strength, flexibility, timing, and breathing.²⁵ What would Patanjali, who founded yoga in India more than two millennia ago, think?

THE SOURCE

One of the most intensive scientific explorations of how to overcome the filters that shield us from greater awareness has been conducted at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory. For more than three decades, Robert G. Jahn, former dean of engineering at Princeton University, psychologist Brenda Dunne, and an exceptional team of scientists have explored ways in which subjects can nonlocally and mentally influence the function of an array of electronic, mechanical, optical, fluid dynamic, and nuclear random event generators, as well as acquire information remotely, as in remote viewing, bypassing the physical senses. These abilities require subjects to skirt the limitations imposed by the brain—Huxley's "reducing valve," which Jahn and Dunne call the "neurological grid and control center" that produces the "measly trickle" of information we ordinarily perceive.

The findings of the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research have led Jahn and

Dunne to assert, "[T]here exists a much deeper and more extensive source of reality, which is largely insulated from direct human experience, representation, or even comprehension." They call this domain the "Source." As they say in their book *Filters and Reflections*,

[W]e reject the popular presumption that all modes of human information processing are completely executed within the physiological brain, and that all experiential sensations are epiphenomena of the biophysical and biochemical states thereof. Rather, we . . . regard the brain as a neurologically localized utility that serves a much more extended "mind," or "psyche," or "consciousness" that far transcends the brain in its capacity, range, endurance, and subtlety of operation, and that is far more sophisticated than a mere antenna for information acquisition or a silo for its storage. In fact, we . . . contend that it [extended mind, psyche, consciousness] is the ultimate organizing principle of the universe, creating reality through its ongoing dialogue with the unstructured potentiality of the Source. In short, we subscribe to the assertion of [astrophysicist] Arthur Eddington nearly a century ago: "Not once in the dim past, but continuously, by conscious mind is the miracle of the Creation wrought."²⁶

Or as the eminent consciousness researcher and philosopher K. Ramakrishna Rao says, "The cognitive structure [the brain] does not generate consciousness; it simply reflects it; and in the process limits and embellishes it. In a fundamental sense, consciousness is the source of our awareness. In other words, consciousness is not merely awareness as manifest in different forms but it is also what makes awareness possible."²⁷

BEYOND THE FILTER

I regard consciousness as fundamental. We cannot get behind consciousness.

Max Planck
Nobel Prize in Physics, 1918²⁸

The fallback position in modern neuroscience is that filter theories sell the brain short. The brain *makes* consciousness,

most scientists believe, rather like the liver produces bile or the pancreas secretes insulin. There is no Source, no higher intelligence. All intelligence, all consciousness, originates in (and dies with) the physical brain. But an increasing number of science insiders and philosophers consider this view to be neuromythology—a faith-based ideology with no empirical foundation. As professor of philosophy Robert Almeder, of Georgia State University, says,

Where in the scientific literature, biological, neurobiological, or otherwise, is it established either by observation or by the methods of testing and experiment, that consciousness is a biological property secreted by the brain in the same way a gland secretes a hormone? . . . There is no scientifically well-confirmed . . . belief within science that consciousness is a biological product of the brain. We do not see the brain secrete consciousness in the same way we see a gland secrete a hormone. Consciousness is nothing like a hormone.²⁹

Almeder's comment exposes the poverty of our current understanding of the origins of consciousness. As such, we are in no position to dismiss concepts of a Source, higher intelligence, or brain filters. Our ignorance is sometimes admitted. In considering how consciousness might arise from some physical organ such as the brain, Harvard experimental psychologist Steven Pinker acknowledges, "Beats the heck out of me. I have some prejudices, but no idea of how to begin to look for a defensible answer. And neither does anyone else."³⁰

Some neuroscientists suggest it is time we looked beyond the brain for greater understanding of our own minds. For example, neuroscientist Mario Beauregard, of the University of Montréal, author of *Brain Wars*,³¹ says,

I stand firmly against the inclination of certain neuroscientists and philosophers toward neuro-reductionism, i.e., the reduction of human beings to their brains . . . , and posit that the brain is necessary but not sufficient to explicate all the human psychological features . . . In my view, persons are conscious, perceive, think, feel emotion, interpret, believe and make decisions, not parts of their brains.

To attribute such capacities to brains [has been called] the "mereological fallacy" in neuroscience, i.e., the fallacy of attributing to parts of the brain attributes that are properties of the whole human person.³²

One of the great filtration feats of the modern brain is the denial of evidence that it is a filter and that consciousness is capable of functioning nonlocally beyond the brain and body. Despite the skeptics' monotonous mantra that there is no evidence for such, hundreds of books and thousands of scientific articles now affirm the nonlocal, space-time independence of consciousness. Among the books that are accessible to laypersons and professionals alike are Peter Russell's *The Global Brain*,³³ David Lorimer's *Whole in One*,³⁴ Nick Herbert's *Elemental Mind*,³⁵ Huston Smith's *Beyond the PostModern Mind*,³⁶ David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*,³⁷ David Darling's *Soul Search*,⁴ Robert G. Jahn and Brenda J. Dunne's *Consciousness and the Source of Reality*,³⁸ Rupert Sheldrake's *A New Science of Life*,³⁹ Lynne McTaggart's *The Field*,⁴⁰ Ervin Laszlo's *The Akashic Experience*⁴¹ and *Science and the Akashic Field*,⁴² Menas Kafatos and Robert Nadeau's *The Conscious Universe: Parts and Wholes in Physical Reality*⁴³ and *The Non-Local Universe*,⁴⁴ Dean Radin's *The Conscious Universe*⁴⁵ and *Entangled Minds*,⁴⁶ Stephan A. Schwartz's *Opening to the Infinite*,⁴⁷ Pim van Lommel's *Consciousness Beyond Life*,⁴⁸ Charles T. Tart's *The End of Materialism*,⁴⁹ Russell Targ's *Limitless Mind*⁵⁰ and *The Reality of ESP*,⁵¹ Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer's *Extraordinary Knowing*,⁵² Chris Carter's *Parapsychology and the Skeptics*,⁵³ Mario Beauregard's *Brain Wars*,³¹ Edward F. Kelley and colleagues' *Irreducible Mind*,⁵ Eben Alexander's *Into the Afterlife: A Neurosurgeon's Near Death Experience*,⁵⁴ my forthcoming book *The One Mind*,⁵⁵ and many, many others that are too numerous to name.

As this evidence continues to accumulate from experimenters and labs around the world, the ideological fixation on the physical brain—our "neurologically localized utility," our reducing valve, our filter—will eventually yield to an expanded view of consciousness that recognizes the Source, or however we wish to language the collective, transpersonal, nonlocal dimension of consciousness. As this happens, the conceptual filter within conven-

tional science will likely gear up to work overtime. It will continue to obscure and deny evidence that it is a filter. But when filters clog and cease to function, they should be cleansed, replaced, or discarded. When this happens within neuroscience, as it eventually will — when we remove the stuffing from the keyhole — the Source will be recognized and we will wonder how we could have been so blind.

—Larry Dossey, MD
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