Chapter 1

The Story and the Dilemma

ABSTRACT

This section tells the story of my mother’s stroke and what I have learnt from it about mind, body, consciousness, and the self, arguably the most cross-disciplinary topic of all. What gives us our sense of personal identity – our body? Our mind? Their union? And what if one of them is diminished – say, as a result of an accident; what then, do we stop being ourselves? This opening chapter sets the scene for the debate that follows, on this most fascinating mystery of all – our own self and consciousness. We question the still dominant dualist approach of the mind, seeking a more holistic view of the self; to this end, we believe that adding relevant experiential aspects will help complement the theory. Thus, an interdisciplinary, trans-theoretical account is needed in this endeavour. In this chapter, we introduce the dilemma and draw the main lines of argumentation related to it. In Chapter 2, we discuss the first experiential (in other words, the clinical) aspects of the mind, and neuroscientists’ view of it, followed – in Chapter 3, by social aspects and psychologists’ contributions to the subject. Chapter 4 will add more idiosyncratic aspects to the debate, such as the spiritual profile of a person, more often discussed in philosophy, religion, and art.

INTRODUCTION

How can our brain – our third largest organ, consisting of millions of neurons – control so much of our daily activity, not only physical, but also (and primarily) mental? How can thought spring out from matter? Where – at which point in this mind-body mechanism, do consciousness and the sense

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of self arise? And how does the relationship of this self and the world, time, 
and space influence who we are? If our personality changes as a result of a 
stroke, does that mean we are a different person? Experts in neuroscience, 
psychology, and philosophy, as well as artists and masters of different spiritual 
traditions have widely varying views on these issues. In what follows, we look 
at some of these views, and try to shed some light on the dilemma of the self, 
using the story of the stroke as an opportunity to ‘test’ the various options. 
As with every dilemma, the aim is not to reach ‘the right’ answer, given that 
each of the alternatives has its own rationale (otherwise we would not have 
a dilemma). Instead, we aim to find the one alternative, which makes most 
sense in the context of our story – a stroke, and its impact on my mother’s 
unique self.

The conundrum that we refer to as Frankenstein’s dilemma is whether the 
sense of the self is –

1. Located in the mind (e.g. brain), in which case, what happens if there 
   are changes to it (after a stroke, for example), does the actual self also 
   change?
2. Somewhere else, deeper, or wider, and more elusive, but still connected 
   to the mind?

Note: Mother is still the same person (or self) after her stroke, as she was 
before the event occurred, which indicates option (2) may be more realistic.

3. What if there is NO self, just a consciousness, which is part of the 
   universal one? (This is widely accepted to be the case, in Buddhism 
   and other traditions.) But then, how can we explain individuality – the 
   sheer diversity of the concrete, e.g. this particular way of being, which 
   only my mother displays, both before and after her stroke?

We are not the first to ask the first part of the key question in this chapter, 
namely how does the brain produce cognition; it is the main preoccupation, 
for instance, of researchers at the Centre for the Neural Basis of Cognition 
(CNBC) at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The second part of our 
enquiry – the one which is at once more philosophical and more applied to 
everyday life, is to what extent (and how) does this matter-thought process 
generate or relate to our sense of identity, to who we are.

CNBC researchers advocate an interdisciplinary study of the mind and brain, 
using a variety of computational, neuro-imaging and behavioural methods in
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