Chapter 2
The Patient

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the issue of a stroke’s impact on consciousness and the self, from a clinical point of view. We look at how the mind is seen by three experts—a neuroscientist, a brain surgeon, and a neuro-philosopher—and find that, instead of solving the mystery of the mind, they in fact add to it. Indeed, they all agree on the lingering mystery of consciousness, underneath and beyond the brain, as well as on the surprising rapport the self seems to establish to the world and its environment – in ways that are not constitutive to the brain itself. This suggests we might need to call on psychologists and sociologists next, to help us solve the conundrum of the self.

To start our cross-disciplinary debate, we look towards neuroscientists first: Jill Bolte Taylor is a Harvard trained neuroanatomist, who suffered a haemorrhagic stroke in 1996 and since then, has dedicated her life and work to investigating the process of stroke recovery and its effects (see the second ‘case’ we introduced in Chapter 1); Henry Marsh is a leading British neurosurgeon and a writer, who has published widely on his experience and what it has taught him about the mind; Georg Northoff is a Canadian neuroscientist, philosopher, and psychiatrist whose transdisciplinary approach to cognitive issues has earned him world recognition in neuro-philosophy.

Jill Bolte Taylor wrote an extraordinarily accessible book (2009) about her personal experience of a massive stroke at the age of 37, and the lessons she learnt from her eight-year recovery process. For purposes of our debate, a number of concepts are interesting in Bolte Taylor’s approach. To begin with,
the relationship between mind and body. She notes how the development of language over the last 3000 years has altered the anatomical structure and cellular networks of our brains and the fact that the cells in our brain do not multiply any more after we are born. This longevity of the neurons partially accounts for why we feel the same ‘self’ on the inside at the age of 10 as we do at the age of 30 or 77, although of course the connections between those cells change along the years, based on our experience (Bolte Taylor, 2009, p. 13). This is a first suggestion regarding the rapport between brain (matter) and the self, in a way that can be seen as both consistent with reductionist views and allowing for something else (or more) than matter to account for our sense of self – namely, our personal experience.

Another suggestion comes when she describes the morning of her stroke, in terms of a twofold experience — both physical and metaphysical. On the one hand, she had an “experiential understanding of how hard the fifty trillion cells in my brain and body were working in perfect unison to maintain the flexibility and integrity of my physical form”, where we can note the clear mind/body link. On the other, she experienced a metaphysical sense of peace and being at one with the universe (Bolte Taylor, 2009, p. 13). This is a first suggestion regarding the rapport between brain (matter) and the self, in a way that can be seen as both consistent with reductionist views and allowing for something else (or more) than matter to account for our sense of self – namely, our personal experience.

Although the field has made enormous progress over the past several decades, understanding of the basic principles of thought and brain function are still far more unknown than known (...). Personally, I think that unraveling how the mind and brain work is a significant step in understanding what makes humans human (Center for Neural Basis of Cognition).

The vast majority of all cognition (and 95% of purchase decision making) occurs in the subconscious mind, according to Harvard business professor Gerald Zaltman (Mahoney & Zaltman, 2003).
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