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PSYC 343

Who/What/Why/How are We?

Review: *The Man Who Wasn't There*

How do we avoid constantly thinking about who we are in this day and age? We are surrounded by devices that allow us to create self-portraits whenever we please. We plug into the Internet where we interact with artificial intelligence that curates virtual realities. We use our social media pages to present to the world different versions of ourselves. People, both friends and strangers, are free to interact with our online selves. Their responses then influence what we decide to present. Thus, social media gives us new opportunities to define and refine our sense of self.

For many people, the disconnect between the versions of ourselves that live online and the versions that live in the real world is anxiety inducing. Our ability to simultaneously exist with various versions across different mediums leads some to question who they are. What does it mean to be me? Where is my self? Is it in my brain, mind, or body? Is it in reality or online? Can it exist outside of these realms?

These questions are not unique to our media-saturated time. Philosophers have wrestled with them for centuries. Plato claimed that self-awareness was neither sensory in nature nor dependent on the awareness of other things. Even in a vacuum, we would be aware of ourselves and our existence. A more modern, familiar quote about self-awareness is Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." Here, self-awareness has two components: an acknowledgement of thinking and an acknowledgement of existence. Today's philosophers might even consider our relatively recent ability to "exist" in a different reality a part of our senses of self.

Anil Ananthaswamy's 2015 book, *The Man Who Wasn't There*, offers new perspective on these questions of the self through explorations of seven different neurological disorders of the self. Weaving in scientific knowledge with firsthand stories from people affected by these disorders, Ananthaswamy challenges our traditional ideas of self by showing us what it means to exist without the parts that define those traditional ideas.

Each chapter begins by introducing someone that has been affected by a disorders or has a close relationship with someone affected. Then, Ananthaswamy teams up with an expert to explain the neuroscience and how the disorder changes theory regarding the concept of self. For example, the fourth chapter of the book focuses on schizophrenia, and it opens with the story of Laurie as told to Ananthaswamy five years after her suicide attempt. She has made a strong recovery, but still struggles to understand why she ended up prepared to jump off of a building. Laurie attributes her attempt to the influence of an outside force rather than an internal drive. This disruption to a person's sense of agency is a common phenomenon among those with schizophrenia. One researcher theorizes that schizophrenic patients' inability to differentiate between self- and non-self-generated actions could be due to a fault in the brain's

signalling mechanism. Similarly, low activity in the left anterior lobe of the brain could be behind the anosognosia (deficit of self-awareness) that Alzheimer's patients experience, and high activity in the temporoparietal junction might explain the shifting center of awareness that people feel during out of body experiences.

Though fascinating, the connections made between disorders of the brain and disorders of the self are not what is most compelling about this book. What is particularly valuable to the discussion of the nature of self is Ananthaswamy's breakdown of what our sense of self is through the explanations of the disorders. Each person's story gives the reader an example of a piece "missing" from the self and in doing so, the reader realizes just how multi-faceted the human self is. The self exists in many different forms. *The Man Who Wasn't There* presents a more concrete, digestible way to begin to understand the concept of the human self than the dense, philosophical theories provided by Plato and Descartes.

In the first chapter, the audience is introduced to William James' theory about the three faces of the self: the material self, social self and spiritual self. These include everything a person considers to be their own, their interactions with others, and their inner being, respectively. In this chapter, Cotard's syndrome, which is an extreme case of depersonalization, can be seen as a severed connection with the material self. When questioning how to include our virtual self in our own definitions of who we are, this idea that different faces of the self comprise the whole could be enlightening. When we see our virtual self as working together with the material, social and spiritual selves to represent the whole self, then anxiety about our virtual selves not aligning completely with who we are in our everyday lives is relieved. It is not that you are two different people, rather the self can be represented in many different ways simultaneously.

Ananthaswamy similarly uses other disorders to explain more concepts of the self. Through the discussion of Alzheimer's, we learn about the concept of the narrative self (the significant events in our lives that define our self-beliefs and self-concepts). When people begin to lose their memories, they lose the knowledge of their personal narratives. Through Body Integrity Identity Disorder, we learn the importance of how our physical connections to our bodies influences our self-awareness. Losing the sense of being physically present in this world can make people question not only who they are, but *if* they are. In the discussion of autism, we learn that theory of mind (the ability to think about the mental states and perspectives that we have and ones that are not our own) is important to distinguishing ourselves from others. Recognizing that we are different from others is key to self-awareness.

This compilation of diverse stories of disorders and scientific discovery shows that one clear definition of the self does not exist. We are our memories, our perspectives, our bodies and yes, even our online profiles. All of these ideas work in unison to provide us with a sense of who we are, and much of this work is carried out by our brains. Ananthaswamy seems to agree with this sentiment in the epilogue of the book. Neuroscience tells us that through various connections in regions of the brain, our brains take our moments of self-awareness, such as being in touch with our bodies or reacting to the world around us and constructs a sense of a

whole self. The book suggests that without this connectivity within our brains, we have no self, because we have no sense of it.

Though we may understand that having a self demands a sense of it, the brain is what provides the basic building blocks of the self. How the brain functions can determine/affect how we see ourselves. Some suggest that adopting the idea that we do not have a self can feel liberating. Could this be the remedy to our discomfort with the disconnect between our online world and physical reality? Sometimes our online self does not feel real, but *The Man Who Wasn't There* begs the question of whether who we are in our everyday lives is real either.