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Implications of spiritual experiences to the understanding of mind–brain relationship

Alexander Moreira-Almeida*

Research Center in Spirituality and Health, School of Medicine, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Objective: While there has been a large increase in scientific studies on spirituality, there has been too few of studies of the core of spirituality: spiritual experiences (SE), which often involve altered states of consciousness, reports of anomalous experiences and of consciousness beyond the body. This paper argues that SE, although usually neglected in debates regarding mind–brain relationship (MBR), may provide the much needed enlargement of the empirical basis for advancing the understanding of the MBR.

Methods: This paper briefly presents and discusses recent scientific investigations on some types of SE (meditative states, end of life and near death experiences, mediumship and alleged memories of previous lives) and their implications to MBR.

Results: Neurofunctional studies of SE have shown that they are related to but not necessarily caused by complex functional patterns in several brain areas. The study of meditative states, as voluntarily induced mind states that influence brain states has been a privileged venue to investigate top-down (mind over brain) causation. End of life and near death experiences offer cases of unexpected adequate mental function under severe brain damage and/or dysfunction. Scientific investigations of several types of SE have provided evidence against materialistic reductionist views of mind.

Conclusions: The recent trend to scientifically investigate SE has already produced interesting and thought-provoking findings that deserve careful further exploration. Because of their potential implication, these findings may also contribute to the understanding of MBR, which remains an important, yet poorly explored way to investigate human nature.

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1. Introduction

In the last decades there has been a large increase in scientific studies on spirituality, especially on the association between religious involvement variables and health outcomes (Koenig et al., 2001). However, there has been a paucity of studies of the core, of what many claim to be the source of spirituality: spiritual experiences (SE).

There is a lasting controversy on the definition of spirituality. More recently, there has been a tendency of enlarging the definition of spirituality. This expansion of concept brings the risk of missing the core of the concept of spirituality and of conflating it with psychological constructs such as well-being and purpose in life (Koenig, 2008; Moreira-Almeida and Koenig, 2006). Etymologically, spirituality comes from “spiritual”, related to the “spirit”: non-material aspects of universe and human beings

(Merriam-Webster, 2012; Hufford, 2010). A recent paper found the belief in supernatural spirits as the best predictor of spirituality (Lindeman et al., 2012). The belief that there is a non-material component in the universe and in the essence of human being is a belief shared by many, if not most spiritual traditions in the world (Hufford, 2010; Walach and Reich, 2005). Based on this it is not surprising that SE often involve altered states of consciousness, reports of anomalous experiences and of consciousness beyond the body. Some authors argue that SE are the source of beliefs in a spiritual realm (Hufford, 2005, 2010; Walach and Reich, 2005).

Too often, SE have been neglected by academics, who refuse to take them seriously as empirical data that deserve careful and rigorous exploration. One possible explanation of this dismissal is the very common confusion between science and the metaphysical/philosophical positions of scientism and materialism (Walach and Reich, 2005; Araujo, 2012). As Haught (2005) discussed, although it is a widespread belief that science (a method of exploration) is inseparable from a materialistic ideology (a worldview), “it is not written anywhere that the rest of us who appreciate science have to believe that. In fact, most of the great founders of modern science did not.” (p. 367).

* Rua Italia Cautiero Franco 497, Granville 36036-241, Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil. Tel.: +55 32 9123 4564; fax: +55 32 3216 7122.

E-mail address: alex.ma@ufjf.edu.br

2. Mind–brain relationship

The understanding of mind and consciousness is one of the most interesting and challenging quests human beings have posed to themselves. Particularly relevant is the investigation of the mind–brain relationship (MBR), how brain relates to mind and vice versa. There are several hypotheses, among the most discussed: mind and brain are the same, brain produces mind, and brain is a tool for mind manifestation. Although this is a millennial debate, there have been renewed interests in the study of consciousness and in the MBR in the last two decades.

Many people, even in the academic environment, think that the mind–brain problem has already been solved, that it has been scientifically demonstrated that brain produces mind. Some others, more cautious, state that we have not proved that yet, but we are very close to demonstrate how brain produces mind. However, the most respected experts in consciousness studies recognize that we are far from understating mind and its relationship to the brain. As put by the philosopher of mind [Chalmers \(1995\)](#), despite the extraordinary advances of neuroscience, explaining conscious experience “poses the most baffling problems in the science of the mind” (p. 200).

The hope that in the (near) future scientists will show how brain produces mind was called by [Popper and Eccles \(1977\)](#) “promissory materialism”, a rhetorical strategy that has been used at least since the 18th century ([Araujo, 2012](#)). Undoubtedly, materialist reductionist view of mind is a hypothesis worth pursuing, however, the hastily acceptance of such hypothesis as the final answer is detrimental to the advancement of human understanding of MBR. The premature closure of an unsolved philosophical/scientific quest is unconstructive since it tends to hamper the development and empirical testing of alternative potentially useful scientific hypotheses. Actually, the discussion regarding MBR has been stuck for a long time. The enlargement of the empirical basis may be a necessary step to move the discussion forward. The enlargement and diversification of empirical observations provided by Galileo’s use of telescope and Darwin’s five year travel in the *Beagle* were essential in the scientific revolutions promoted by such pioneers ([Chibeni and Moreira-Almeida, 2007](#); [Moreira-Almeida and Santos, 2012](#)).

We argue that SE may provide the much needed enlargement of the empirical basis for advancing the understanding of the MBR. However, SE have been usually neglected in this discussion, but it was not always the case. In the decades around the transition between 19th and 20th centuries many high level scientists investigated in depth the implications of SE for MBR. Some examples are William James, Frederic W.H. Myers, Alfred Russell Wallace, Cesare Lombroso, Oliver Lodge, Pierre Janet, C.G. Jung, Theodore Flournoy, and William McDougall. Including the Nobel laureates Charles Richet, Pierre and Marie Curie, J.J. Thomson, Henri Bergson, and Lord Rayleigh ([Alvarado, 2012](#); [Moreira-Almeida, 2012](#)). We have recently edited a book that, through an interdisciplinary perspective, investigates the theoretical and empirical implications of SE to MBR ([Moreira-Almeida and Santos, 2012](#)). This paper summarizes some of the main points of that work.

3. Spiritual experiences

During the second half of 19th century and most part of 20th century, SE were often explained away as symptoms of mental disorders. In this way, SE were usually considered as consequence of brain disorders, psychological defenses or immature personality ([Le Maléfan, 1999](#); [Moreira-Almeida et al., 2005](#)). However, there has emerged a growing body of evidence that SE are not usually related to mental disorders and that they are often related to

actually better mental health ([Moreira-Almeida and Cardena, 2011](#)).

This paper will cover recent scientific investigations on some types of SE that have been carefully studied and have provided useful data to the understanding of human mind and its relationship with the body. Because of space constrains, I will present a very short overview of each topic just to show the relevance of SE to MBR, more detailed data and discussion are available in the references provided.

3.1. Meditative states

During deep meditative states many people experience altered states of consciousness including loosening of ego’s border and sense of union with other beings and the universe. This type of SE has been one of the most investigated, especially under neuroimaging techniques. Two misunderstandings have been pervasive regarding neuroimaging investigations of SE: (a) “God spot”: the idea that there is a specific brain region (usually in the temporal lobe) responsible for SE; (b) the assumption that showing a certain type of brain activation during a SE or brain stimulation raising an experience similar to SE implies that the brain is the ultimate cause of the SE. Regarding the first assumption, scientific data available show that SE are complex and multidimensional phenomena related to several different brain areas involved in a variety of functions ([Beauregard, 2012](#); [Beauregard and Paquette, 2006](#); [Edwards et al., 2012](#)). The second conjecture is related to the fallacy of conflating association with causation. In addition, producing a given experience by brain stimulation does not mean that this experience is always merely a brain phenomenon, with no external reality. Although certain brain areas have been associated with hearing and even produce auditory experiences when stimulated, this obviously does not mean that there is no auditory experience based on an external source ([Hageman et al., 2010](#)).

In addition to demonstrating the brain correlates of several consciousness states, the study of meditative states, as voluntarily induced mind states that influence brain states, is a privileged venue to investigate top–down (mind over brain) causation ([Beauregard, 2007](#)).

3.2. End of life and near death experiences

End of life and near death experiences (NDE) provide valuable opportunities to study MBR. Since the dying process often involves a progressive impairment of brain function and death may be defined as the stopping of brain functioning, the investigation of the relation between these brain changes and consciousness may be very informative to improve our understanding of MBR.

NDE is a SE that has received a lot of attention in the last decades. Probably, most of the interest in NDE is related to the claims that conscious and spiritual experiences would happen during clinical death. If mind is just a product of brain activity, when brain functioning is impaired or stopped, consciousness should be disturbed or ceased. Several authors, who do not usually do empirical studies in NDE, have argued that all NDE features could be explained by brain activity and psycho-cultural factors ([Lester, 2005](#); [Mobbs and Watt, 2011](#)). However, those who have conducted the largest empirical studies on NDE argue that these factors cannot explain all NDE features and that NDE suggest some sort of consciousness beyond the brain ([Athappilly et al., 2006](#); [Fenwick, 2012](#); [Greyson, 2007](#); [Parnia, 2007](#); [van Lommel, 2011](#)). Prospective studies with hundreds of cardiac arrest survivors have found that NDE could not be explained by medication use, religious belief, fear of death, or cognitive dysfunction ([Greyson, 2003](#); [Parnia et al., 2001](#); [Van Lommel et al., 2001](#)). Experiences induced by hypoxia, drug use and brain stimulation seem to have some

similarities with NDE, but they seem to be more dissimilar than similar. There is a large controversy about if the memories related to NDE refer to what has happened during cardiac arrest or any time before or after it. There are several anecdotal reports of NDE patients describing things that happened during the cardiac arrest, a period when they are supposed to have no conscious experience and no memory. There are also reports of accurate descriptions of the environment made by blind people who claim had been able to “see” the room during a NDE (Fenwick, 2012; Holden, 2009; van Lommel, 2011).

More recently, several studies have been published on end of life experiences (ELE), defined as “a set of phenomena which occur in the last few days/weeks of life and are associated with the process of dying” (Santos and Fenwick, 2012: 174). During ELE, patients often report several SE that occur in clear consciousness and seem to be different from confusional states and drug-induced hallucinations (Fenwick et al., 2010). Another intriguing phenomena related to ELE is “terminal lucidity”, defined as “unexpected return of mental clarity and memory shortly before death in patients suffering from severe psychiatric and neurologic disorders” (Nahm and Greyson, 2009; Nahm et al., 2012). Scientific studies of these experiences related to the dying process have just started and they seem to be promising research lines regarding MBR, since they offer cases of unexpected adequate mental function under severe brain damage and/or dysfunction.

3.3. Mediumship

Most cultures and spiritual traditions have reports, both currently and/or in their roots, of experiences of contact with spiritual, non-material, entities (gods, angels, demons, ancestors, deceased loved ones etc.) (Bourguignon, 1976). We use the term mediumship to designate this sort of experience. Specifically to our discussion regarding MBR, the mediumistic experience most relevant is the claim of contact with deceased people. This claim, frequent in several spiritual traditions, implies, at least at face value, survival of some aspect of mind after brain's death. This is a very prevalent belief worldwide, according to the World Values Survey, 87% of the world population believe people have a soul and 68% in life after death; among people living in North America and Western Europe 24% have felt in touch with someone dead (EVSG and WVSA, 2006).

In the last 150 years there has been a large body of scientific studies on the source of mediumistic experiences and in testing if mediums can actually get some sort of non-ordinary source of information (e.g. telepathy or contacting the departed). These studies were common in the decades of transition between 19th and 20th centuries and involved many members of the world's scientific elite including several Nobel Laureates (Moreira-Almeida, 2012). William James, from Harvard, a leading name in psychology and philosophy, as well as pioneer in the investigation of spiritual experiences, emphasized the critical importance of investigating mediumship to understand mind (Sech et al., 2013). He, himself, investigated the subject for more than two decades and regarding one of the most studied mediums in history, he concluded:

“(…) a universal proposition can be made untrue by a particular instance. If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you must not seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper. In the trances of this medium, I cannot resist the conviction that knowledge appears which she has never gained by the ordinary waking use of her eyes and ears and wits. What the source of this knowledge may be I know not (…); but from admitting the fact of such knowledge I can see no escape.” (James, 1896/1986).

Mediumship has already contributed to our understanding of mind, specifically in the exploration of dissociative states and subconscious mind, but academic interest in mediumship waned during most part of 20th century (Almeida and Lotufo Neto, 2004; Alvarado et al., 2007; Crabtree, 1993). However, in the last decades there has been some resurgence of scientific studies on mediumship published in academic journals. These studies usually have put emphasis on methods to control for fraud, chance, sensory leakage, and cold reading as explanations for the information provided by mediums. A lot has already been written about methods to investigate this sort of phenomenon (Beischel 2007/2008; Kelly, 2010). Some of these studies have found negative results (Jensen and Cardeña, 2009; O’Keeffe and Wiseman, 2005) and others have positive findings (Beischel and Schwartz, 2007; Kelly and Arcangel, 2011).

Most mediumistic communications do not provide challenging evidence, but there are well documented cases where veridical information known to the deceased personality, but unknown to the medium were provided by the medium under controlled circumstances. Some mediums got especially high scores for accuracy, providing several specific pieces of information that were recognized by blinded sitters (Moreira-Almeida, 2012).

Like James (1909), the large majority of scientists who investigated mediumship in depth ended convinced that conventional explanations (fraud and unconscious mind activity) could explain part but not all the observed data (Almeder, 1992; Beischel, 2007/2008; Bem, 2005; Braude, 2003; Eysenck and Sargent, 1993; Gauld, 1982; Kelly, 2010; Stevenson, 1977). Naturally, there are researchers that remain skeptical on the need of non-conventional explanations to mediumship (Lester, 2005; O’Keeffe and Wiseman, 2005).

3.4. Reincarnation

The belief in reincarnation (the rebirth of a soul in a new human body) has been widespread in many cultures and spiritual traditions (e.g. ancient Egypt and Greece, Buddhism, and Hinduism). The World Values Survey has found that about one third of the world population believe in reincarnation. In the last half century, some scientists have performed careful investigations on thousands of children who claim to remember previous lives (Haraldsson, 2012). Although more frequent in countries where the belief in reincarnation is more prevalent, these cases have also been found and studied in Europe (Stevenson, 2003) and America (Stevenson, 1983). Most of cases of children who claim to remember previous lives do not provide challenging evidence requiring non-conventional explanations. However, there is a substantial body of cases where children have reported alleged memories about a claimed previous life that have been verified as accurate. In some cases, not only the factual information are compatible with a deceased unknown to the children and his/her family, but also habits, likes, dislikes, skills, and even phobias and birthmarks compatible with the mode of death (Haraldsson, 2012; Mills et al., 1994; Schouten and Stevenson, 1988; Stevenson, 2000; Tucker, 2008).

These cases of reincarnation type have implications for the possibility of the persistence of personality after brain death, what has obvious implications for MBR (Haraldsson, 2012; Stevenson, 2000). Based on this, it would be worth to expand exploration of this sort of SE.

4. Conclusion

The recent trend to scientifically investigate SE has already produced interesting and thought-provoking findings that deserve

careful further exploration. Because of their potential implication, these findings may also contribute to the understanding of MBR, which remains an important, yet poorly explored way to investigate human nature.

Conflict of interest

None.

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