



'Mindblowing'
MICHAEL POLLAN

THE FLIP

Who You
Really Are
And Why It
Matters

JEFFREY J. KRIPAL



PENGUIN BOOKS

THE FLIP

‘Kripal uses an imaginative transdisciplinary method that weaves together contemporary thought in ecology, quantum physics, evolutionary biology, philosophy of mind, comparative mysticism, and first-person experiential accounts.

The result is an eminently readable manifesto for the role of the humanities in integrating emergent thought in these many domains’ Bradley Lewis, author of *Narrative Psychiatry: How Stories Can Shape Clinical Practice*

‘Kripal continues to believe that spirituality and science should not contradict each other’

The New York Times Book Review

‘Kripal is one of the most important voices pushing the academy to broaden its perspective beyond the secular: to take seriously the idea that reality is more complex. He is slowly winning the argument and changing the terrain of debate without making an argument for any one religion. This is a remarkable achievement. *The Flip* is worthy of a wide readership’ T. M. Luhrmann, author of

When God Talks Back

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Concepts in Neuroscience

‘*The Flip* synthesizes some of the most recent speculations about the nature of the cosmos and the human, proposing a renewed mutual engagement of the sciences and humanities. . . . With its visionary notions and revisionary potential, *The Flip* merits a wide readership, across the academy and outside of it’ *Houston Chronicle*

‘Wonderfully rich. . . . Reading this book is an embodied experience; it is yoga for the mind’

Reading Religion

‘*The Flip* will ignite conversations about the limits of science and the potential for dramatic shifts in perspective’

Publishers Weekly

‘Makes the baffling notions of quantum mechanics and neuroscience digestible. In this respect, *The Flip* is similar to *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher* by Lewis Thomas . . . The research incorporated into the book is well thought out, and ranges from writer Philip K. Dick to mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan. Kripal even discusses how Joni Mitchell came up with the idea that “we are stardust” ten years before Carl Sagan popularized it’ *NewPages*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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*An era can be considered over
when its basic illusions have been exhausted.*

—ARTHUR MILLER

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THE FLIP

PROLOGUE:

THE HUMAN COSMOS

*Hydrogen is a light odorless gas that,
given enough time, turns into people.*

—ANONYMOUS

This little book is about many things. It is a report on the state of knowledge about the nature of mind and its relationship to matter, including the matter of the brain. It is an ironic, affectionate observation about how much visionary literature the scientific and medical professions have helped produce over the last century (think of the literature on the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics, on the near-death experience, on savant phenomena, and on psychedelic molecules). It is also a designed polemic and public complaint about the dangerous disregard for the humanities in contemporary culture, academic and otherwise. In the end, though, it is mostly an inappropriately hopeful, if not wildly optimistic, essay about a tipping point, about the future—be it near or far—of a new worldview, *a new real* that is presently forming around the epiphany of mind as an irreducible dimension or substrate of the natural world, indeed of the entire cosmos, before and beyond any present scientific,

ethnic, political, or religious story that one happens to find oneself (caught) in at the moment.

And I do mean *epiphany* of mind. Among other rhetorical strategies, I mean to highlight and comment on a few examples of a large, scattered, but remarkably consistent set of stories about extreme life-changing experiences that intellectuals, scientists, and medical professionals have been reporting for centuries now but have written about with increasing visibility and effect only over the last few decades.

As these stories dramatically demonstrate, a radically new real can appear with the simplest of “flips,” or reversals of perspective, roughly, from “the outside” of things to “the inside” of things, from “the object” to “the subject.” And this can occur *without surrendering an iota of our remarkable scientific and medical knowledge about the material world and the human body*. The general materialistic framework of the sciences at the moment is not wrong. It is simply half-right. We know that mind is mattered. What these stories suggest is that matter is also minded, that this mindedness is fundamental to the cosmos, not some tangential, accidental, or recent emergent property of matter. Some of the stories go even further and suggest that matter may, in fact, be an expression of some kind of cosmic Mind, which expresses itself as the material world through the abstract structures of mathematics and physics.

What these stories also suggest is that abstract third-person knowledge or philosophical modeling of such mind is seldom, if ever, sufficient. At least in our present moment, it usually takes a deeply personal and direct encounter with this minded cosmos to convince an intellectual or scientist. That moment of realization beyond all linear thought, beyond all language, beyond all belief, is what I call “the flip.” It is a *very* big deal. Such a flip is often

sudden, unbidden, or traumatically catalyzed. It is also beautifully, elegantly simple.

The relative brevity of this book is meant to signal this simple beauty. I fully understand that most of my readers will never have experienced such a flip. The book, then, works primarily on the level of the intellectual imagination. It does not rely on or require such a direct experience. The pages attempt to flip the reader via story, philosophical argument, and simple human trust (in the otherwise-unbelievable stories that other human beings tell us here), as the pages tease out what exactly this flip is, what it might imply about us and our world, why it is so convincing to those who have known it (and so unconvincing to those who have not), how it reintroduces real meaning back into the real world, and, finally, what its moral, political, and spiritual implications might yet turn out to be. The book attempts all of this through five chapters that can be read in a single day. I do not want to exhaust you with words. I want to flip you.

Each chapter is an *essai*, as in the French—that is, a “test,” an “attempt,” or an “experiment” rather than a proclamation of certainties or a statement of settled convictions. I possess none of the latter. These are public thought experiments, professional complaints, moral struggles, friendly jabs, a thinking-through.

I begin by employing a set of common extraordinary experiences to call for a new recalibration of the humanities and the sciences toward some future form of knowledge.¹ That new coordination, I suggest, will come as contemporary neuroscience continues to fail, spectacularly, to explain consciousness through any materialistic model or causal mechanism and a new philosophy of mind begins to appear that understands consciousness (which is not to say ego, personality, or social self) as prior and primary and so irreducible to brain function or any other material mechanism.

With this irreducibility of mind will come the new ascent of the humanities, which, after all, have always been about engaging and interpreting both the most banal and the most fantastic ways that consciousness is reflected and refracted through the cultural codes of human civilization—that is, through history, social practice, language, art, religion, literature, institution, law, thought, and, I dare add, science.

I do not just focus on extraordinary experience, though. I focus on the extraordinary experiences of scientists, medical professionals, engineers, computer scientists, and highly trained intellectuals, including some Nobel laureates, each of whom flipped his or her previous materialistic outlook after experiencing some overwhelming event that revealed the fundamental, irreducible nature of mind as such. With such a professional focus, I want to shake the reader from the easy notion that such completely inexplicable events happen only to the naïve or to those who do not know their science. This assumption needs to be called out for what it is: utter and complete nonsense. The hyperreality and burning implications of these events for those to whom they happened have absolutely *nothing* to do with a rejection of science. Quite the opposite: They often result in new scientific ideas and even new technologies. Whatever they are (or are not), such flips appear to be scripted as goads and inspirations, not as blocks or trips. They appear to be pointing us to the new real and to the future of knowledge.

I do not leave it there. I attempt to hone the conversation further by seeking to interpret these epiphanies of mind through the apparent relationship of mind and matter implied or revealed in these types of experiences. Here we move from *what* the flip looks like in the lives of professional intellectuals to *how* it might work, or, to put it more technically, we move into a discussion of

the ontological conditions (that is, the nature of the real itself) that would render the flip both possible and plausible, and—and this is a big one—that makes mathematical discovery and scientific knowledge possible at all.

Here I make the jarring but perfectly accurate observation that mind or consciousness is the subject and locus of *all* scientific practice and knowledge; that science, at the end of the day, is a function of human subjectivity and consciousness and not, as is often assumed, a simple photographic record of the world of things and objects “out there.” If, however, science is finally an expression of human subjectivity, and if the same human sciences have been uncannily successful in peering into some of the deepest secrets of the universe, then the human subject itself must bear some intimate relationship to that same universe. The astonishing successes of science and the unreasonable ability of abstract mathematics to model and mirror the furthest reaches and cosmic history of matter, I suggest, are the best evidence for our own secret nature. *Human science works because human nature is cosmic.*

Part of how the flip works involves the dramatic and powerful ways that the event communicates meaning to the individual, often through baroque or fantastic imagery (think of the wild imagery of a near-death journey to “another world” or of a life-changing psychedelic “trip”). Conventionally, these images and narratives have been interpreted in entirely subjectivist or hallucinatory ways as fundamentally meaningless—that is, as possessing no real connection to the real world. That is a serious mistake, I will explain, and one that is easily avoidable once we distinguish between conventional and symbolic forms of communication and representation.

Finally, I explore some of the moral, social, and political implications of the flip. Not the *what* or the *how* of the flip now, but the *where to* and the *what for*. The single big idea here is that once one

makes the flip and begins to understand that consciousness is fundamental, is a primitive of the physics and mathematics of the universe, it becomes more than apparent that every local religious ego or political identity, every local story, is historically relative, built on and constructed out of this deeper-minded matter or conscious cosmos. One can still affirm and nurture all of those local relative identities after the flip as intimate expressions of consciousness (and so one can also continue to act from within a particular story and its script, if one so chooses), but one will no longer make the dangerous mistake of privileging one's own inherited story and script over every other. One will recognize that there are many stories, many ways of enacting a form of reality, and that each of these do different things well (and other things poorly).

It really matters, then, which story one lives in (depending on what one wants to do well), but no story, however "sacred" or "scientific," can or ever will be absolute and speak for all of human experience and human potential, much less all of earthly or cosmic life. This is not a curse. This is a promise, a gift, and a preservation. As in biological evolution, so, too, in human culture and consciousness: Pluralism and diversity are precious goods that enable life to survive, flourish, and experiment, like an artist at work.

The flip, in short, relativizes and affirms each and every culture, community, and religion, even as it cosmicizes and—I dare say—spiritualizes our shared humanity. The flip results in a new *cosmic comparative* perspective that reorients us within an immeasurably larger vision of who we are as a species of the cosmos and what we might yet become. The future of knowledge, it turns out, is also the future of us.

• • •

I recognize, of course, how far we are away from any and all of this. I am not naïve. I have suffered serious harassment and backlash over the years for my writings on this cosmic humanism both from politically motivated religious censors (for my insistence on the sexual—read material—dimensions of many forms of ecstatic religious experience) and, to a much lesser extent, from secular critics (for my insistence on the paranormal or mind-over-matter dimensions of American culture and history). I know perfectly well that the form of mind I inhabit, the seemingly paradoxical “third way” of the flip—at once deeply critical of and deeply sympathetic to all local religious expressions—is very difficult, impossible really, for both the religious fundamentalist and the ideological materialist to understand and accept (and, as I will show, these two mind-sets have much more in common than either wants to admit).

I nevertheless think that this third way “beyond belief” and “beyond reason” is far preferable to religious belief or pure mechanistic rationalism, since it opens up new horizons of inquiry and thought and does not prematurely shut down our quest for meaning, which is exactly what belief and hyper-rationalism do in different ways.² Put a bit differently, I am convinced that this third way represents our best way forward into the future, into new ways of knowing and new conceptions of the human that we have only imagined at this point in genres like comparative mystical literature and science fiction. I do not think these future forms of knowledge will be “religious” in the traditional sense, any more than I think they will be “scientific” in the classical materialist sense. They will be both, and neither. They will be something else, and something way, way more.

The flip, then, gives us a new way of revisioning and renewing the humanities in deep conversation with the sciences. It

enables us to tell a richer and, frankly, more accurate history of science and medicine (since such a history has been informed and inspired by anomalous or “flipped” states of mind from the beginning). The flip points to new ontologies and epistemologies on the horizon of thought. And it suggests a new philosophical, really cosmic, foundation for a future ethics and politics. Obviously, this is not a minor project. Nor is it a humble or cautious one. This is a manifesto. Short. Irreverent. Punchy. Blunt.

And why not? Do we really have that much time for self-censoring politeness and endless qualifications, which are too often also obfuscations? I don’t think so. *The Flip* is an intervention into our present fraught political moment—fraught because we appear to have lost any sense of the cosmic human and have shrunk ourselves down to this or that minuscule religious, nationalist, secular, ethnic, or genetic ego. We are shrinking into oblivion. We have it all exactly upside down. We have forgotten, or not yet realized, our own secret giant grandeur. And so we suffer.

May you not suffer like this any longer. May the present “you” not survive this little book. May you be flipped in dramatic or quiet ways.

VISIONS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

But, as always, the key to making sense of our lives lies in those details that seem most nonsensical. The small strangenesses surrounding us are our best possible clues to reality.

—PETER KINGSLEY, *Reality*

Two impossible true tales.

Scene 1. Twain's Mental Telegraphy. Dressed in his famous white "dontcaredam suit," Mark Twain was famous for mocking every orthodoxy and convention, including, it turns out, the conventions of space and time. As he related the events in his diaries, Twain and his brother Henry were working on the riverboat *Pennsylvania* in June 1858. While they were lying in port in St. Louis, the writer had a most remarkable dream:

In the morning, when I awoke I had been dreaming, and the dream was so vivid, so like reality, that it deceived me, and I thought it *was* real. In the dream I had seen Henry a corpse. He lay in a metallic burial case. He was dressed in a suit of

my clothing, and on his breast lay a great bouquet of flowers, mainly white roses, with a red rose in the centre.

Twain awoke, got dressed, and prepared to go view the casket. He was walking to the house where he thought the casket lay before he realized “that there was nothing real about this—it was only a dream.”

Alas, it was not. A few weeks later, Henry was badly burned in a boiler explosion and then accidentally killed when some young doctors gave him a huge overdose of opium for the pain. Normally, the dead were buried in a simple pine coffin, but some women had raised sixty dollars to put Henry in a special metal one. Twain explained what happened next:

When I came back and entered the dead-room Henry lay in that open case, and he was dressed in a suit of my clothing. He had borrowed it without my knowledge during our last sojourn in St. Louis; and I recognized instantly that my dream of several weeks before was here exactly reproduced, so far as these details went—and I think I missed one detail; but that one was immediately supplied, for just then an elderly lady entered the place with a large bouquet consisting mainly of white roses, and in the centre of it was a red rose, and she laid it on his breast.¹

Now who of us would not be permanently marked, at once inspired and haunted, by such a series of events? Who of us, if this were *our* dream and *our* brother, could honestly dismiss it all as a series of coincidences? Twain certainly could not. He was obsessed with such moments in his life, of which there were all

too many. In 1878, he described some of them in an essay and even theorized how they work. But he could not bring himself to publish it, as he feared “the public would treat the thing as a joke whereas I was in earnest.” Finally, Twain gave in, allowed his name to be attached to his own experiences and ideas, and published this material in *Harper’s* magazine in two separate installments: “Mental Telegraphy: A Manuscript with a History” (1891) and “Mental Telegraphy Again” (1895).²

Mental telegraphy. The metaphor points to the cutting-edge technology of the day. It also points to Twain’s conviction that such precognitive dreams and instant communications were connected to the acts of reading and writing. Indeed, Twain suspected that whatever processes this mental telegraphy named had some profound relationship to the deeper sources of his own literary success. And he meant this quite seriously. The “manuscript with a history” of the first essay title refers to a detailed plotline for a story about some Nevada silver mines that came blazing into his mind one day, as if out of nowhere, as if from someone else. When a letter from a friend three thousand miles away arrived in the mail a few days later, he knew exactly what was in it before he opened the envelope: the plot of the silver mine story that he had received in a flash of creativity and inspiration a few days earlier.

Scene 2. The Wife Who Knew. Then there is the American forensic pathologist Dr. Janis Amatuzio. Her book *Beyond Knowing* is filled with extraordinary stories of impossible things that routinely happen around death. Here is one such true tale.

This one began one night when Amatuzio encountered a very troubled hospital chaplain in the course of her work. He asked to go back to her office, where he then asked her if she knew how they had found the body of a young man recently killed in a car accident. She replied that her records showed that the Coon

Rapids Police Department had recovered the body in a frozen creek bed at 4:45 A.M.

“No,” the man replied, “Do you know how they *really* found him?” The chaplain then explained how he had spoken to the dead man’s wife, who related how she had had a vivid dream that night of her husband standing next to her bed, apologizing and explaining that he had been in a car accident, and that his car was in a ditch, where it could not be seen from the road. She awoke immediately, at 4:20 A.M., and called the police to tell them that her husband had been in a car accident not far from their home, and that his car was in a ravine that could not be seen from the road. They recovered the body twenty-five minutes later.³

From the Preternatural to the Paranormal

Impossible, right?

We have no idea what to do with such poignant, powerful stories. So we disempower them with words like *anecdote* and *coincidence*. Or perhaps we could study their textual histories and show that they were not really this clean or simple. That would be a relief. Like the heads of Hercules’ Lernaean Hydra, however, with every story we so decapitate, three more, or three thousand more, would appear. We are, in fact, swimming in a sea of such stories at this very moment, if only we could recognize our situation and its strange signs.

We cannot recognize our situation because we have shamed every category and every word that might help us. Consider that most difficult word *paranormal*. Most journalists, scientists, and even intellectual historians (who should know better) demonstrate little more than total ignorance of the word’s philosophically nuanced origins and its actual place in the history of science.

It appears that the word was coined by the French researcher

Joseph Maxwell in 1903. Maxwell was no naïf. He was a prosecuting attorney who became the president of the court of appeals of Bordeaux. He was also a medical doctor with an advanced degree and dissertation on amnesia and disorders of consciousness in epileptics. In his book *Les Phénomènes psychiques: recherches, observations, méthodes*, he used the term *paranormal* to describe mind-over-matter phenomena that, already then, were very well documented, if poorly understood. Think telekinetic, poltergeist, or materialization phenomena. The *paranormal*—literally “to the side of” or “beyond” (*para-*) the normal—was almost certainly a French gloss on an earlier English word, this one coined by a Cambridge-trained classicist and education reformer, Frederic Myers: the *supernormal*.

It is crucial to understand that both the English and French adjectives did not imply or require anything supernatural or miraculous—that is, “from God” or outside the natural world (although they did not exclude such possibilities, either). Rather, both words were coined to describe our own almost total ignorance of all of those fantastic phenomena that are a part of our human nature and the natural world but that we cannot yet model or explain within any adequate scientific framework.⁴

These new words, then, were not naïve expressions of credulity. Nor were they a mark of some willful ignorance of science. They were coined and used by some of the most educated minds of Europe to explore anomalous phenomena that appeared to signal some richer reality than the present science could explain but that, it was hoped, some future science would. Both words were humble and honest placeholders, markers of a deep intellectual humility and a radical empiricism that refused to look away from things it could not explain and saw anomalies not as idiocies but as meaningful signs pointing toward some future form of knowledge,