

Sum (2009) and Incognito (2011), both by David Eagleman and published by Canongate

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David Eagleman is a very learned and impressive author. Recently he was on “*The Life Scientific*” with Jim Al-Khalili. In 2020 and 2021 alone, he has produced some twenty publications. These range from deciphering sound via patterns on the skin, to predicting the risks of criminal recidivism, why “moist” is a word that people dislike, and how the internet can become a safety net for “surviving pandemics and other disasters”.

“He must be a statistician!”, you may suppose. How can all this be done without statistics as a linking methodology? No other field tears down “No Trespassing” signs with such vigour and conviction, opening the way for entry into other experts’ territories. Not for nothing did Karl Pearson describe statistics as the inter-disciplinary field *par excellence* – tailor-made for “buccaneers” who thrive on looting other peoples’ ideas. Statistics provides high-level viewing points over foreign lands from which we may gain “wide views in unexpected directions” and find “easy descent” into their territory. “I felt like a buccaneer of Drake’s days”, Pearson exclaimed – one of the order of men “not quite pirates, but with decidedly piratical tendencies”.

Leaving aside one’s views about Pearson or about buccaneers, my sense that Eagleman may “really” be a statistician was reinforced when he described life as “taking patterns from the data and making sense of it”. From his book-title, “Sum”, you might suspect he started life as a mathematician. However. Eagleman’s first degree was in literature (British and American). Only later did he move into neuroscience. The tale of his journey is recounted in “*The Life Scientific*”. (There have been more than 240 lives in this series so far. I believe a book is on its way.)

Great scope exists for parallel series of lives in other areas. Members of my U3A maths group have been giving talks under the title “A Life Mathematical” (note – ‘a’, not ‘the’). Perhaps Radstats should sponsor a series of “Lives Statistical”. I am sure we could learn much about each other, just as I am finding at the unfortunate series of funerals I have been attending recently that even friends I thought I knew really well had features or skills of which I was completely unaware – one collected butterflies, another was a cornet-player, a third had three earlier wives and many unexpected children who turned up at the funeral!

However, to return to Jim Al-Khalili’s amazing series – why do we review books, but we do not review radio programmes? Ten years ago one could have argued that books possess permanence while radio programmes disappear with the waves. But this was a poor argument even then, and today in the age of “*BBC Sounds*” and *YouTube* it is no longer true.

More convincing is the argument that books are a “commodity” with a price-tag, while radio programmes are not. Also, books are expensive and a “status” commodity, so book reviews serve the interests of book-producers whilst also being in the interest of their consumers, whom they inform and assist in spending their ill-gotten gains in an optimally informed, evidence-based manner. Book reviewers are the aboriginal “influencers”, active long before the internet. (The most important thing is to get talked about, so even ‘bad’ reviews can be commercially advantageous.)

Some of my above statements are ‘testable’ in that we could compare reviews of different categories of books in terms of variables such as length, frequency, number of times quoted or retweeted. That is more than can be said for some of the statements in Eagleman’s book “*Incognito*”. Several of his predictions have an air of *Old Moore’s Almanac* about them - Don’t be too precise, and your forecasts may be well-nigh invulnerable. (I have been predicting the death of the Duke of Edinburgh for decades. At last in 2021 I have been proved right.)

Eagleman’s “*Sum*” is very different from “*Incognito*”. It is much slimmer, barely 100 pages, and contains 40 mystical *vignettes* “from

the Afterlives”. Each *vignette* is a letter sent by a deceased person, on one particular subject. They often have one-word cryptic titles - “Missing”, “Spirals”, “Scales” and “Adhesion” , for example – which tend not to mean what at first sight they appear to mean. “Sum”, for example, has nothing to do with addition. It refers to existence, as in “Cogito ergo sum”.

The reviewers’ comments reprinted in the blurb on *Sum*’s cover are ecstatic, almost orgasmic. “Dazzling” says Stephen Fry; “Elegant, surreal and philosophically questioning” says another reviewer; the book’s “inventiveness, clarity and wit ... add up to something completely original” says a third; it has “the unaccountable, jaw-dropping quality of genius”, says *The Observer*.

Several of the *vignettes* are indeed thought-provoking, but others are irredeemably derivative. *Metamorphosis* takes the familiar meme that nobody really dies till they cease to be remembered. This happens only when all their friends are also dead, so their name has been spoken for the last, last time. This argument may be questioned on several fronts. Firstly, is it regressively circular. Second, its nominalism confuses the name with the thing, suggesting that the word is the concept is the essence. Eagleman converts this meme into an ante-room in the Afterlife where people must wait until they are truly dead in the never-again-to-be-mentioned sense. Until that happens, no peace is possible. So the farmer whose name is cited every week by a tourist guide recounting the story of his drowning is “stuck and he’s miserable” after many centuries in the ante-room. Moreover, his story is retold so many times that its essence drifts: it recounts his name, but this is no longer his identity. “And that is the curse of this room”, the story concludes: “since we live in the heads of those who remember us, we lose control of our lives and become who they want us to be”.

God’s personal and personnel problems feature in some of the stories. It may be a problem of management (all God’s decisions are taken by committee), or it may be a problem of clientele (“only microbes are in the running for eternal punishment or reward”). There are also gender problems: God may be male or female (but not yet non-binary). In “*Missing*”, they is a married couple. In “*Spirals*”, the Creator is “a species of small, dim-witted, obtuse creatures”.

The purpose of life is also much-discussed. One of the longest *vignettes*, “*Narcissus*”, provides a theory that may appeal to statisticians: “In the afterlife you receive a clear answer about our purpose on the Earth: our mission is to collect data”. We are like mobile cameras planted here by the Creator. “Our calling is to cover every inch of the planet’s surface. As we roam, we vacuum data into our sensory organs, and it is for this reason alone that we exist.” Unfortunately, all the data collected by our sophisticated cameras proves to be of no use. So the cameras turn their attention to each other. “On their sophisticated sensory skin, they simply want to be stroked”. The head engineer is sacked. “He has created an engineering marvel that only takes pictures of itself” – narcissism and robotism combined, the very worst sort of statistics.

Eagleman’s final story, “*Reversal*”, appeals to me, not just because it is last. “There is no afterlife, but that does not mean we don’t get to live a second time.” However, in our second life time runs backwards and life runs in reverse, beginning underground. (Do crematees start in the air? We are not told.) Impossibilities happen. Broken vases reassemble, meltwaters refreeze into snowpersons, bearded men become smooth-faced children. We all become diseducated. On our last, last day, babies crawl back into the wombs of their mothers, who crawl back into the wombs of *their* mothers “and so on like concentric Russian dolls”.

Continuing this “*Reversal*” theme, we shall end this review at the beginning of the book: Eagleman’s first *vignette* indulges in some statistical reverie: each seventy-year life includes thirty years of sleep, two hundred days taking a shower, seven months having sex, six days clipping our nails, five months sitting on the toilet. Which is probably a very good place to end, and a good place to keep this book available for whatever use you choose to make of it.