

BOOK REVIEW

Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness
by Imants Barušs and Julia Mossbridge. American Psychological Association, 2016. 256 pp. \$69.95. ISBN 978-1433822773.

Imants Barušs, professor of psychology at Kings University College (Western University Canada), and Julia Mossbridge, Visiting Scholar in Psychology at Northwestern University and an experimental psychologist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences, have written what can be called a “post-materialist” psychology text. It alleges that consciousness is independent of the brain and that each person, potentially, is in contact with all other people and events in the past, present, and future and can not only obtain knowledge of these events but also influence them as well. Barušs and Mossbridge see consciousness as “fundamental,” existing “prior to space and time as usually experienced.” Their paradigm is meant to replace “materialism,” which they purport is “on its way out” (p. 20), in part because it has ignored or discounted the acquisition of information outside of the usual sensory channels (p. 29).

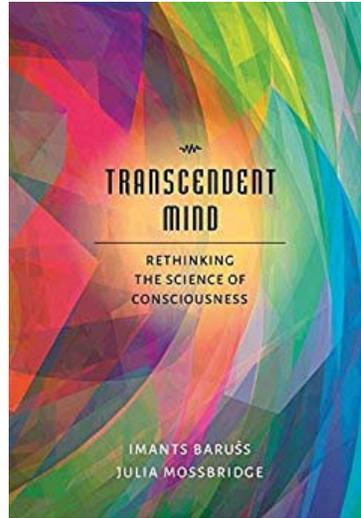
Their paradigm is based on several strands of evidence drawn from such fields as special relativity and quantum mechanics, anomalous psychology, parapsychology, neurophenomenology, and ancient and contemporary philosophers. Inclusion of the latter sources will trigger a negative reaction from many potential readers, but they may forget that William James (1890), the founder of U.S. psychology, was a philosopher as well as a psychologist. James’ concept of the “specious present” as “the original paragon and prototype of all conceived time” is one way to fathom the paradigm presented in this book and served as the basis of Gordon’s (2016) review. The fact that her review appeared in the American Psychological Association’s review journal, *PsycCRITIQUES*, and that *Transcendent Mind* was published by the American Psychological Association indicate that the time may be ripe for serious consideration of radical psychological and philosophical paradigms (see Vaidya 2015). Indeed, Francisco Varela (1999) also used the term “specious present” in his advocacy of neurophenomenology as a research method in the study of consciousness.

Barušs and Mossbridge explain that when they use the term “consciousness,” they are referring “to subjective events suffused with existential qualia that occur privately for a person” (p. 15). “Qualia”

are described as the “raw feels” of perceptions, and “*transcendent mind*” refers to the notion that mind is *transcendent* in nature, in that it cannot be adequately characterized in physical terms” (p. 15). Finally, “mind is the aspect of the psyche that embodies consciousness along with all nonconscious cognitive processes” (p. 15). To be nitpicking, “psyche” is not defined, and affective (and social) processes are ignored, but the authors have gone further in defining their terms than most writers on this topic have.

The authors review several theoretical models of consciousness, focusing on those that have attempted to explain the anomalies they present, including mediumship, out-of-body and near-death experiences, and mind-to-mind communication. They find none of them completely satisfactory and go on to elucidate their own proposal, namely that we live in a four-dimensional “block universe,” one in which time has been “spatialized” and added to the three customary dimensions. The implications of this block universe may seem to violate the second law of thermodynamics, but we are reminded that this law was written for a “closed system,” yet the universe may not be “closed” at all. Further, this law was not designed to explain time. Barušs and Mossbridge introduce the concept of “deep time,” in which there is a sequence of potential “nows.” When we make a decision to change an ongoing “now,” we move to a different “block universe,” one in which that event can occur. On the other hand, ordinary time, or “apparent time,” does not facilitate this movement from one “block universe” to another. However, an understanding of consciousness depends upon fathoming “deep time.” They conclude that “time and consciousness are so related that it can be difficult to disentangle them” (p. 59). Decades ago, the distinguished psychologist Gardner Murphy told me, “We will not understand parapsychology until we understand time”; in retrospect, his comment was wiser than I had realized.

This sequence of “nows” is discrete with physical manifestations coming into existence and disappearing, producing the appearance of a continuous stream of consciousness from a series of “nows.” The philosopher Alan Watts (1966) wrote of a “hide and seek God,” in which “nothing so eludes consciousness as consciousness itself” (p. 126). Watts’ comments bear an



uncannily resemblance to Barušs and Mossbridge's statement that "we can think of this as a *flicker theory*" (p. 181). Later, they add *filter* to the name because they suspect that the origins of waking experiences lie in the deep unconscious; the more permeable the filter, the easier their accessibility. Consciousness contains an aspect that we can only partially know conceptually, but contemplative practices can foster this understanding.

The authors suggest how *flicker-filter* theory can explain any number of parapsychological phenomena including psychokinesis and precognition. However, it would have been to their advantage had they extended their explanation to related psychological puzzles. Are alterations in consciousness adaptive or are they mere byproducts of brain evolution? Is transcendence an adaptive "trait" or a socially constructed "state"? Are reports of "dual consciousness" following an operation that divides the cortical hemispheres grounded in brain neurology? The ubiquitous "hard problem" of consciousness is only briefly mentioned, even though its solution is implied. However, the authors maintain that it is the psi-related experiences that are essential to an understanding of consciousness, even though they admit that the money spent on their investigation, worldwide, is equivalent to two months of that devoted to conventional psychology (p. 42). It is this emphasis that will induce many potential readers to dismiss this book and its importance, much to their loss. Some of them might have been retained had the authors presented "neutral monism" (Vaidya 2015) and "naturalism" (Rousseau 2015) as alternative paradigms to those readers reluctant to part with "materialism."

After presenting the arguments against the materialist paradigm, claiming that it has held back progress in this field, Barušs and Mossbridge have drawn a "road map" for future studies of consciousness. Their suggestions for research include:

1. Using self-observation skills and reporting the outcome.
2. Examining hypotheses by using existing learning paradigms.
3. Using the services of skilled participants who have been pre-screened.
4. Devising game-like tasks to amplify the acquisition of data.
5. Obtaining computerized online single-trial datasets.
6. Performing open-ended thought experiments.
7. Utilizing dream reports to gather insights.
8. Asking the "embedded mind" appropriate questions.
9. Harvesting data at different points in time.
10. Looking for meaning in reports from transcendent states.

I would add that lucid dream reports might be especially fruitful, as well as reports from contemplative, hypnotic, and psychedelic sessions; there

is a vibrant literature regarding anomalous means of accessing knowledge (e.g., Krippner 2011). The search for meaning in ensuing reports is another worthwhile research objective. In a world beset by threats to the survival of the biosphere, and to that of the human species as well, a shift from a materialistic paradigm to one based on transcendence and unity might provide a useful antidote. As the authors conclude, “. . . such a process could lead beyond itself to states of mind in which we can more adequately comprehend what is happening mentally and physically in time and space” (p. 195). Their book is an invaluable addition to the literature arguing that consciousness (however defined) plays a key role, and perhaps an essential role, in the construction of reality (however defined). It is radical, even at times outrageous, but it makes its case elegantly and (for many readers) persuasively.

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