

BOOK REVIEW

Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction second edition by Susan Blackmore. Oxford University Press, 2018. 152 pp., \$10.46 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0198794738.

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What is consciousness? What is this thing with which we are most intimate, yet remains outside of our best scientific understanding? In recent years, consciousness research has expanded its range of investigation, and these include new metaphysical approaches. However, we are still far from any kind of consensus on a theory of consciousness. In addition, scientists and philosophers remain divided on what a satisfactory theory or explanation might look like. Many are confident that consciousness will ultimately be explained through various materialistic processes that we do not yet understand. There are others who champion more radical approaches than more conventional, physicalist ones. Then there are those who insist that when we take the right approach, much of the mystery evaporates.

Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction by Susan Blackmore, falls into this latter camp. The book does offer some attractive features. Blackmore uses an extremely bare bones approach to present a considerable range of information within its slender volume. Overall, her style is concise and engaging. She also provides many useful and interesting summaries on current work in neurobiology and cognitive science.

That said, however, the book is flawed. As I'll discuss, the book is far from a neutral and even-handed treatment for various theories of consciousness. Blackmore doesn't waste much time before she begins to tilt the discussion toward her own view, which she calls delusionism. Alternate approaches and theories, especially ones that embrace a 'hard problem' view of consciousness, are given short shrift. While I believe most readers would prefer a more balanced introduction, materialistically inclined readers might find value in this slender volume. Nevertheless, the book might have been better titled 'A Very Short Introduction to the Delusionary Approach to Consciousness.'

Blackmore begins the book with a relatively clear exposition on the mystery of consciousness, also known as the mind–body problem. This problem is often framed as the hard problem, a phrase coined by the philosopher David Chalmers (1997). As Blackmore explains, Chalmers

divides the problems of consciousness into the easy ones and the hard one. The easy problems include those that can be characterized by some sort of function, such as perception, learning, attention, or memory. The hard problem is how to explain experience itself. That is, how do inherently subjective experiences, such as the taste of mango, the blueness of the sky, or the feel of wet sand beneath our feet, fit into an objective understanding of the world? Philosophers of mind refer to these varieties of subjective experience as qualia and they are at the heart of the hard problem of consciousness.

Blackmore elaborates on the problem of consciousness by giving us a brief look at Nagel's (1974) famous exploration of what it is like to be a bat. Nagel has famously characterized the consciousness of an organism as what it is like to be that subject, from the inside. According to Nagel, no matter how much we understand about the physical characteristics of the bat, including its echolocation and unique nervous system, there is no way we can really know the experience of a bat. Our understanding of physical, chemical, and biological laws, no matter how advanced, cannot close the gap between our own experiences and our objective understanding of the world with those of creatures quite different from us. This suggests for Nagel that inherently subjective experiences are not entailed by physical processes.

Soon after introducing us to the hard problem and the mystery of consciousness, Blackmore makes a rather sharp pivot in order to make her case that we are severely deluded about the nature of our experiences. Blackmore's priority is not to provide a relatively even-handed introduction to the theories on consciousness; rather, she organizes her book to make a case for her view of delusionism, which is similar to what others have termed illusionism and eliminativism. Early on, she frames the question of how best to think about consciousness between two general approaches: 1) as an "extra ingredient" to various functional aspects such as perception, memory, attention, learning, and so forth (the so-called easy problems) versus 2) something intrinsic to these functional aspects of cognition, so that no additional explanation is necessary. With this latter view, once we understand all the functional aspects of cognition, there is nothing else to explain. This being the case, Blackmore argues, the problem essentially turns on its head and we need to "explain why there seems to be a hard problem and why we seem to be having ineffable, non-physical, conscious experiences" (p. 10). I can note that Blackmore has a tendency throughout the book of associating inherent subjectivity, that is, the truly difficult part of the problem of consciousness, with such loaded terms as magic, supernatural, soul, and spirit. To Blackmore, it appears that the inherent

subjectivity of conscious experience might in some sense be comparable to a kind of obsolete religious belief.

Throughout the book, Blackmore gives us concise descriptions of various brain structures and processes. These are accompanied by well-labeled diagrams that accompany various mechanisms or neurobiological studies she discusses. A key characterization for Blackmore is that the brain is not similar to a computer with a central processor, but rather “a massively parallel and distributed system with no central organization, no inner sanctum where the really important bits happen” (p. 19).

Perhaps Blackmore’s strength in the book is describing and summarizing a relatively large number (for such a small volume) of neurobiological and cognitive science studies. An especially important category of research for her is how we might be subject to perceptual illusions. For example, she discusses Libet’s finding that our conscious awareness of a stimulus to the brain appears to lag the actual stimulus by half a second. Other cases include how the brain’s processing seems to fill in gaps in our perceptions. There are also examples that include the puzzling ways our minds seem to shift from consciousness to unconsciousness when we are driving; or the ways our mind is somehow able to pick out from unintelligible streams of conversation at a party someone who is mentioning our name. The upshot is that brain processes produce experiences that are illusory in the sense that they deviate in significant ways from a straightforward and transparent reading of our environment.

But Blackmore devotes a mere five pages to a section that covers various theories of consciousness. (She does manage other brief mentions here and there in other parts of the book.) Most alternative theories are defined and discussed in no more than a paragraph. One by one, Blackmore dismisses a particular theory on the grounds that it cannot explain a particular cognitive puzzle, such as how the contents of our mind seem to go from consciousness to unconsciousness while we are driving a car. For example, on dual-aspect theories of mind, which posit that mind and matter are different aspects of a more foundational substance, Blackmore claims, “these include Chalmers’ claim that consciousness is as intrinsic to the world as matter and energy, but these ideas provide no explanation for unconscious driving” (p. 45). Some readers might be left wondering whether a more developed or refined version of dual-aspect theory might do the trick, but this sort of treatment isn’t feasible within such a short space. Similarly, Blackmore takes a whole paragraph to discuss Penrose and Hameroff’s theory of ‘orchestrated objective reduction,’ based on an objective collapse of the wave function interpretation of quantum mechanics. Within their framework, quantum coherence is maintained within microtubules within the brain. Without

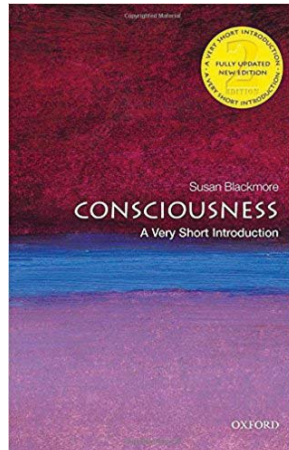
exactly explaining why, Blackmore argues that their model does not explain subjectivity.

Blackmore is an advocate for Dennett's multiple drafts theory of consciousness, although she doesn't spend much more time describing Dennett's theory than the others she dismisses. Dennett views the brain as a vast parallel processor that models something like a virtual computer. Within this virtual computer, diverse patterns of information arise, combine, and perhaps dissolve, perhaps like different drafts of a written composition. Dennett uses the notion of meme coined by Richard Dawkins to suggest how some patterns of information might arise and endure in the brain.

When all is said and done, Dennett's theory claims that our consciousness is nothing more than the operation of a kind of software within the neural network of the brain, which in turn can be compared to a parallel processing computer. (For an excellent overview and critique of Dennett's theory of consciousness, see Searle 1997).

But what about the hard problem? Dennett simply dismisses it as a pseudo problem. To be more specific, Dennett simply does not recognize the inherently subjective nature of our experience, the qualia, as something that legitimately needs explaining. For Dennett, the only data that can be admitted into our scientific framework are that which is gathered through third person, objective methods. Otherwise, as far as Dennett is concerned, the data doesn't exist and should therefore be ignored. And like Blackmore, Dennett uses copious examples of the illusory nature of our perception and brain processes in order to argue that consciousness itself is some kind of trick. Needless to say, this is not a widely shared view among most scientists and philosophers. For Nagel (2017), faced with Dennett's efforts to convince us to reject our own intimate experiences, he recalls a Groucho Marx line: "Who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes?"

Thus, Blackmore favors the views of Dennett and Patricia Churchland that consciousness is simply nothing more than the various mechanistic processes and functions of the brain. However, this sort of argument is highly vulnerable to the conceivability (of zombies) argument. Blackmore introduces us to this argument very early on, but doesn't really engage with it. (She calls it "daft" and then moves on.) In the present context, we can see the problem as follows. Suppose we claim, following Dennett and Churchland, that conscious experience is nothing beyond all the various



functions of the brain, such as perception, memory recall, learning, and so forth. After all, they argue that these cognitive functions can be simulated with computers, and we have made some progress identifying neurobiological mechanisms with each. Thus, every aspect of the brain can be understood in purely physical terms. However, the laws of physics and chemistry, which tells us everything we know about physical systems, do not say anything about consciousness. Then it seems to follow that we can conceive of an alternate world or an alternate evolutionary path with organisms identical to us in otherwise all respects, except that they lack consciousness. This should be a very easy thing to imagine, given that, as Blackmore argues, consciousness itself doesn't really seem to do anything in addition to the various functions we associate with the brain. If theories such as those by Blackmore, Churchland, and Dennett lead us to conclude zombies are possible, then they trigger a very large red flag.

Later in the book, having established (at least in her mind) that much about our conscious experience is illusory, Blackmore proceeds to examine the concept of 'self.' Here, Blackmore's tendency to use such terms as ego, self, soul, and spirit interchangeably, as if they all mean more or less the same thing, will likely frustrate many readers. She explores 'bundle theory,' which may have begun in the West from the work of the philosopher David Hume. Blackmore summarizes Hume's thinking as follows:

[Hume] described how he stared into his own experiences looking for the experiencing self but all he ever found was the experience. He concluded that the self is not an entity but more like a 'bundle of sensations'; one's life is a series of impressions that seem to belong to one person but are really just tied together by memory and other relationships. (p. 68)

Blackmore then proceeds to strengthen the case that what we mistake for a sense of self is simply a bundle of sensations. She also discusses the teachings of anatta within Buddhism, which is arguably very similar to Hume's argument. In addition, she explores the research of Sperry and Gazzaniga on patients who had the main connection to their brain hemispheres severed. Their findings suggest to Blackmore that our sense of self is likely a construction. "There is neither one self nor two selves inside the split brain; there are experiences but there is no one who is having them—just as it is with you and me" (p. 73).

Blackmore's discussion into the illusory nature of our 'self' is interesting and thought-provoking. But her incomplete treatment of the hard problem (noted above) seems to allow her to move from an illusion about 'self' to an illusion about consciousness itself. In fact, in the book's final chapter, she does indeed embrace the conclusion that consciousness itself is an illusion

(p. 130). But how can her argument be coherent? If Hume is only aware of his experience (but not a self), isn't there still an event of some kind entailing consciousness? And according to Buddhist teachers and scholars with which I'm familiar, the teaching of anatta (no self) refers to the illusory nature of a constructed ego or self, not consciousness itself (Thurman 2005, Praetorius on behalf of Adyashanti 2016). Further, Buddhist teachings are not inconsistent with the notion that consciousness is fundamental in some sense; not my consciousness or self, but a deeper, more foundational domain of consciousness. And according to Keown (2004), the Buddha condemned the view that there is no rebirth or the fruition of karma or that experience is fully annihilated at death.

Blackmore also considers the question of free will. In the context of what has come before, she understandably is predisposed to consider free will an illusion. She examines Libet's experiments that show neural activity precedes the conscious decision to act, and considers this as evidence supporting that claim. However, Blackmore does acknowledge the complexities and diverse arguments of this long-running debate, including Libet's own view that free will operates through an ability to veto a particular action. I would submit that Blackmore's omission of a careful treatment of the hard problem leaves open an escape clause in her argument that free will is an illusion. That is, if consciousness is fundamental in some sense, it follows that we cannot rely on third person, objective methods of investigation; first person, phenomenological approaches are required also. And this implies that our direct experience of having free will cannot be so easily dismissed.

At various points in the book, Blackmore also considers some paranormal phenomena, and these include out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, mediumship, and table tipping. Blackmore maintains that all such anomalous phenomena can be explained using conventional theories. Unfortunately, she provides no space for a look at the experimental psi data accumulated in laboratories. Now in fairness to Blackmore, few mainstream books on consciousness include anything like a fair survey of the psi literature either (and of course, Blackmore is a well-known psi skeptic.) Nevertheless, we can note that meta-analyses for a number of psi categories, such as telepathy and precognition, do yield highly significant (though modest) effects. Whether this supports a view that consciousness is in some sense fundamental or not can be debated. Barušs and Mossbridge (2017) provide a rich survey of the extant evidence in parapsychology and explore the implications for theories of consciousness.

As I've discussed, Blackmore never substantially explores the possibility that consciousness might be fundamental. She does briefly

discuss such alternatives as dualism and idealism, but quickly dismisses them. But many who today are exploring approaches that take the hard problem seriously are influenced by Bertrand Russell's (1927) argument on the intrinsic aspect of matter. (This view is commonly called Russellian monism. See Alter and Nagasawa (2012) for a good overview.) Russell's argument has two parts. First, scientific understanding gives us theories that describe the world in terms of structural relationships. But science is silent on the intrinsic aspect of the world. In other words, third-person methods lead us to acquire elegant mathematical equations, but these equations tell us how matter behaves, not what matter truly is. What might the intrinsic aspect of matter be? The second part of Russell's argument claims that the only truly intrinsic element that we are directly acquainted with, without the aid of abstract theories or equations, is what he terms 'percepts.' These would be the raw feels of our perceptions, what today we usually call qualia. Thus, Russell argues that the intrinsic aspect of our world likely possesses phenomenal properties. The most common application of this argument is panpsychism; all particles of matter contain some (arguably rudimentary) level of consciousness. Some find panpsychism implausible, but Russellian monism can take other directions that lead to such approaches as neutral monism, where matter and mind are two aspects of a neutral, foundational reality. In any case, within our current context, Russellian monism suggests a way to think about consciousness in our physical world while avoiding such problems as how fundamentally different substances interact (dualism) or by denying our conscious experiences (illusionism).

Overall, Blackmore's book has some strengths, such as her concise presentations of various neurobiological and cognitive science studies. And readers may well value her thought-provoking discussions on how various cognitive functions can yield to us misleading perceptions of our world. Of course, as I have argued, making the leap that we are mistaken about our conscious experiences (as being characterized as inherently subjective) is a bridge too far. In fact, I admit that I find it disappointing that readers, new to the literature or expecting to learn something exciting or interesting about consciousness, will be encouraged to dismiss their conscious experience as something inherently unreal. I believe a better introduction would have put a delusionist theory in context within the field and not given so much weight to what might be charitably characterized as a rather paradoxical minority position.

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