



Consciousness: An Introduction

By Susan Blackmore

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Is there a theory that explains the essence of consciousness? Or is consciousness itself just an illusion? The "last great mystery of science," consciousness was excluded from serious research for most of the last century but is now a rapidly expanding area of study for students of psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience. Recently the topic has also captured growing popular interest. This groundbreaking book is the first volume to bring together all the major theories of consciousness studies--from those rooted in traditional Western philosophy to those coming out of neuroscience, quantum theory, and Eastern philosophy. Broadly interdisciplinary, *Consciousness: An Introduction* is divided into nine sections that examine such topics as how subjective experiences arise from objective brain processes, the basic neuroscience and neuropathology of consciousness, altered states of consciousness, mystical experiences and dreams, and the effects of drugs and meditation. It also discusses the nature of self, the possibility of artificial consciousness in robots, and the question of whether or not animals are conscious. Enhanced by numerous illustrations and profiles of important researchers, the book also includes self-assessment questions, further reading suggestions, and practical exercises that help bring the subject to life.

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Editorial Review

From Scientific American

If you've ever driven along a highway and suddenly realized that you have no memory of how you just got to a certain point, then you have some idea of what it's like to be "in" and "out" of consciousness. Understanding the difference is the crux of *Consciousness: An Introduction*, which examines the scientific nature of subjective experience. Susan Blackmore, a former lecturer in psychology at the University of the West of England in Bristol, casts a wide net in exploring what she calls "the last great mystery of science." She painstakingly documents the evolution of consciousness studies, from the pioneering work of William James to the controversial, contemporary work of Daniel C. Dennett of Tufts University, who maintains that consciousness is a complex of "memes"—verbal and written information that is transferred from person to person. Then she marches through a host of other topics, including how subjective experiences arise from objective brain processes; altered states; and mystical experiences and dreams. To offset this weightiness, Blackmore periodically invites the reader to participate in interesting practice exercises with titles such as "Was this decision conscious?" and activities such as "Blind for an hour" that sharpen selfawareness. "Some of you will enjoy the self-examination and find the science and philosophy hard," she writes of her approach. "Others will lap up the science and find the personal inquiry troubling or trivial. I can only say this: both are needed." Blackmore also strikes a balance in showing how Western and Eastern philosophies view consciousness. Parts of this discussion may seem too difficult to grasp, but she is not after black-and-white conclusions; she is bold enough to leave some questions unanswered. Blackmore's best chapters come in the latter part of the book. Her analyses of the effects of brain damage on consciousness are fascinating in their human detail. She does get sidetracked by devoting three short chapters to the possibility of consciousness in robots, even though a machine's total lack of subjectivity would appear to make a prolonged analysis beside the point. But she redeems herself with an amusing anecdote that underscores how even the best intentioned scholars can get carried away by their own theories. When computer scientist John McCarthy of Stanford University claimed that his thermostat had a belief system, philosopher John Searle of the University of California at Berkeley immediately asked, "John, what beliefs does your thermostat have?" McCarthy's reply was both clever and courageous: "My thermostat has three beliefs. My thermostat believes that it's too hot in here, it's too cold in here and it's just right in here."

Robert Rorke

Review

"This is an extraordinary book. Consciousness is a swamp, a hornet's nest, a morass of competing theories and rival projects. It takes guts to put together a book like this one that seeks to present a truly general overview of the literature, ranging from philosophy of mind, through discussions in the fast-developing field of cognitive neuroscience, to the hot and fraught issues of the paranormal, lucid dreaming, and altered states of consciousness. Sue Blackmore carries off this ambitious project! There are lots of people who are expert in one, two or three of the areas she discusses, but almost no one who is deeply conversant, as she appears to be, with all of them."--Alva Noe, University of California, Berkeley

About the Author

Susan Blackmore is Lecturer in Psychology at the University of the West of England.

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