

Everything You Wanted To Know About Consciousness But Were Afraid To Ask:

A review of The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates, edited by Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere

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Published in: PSYCHE, 8, 17, (October 2002); at
http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/book_reviews/blocketal/.

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The Nature of Consciousness: Philosophical Debates, edited by Ned Block, Owen Flanagan, and Güven Güzeldere, is the best anthology of material on the philosophical study of consciousness currently available. It is an extensive collection, including fifty different readings and a helpful introductory essay by Güzeldere. Though its 843 pages may seem daunting to the reader approaching this area of study for the first time, the anthology contains a number of classic articles in the philosophy of mind that are required reading in the field, as well as groups of articles that serve as a foundational introduction to several of the hottest topics in philosophy. The work can serve both as a guided tour of the landscape of consciousness and as a useful reference and source book for extended research. The Nature of Consciousness has already become the standard text in graduate and advanced-level undergraduate courses on consciousness, and it certainly is a “must have” for anyone concerned with following the direction of philosophical research on the conscious mind in the 21st century.

The book is broken down into ten sections, each dealing with a sub-topic in consciousness studies. Most of the chapters are devoted wholly to philosophical issues, but there is also an important section presenting background empirical information culled for psychology and the neurosciences. The work is kicked off by an introductory essay which attempts to place the study of consciousness in an historical perspective. It also introduces some of the major themes that dominate the majority of the readings. The bulk of the selections in the book were written after 1970, so the introduction is really the only place where the origins of the current debates are laid out. Unfortunately, it is impossible to really present the details of this history in such a restricted format, and the reader is left to fill in many of the blanks herself. But this is the nature of The Nature of Consciousness. In keeping

with the general ahistorical approach of analytic philosophy, the editors chose to present the specifics of today's debates, and to leave questions of historical etiology to the side. This may have the danger of prompting the reinvention of the wheel in some cases, but it does provide the reader with the essential dialectic of current research.

The first section of the book considers the nature of the so-called stream of consciousness. Here we see the only work composed before the late 60's, an excerpt from William James' Psychology. James argues that consciousness proceeds in a flowing, ever-shifting manner, and that the objects of conscious experience possess a "fringe" that blends them into each other. The following selections by Daniel Dennett and Owen Flanagan debate the very existence of this stream-like flow, with Dennett typically skeptical of a robust phenomenal procession, and Flanagan defending a naturalistic realism concerning the phenomenon.

Section II deals with the relationship between scientific methodology and the study of consciousness. A selection by Flanagan proposes a "natural method" for studying consciousness, one that accepts data from psychology, neuroscience and phenomenology. Alvin Goldman argues that considerations gleaned from our folk-psychological conception of consciousness are important in theorizing, and shouldn't be rashly eliminated. Approaching the subject from a different direction, Patricia Churchland argues that a reductive approach proceeding on a variety of explanatory levels is the best plan for deciphering the riddles of consciousness, and furthermore, she claims that nothing stands in the way of a complete reductive, scientific explication of the conscious mind.

Churchland's piece is followed by an important work by Daniel Dennett and Marcel Kinsbourne laying out their "Multiple Drafts" model of consciousness. The authors rail against a "Cartesian theater" model of the mind, where there is a special place or medium where everything comes together in conscious experience. Instead, they argue that consciousness is the result of distributed, divergent processes vying for domination of the mind's resources. In such a model, there is no canonical stream of conscious experience. The next two chapters are critical commentaries on Dennett and Kinsbourne's hypothesis, by Ned Block and Robert Van Gulick.

Section III contains five selections from the sciences designed to give a sample of empirical work on consciousness, and to provide a primer for some of the strange dissociative disorders that can afflict the damaged mind. These syndromes figure in many philosophical arguments and thought experiments throughout the book, so it is nice to have them presented in some scientific detail. Bernard Baars, Martha Farah, Edoardo Bisiach, Tim Shallice, and Francis Crick and Christof Koch all contribute chapters. Several of the authors in this section, notably Crick and Koch, offer preliminary theories about the nature of conscious

awareness. It is an informative study to compare the approaches of these working scientists to the more philosophical approach taken in most of the other selections.

The fourth section deals with the relationship between consciousness and intentional content. Colin McGinn considers whether the apparent difficulties with explaining consciousness extend to the project of explaining the representational content of thoughts. Martin Davies argues that, like the content of thought, perceptual experience is externally individuated, though it is best considered as “nonconceptual” content. Michael Tye and Christopher Peacocke debate whether conscious experience is fully determined by its representational properties, or if there is a nonrepresentational element in experience that demands a separate treatment. This debate, over “representationalism,” is one of the hottest topics in philosophy of mind today, and these selections make a great introduction to the basic dialectic.

Section V addresses the function of consciousness. What is the role of consciousness in our mental lives, and could these same functions be achieved without phenomenal awareness? Owen Flanagan argues that consciousness does indeed play a vital functional role in our psychology, but Ned Block counters that the concept of consciousness is ambiguous between a functional, causal notion, and a purely phenomenal one. Block’s important paper “On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness” is the centerpiece of the section. His notions of “phenomenal” and “access” consciousness are explained, and the danger of reasoning from one to the other is exposed. Block’s article is followed by four critical commentaries, by Daniel Dennett, David Chalmers, Jennifer Church, and Tyler Burge. Several of the authors reject Block’s distinction, but some accept it, and Chalmers even argues that Block does not go far enough in noting the implications that phenomenal consciousness has for the prospects of understanding the conscious mind. The section closes with a piece by Van Gulick that taxonomizes a variety of arguments against a physicalist explanation of consciousness. In Van Gulick’s analysis, the arguments fail to make their point.

The seventh section of the anthology addresses the metaphysics of consciousness. There is an excerpt from Saul Kripke’s classic “Naming and Necessity” lectures which lays out an argument against mind/body materialism based on considerations from modal logic and the nature of identity. John Searle also argues against a reduction of mind to body, but he argues that this does not threaten the completeness of the scientific worldview. The failure of the reduction is a result of the pragmatics of our definitional practices rather than any deep metaphysical fact. Frank Jackson maintains that even a physicalist theory of mind requires some a priori foundation in order to fit the mental in with the physical. Thus, conceptual analysis is still a necessary part of theorizing about consciousness. Georges Rey, on the other hand, offers arguments to the effect that consciousness does not exist at all. He claims that when the folk notion of consciousness is stripped of various indefensible pieces of philosophical baggage, there is no

reason to believe that the phenomenon exists. Another chapter by Searle runs in the opposite direction, holding that the concept of consciousness is unconnected to any causal, functional or behavioral factors. Furthermore, the existence of consciousness is evident in such a way that no theory or argument is needed to establish its existence from the first-person perspective. Sydney Shoemaker accepts that first-person access is important to theorizing about consciousness, but maintains that the third-person perspective is equally valid, and things posited from the first-person point-of-view alone need to be vindicated from the third-person viewpoint.

The next three sections of the book revolve around attempts to explain the subjective aspects of consciousness, which are sometimes referred to as “qualia.” Thomas Nagel’s classic “What is it Like to be a Bat?” argues against an objective scientific explication of the subjective aspects of mind, at least as we conceptualize things at present. Colin McGinn goes farther, arguing that an explanation of consciousness is “cognitively closed” to creatures like us. Joseph Levine is also pessimistic about explaining what it is like to have a conscious experience (he terms this the “problem of the explanatory gap”), but he holds this is an epistemic, rather than a metaphysical issue.

Next, there is a series of articles focused on the “Knowledge Argument” against physicalism. The argument claims that even if someone knew all the physical facts, there would still be facts that person did not know, namely subjective or phenomenal facts about what it is like to have conscious experiences. Robert Van Gulick provides a paper summarizing the argument, and laying out the logical space of replies to the claim. Frank Jackson, who gave the Knowledge Argument its most recognized formulation, and Paul Churchland engage in a debate over the effectiveness and significance of the argument. David Lewis offers a different materialist defense, arguing that the supposed phenomenal facts left out of a physicalist description of consciousness are really just various abilities or “know how” whose absence does not threaten the completeness of physics. Brian Loar contends that the Knowledge Argument does not achieve its goal once a proper distinction between concepts and properties is in place.

The next set of papers considers the possibility of a so-called “inverted spectrum,” where things might look one way to me and another way to you, despite the fact that we are functionally and behaviorally identical. Daniel Dennett rejects this idea, and offers a variety of “intuition pumps” to disavow the reader of any belief in qualia. Sydney Shoemaker argues for the possibility of spectrum inversion by first establishing the possibility of intrasubjective inversion and then moving to intersubjective inversion. Gilbert Harman offers a defense of a functionalist theory of mind, and holds that the only qualitative features of experience are those we represent objects to have. These representations can be individuated functionally, so there is no possibility that two functionally identical people could have different subjective experiences. Ned Block rejects Harman’s “representationalist” thesis,

and offers a modified version of the inverted spectrum case, called “Inverted Earth” to challenge Harman. Finally, Stephen White reviews the various positions on qualia, and holds that either one is threatened with dualism, or one must embrace a functionalist position on qualitative experience.

The last section of the anthology explores what has come to be known as “Higher-Order” theories of consciousness. These theories hold that mental states are conscious when we are conscious of them in a suitable way, either by having thoughts about them, or by perceiving or sensing them. David Armstrong and William Lycan present higher-order perception version of the thesis, while David Rosenthal defends a higher-order thought theory. Fred Dretske offers a number of criticisms against both versions of the view, and Güven Güzeldere lays out the details and subtle differences between the two positions, before offering his own criticisms.

That concludes my summary of the book. As noted above, I believe that The Nature of Consciousness is the best anthology available on this topic, and it is well designed as an introduction to the field and as a reference volume for in-depth study. One mild criticism is that the work makes no attempt to link the study of consciousness in the analytic tradition with that of the “continental” or phenomenological school of thought. Both research programs are keenly interested in the foundations of human conscious experience, and a bridge between the two sides, even a thin one, might help promote cross-pollination of ideas on this rich and difficult subject. Also, as noted above, there is very little in the way of historical perspective in this volume. Perhaps this is as it should be; why delve into historical exposition when there are current investigations in progress? But many of the issues pursued with such vigor in the book, particularly the battles over qualia, bear a striking resemblance to the debates over the nature of “sense data” that occupied analytic philosophy in earlier parts of the twentieth century. Having an outline of that dialectic might help us to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

But in conclusion, The Nature of Consciousness is a superbly crafted collection of material. The editors have done a standup job of collecting and arranging the selections in the work, and, in doing so have provided the reader with a road map to the consciousness debates of the coming century. It is an exciting time to be studying in this field, and The Nature of Consciousness is the perfect guide book to the ever-expanding world of consciousness studies.