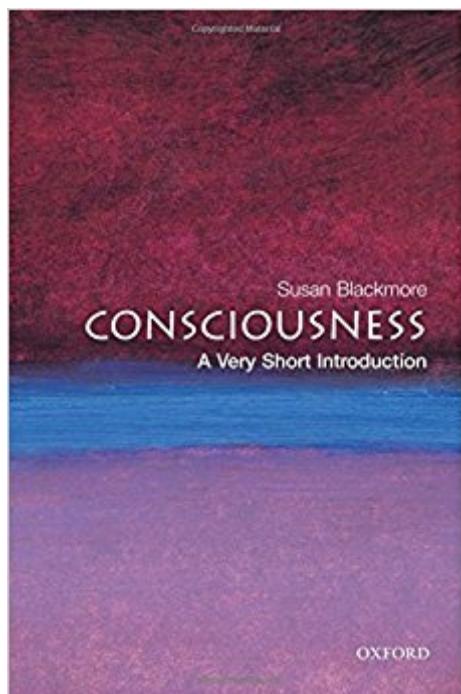


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Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

"The last great mystery for science," consciousness has become a controversial topic. Consciousness: A Very Short Introduction challenges readers to reconsider key concepts such as personality, free will, and the soul. How can a physical brain create our experience of the world? What creates our identity? Do we really have free will? Could consciousness itself be an illusion? Exciting new developments in brain science are opening up these debates, and the field has now expanded to include biologists, neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers. This book clarifies the potentially confusing arguments and clearly describes the major theories, with illustrations and lively cartoons to help explain the experiments. Topics include vision and attention, theories of self, experiments on action and awareness, altered states of consciousness, and the effects of brain damage and drugs. This lively, engaging, and authoritative book provides a clear overview of the subject that combines the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience--and serves as a much-needed launch pad for further exploration of this complicated and unsolved issue.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, Very Short Introductions offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

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Customer Reviews

A very thought-provoking book. * The Guardian *

Susan Blackmore is a psychologist, freelance writer, and lecturer. Previously Reader in Psychology at the University of the West of England, Bristol, she left in 2000 to write an undergraduate textbook on consciousness. The author of numerous scientific articles and book contributions, she writes for several magazines and newspapers and is a frequent contributor on radio and television, both in the UK and abroad. She has presented several television programs including a Channel 4 documentary on the intelligence of apes. She has been training in Zen for twenty years. Her books include an autobiography, *In Search of the Light* (1996), *The Meme Machine* (1999), *Consciousness: An Introduction* (2003), and *Conversations about Consciousness* (forthcoming in 2005).

This is the best one that I've read so far. And I've read several within this series, including *Nothing*, *Reality*, and *Magnetism*. Ms. Blackmore does an excellent job of laying out the sticky problems, but it rarely feels like she's rushing through it. Now, this one is a bit different because it is both an overview and an angle with a conclusion. However, you learn much along the way. Is it fair? I'm no expert, so I'll have to trust that her quick dismissal of Dualism is warranted. Ms. Blackmore seems to pass over the problem of memory. If consciousness is an illusion and is caused by brain processes and environmental reactions, then memory seems to pose a problem. I can often pull out memories or think of things that have nothing to do with my environment (a purple horse!). And, if my thinking is due to brain processes, then what causes those? These Very Short Intro books pose a major challenge for most writers. With only 140 pages or so, the writer needs to hit the major concepts of the subject. But most of them tend to spread themselves too thin (see *Nothing*). Anyway, *The Ego Tunnel* by Thomas Metzinger appears to have much in common with Ms. Blackmore's solution. I loved the ride, even if I am only about 75% with her. Something is still missing.

At the beginning this book is fairly straightforward. It looks at the definitions of consciousness and theories of how it comes about. If you finished high school you probably have a general idea of it: it must be generated by some area of the brain and is behind many voluntary actions, such as movement, speech etc. If it was only that simple... As of now, there are no theories that try to explain how the movement of neurotransmitters across cells eventually materialize into the experience of being conscious. Philosophers and scientists have been arguing about it for ever, and we are no closer to the answer than decades ago. Susan Blackmore does a great job summarizing evidence

and philosophical debates regarding consciousness. The conclusion at the end of the book was surprising and satisfying for me at the same time. It seems that the science getting the same idea that ancients figured out a while ago: consciousness - as the property of the self - is an illusion. It is nothing more than a bunch of constantly changing processes going on in the brain all the time. Do not be alarmed, there is nothing New Age in the book, it is based purely on science. If you are interested in the topic of consciousness - this is the right book to start from.

Most people who write about consciousness or free will manage to sweep the hard part of the problem under the rug in one way or another, without really saying anything new. This book clearly and plainly presents the problem, lays out why it is so hard, examines and identifies the flaws in the usual ways of making it go away, and then suggests, modestly and tentatively, another way out. I'm not convinced that the theory outlined at the end of the book is actually correct, but at least it is not obviously wrong, it addresses the problem head-on, and actually suggests an avenue for research. Combined with a plain-English writing style and well-written sidebars, this book is a refreshing bit of actual light in an overheated room.

Fascinating collection of neuroscience research and observations about brain abnormalities that the author uses to explore many theories of consciousness. She covers many intriguing conjectures about the state or even true existence of free will, consciousness or any actual subjective experience at all. But rather than the very unsatisfying and mostly unsubstantiated conclusions about fictive consciousness it seems the author would better serve her lay readers by leaving the question open.

Intense book

These books "Very Short Introductions" give me all the info I want. I'm not trying to be an expert, just satisfying my curiosities without going over my head. Almost any topic you could think of is presented very well. With recommendations for further reading if you're still thirsty.

Although the book is very informative, I disagree with Blackmore on her assertion that the self, our personal identity, is just an illusion. I believe that the self is a product of our genetic inheritance and the environment in which we were raised. That being said though, I found the book informative, and well worth reading.

If you are interested in the topic of consciousness this book is just the ticket. It is a wonderful compendium of the opinions and theories of the foremost minds in the field from the scientific and philosophical angles. Excellent book and fascinating reading. Valuable in numerous ways, one of which is the insights into the minds of all these luminaries through direct conversation with them. A must read for anyone interested in consciousness.

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