

What about Consciousness?

Is it important? Of course it is, I hear you protest! It's said to be the essence of our mental experience without which we would not exist – or not know we existed, anyway. But then the question of what it is and where it comes from becomes what am I and where did I come from? For **everyday mind** stuff I choose not to go there. To be aware of one's own existence is indeed a **wondrous** experience, but I think that puts its underlying process in the realm of the **unknown**. What we deal with in daily life is the **conscious part** of our mind as it relates to the larger subconscious part. We can learn a bit about how they work together – **story** and **affect** – creating our aliveness every day. That guides us in the use of our mind, but the question of what makes that conscious part happen in the way it does still eludes us.

A common question about consciousness is: do other beings have it too? Most people are comfortable sharing it with their cat or dog or even the mouse in the garden, but what about a mosquito or a snail or the invisible bacterium in your gut? If you've read anything about the **octopus** with its amazing social behaviour, including with humans, you couldn't possibly leave them out. *The Soul of the Octopus - A Surprising Exploration into the Wonder of Consciousness* by Sy Montgomery is one of several interesting books about this.

And if you've read *The Hidden Life of Trees - What They Feel, How They Communicate* by Peter Wohlleben you'll know how incredibly social **trees** are, communicating with one another all the time. In a forest they have a 'wood-wide-web' whereby fungi in the soil connect their roots into networks. They appear to care for one another, exchanging nutrients if they are needed somewhere else, alerting other trees to an insect attack by sending chemicals through the air. They need one another just as we do and, accordingly, trees that become isolated live shorter lives.

So, as a biologist for whom **mind is life in all its forms**, I've never felt comfortable with the idea that the experience of being conscious is simply produced within our incredible human brain. I know the brain is a major player in the process, but it can't create a mind on its own. If you've seen the Pixar-animated movie *Inside Out* you might disagree – there are five delightful, different coloured, little characters in there (called joy, sadness, anger, fear and disgust) that interact to make your life happen. The Disney folk deserve credit for drawing attention to the influence of subconscious emotions on our experience, but they don't explain how our mind works.

The two books I wanted to feature this week have very similar names. *Out of Our Heads - Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* by Alva Noë (2010) and *Out of My Head - On the Trail of Consciousness* by Tim Parks (2018). The first is a very well-written scientific book by a Californian professor of both philosophy and cognitive science. The second is a more personal narrative – a story-teller's encounter with different theories of mind – and I couldn't put it down once I started reading it. Tim Parks is a British novelist (*Europa, In Extremis*, etc.) and professor of literature who lives in Italy.

His book came about because he was paid to attend (and write an assessment of) a conference in Heidelberg where neuroscientists and theologians were exploring links between science and religion. Fittingly, there are no conclusions from the conference in the book. It's a witty and engaging description of his experience of being there, interviewing some key scientists and, discussing it all with his new, much younger, girlfriend.

The scientists he met were **Sabina Pauen**, who measures electrical impulses in the brains of babies when they first start to think, the esteemed psychiatrist/philosopher **Thomas Fuchs**, and **Hannah Monyer**, whose high-tech experiments monitor neural activity in the brains of mice as they ‘compute information’ about different smells they encounter. He is respectful, but also quite mischievous in his interpretation of what their research actually tells us.

Actually, his closest confidante during the trip (apart from his girlfriend) is an Italian friend, **Riccardo Manzotti**, who has caused a stir in the world of mind science with his *Spread Mind* theory that locates consciousness outside our bodies in the physical world. This is also called Mind-Object Identity Theory. You can explore it for yourself on the internet and draw your own conclusions, which the book leaves delightfully hanging in the air.

The restaurant cuisine of Heidelberg is detailed nicely in this book. At one point Manzotti writes on the back of a pizza placemat the letters N, O, and P, being the three main ‘models’ of how the mind works. I mentioned these back in Blog #5 of this series. He said: your experience of this apple is ‘red, round and applish,’ right. So what creates it? Is it: N for neural activity, O for the object itself, or P for the process of interaction between your brain and the apple? You might recall that, as an Enactivist, I favour the idea of the connectedness between us and it as the best explanation of the process of mind, such that **what we do enacts our mental experience**. Manzotti says he used to think that way, but now he believes it has to be O, the object itself, where the consciousness experience is produced. Consciousness is a physical phenomenon present in everything outside of ourselves – we just feel that we manufactured it in our own mind. It is real, but not neurally or physiologically produced by us in the first place.

So how important is it to know this? Does it really matter? My own experience of learning about the mind was motivated by my desire to be less lonely, less unhappy, less anxious and less depressed than I was in my mid-twenties. I found a combination of spirituality and mind science that has enriched my life enormously. The question I ask myself now is: am I **using my mind** in the best way I can? To answer this I draw upon scientific explanations of the **story-creating** part of my mind that carries my meaning, the primary **emotions** I was born with that propel my passage through life, and the **feelings** that lie in between the two and generate the present-moment **meaning** I need to live well. The science is incomplete and the mysteries are fascinating, but what we learn can be applied to our **everyday mind**. Just as trying to fly to the moon spins off some new knowledge that is useful in our lives, so our quest to understand consciousness triggers snippets of practical meaning that we can personalise and use every day.

In an Afterword Tim Parks writes a useful piece of advice to the reader. He says: refer everything you are told about consciousness to your own **experience**, don’t be too wowed or dazzled by new ideas, because the evidence you have from your own experience is ‘richer than any available in the neuroscientist’s laboratory.’

But, I would add – and he adds this as well – that doesn’t mean we should be complacent because we can **always** learn something more that is relevant to our own experience when we take the trouble to study the workings of our mind.