

Book Review

Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness

Alva Noë

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As the author notes at the beginning of the book,

we live in a time of growing enthusiasm for the brain. Perception, memory, pleasure or displeasure, intelligence, morality [...] the brain is supposed to be the organ responsible for all of it. It is common belief that even consciousness, the Holy Grail of philosophy and science, will soon become the object of a neural explanation. (p. XI)

As Patricia Churchland, one of the most important experts of philosophy of neuroscience, has noted: «the weight of evidence now implies that it is the brain, rather than some non-physical stuff, that feels, thinks, decides» (Churchland 2002, p. 1).

However, after decades of common endeavors on the part of neuroscientists, psychologists and philosophers, the only point that seems non-controversial about the role of the brain in making us consciousness – that is, the way it brings upon sensations, feelings, and subjectivity – is that we know nothing about it. This is what the American philosopher Alva Noë states in his book. In this book the author deals with the problem of consciousness, suggesting a radical solution: abandoning the assumption that, ever since Descartes, confines the mind within the brain.

Thus, the idea that the only properly scientific inquiry of consciousness is the one that identifies it in the events occurring within the nervous system collapses. Accordingly, Noë suggests a new thesis consisting in the claim that, in order to understand consciousness – meaning the fact that we think, feel and

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that a world manifests itself in front of us – we need to look at a larger system of which the brain is only element. Consciousness is not something the brain achieves on its own. Consciousness requires the joint operation of brain, body and world.

Two notable aspects surface from these lines: the first one concerns what has been sometimes called the “gap” or “explanatory blank” (which scientists haven’t yet been able to fill) between neural states and conscious experience. The central thesis of this book is to recognize that the brain, in itself, is not a source of experience or cognition. Experience and cognition are not bodily by-products. The second aspect sheds light on the new task of philosophy: in order to advance in the understanding of consciousness one must abandon the internal neural micro-analyses and look instead at how each of us, in his wholeness, carries forth his life in the surrounding world, with it and in response to it.

This is why Alva Noë tries to show the assumption that the current research in neuroscience is badly mistaken. Indeed, as the first chapter of the book shows, the brain (on its own) doesn’t explain what we are:

my consciousness now – with all its particular quality for me now – depends not only on what is happening in my brain but also on my history and my current position in and interaction with the wider world. (p. 4)

In light of these considerations, the author assumes a critical attitude towards all those theories, scientific or philosophical, that deal with “the problem of other minds” (the way we decide who or what is conscious) starting from a theoretical point of view. The attack is directed especially toward the theory of mind, accused of treating consciences like something private and hidden. There is an experiential and essentially practical reason for our faith in the existence of the minds of others. No “sane” person could take seriously the idea that our knowledge of other minds is merely hypothetical. However weak our proof that others possess a mind may be, it would be altogether absurd to think that because of this our commitment to the existence of others’ minds fails.

A simple example is enough: Noë notes, in this regard, that the relationship between the young child and whoever takes care of him is truly paradigmatic. There is no theoretical distance between the child and the caregiver. The child does not question whether his mother is an animated being or not. For the child the living consciousness of his mother is simply

something present, like her warmth or her breath; it is, in part, what animates their relationship. The mind of the mother and that of the child manifest each other in the direction that is made up of tenderness and cuddling. This is why, if one wants to speak of a commitment to the alive consciousness of others here, one should speak not of a cognitive commitment but, rather, of a practical commitment.

This statement sheds light on two very important aspects of Noë's provocative and stimulating theoretical suggestion: the first one is that like the child in his relationship to the mother, we are involved in one another; it's our living together that assures our living conscience of other people. The second consideration regards the clarification of the field of enquiry within which the philosopher's speculation occurs. Indeed, Noë shows that there is something paradoxical in the science of the mind: scientific knowledge requires a detached attitude, but the mind become object of study only if we assume a different attitude, that is, a much more involved one.

The example of the relationship between mother and young child illustrates well that the perspective that we need, from which the meaningful, non mechanical nature of conscious life can come into focus, is none other than the biological perspective. To understand an organism, we must take up a perspective on its life that is at once narrative and historical and also ecological. This shows that the question of consciousness arises for living beings and it arises for them because living beings exhibit at least primitive agency. To study mind, as with life itself, we need to keep the whole organism in its natural environmental setting if focus. Neuroscience matters, as does chemistry and physics. But from these lower-level or internal perspectives, our subject matter loses resolutions for us.

The aim of this book is therefore to convince the reader that there is something perverse in believing that we are our brain, that the world we have experience of is within us. We don't need to have the world inside us: we have access to the world that surrounds us; we are open to it. The idea according to which we are our brain is not something scientists have learnt; instead, it is a prejudice that they take from home into their laboratories.

Once any type of prejudice has collapsed, at the end of the book, Noë outlines a new conception of conscience: the substratum of our life and our experience is nothing but the world we live in. The entire world and the nature of our situation within it are the material of a theory of conscious life. In this story, the brain has the leading role, no doubt. But the task of the brain is not to

“generate” consciousness. Consciousness is not this type of thing. Consciousness is not a thing. This is what a genuine biological approach to the study of human mind and human nature teaches us. So if we want to understand consciousness we must turn our backs on the orthodox conception according to which consciousness is something that happens within us and we must make progress in the creation of an authentic ecological theory of ourselves. This is why, it is now clear that consciousness is achieved in action, by us, thanks to our situation in and access to a world we know around us.

Thus this book – rich of reflections and argumentations, lucid and systematic in examining (and confuting) the different positions on the subject – don’t fail to make readers reflect and to provoke discussions really helping to understand in which way the encounter between our brain and our experiences allow us to become the people we are.

REFERENCES

Churchland, P. S. (2002). *Brain-Wise: Studies in Neurophilosophy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.