

Preface

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Finding Consciousness in the Brain: A neurocognitive approach

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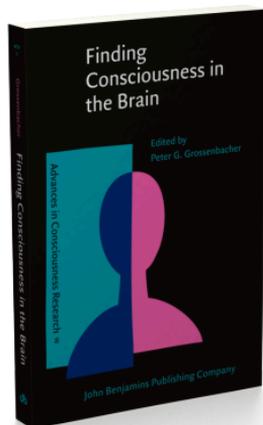
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Preface

In intellectual discourse, consciousness often gets treated as an abstract thing. That approach is very misleading! In fact, *there is nothing more immediate and directly real than conscious experience*. It is the act of referring to our experience with the indirectness of concepts and words that renders consciousness into something abstract. For this reason, it makes sense to set aside many abiding philosophical and linguistic concerns in order to focus more directly on the conscious experience embodied in the sensitive and responsive nervous systems of human beings.

Why is there consciousness at all? Although ever-mounting evidence makes it clear that the brain's neural systems play a vital role in consciousness, it remains difficult to understand precisely why conscious experience subjectively feels ("from the inside") the way it does. For some reason, each human nervous system has a point of view from which many life events, large and small, are held in conscious regard. That is, there is an appreciation for, noticing of, or personal response to events transpiring within the brain. As to the question "Why is there consciousness?" — this is a poser on par with questions such as "Why is there matter?" Although such *Why* questions may be the first to come to mind, they are not easily answered. On the other hand, *How* questions are more easily addressed by the slow, piece-meal methods of science. Especially in the case of consciousness, it may be something of a mistake to ask "Why?" without first answering "How?"

How is it, then, that each of us is conscious? Conscious experience intimately depends on activity in the nervous system, an amazingly intricate universe of intercommunicating cells. We must take heed that an unstructured approach to studying the conscious brain would today encounter a bewildering array of facts about consciousness and facts about brains. Without the benefit of fundamental principles, an untutored survey might encounter only sparse links between these psychological and neurobiological findings. It is these mind-brain links which establish basic findings on the nature of conscious brain activity that constitute the backbone of this book.

When a mind wanders, where can it go? The entire mental landscape may be nothing more than the dynamically shifting patterns of activity in networks of living neurons in the central nervous system *as experienced from the inside*. This is the understanding presently emerging from several decades of increasingly detailed studies which link mental processes, including conscious phenomenology, with the corresponding activity of living neural systems.

Recognizing a new opportunity for better understanding the physical basis of mental activity, educational and research institutions have recently begun to train a new generation of scientists to think equally in terms of mind and brain. These cognitive neuroscientists mix two scientific strands, psychology and neurobiology, into a joint investigation into the neural basis of mind, which includes conscious experience. Exemplifying this new tradition, the contributors to this volume are researchers who have themselves conducted pioneering studies into mental functions of the brain.

With regard to the variety among the possible contents of conscious awareness, this book focuses primarily on awareness of the physical world, the bodily self and its surrounding environment. Without much concern for the conscious experience of recollecting past experience, we focus more on the sensory processes which establish the moment-to-moment experience of immediate physical and mental presence. Regardless of culture or language, every awake human being has this sort of conscious experience. Human sensory experience is thought to share much in common with other mammalian species, and in part because of this shared evolutionary heritage, sensory (and motor) systems are the best understood systems in the brain. Against this backdrop, the contributors to this book pursue the following questions:

1. Which parts of the nervous system are accessible to consciousness? That is, which subsystems of the brain process the information pertaining to the contents of which we are aware?
2. Which subsystems of the brain direct the mind to the next focus of attention, selecting from multiple potential contents the ones which will most occupy awareness?
3. Which neural subsystems lend structure to the current contents of consciousness within a framework of energy and emotion?
4. How has the human brain evolved to sustain conscious experience?

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