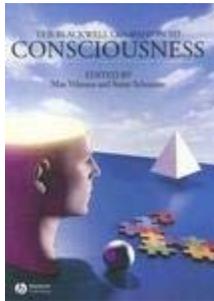


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Essential Topics in the Philosophical and Scientific Study of Consciousness

A Review of

The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness

by Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Eds.)

Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 768 pp. ISBN 978-1-4051-2019-7 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4051-6000-1 (paperback). \$99.95, hardcover; \$49.95, paperback

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In the last few decades, research into consciousness has enjoyed something of a renaissance. Scholars trained in neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and other areas have turned their attention to the study of consciousness, changing the field dramatically. Currently, academics discuss consciousness from multiple vantage points, including philosophy, the cognitive sciences, neuroscience, the social sciences, medicine, the physical sciences, and the arts and humanities. This excellent collection reflects these developments. With 55 resourceful essays, *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness* proffers some of the finest recent work in the study of consciousness.

Max Velmans and Susan Schneider have organized the book into five parts. These include Problems of Consciousness, The Domain of Consciousness, Some Contemporary Theories of Consciousness, Some Major Topics in the Philosophy of Consciousness, and Major Topics in the Science of Consciousness. As these sections indicate, the book's emphasis is upon studies of consciousness as they have developed in the West over the last century. However, there are also essays on more ancient traditions of consciousness studies that have developed in the East.

This book has several attractive features. Most of the contributors are well known and have written previously on the topics they discuss. To name just a few, John Searle offers "Biological Naturalism," David Chalmers contributes articles on "The Hard Problem of Consciousness" and "Naturalistic Dualism," and Jaegwon Kim discusses "The Causal Efficacy of Consciousness." Carefully, these experienced authors outline the debates about particular issues and define areas for future research. Notably missing is a contribution from Daniel Dennett, though Susan Schneider does discuss his work in "Daniel Dennett on the Nature of Consciousness."

In Part I, Problems of Consciousness, there are two essays that discuss some background to current research and controversies in the field. In addition to discussing some of the enduring philosophical problems surrounding consciousness, they also describe the ways in which empirical studies of consciousness developed in psychology and related sciences. What would have been helpful, though,

is a developed discussion of the ways in which scientists interested in the field of consciousness studies can plan and implement research designs to adequately address the philosophical problems of consciousness.

In Part II, *The Domain of Consciousness*, the authors start with the discussion "Origins and Extent of Consciousness." Herein one may find essays discussing the forms of consciousness that have been the subject of investigation and speculation. Topics discussed range from consciousness in young infants and nonhuman animals to machine consciousness. Next, the topic of the essays turns to "Some Varieties of Conscious Experience," in which various essays are included that deal with conscious experience in human adults. Here essays deal "both with the states of the brain that condition its presence or absence in waking, sleeping, dreaming, and coma, and with some of the forms (both normal and abnormal) that consciousness takes within those states" (p. 2). The editors then introduce the chapter "Breakdowns and the Unity of Consciousness." The focus of these essays is upon some of the major dissociations of consciousness that have emerged from neurological syndromes. Although the editors include discussions across the life span, their discussion would have been aided by first offering a detailed discussion of a fundamental and commonly used notion of *consciousness* such as that found in Thomas Nagel's famous "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" (Nagel, 1974).

In Part III, *Some Contemporary Theories of Consciousness*, the editors turn to contemporary theories on the nature of consciousness. The editors do a nice job of setting up this section with David Chalmers's "The Hard Problem of Consciousness." This essay sets the tone of this section, which involves the "hard problem" of elucidating why persons have qualitative phenomenal experiences. Chalmers and others contrast this "hard problem" with the "easy problems" of explicating discriminative ability, information integration, attentional focus, and so forth. One may understand "easy problems" as being less difficult because their solution requires only the specification of a mechanism by which a given function is performed. The distinction of "hard problem" involves the fact that these problems persist even after we have explained the performance of all the relevant functions.

There are first-rate philosophers, however, who do not agree that there is a hard problem. For example, Daniel Dennett (1996) felt that Chalmers's efforts to divide discussion of consciousness into "hard problems" and "easy problems" do not make a useful contribution to research. In fact, Dennett asserted that this is a major misdirection of attention. As mentioned earlier, this section would have been enhanced by a contribution from Daniel Dennett instead of a discussion of his work by Susan Schneider in "Daniel Dennett on the Nature of Consciousness."

Part IV, *Some Major Topics in the Philosophy of Consciousness*, deals with some of the topics that currently attract special interest among professional philosophers. The editors chose these essays because they bring together key issues in the philosophical aspects of consciousness. Much of this philosophical work draws upon results from scientific studies. Such scientific investigations of consciousness have important potential applications to traditional philosophical problems in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Part V, *Major Topics in the Science of Consciousness*, focuses on current studies of consciousness that attempt to be less philosophical in nature. According to the editors, the majority of contemporary consciousness studies are empirical. As a result, the editors have heavily weighted the book with such essays. The editors grouped the essays according to investigative approach: "Topics in the Cognitive Psychology of Consciousness"; "Topics in the Neuroscience of Consciousness"; and "First-Person Contributions to the Science of Consciousness." Although these essays hold out optimism for a

philosophically oriented science of consciousness, in my view, the intersections between philosophy and the sciences of consciousness reside primarily in less significant issues, conceptual questions arising in the sciences themselves.

Although Velmans and Schneider have compiled an excellent array of essays in the *Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, their text might have been improved by increased discussion of the important role emotions and physical environments play in consciousness. While the editors did include Jaak Panksepp's essay "Affective Consciousness," the book would have been enhanced by the work of a number of other researchers who are now investigating such issues through evaluation of the brain mechanisms underlying affective processing in normal individuals and persons with affective disorders (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 2000; Rolls, 1999; Saarni, 1993). A science of consciousness that takes seriously the impact of affect and mood upon representation and computation may better explain epistemic access and justification. While the decomposition of cognitive processes into more basic constituents has been extremely successful, the inclusion of affect may help cognitive science develop a more focused understanding of normal and pathological functioning (Davidson, Jackson, & Kalin, 2000).

In Conclusion

Max Velmans and Susan Schneider's work *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness* includes multiple essays by well-known authors. Both students and seasoned members of the consciousness studies community will enjoy this anthology. Students will find the compilation a first-rate introduction to the study of consciousness. Seasoned members of the consciousness studies community will want to see how prominent authors understand the debates in their field. For psychologist faculty, this is a rich resource for lectures and discussions. In my opinion, however, a more fully developed discussion of the structures involved in affective and social aspects of consciousness would have aided the text. In conclusion, this book is a valuable guide to the extraordinary recent developments in the study of consciousness. It should serve as one of the standard reference texts for years to come.

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