

Susan Blackmore and the perspective of consciousness as an illusion

British psychologist Susan Blackmore recently published a book, *Counsciousness. A Very Short Introduction*¹ in which, following very closely Daniel Dennett's footsteps tries to convince us that consciousness and our self are illusory.

Conscious experience is what is lived, with more or less deep, in the subjective dimension of each of us. It concerns first of all sensations and perceptions, as well as feelings and emotions, but also includes other contents which refer to the domain of thought. And the self?

The self is an image that gradually emerges as a result of repeated experiences, mainly in relation to the activities implemented by the individual. There would not be a self if we were not subjects of experience, that is if we were not able to experience first hand - in a conscious way - a large number and variety of experiences.

In any case, conscious experience, and the self that it implies, are absolutely central phenomena in our existence. Any attempt to explain them should have as its starting point the forms and ways in which they are experienced subjectively. These represent the original data, or - if you prefer - the "facts" with which the function of consciousness is revealed to us. Maybe one day we will be obliged to change such a setting, but this should be done following the discovery of new phenomena in conflict with it, and not from the idea that conscious experience is incompatible with the current scientific paradigms.

However this is precisely the motivation behind the operation undertaken by Blackmore. In fact, we see her to emphasize how the characteristics of mind are far from current scientific models². In this way she prepares the ground for the next step, where she presents us a long sample of cases in which consciousness deceives us, showing contents that don't correspond to reality. The ultimate goal of this strategy is to lead us, little by little, to doubt the very reality of conscious experience.

The path of arguments is about the following: if we are subject to a number of perceptual illusions, if we often do not notice certain details of environment or we are like blind in front of some changes happening around us, what prevent us from thinking that conscious experience can be, itself, an illusion?

It is important to note that Blackmore never categorically and clearly affirms that conscious experience or our self don't exist. This inevitably would expose her to serious conceptual problems from which she would be difficult to come out. She chooses instead the strategy of ambiguity, trying to promote her idea in an underground way, in order to allow an escape in front of possible criticism. She starts with "explaining" us that illusion is not something that doesn't exist, but something that is not like it appears³. Applied to consciousness, this view should lead us to replace

the idea that consciousness doesn't exist, with the one (apparently more moderate) that consciousness is different from it seems.⁴

How is consciousness like, then? What do we mean when we speak of conscious experience according the perspective outlined by Blackmore?

In her book, we don't find other characterization of awareness, that is compatible with her arguments, but the one that reduces awareness to an illusion which, for the sake of scientific progress, we would try to get rid of. In this sense, I challenge anyone to prove that the illusion of consciousness may be something different from non-existence.

About our self, Blackmore acknowledges that each of us has the overwhelming feeling of existing: «When I think of my conscious experiences, it seems to me there is someone who feels them. When I think of my body movements, it seems to me there is someone who performs them. When I think of the difficult decisions of my life, it seems to me that someone should take them»⁵. But – Blackmore notices - «science doesn't need an inner self»⁶. Therefore it is reasonable to look at our self as «a mere convention, a name given to a set of elements»⁷. This means «to admit that whenever I seem to exist, this is only a temporary fiction and not the “me” that seemed to exist a moment ago, or last week, or last year».⁸

I let the readers decide whether this way of presenting the illusion of self does not simply represent a different form - perhaps more veiled - to assert the non-existence of our self.

Why is it difficult to deny the existence of conscious experience or of our inner self? In consciousness, what appears (or seems) can only coincide with the reality of experience. If I'm in a certain state of mind, if I feel any pain, if I hear any noises or see any lights, it may be that they don't correspond to anything real that is objectively verifiable by the methods of science. It happens with dreams and hallucinations, for example. But it is impossible to deny they are real to me in the form of first-person experiences. Denying their existence or affirming they are illusory as someone's experiences is a real contradiction in terms.

I don't want to venture here in difficult philosophical speculations about the possibility that somebody has experience - some faithful representations of reality or completely illusory - in a totally impersonal way, ie in absence of any entity that experiences them. I prefer to turn my attention to other critical aspects of Blackmore's proposal which are much easier to uncover in their unsustainability.

There are two important theses which Blackmore openly says to adhere to: the one of consciousness as intrinsic brain process and the one that considers our self as a “bundle of perceptions”. According the first of these theses, consciousness would be inseparable from the complexity of brain processes, in the sense that any creature which has evolved to develop intelligence and thought, to be able of perceptions, feelings and emotions, must necessarily be conscious. This is obviously intended, in Blackmore's view, such as susceptibility to the dangerous illusion of being conscious: “All creatures like us, who can see, feel, think, love, or enjoy a good wine, inevitably end up believing themselves conscious”.⁹

This view of considering awareness, apparently acceptable, in fact conceals a serious deception. It seems to be plausible because, in its own statement, it incorporates just what it would like to eliminate from real world, that is conscious experience. Can you have emotions which do not involve your way of perceiving yourself? Can you fall in love and not be aware of it? Can you think of something without knowing it? Can you enjoy a good wine without experiencing its taste?

When Blackmore says that consciousness - or rather, the illusion of being conscious - is inherent to the level of complexity needed for the skills listed by her, she is not talking about properties or characteristics that could be reproduced in a specifically designed machine. She refers

instead to the mental aspects belonging specifically to humans and, as such, often associated with awareness.

No artificial system created to date ever showed himself able to feel emotions or love, to think which it is not a simple data processing based on predefined algorithms, to taste any food or drink which is not limited to a mere analysis of components. It is clear that a creature (or a hypothetical artificial system) able “to do all the things that men usually do”¹⁰, can’t but be conscious; however this happens only because the possession of these skills requires the existence of consciousness, even if we can’t explain the way and why this occurs.

A basically similar speech can be done regarding our self. The hypothesis it comes from a large number and variety of perceptions and sensations may also be accepted, but as long as we recognize that these perceptions and sensations are accompanied with some form of conscious experience, and it is not instead of simple impersonally data acquired from environment or from our body. It is not conceivable that a quantity, even huge, of information - visual, auditory, tactile - gathered in a completely automatic way, as only a machine would be able to do, can lead to some image of itself, lived in the form of conscious experience. Our self may not reflect the image that each of us develops in the course of existence, but surely that image cannot be the result of neutral information, not related to any kind of conscious experience.

The theory of consciousness as an illusion, as well as the theory of the self as a bundle of perceptions, are misleading because they hide inside them exactly what they would deny existence. They consider certain characteristics of mind as impersonal and objective aspects of reality, ignoring that these characteristics are themselves the bearers of the same experience which is causing most of the problems we face today.

This kind of deceptions is however essential to go on supporting certain positions which aim is to focus on the reasons of scientific method rather than the primary reality of our inner feelings.

NOTES

(1) Susan Blackmore, , *Consciousness. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005; It. tr., *Coscienza*, Codice Edizioni, Torino, 2007. The page numbers listed in the following citations refer to the Italian edition.

(2) *Ibid.*, pag. 5, pag. 45, and pag. 47.

(3) *Ibid.*, pag. 55.

(4) *Ibid.*, pag. 56.

(5) *Ibid.*, pag. 73.

(6) *Ibid.*, pag. 74.

(7) *Ibid.*, pag. 75.

(8) *Ibid.*, pag. 89.

(9) *Ibid.*, pagg. 12-15.

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(10) *Ibid.*, pag. 12.

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