

What is it like to be a predictive mental model

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Where did we go wrong? After three decades, the field of consciousness studies is still largely mired in the hard problem, assuming that consciousness ‘arises from’ or is ‘generated by’ the brain, and seeking the NCCs. Perhaps the mistake was asking ‘What is it like to be a bat?’ instead of, ‘What is it like to be a bat’s model of the world?’ Unlike Nagel’s question, this question can be answered. It is like whatever a model describes.

If we reject the conventional assumption that physical entities such as bats, people, or machines are conscious and instead say that all the models they construct are conscious, there is no mind/brain split or explanatory gap.

What are these models? Predictive processing theory describes the brain as a hierarchical system in which each level builds models to predict the likely next input from the level below, from simple, fleeting models in early sensory processing to dynamic models of objects, people, and eventually a self. This means that we are models in a controlled hallucination based on predictions in a Bayesian brain.

In shifting how we think about ‘what it is like to be’, this approach provides new directions for research. Instead of searching in vain for the NCCs, neuroscience can investigate how these predictive models change when, for example, anaesthetics block thalamocortical loops, when deep meditation or psychedelics weaken long-range self-related connections, or when their return explains the feeling of ‘waking up’ in lucid dreams.