Review of *Noises from the Darkroom: The Science and Mystery of the Mind* by Guy Claxton, Aquarian, 1994. £8.99 paperback, 276pp, index.

Reviewed for *New Scientist* by Susan Blackmore September 1994

We've got it all wrong about ourselves. This is the thrust of Claxton's witty, readable and somewhat disturbing book about selves and consciousness. The darkroom of the title is the whole brain-mind system, and our personal consciousness, far from being a bright light that can look inside the box, is merely the noise emerging from it.

We may think that "we" make choices and decisions, but in fact the whole clever system is doing it - as well as constructing "us". We may think that we think our thoughts, when in fact they think us. We may think we created our language, but according to Claxton it created us. Even our sense of being in control of our own bodies may be more a matter of prediction than true control.

The power of Claxton's book is that he traces carefully, and with rich and beguiling imagery, the way that biology and language have conspired to construct "the conceit and the conspiracy" of a conscious self that is in charge.

Many writers have struggled over the question of why consciousness has evolved. If consciousness exists, so the argument goes, then it must have a function, and the functions suggested have included the social (consciousness helps us to predict the actions of others), the computational (consciousness is the top of a computing hierarchy) and the teleological (consciousness actually drives evolution). Claxton will have none of this. For him consciousness did not emerge for a purpose but came along with the brain's developing ability to distribute attention - to react quickly to emergencies by diverting its limited energy resources. Consciousness is a useless by-product, of no more functional significance than the redness of liver or the whiteness of milk. Consciousness is an epiphenomenon.

Why, then, should we all get it wrong? This is the central question the book seeks to answer. Claxton suggests that when intelligent mind-brain systems evolved they needed ways to assess their own abilities, refer to themselves and others, and describe their own behaviour. This meant acquiring language and a sense of self - but a sense of self can no more look into the brain that created it than a television picture can

look into the workings of the television. Moreover, the sense of self got out of hand. It began to describe itself as the "ghost in the machine", and having created this illusion it had to keep on bolstering it - "I" must keep owning things, doing things and controlling things in order to prove that I exist, even though this creates a society of frantically active, greedy and unhappy people.

There is a solution, says Claxton. We are quite capable of clearing away the fog of ignorance and stupidity "if we choose" - but here he fails to extricate himself from the trap of his own language - for who is to choose to get out of the illusion? I suspect that Claxton is hinting at an answer but if so he never makes it clear.

Noises from the Darkroom reflects the inexorable progress of today's materialist science. The more we understand of the workings of the brain, the less room there is for a mysterious little person inside who directs the action. As philosopher Dan Dennett points out, there is no theatre inside the brain where "we" watch our mental images; or as neurophilosopher Pat Churchland argues, there are only neurons and their connections. Francis Crick's recent "Astonishing Hypothesis" is that our joys, sorrows, ambitions and even free will are nothing more than the behaviour of those neurons.

What perhaps distinguishes Claxton from any of these is that he does not shy away from the religious and mystical. He is no fan of New Age consciousness-raising, nor even of much of psycho-therapy, and he cuttingly accuses those proponents of the "new paradigm" who seek to explain consciousness in terms of quantum mechanics, of cheap jokes and conceptual vandalism. Yet his proffered solution to the problems we have created for ourselves is essentially a Buddhist one - to cultivate mindfulness - to use attention in a way that strips the Self System of its illusion of control.

Susan Blackmore is not sure that her particular brain-mind system wants to drop its illusion of "me" but this enjoyable book makes a compelling case that it would be more honest and much wiser if it did so.