Demolishing the Self

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 the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* by Susan Blackmore, Department of Psychology, University of the West of England, Bristol, BS16 2JP. January 1995

Do you believe, deep down, that you exist? Do you feel as though "you" make the decisions and run "your" life? Above all do you think that "you" are conscious? If so, according to Guy Claxton's latest book, you have got it all wrong. (And if you are already getting confused about you, "you" and yourself, read on!).

"Noises from the Darkroom" tackles head on the problems of self, language and consciousness and argues powerfully that we have bogus ideas about all of them. Drawing on personal experience, the reports of mystics, and on cognitive science and psychology, Claxton demolishes our deepest misconceptions.

Of course, he is not the first to do so. His ideas have much in common with Dan Dennett's demolition of the "Cartesian Theatre" - that mental screen in the mind, with its audience of one, that simply does not exist - with the insights of countless mystics and with Buddhist thought and its concept of anatta, or "no-self".

Dennett himself claims no interest in Buddhism and appears to have come to very similar ideas from a completely different direction. Many others have done so too and Claxton does not deal with them all, for example he might have used Parfit's helpful distinction between "ego" and "bundle" theories of the self. Nevertheless, Claxton wins over all of them in having written a witty, provocative and eminently readable book and in going beyond the destruction to point to a new way of living. He has a way with words and of using analogies and images that lures the reader into taking seriously his difficult and disturbing ideas. Open the book almost anywhere and you will find something challenging, and yet understandable.

The starting point is that we think we can look into our own minds and know them. Not so, says Claxton. The "Darkroom" of the mind must remain forever dark, for our thoughts and experiences are not glimpses of its operation but just the "noises" emanating from it. Or, to use another of his analogies, consciousness no more shows us the workings of the mind than a television picture shows us the workings of the television.

This seems to put consciousness well and truly in its place. Consciousness is not the controller, the centre or the prime mover of action. This is fascinating, given

the current enthusiasm for consciousness. For Claxton is flying in the face of popular culture and the New Age, in which consciousness is exalted, raised, and chased after as the source of knowledge and spirituality. On an intellectual level, too, there is an upsurge of interest in consciousness; indeed this journal is just one example. Many people who are concerned with life's deepest mysteries look to the understanding of consciousness for answers - but if Claxton is right, they are looking in quite the wrong place and he is prepared to say so.

He is at his toughest when confronting attempts to explain consciousness in terms of quantum mechanics. It is just a "cheap joke" to compare human free will with quantum indeterminacy. We need different levels of explanation - brain is builder language for one part of the body, while "mind" is designer language for the functions the brain carries out. To confuse the language of quarks with the language of consciousness is, he declares, just conceptual vandalism.

For Claxton, if we could understand consciousness then we would be close to doing away with it altogether - at least we would have to do away with our false notions of consciousness as "doing" anything or existing independently of the biological system; a system that gives rise to all the illusions about self and consciousness.

Descartes takes much of the blame here, for his unwarranted assumption that if there is thinking, there must be someone doing it. In Darkroom-speak, as in Buddhism, there are thoughts but no-one who thinks, actions but no-one who acts, fears but no-one who is afraid.

This must be the hardest idea of all to accept, and yet this book explains it so well and approaches it through so many different ideas and analogies, that its terror begins to melt away. Instead we begin to ask different questions. If consciousness and self are not what we thought they are, why not? How did we get this wrong idea about it all? In other words we are right into that vexed question of the evolution of self and consciousness, and to a large extent this is what the book is all about.

Unlike Crook and Humphrey (who link consciousness to the development of self-observation in social animals) or Ornstein (who gives it the power of deliberate control), Claxton identifies consciousness with "transient states of super-activation". Imagine an animal that meets with an emergency. There is a man with a spear or a hovering animal-eater overhead. All systems must be instantly switched to deal with it and it is this state of disruption that gives rise to consciousness. This began as a useful skill, not used too often, but in modern humans has become overused, leading to a

state of almost permanent low-grade emotional distress. In other words consciousness has become a burden rather than the glorious achievement of a great species.

Our sense of self came about through the body image we must construct in order to control behaviour, the vantage point given by our senses and our knowledge of our own abilities - that is the abilities of the body-brain-mind. Then along came language. Language turns the self into a thing and gives it attributes and powers. We begin to seek "good" attributes and social approval for this thing. We speak as though there is someone inside doing the acting, thinking and choosing. But of course there is no thing - only a body-brain-mind system that speaks as though there is. The language that is so powerful for so many uses, utterly misleads us here. We end up thinking - whatever science tells us to the contrary - that "we" are something separate from the system. We say "I chose the fillet steak" and assume there was a little "me" inside who was responsible for the choice.

The basic features of this mythical "I" are separateness, autonomy and persistence. The false story we tell about ourselves leads us to fight to protect the mythical self - even at the cost of physical harm, and to be embarrassed and fearful of death. He might have added that it leads to almost ubiquitous myths about life after death and the survival of consciousness.

So Claxton's answer to the evolution question is that consciousness did not evolve for a purpose and is an epiphenomenon of the development of complex animals. It is a product of the mind of no more significance than any other. What began as a mechanism for responding to emergencies has become a mechanism for constructing dubious stories about a mythical self.

What I don't understand is how consciousness, or awareness, can a product of the mind, comparable to any other. After all, the very reason we struggle so much with it, is that it doesn't feel that way. The whole problem is that of subjectivity. By consciousness we mean the way it feels, or Nagel's "what it is like" to be something. To equate consciousness with particular states of activation, or with particular uses of attention, does not seem, to me, to get at the heart of the problem.

Nor do I understand how consciousness can be a mechanism in evolution and a purposeless epiphenomenon at the same time. These may be just the linguistic slips inevitable in discussing such a problematic subject or they may reveal that Claxton has failed to push his own ideas far enough. What is clear is that he is deeply undermining the comfortable illusion that the conscious self is in charge, and blaming this illusion for the mess we are in.

The final part of the book is devoted to getting out of the mess. If the illusion of self and consciousness has become a heavy burden how can it be dropped?

Sometimes it simply drops itself, as in spontaneous mystical experience. If mystical insight is about dropping the false sense of self, then several obscure notions begin to make more sense; the medieval Cloud of Unknowing, the dazzling darkness of God, or even the prayer "thy will be done" - for if "I" stop exerting "my" will the grip of the false self must surely be lessened.

William James, a century ago, pointed out that mystical experience is not so much invoking higher powers or other realms but losing, albeit briefly, one's own identity. If this is the key to it all, Claxton has prepared the ground well, and also makes it quite clear that the task ahead is not to banish the Pretender from the court of the brain altogether, but to restore it to its rightful place. He is probably attempting something as bold as trying to understand mysticism as a phenomenon of mind.

Of course not everyone falls into the light of mystical insight, but there are ways to drop the false self. Claxton briefly considers psychotherapy (which merits a couple of pages), and shocks to the system of various kinds, but ends up advocating the Buddhist practices of meditation and mindfulness in which he has much experience. The Buddha himself confused people deeply by talking about self and no-self in one breath. But even such classic Buddhist paradoxes becomes clearer in Claxton's analysis. It is not that there is no self - there is of course the temporary biological reality of body-brain-mind - rather the self is not what we thought it was. Mindfulness, something like being in the present moment, gradually wears away at the false sense of a permanent and powerful self.

But what is mindfulness? Claxton hints at the way it changes attention but takes this no further. He rejects intellectual routes to insight, and yet surely seeing through the illusion by reading his book could be a start to destroying the trap couldn't it? He suggests that kindness and wisdom are not to be sought by a mind ruled by its self-system but emerge gradually as the false sense of self is dropped. This fits with my own experience of Buddhist practice - but what a lot of questions it raises. Who or what is doing the dropping? Could we say the biological system is dropping the sense of self? And do we need a new language for talking about the self? Here I was left asking so many questions.

Still, that is what a good book should do. I have read much of this book many times, have recommended it to my students, and will no doubt have to read it again when they start to ask me difficult questions. But this is one book I won't mind having to read again.

Footnotes

1. Dennett,D. (1991). *Consciousness Explained.* Boston, Little, Brown.
2. Parfit,D. (1987) Divided minds and the nature of persons. In: Blakemore, C. and Greenfield, S. (Ed) *Mindwaves*, Oxford, Blackwell 19-26.
3. Crook, J.H. (1980) *The Evolution of Human Consciousness.* Oxford, Clarendon Press.
4. Humphrey,N. (1986) *The Inner Eye* London, Faber and Faber
5. Ornstein,R. (1991) *The Evolution of Consciousness.* New York, Touchstone.
6. Nagel,T. (1974) What is it like to be a bat? *Philosophical Review, **83,*** 435-450. or in *Mortal Questions,* 1979, Cambridge University Press.