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

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The darkroom is the whole baffling concoction of body and mind and consciousness is just the noises emanating from it - this is the thesis of Guy Claxton's clever, witty and insightful new book. Just as the noises cannot look inside the room and understand it, so we cannot look into our own minds and understand them. Indeed Claxton goes much further than this and suggests that we are completely misled about our own nature.

It is not we who think, rather our thoughts think us. It is not we who make our language, rather it makes us. We may think that our conscious self is in charge - that "we" take the decisions, make the choices, cause the actions of our bodies and persist throughout a life-time. But in fact, he argues, the idea of a self is something constructed by clever brains as they evolved. The sense of self appeared when evolving primates developed language and needed to distinguish themselves from others. Similarly consciousness appeared when evolving systems had to find ways of redirecting attention, especially in crises. Consciousness itself has no function and is just a useless by-product - an epiphenomenon.

The problem now is that the idea of self has got out of hand. Initially a useful construct it has come to dominate the system so that people seek to own things, do things, or become things just to bolster the idea that they really exist - and this is what has produced a society of frantic activity, greed, disappointment and aggression. The solution, according to Claxton, is to get away from the rational and illusory self and closer to the essential mystery of the unconscious. One way to do this is by learning to redirect attention and methods such as meditation and mindfulness can help. Mystical and religious experiences are to be understood in terms of dropping the false idea of self rather than in terms of any separate spiritual realm.

This book contains not one word about psychic phenomena or the paranormal, in spite of being about "the science and mystery of the mind". Yet I thought it would interest SPR members because it shows how inexorably recent thinking in psychology and the neurosciences is moving away from the idea of a soul or spirit, or even any

kind of persisting self. And this is so, even in a book that tackles head on the nature of mystical and religious experience.

This tendency is clear in philosophy, for example in the work of Dan Dennett who has tried to demolish the idea of a "Cartesian Theatre" in which we watch our mental images or from which we direct operations. Neurophilosopher Patricia Churchland takes as a cardinal principle that there is no homunculus, or little person in the brain, who perceives, acts and so on - there are only neurons. And Nobel Laureate Francis Crick propounds his "Astonishing Hypothesis" that all of our joys and sorrows, our sense of self and free will are nothing other than the behaviour of those neurons. All this widens the gap between mainstream thought and the belief of many psychical researchers in a separate mind or soul, or in survival after death. For if there is no persisting self in life there can hardly be one to survive afterwards.

I suspect many psychical researchers will dislike Claxton's approach intensely. However, his book is well written, full of interesting ideas and delightful examples and it surely addresses those very questions that our founders first set out to explore - who am I? What am I here for? And what will happen when I die? Although he doesn't explicitly say so, I imagine his answer would be nothing.