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Deconstructing consciousness: a story of levels, perceptions, and interpretations

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Review of *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* by Anil Seth, Faber & Faber Ltd, 2021. 358 pp. ISBN 978-0-571033772-9 (paperback)

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Deconstructing consciousness: a story of levels, perceptions, and interpretations

The use of the word 'science' within the title of *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* sets the scene for the broad range of disciplines which underpin the contents of this book. No doubt a conscious choice, based on the topic of focus. Over four parts, split into 13 chapters, the reader is guided through various scientific and academic disciplines, with the potential contribution of each outlined. This includes reaching back to the ancient philosophers and foundational thinkers of psychology, taking the reader through mathematical modelling, and then into the emerging discourse around artificial intelligence. These concepts form the foundations which are built upon throughout the four sections, which include specific descriptions of individual pieces of research to broader theories which bring together collections of findings and ideas.

The structure of the book splits consciousness into: Level; Content; Self; and Other. These sections are clearly differentiated into a four-act play, with each chapter within describing a key part of the plot which together is the story of consciousness. The tone of these chapters includes a thorough and contemporary summary of the underpinning literature in the area, as well as the author's own contribution to this alongside their viewpoint on the literature outlined. This evolution through the historic, the contemporary, and the novel makes for an exciting read as you consider the progressions that have been made, and the unknowns of consciousness which remain but may one day be seen as common knowledge.

As a reader there were notable shifts in how the book was experienced. On the one hand reading this book, at times, led to connection with your own 'self' and therefore an experience of relating closely to what was being described. On the other hand, the book involved an experience of great distance from the material as you act as an observer to the outlining of a complex scientific discussion which was sometimes effortful to understand and thus connect with. Noticing this duality as a reader left me wondering about the opportunities and barriers for the author whilst they wrote this

book, through both being an academic in the field of consciousness as well as a person with their own conscious experience. Overall, it appears it is quite possible, for Anil Seth at least, to do this in a balanced way.

The marketing decisions of this book present it in a way that could be interpreted as communicating a level of accessibility which ultimately this book did not always achieve. Examples include 'Sunday Times Bestseller' alongside endorsements from celebrity names. In exploring the 'big questions' or the 'real problems' of consciousness, as this text puts it, the book can at times feel theoretically and mathematically deep as it draws upon such a wide range of voices and disciplines. Though, to quote directly from this text, "of course, this is not necessarily a bad thing: nobody said that solving consciousness should be simple" (p.60). However, this reality does lead to it being a book that required space and time to engage with and navigate through. Enjoyment of this book may also be supported by a capacity to read it at pace, as there were sections where occasional recaps of previously developed points would have brought clarity to the current discussion. This experience was especially present following stepping away from the book for a few days.

The writing is most accessible and impactful when the author utilizes examples and visualizations, rooted in real life situations where experiences of consciousness are varied or altered. Within the 'Level' and 'Content' sections particularly, these examples are useful to express complicated ideas, though the concepts being dissected often remain complex and multifaceted, which reflects just how many ideas, theories, and research fields intersect in the place which is 'consciousness'. This bridging between the author, material, and reader, supported using symbolism and metaphor, often provides an experience of an 'aha moment' in your own conscious experience of the book when as a reader you realize you've just connected with the concept of discussion. The author works hard to generate a range of constructs around the complex phenomena of focus, but at times an awareness

rose within myself that these illustrations may be restricted due to the limit of language and the conceptual possibilities that the written word allows.

A feature of the 'Self' section, which was of interest psychologically speaking, was the clear deconstruction of the idea of a singular self which can be dominant in Westernized cultures. 'Being You' refutes the idea of a singular 'You' and instead argues the self exists as a collection of perceptions of which only one is the 'I' behind the eyes that many may view as 'the self'. Instead of the idea of a single 'you', the self is dissected into parts. Two examples being the embodied self which is how humans inhabit their bodies and hold an awareness and perception of their bodies, which also exists alongside a self which views the world from a particular viewpoint, the perspectival self. Together it is suggested that all the types of self are bound together and may be experienced as 'you', whilst it is articulated decisively that this does not necessarily signify that an actual, singular self truly exists. Instead 'being you' or being me is outlined as a perception in itself, or a group of perceptions that sit well together.

Consideration of 'selfhood' in this book also gives insight to experiences where a cohesive experience of self is disrupted. Examples include hallucinations and the dissociative response that can occur following an experience of trauma. Within 'Being You' these experiences are outlined as relating to disruptions in specific types of self, without complete loss of full selfhood as a 'bundle'. In more basic terms, the argument is that one foot remains in the self which others would view as 'real' or 'reality', whilst the person is connecting with a disrupted experience of self which differs from the one that others may be able to perceive. Of note, this whole section of writing was experienced as accessible and simple which on reflection may be partly due to my existing knowledge as a clinical psychologist, but in reality felt like it was more due to the lived experiences of being a human which made all the concepts and differentiations of 'self' seem so familiar.

Whilst broad in focus, it is also apparent that the writing takes a specific position, one in which measurement and empiricism are prioritized ahead of other ways of exploring and viewing

consciousness and subjective experience. This is reflective of the book's position as largely individualist in focus with a prioritization of 'I' and 'you' rather than 'we' and 'us'. There are times when the impact of life experience, context, and culture remain implicit and inferred, but the writing does move close to the relevance of these factors. Whether this is close enough may be the opinion of each individual reader. An example being a discussion of how our expectations shape our perceptions, with these ideas suggesting that our expectations are shaped by experiences without ever fully embracing such ideas. This appeared to be less an oversight and more a decision to prioritize a focus on the particular and specific details of human consciousness which exist within the individual. This specificity also included a focus on the meniscus, for instance detailing an experiment involving a tenth of a second difference in experience and response, as part of the building narrative about consciousness. With this level of focus, to go beyond the physical boundaries of the individual, and embrace the 'out there' aspects of consciousness may make for a full other text. What seems to be lacking, however, is an explicit recognition of this and a level of reflexivity and shared intentionality about what is not being considered in this text.

A theme of the text is the ways in which the brain perceives the world and takes a 'best guess' approach to what it encounters. It is within this discussion where the question about how these 'best guesses' are shaped and constructed felt most apparent, with little attention given to the impact of context and experience on the individual's guesses. Moments like these felt like a missed opportunity to introduce ideas of relevance and connection, such as social constructionism. Such theories could have acted to expand, justify, and further define the position of perception as 'best guesses', by locating these as part of a social and shared consciousness rather than existing in the person only.

As the book comes to its closing chapters, a range of interesting applications are discussed in the 'Other' section. Through discussions of animals, such as intelligent species like the octopuses, the experience of consciousness is rooted as not solely about being human, followed by discussions of

artificial intelligence which raise the possibility that consciousness is perhaps not even about being 'alive', as we might define it. These chapters have impact, from anxiety about the possibilities of technology and machinery to the reality of consuming animals which clearly are conscious and sentient. Some of this impact was led by the text, whilst other reflections connected with what the text brushed against but skillfully did not overly dictate, with my 'self' as a reader doing the work. To end with such provocation expanded the definition of consciousness which had been built and articulated thus far in a way which felt humbling. The finish of 'Being You' therefore seemed like a punctuation, rather than a full ending, due to a clear acknowledgement that the future of consciousness and consciousness research remains to be perceived.