

ACTUAL CONSCIOUSNESS by Ted Honderich. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 402 pages. Hardcover; \$55.00. ISBN: 9780198714385.

Often known as “the hard problem,” consciousness has been an issue of debate in recent years in the fields of religion and science as well as philosophy. In *Actual Consciousness*, Ted Honderich presents a summary of the major theories and discussions available, while working toward a possible solution. He sets his tone early in the book:

The informality of style, not always serious and impersonal enough for all professional philosophers in their working hours, is partly owed to and a reminder of the fact that the inquiry must be a kind of joint and mutual enterprise ... That’s life, baby. (p. xv)

The book does follow this convention, and is quite conversational, from its scattered references to Tottenham Hotspur to its direct addresses to the reader.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, which build the author’s argument while at the same time summarizing popular viewpoints on consciousness. The chapters read as follows:

- “Need for an Adequate Initial Clarification”;
- “Five Leading Ideas about Consciousness”;
- “Something’s Being Actual”;
- “Dualisms, Functionalisms, Consciousness-Criteria”;
- “Other Consciousness Theories, Criteria Again”;
- “What Is it to Be Objectively Physical?”;
- “Perceptual Consciousness – What Is and What Isn’t Actual”;
- “Perceptual Consciousness – Being Actual Is Being Subjectively Physical”;
- “Cognitive and Affective Consciousness – Theories, and What Is and What Isn’t Actual”;
- “Cognitive and Affective Consciousness – Being Actual Is Being Differently Subjectively Physical”; and
- “Conclusions Past and Present.”

With all that said, the book covers topics you would expect in a book on consciousness, such as a discussion of dualism, functionalism, and linguistic theory. All the while Honderich is building the argument for “actual consciousness.” On pages 67–68, Honderich presents a list of the characteristics of consciousness. He follows up with this description of actual consciousness:

We need a summary description for the characteristics assembled. Ordinary consciousness taken as having these characteristics, I shall henceforth say, is

actual consciousness, consciousness as something’s being actual, consciousness as the actuality of something. Whatever else may be the case with conscious states and events—for example the quite different fact that we have a hold on our own conscious states and events—they have this nature. (p. 69)

The approach to the discussion and the organization is helpful in a few ways. First, the book serves as a summary of current discussion on consciousness. Second, the text has many organized lists scattered throughout its pages, such as the one mentioned above, reminding the reader of what we do know about particular topics. For example, there are checklists on pages 184–86 and 231–32 that list the characteristics of objective and subjective physical worlds, respectively (two individual lists in the first case). These sorts of lists allow the reader to review quickly what is known about a subject and to follow the overall argument of the author, which at times can be difficult in a large monograph. On pages 328–29, there is a chart with lists that bring this all together. Third, the text is a long-running dialogue, and although a difficult topic, it does bring the reader into conversation with the author, keeping things a bit more engaged than many other monographs.

Overall I believe this to be a helpful book for those interested in the issue of consciousness, both in the professional and academic realms, as the author has intended (p. xv). Consciousness is a key issue in religion and science dialogue, specifically in the Christian tradition due to the long-standing ways in which theology has been tied to dualist conceptions of the person. In moving beyond (or defending) a dualistic conception of the person, a full knowledge of the field of consciousness is essential. For theologians, the issue is so connected to the idea of soul that it becomes a foundational point for argumentation. The text weaves both science and philosophy together in a way that leaves the reader feeling that the issues have been discussed, the author has made his case, and the argument holds. With that said, not everyone will agree with the author’s conclusions, but hopefully all readers are left with a better sense of what the subject of consciousness entails and what subissues are relevant to this discussion. Make no mistake, this is a philosophy book, not a religion and science text, but readers in the field of religion and science may find it useful and an excellent resource.

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