

Research Proposal for MSc by Research programme

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In a special issue of the Journal of Consciousness Studies devoted to Machine Consciousness, Susan Blackmore questions Daniel Dennett's concept of consciousness. She quotes Dennett: "Human consciousness is *itself* a huge complex of memes..." (Dennett, 1991, p. 210), goes on to describe her experience and understanding of meditation, and concludes:

If this experience can justifiably be thought of as consciousness without memes, then there is something left when the memes are gone, and Dennett is wrong that consciousness is the memes. (Blackmore, 2003, p. 25)

It seems possible that these are different concepts of consciousness, that is, different explananda, but Blackmore appears to broadly agree with Dennett on the nature of "normal" human consciousness; her discussion of machine consciousness concerns that rather than meditative consciousness and seeks to explain the possible occurrence of the consciousness meme in machines; and she sees normal human consciousness as illusory: not that it does not really exist, but "it is not what it appears to be." (*ibid.*, p. 22) However, she believes that in meditation, memes can be temporarily eliminated, resulting in a state of non-illusory consciousness, by which she seems to mean primarily that there is no longer a sense of a self that is conscious, no "user illusion," which she sees as malign (Blackmore, 2000), unlike Dennett, for whom it is benign (*op. cit.*).

One line of approach to an understanding of the difference between Blackmore and Dennett might be to hypothesise that the state experienced by Blackmore during meditation is best considered to be that of "sentience," as discussed by Dennett in later work. (Dennett, 1997) On the other hand, while Dennett sees sentience as "... the lowest grade of consciousness" (Dennett, 1997, p. 64), in meditation, according to Blackmore, "... far from consciousness ceasing, it is usually described as enhanced or deepened..." (Blackmore, 2003, p. 25). Also, sentience is generally considered to be shared with many other species, but even if the distinctive features of the human mind are quiescent during the experience described by Blackmore, it is not inconceivable that they nevertheless influence the experience itself, and, perhaps more plausibly, subsequent memories of it and thinking about it (see Dennett's "multiple drafts" concept (*op. cit.*)).

I intend to research the relationships between

- Dennett's concept of consciousness—in particular, his "multiple drafts," "fame in the brain" and "Joycean machine" concepts (Dennett, 1991, 1997)—and higher order thought theories in general (e.g. Carruthers (2001)),

- Dennett's and others' concepts of sentience (Dennett (1997) and, e.g., Kirk (1974); Clark (2000); Duncan (2006)), and
- both first-person reports and third-person investigations of meditation (e.g. Austin (1999); Shapiro Jr and Walsh (2008)).

Consideration will also be given to the questions raised by the use of first-person methods. (E.g. Varela and Shear (1999))

References

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