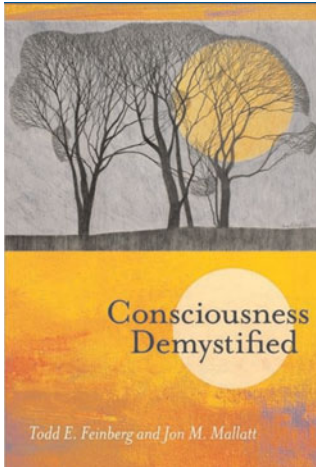


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge and Femi Oyeboode

**Consciousness Demystified**

By Todd E. Feinberg and Jon M. Mallatt. MIT Press. 2018. £20.00 (hb). 208 pp. ISBN 9780262038812

The words ‘consciousness’ and ‘mystery’ are often associated in both philosophical and scientific literature. The nature of consciousness and the ‘explanatory gap’ between the brain as a biological organ and the mind as subjective experience have been identified as the Gordian knots of the ‘mind–body problem’, recently reframed as the ‘mind–brain problem’. Feinberg and Mallatt’s previous book (*The Ancient Origins of Consciousness*, MIT Press 2016) focused on the nature and evolution of consciousness. In their more recent book, these authors build on their previous work to explain how natural brain processes can lead to subjective, first-person, experiencing aspects of consciousness (‘qualia’ in philosophical jargon).

‘Nihil quod non scriptum est’: Descartes’ substance dualism reverberates in the authors’ reference to the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the material neurons of the brain (‘res extensa’ in Descartes’ terminology) and immaterial experience (‘res cogitans’). Descartes’ solution to the mind–body problem was a rather shaky bridge: according to the French philosopher, the interaction between the brain and the mind somehow occurred at the level of the pineal gland. Feinberg and Mallatt’s solution is more appealing to modern neuroscientists as they explicitly aim to demystify consciousness by naturalising it, i.e. by placing its most perplexing philosophical features among the natural properties of life and explaining the evolutionary origins of subjective experience.

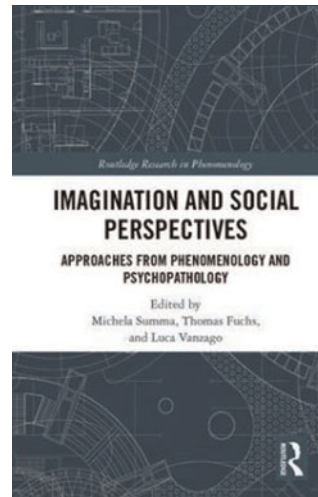
Feinberg and Mallatt’s neurobiological naturalism is an outgrowth and elaboration of the theory of biological naturalism first proposed by American philosopher of mind John Searle. According to Searle’s biological naturalism, consciousness is a mental event that belongs to our biological natural history like digestion, mitosis and all other biological processes. According to Feinberg and Mallatt’s neurobiological naturalism, consciousness is fully natural but requires explanations that are uniquely different from explanations applied to the rest of biology. Specifically, neurobiological naturalism rests on three interrelated principles: (1) the unique features of consciousness are fully grounded in the unique features of life; (2) consciousness as a living process depends on additional neurobiological features that are unique to complex neural systems; and (3) the subjective–objective barrier can be naturally explained by the special features of complex brains.

Compared to *The Ancient Origins of Consciousness*, *Consciousness Demystified* is more condensed, less technical and accessible to a wider range of readers interested in understanding consciousness. This agile book, with its armamentarium of useful tools (Glossary, Notes, References, Index), undoubtedly contributes to the enduring appeal of the neuroscientific study of consciousness.

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**Imagination and Social Perspectives: Approaches from Phenomenology and Psychopathology**

Edited by Michela Summa, Thomas Fuchs and Luca Vanzago. Routledge. 2017. 358 pp. £125.00 (hb). ISBN 9781138221000

This book examines the role of imagination in creating a sense of self, in extending how reality and fiction are experienced and in determining the nature of ‘the Other’, as well as in the fostering of mutual understanding in human culture. For the psychiatrist its most compelling section is that which deals with the impairment of imagination in schizophrenia and autism.

What is imagination? It turns out that this is not as simple a question as it sounds. In many respects it is easier to say what it is not than to say what it actually is. In this account, imagining is not merely ‘supposing’ and it is distinct from mental imagery as well as from perception. It is best regarded as an intentional activity that is ‘a representational state of mind, [...] a form of sensible knowledge, [...] the inner visualising of mental images, [...] a modification of perception, [...] a psychic faculty or as a source of knowledge’. This definition itself points to the complexity of the subject matter.

The capacity to situate oneself in someone else’s shoes, to look at the world through their eyes, is a fundamental aspect of human cognitive capacity, and much in the practice of psychiatry relies on this skill. And imagination is critical for this ability in which there is ‘some kind of de-centring from one’s own perspective’. In addition, the editors remind us that imagination has a role in distinguishing between reality and alternative worlds, and hence enhancing cognitive flexibility and increasing freedom as decisions can be made in the context of multiple imagined options.