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Whenever we ask 'Am I conscious now?' the answer seems to be 'Yes'. We always seem to be consciously feeling, hearing, and seeing something. But how can the existence of millions of interconnected brain cells give rise to this personal, private, ineffable experience? Either we must answer this question, or show why it is the wrong question.

Ever since William James (1890) coined the phrase the 'stream of consciousness', it has seemed indisputable that this rich, flowing succession of thoughts and perceptions is what needs explaining. Research on the 'contents of consciousness', the 'neural correlates of consciousness', and popular global workspace models all depends on distinguishing between what is in and what is out of the conscious stream. But what if it simply is not like that? What if there is no stream and no experiencer?

In experiments on 'change blindness' people look at a picture of a complex scene and, just as they blink or move their eyes, some key feature of the picture is changed. Most of the time they simply do not notice. The effect is very robust and has been shown using cuts in film and video, by making the change just as a 'mud splash' hits the picture, and even in real-life situations. The changes can be very large or right in the centre of the display and still not be noticed.

These surprising results suggest that we do *not* hold in our heads a rich visual image of the world, for if we did we would surely notice the changes. Rather, during each fixation we see only a small area, and when our eyes move that information is lost, leaving at most only a sketchy description. We *think* there is rich detail in our stream of consciousness because if ever we forget something we can look again and there it is. By using the outside

world as a memory, we get the illusion of seeing much more than we really do. This alone shows we are wrong about our stream of consciousness. The stream of sounds is peculiar in a different way. The classic example is when the clock chimes several times before you notice. At that point you can distinctly count the number of chimes—chimes you did not consciously hear. With practice it is possible to pull out several such sound threads and, as it were, rehear the past few moments in different ways. Which then was really in the stream of consciousness?

One way of understanding these oddities is to replace the notion of a continuous stream with the idea that much of the time there is no distinction between ‘in’ and ‘out’ of consciousness. Then every so often we wonder ‘Am I conscious now?’ and an answer is concocted, backwards, from memory. A stream of consciousness and a self who observes it, both appear together—and both are illusions.

This may not be how it seems, but then how it seems can change dramatically with a little practice and attention. Perhaps we might even see through the illusion.

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