

Home Sweet Home: Finding Ourselves

NPR, by Alva Noë

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For a while now I've been arguing that we shouldn't look for consciousness in the brain. We haven't found it there, and we won't. Not because consciousness happens somewhere else, in the soul, say, or in the environment, or in the collective. But because consciousness isn't something that happens; it is something *we do* or *make*. And like everything else that we do, it depends both on the way we are constituted — on our brains and bodies — but also on the world around us.

Looking for consciousness in the brain is like looking for dance in the legs.

Both Cartesian dualism, with its insistence that the mind is separate from the body, and the contemporary dogma that that the thing inside us that thinks and feels is the brain, share a common premise: that *there is* a thing inside that thinks and feels and decides and is conscious. It is this assumption, shared by dualist and most neuroscientists alike, that really holds us captive.

[Adam Frank](#), my esteemed co-blogger, is right to worry about the relation of mind and matter. And he is right that there is as of yet no consensus on what a science of human or animal experience should even look like. I propose that what limits us, and what limits our science, is a dual misunderstanding. The first I have already indicated: we suppose that mind is in the head. No, we need to get [out of our heads](#) to understand the workings of the mind, to look at the way the animal is closely coupled to and involved with its environment.

The second concerns our understanding of the nature this environment in which we find ourselves. We confuse the fabulous success of modern physics with grounds for believing that we live in the world that physics describes. And then we are confronted with the fact that the world of the physicist is a world devoid of colors and sounds and textures and odors and all the other qualities that fill up our experience. This tends to throw us back on our brains again: if the world isn't really the way we experience it as being, then our experience must be something we confabulate, or that our brains confabulate for us. Back to the Cartesian capsule!

The distinguished scientist Sean Carroll, writing in response to Adam Frank's discussion, [insists](#) that the laws of physics underlying life are completely understood. Yes. But no. The statement is ambiguous. The basic laws of physics that support life are well understood; but this does not imply that we understand, in the terms of physics, how there is life!

The thing is: we do not live in the world of physics. If that were so, then there would be no biology at all. No, humans and other animals live in *niches*. They, or rather, we, occupy landscapes of values — worlds made up not of quantum lattice structures, but of opportunities and obstacles, affordances and hinderances. Life, including our experiential lives, happen not in clouds of atoms, but on level ground, with others, surrounded by hiding places, food, friends and enemies.

It is *there*, where we find ourselves, that we find the stage of our active lives and our active experience. We actually have the resources we need to understand ourselves. It is two dogmas of now antiquated modern science — that mind is in the head, and that the world is devoid of meaning unless we, or our brains, give it meaning — that creates the illusion — a meta-cognitive illusion! — that there is a hard problem of consciousness we are unable to solve.