
Consciousness And Reflexivity In David Foster Wallace's Commencement Speech This Is Water

Consciousness and Reflexivity

David Foster Wallace's commencement speech, "This is Water," opens up a complex discussion on whether we can "adjust" what is "hardwired" into our brains. Robert Kurzban's book, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite*, contributes to this discussion with its neurodeterministic perspective and skepticism of the self. These topics are further critiqued on by other well-educated individuals (Raymond Tallis, Henry T. Greely) that are also considered in this essay. After dissecting the sources and establishing connections between them, I have come to the conclusion that our consciousness is a product of our brain, which contains both unconscious and conscious modules that are able to communicate and affect each other in ways that our conscious modules are not fully aware of. This lack of awareness affects our perception of the world, which in turn reflects back to affect the way we think. Even though consciousness originates from the brain, this doesn't mean we can't adapt.

To begin with, David Foster Wallace brings up the idea of a "default setting." We see ourselves as the center of the universe because of how "people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real" (Wallace 2). The problem I found with this is how he came to the idea that this is the "default setting." He relates our self-centeredness to our experiences: "Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence" (Wallace 2). If it is our experiences that reinforce this behavior, then what Foster says to be "default" is more accurately a product of our perceptions of the world. Then, it is more convincing that we can train ourselves to become more aware of the world around us, since our "default" setting was also trained into us. A possible solution to how this occurs can be introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 ("Who is 'I'?" and "Modular Me") of Robert Kurzban's book, *Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite*. Within Chapter 3, Kurzban brings up "modules," different functional parts of the brain, and states significant properties of them. For instance, "no part of the brain can, at one and the same time, also be a whole brain" (Kurzban 3). To say that one module has the function of all modules and can work alone as the whole brain would in fact contradict the creation of modules in the first place. Second, "there must be lots of modular systems—functional parts of the mind—that are not accessible to consciousness" (Kurzban 3). The statement that there are unconscious and conscious modules in the brain and that the conscious brain isn't always sent or aware of the information that contributes to making a decision plays an important role in this essay. Kurzban's idea of what is "default" differs from Wallace's, pointing out that "informational encapsulation—the lack of information flow across modules—is, oddly, the default" (Kurzban 4). When considering Kurzban's idea, you could say that this lack of full communication between the unconscious and conscious modules is what causes Foster's idea of default, our self-centeredness. But how does this concept of "self" even form?

To continue, Kurzban touches on the concept of self when discussing an experiment performed by Benjamin Libet, where participants were told to move their wrist and indicate when they decided to move it, all while their brain activity was recorded. Kurzban says, "Libet and his

colleagues found that brain activity preceded subjects' reports of their wish to move their wrist" (Kurzban 6). To me, this makes sense, as a physical movement requires a module or set of modules in the brain to perform. These results cause controversy on whether we truly have free will, to which I would argue that we do not, in the sense that we cannot perform any action without the use of the brain and its modules. Rather, we have conscious intention of moving our wrist, but the lack of information flow between our unconscious and conscious modules leaves our conscious modules not fully aware of why or how we moved our wrist at that particular time. Therefore, they fill in the gaps, because if the conscious modules do not perceive this communication with the unconscious, then it seems natural that we would get the idea that our decisions come from and are ultimately made with our consciousness, enforcing Foster's point of how we see our conscious as the most immediate, important thing about ourselves. So if our unconscious modules communicate certain information back to the conscious modules, perhaps there is information coming from the conscious modules to the unconscious modules as well. This reflexivity can be what causes our brains to be trained and adapt.

In contrast to Kurzban's support of neurodeterminism, Raymond Tallis in his book, *Aping Mankind*, claims, "Those who deny our freedom do so on the basis of experiments that remove selves from their worlds and focus on elements of behaviour that are uprooted from the contexts that make sense of actions: or, more precisely, reduce actions to movements" (Tallis 247). Kurzban focuses on the movement of the wrist without considering the set of actions and decisions associated with it. Yet, Tallis doesn't effectively explain how these sets of decisions are distinctly separate from the movement of the wrist when all of them require the modules of the brain in order to come into existence. While Tallis tries to argue free will, in the end, our intentions and decisions still form within the brain. However, his consideration of how outside factors play a role opens up the discussion of how our perception turns back and affects our modules. Specifically, his mention of a study by Jan Scholz reveals interesting results: "The researchers found that people who learned to juggle over a period of six weeks had clear changes in the white matter of a part of the cerebral cortex (the intraparietal sulcus) that is associated with visuomotor skills" (Tallis 254). This shows how the brain can condition itself through constant training. While Tallis claims that "it is not the brain that is doing this but the participants who enrolled in the experiment," as said before, the set of activities that these participants perform originate from the brain's modules, including our idea of "self" and Tallis' belief that "we" will our brains to change. It's not possible for them to originate outside of all the functioning modules of the brain. While I am convinced of this neurodeterministic perspective, that does not mean I believe we are all simply products of nature.

As previously stated, our unconscious modules do not reveal everything to the conscious modules, resulting in the rationalization of our decisions and the idea that our conscious plays the most significant role in what we do and how we live. The various ways we can rationalize lead to different perspectives and interpretations, and I believe this contributes to the complexity of society (morals, conflict, inequality, for instance). After forming this opinion, I've found it to align with Henry T. Greely's opinions in his commentary, "What If? The Farther Shores of Neuroethics:" I cannot see how I can have something like a robust free will in a determined universe. But I feel as though I have free will" (Greely 444). The belief that we have free will, that we can choose how to act and what to believe, is a prevalent idea in society that affects it large-scale. It has been trained into us the moment we could experience things through our consciousness. This belief helps form society, revealing the importance of the informational encapsulation and reflexivity between the unconscious and conscious modules in our brain.

In conclusion, consciousness is a part of the brain. The brain consists of modules, unconscious and conscious, that communicate only certain parts of information, leading to a lack of full awareness in our conscious modules. Our brains' lack of full awareness is what allows them to be so greatly affected by the environment and form different perspectives, which turn back and affect how we think. With training, we can condition our brains as David Foster Wallace said, as we are not just products of our environment, but also products of our own making.

Works Cited

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