

Is conscious thought just an illusion?

Philosopher Peter Carruthers insists that conscious thought, judgment and volition are illusions.

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[Carruthers:] Thoughts such as decisions and judgments should not be considered to be conscious. They are not accessible in working memory, nor are we directly aware of them. We merely have what I call “the illusion of immediacy”—the false impression that we know our thoughts directly.

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[Ayan:] What side effect does the illusion of immediacy have? [Carruthers:] The price we pay is that we believe subjectively that we are possessed of far greater certainty about our attitudes than we actually have. We believe that if we are in mental state X, it is the same as being in that state. As soon as I believe I am hungry, I am. Once I believe I am happy, I am. But that is not really the case. It is a trick of the mind that makes us equate the act of thinking one has a thought with the thought itself.

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[Ayan:] Would you agree that we are much more unconscious than we think we are? [Carruthers:] I would rather say that consciousness is not what we generally think it is. It is not direct awareness of our inner world of thoughts and judgments but a highly inferential process that only gives us the impression of immediacy.

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