

# SUMMARY

## CONSCIOUS

ANNAKA HARRIS



# **Summary of “Conscious” by Annaka Harris**

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A Brief Guide to the Fundamental Mystery of the  
Mind

Introduction	5
The Mysteries Surrounding Consciousness and the Reasons We Rely on Intuition	6
The Consciousness of Plants	8
Consciousness and Thought are Two Separate Experiences	10
Consciousness and the Self	12
Panpsychism Could be the Theory That Provides Us with the Answers we Seek	14
Final Summary	16



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# Introduction

When you think about consciousness, you might assume that it is an obvious or inevitable result of complex life. However, many fail to realize that consciousness is an experience, and for that reason, it is one of the strangest aspects of reality. The purpose of *Consciousness* is to shake-up your everyday assumptions about the world you live in and to discover just how surprising consciousness is. But before we begin, we must first determine exactly what consciousness is. Some use the term to refer to a state of wakefulness, a sense of selfhood, or the capacity of self-reflection. The most basic definition of consciousness, however, comes from philosopher Thomas Nagel who suggests that “an organism is conscious if there is *something that it is like* to be that organism.” In other words, a conscious organism is one that has some kind of experience. So it would be like something to be you at this moment, after all, you’re currently experiencing something. But it may not be like something to be the chair you’re sitting on since the chair isn’t experiencing anything, right? “It is this simple difference - whether there is an experience present or not - which we can all use as a reference point,” that constitutes what author Annaka Harris means by the word “consciousness.”

Now that you know what consciousness is, it’s time to explore the various mysteries surrounding consciousness. What is it exactly? Where did it come from? And why does it exist? If you’re interested in answering these questions and more, then it’s time to dive in.

# The Mysteries Surrounding Consciousness and the Reasons We Rely on Intuition

As we begin to define what consciousness is, we can begin to see that a conscious organism is one that *experiences something*. So while you may be a conscious organism, the table you are working at may not be. But is it *like something* to be a grain of sand, a bacterium, an oak tree, a worm, an ant, a dog? At some point along the spectrum of consciousness, the answer is yes. Some collections of matter in the universe are conscious, but why? Where does it come from? And at what point does a human's consciousness even begin?

When you look at the moments after conception, a human blastocyst is a collection of only about two hundred cells. Surely, there is *nothing it is like* to be a microscopic collection of cells. Over time, however, these cells multiply and slowly become a human baby with a brain that is able to detect changes in light, and even recognize its mother's voice in the womb. And while a computer can also detect light and recognize voices, the difference is that a human baby also processes an *experience* of light and sound. Eventually, your intuition tells you, "*OK, now an experience is being had in there.*" But at what point does that transition happen? This question presents one of the greatest mysteries of consciousness.

Consciousness doesn't simply start at nothing and then suddenly, magically, become *something*. After all, an infant is composed of particles similar to those swirling around in the sun. Therefore, consciousness is a matter of matter since that is what we *are*. Still, the fact that some groups of matter have an inner life while others don't is a mystery that many scientists and philosophers are still trying to understand. Because of the mysteries surrounding consciousness, humans often rely on intuition to signal to them what seems right or wrong. For example, "we have the ability to unconsciously perceive elements in our environment in threatening situations that in turn deliver an almost instantaneous assessment of

danger - such as an intuition that we shouldn't get into an elevator with someone, even though you can't put your finger on why."

This is because you rely on your "gut feelings" as your brain processes helpful cues that you might not be aware of, such as the dilated pupils or flushed face of the person getting on the elevator - both of which are signals that the person may become violent at any moment. Unfortunately, your gut can be deceiving as well. For example, many people are nervous fliers, despite the fact that you are far more likely to be involved in a fatal car crash. In fact, statistically, you would need to fly every day for 55,000 years before being involved in a fatal plane crash. So while it's important to listen to your intuition, it's also important to be open about changing your ideas about consciousness.

# The Consciousness of Plants

While there are still many mysteries surrounding consciousness, we can still be certain that humans are indeed conscious. So when we try to determine whether or not an organism is conscious, we believe that we can simply examine its behavior. This is one of the many assumptions we make that are in line with our intuitions, which leads us to believe the following statement: people are conscious; plants are not conscious. But is this true?

We might feel strongly that this statement is correct because we assume consciousness only exists when there is the presence of a brain and a central nervous system. But let's take a look at the revelatory research by ecologist Suzanne Simard surrounding Douglas fir and paper birch trees to prove that there is a lot more going on in plants than we might realize. In a 2016 TED talk, Simard uncovered the interdependence of these two tree species in her research on the vast system of fungi and roots called the mycorrhizal network - which works in transferring water, carbon, nitrogen, and other nutrients and minerals among plants. When studying the Douglas fir and the paper birch, she discovered that the two species were able to communicate with one another. In the summer months, when the fir needed more carbon, the birch sent more carbon and vice versa.

Even more surprising, Simard showed that Douglas fir "mother trees" were able to distinguish their own kin from a stranger's seedlings. Mother trees were able to provide their kin with bigger mycorrhizal networks and send them more carbon belowground. Additionally, mother trees "reduced their own root competition to make room for their kids." Additionally, they can communicate with their kin to help survive environmental threats. By spreading toxins through underground fungal networks, plants can fight off threatening species. In fact, because of the vast interconnections and functions of these mycorrhizal networks, they have been referred to as "earth's natural Internet."



Not only can plants communicate with one another, but they can also sense their environment through touch. A vine, for example, will increase its rate and change its direction of growth when it senses an object nearby to wrap itself around. Similarly, a Venus Fly Trap can distinguish between heavy rain and an insect. One will not cause its blades to close and the other will make them snap shut in just one-tenth of a second. Not only that, but a Venus Fly Trap also has a memory. For instance, the plant needs to have two of the hairs on its leaves touched by a bug in order to shut, so it remembers that the first one has been touched.

As you can see, plants have more in common with humans than you might realize. In fact, the genes that cause plants to react to light and darkness contain the same DNA found in humans. Ultimately, plants either have experiences, and therefore, a form of consciousness, or things like memories, sensing light, and responding to danger aren't related to consciousness at all! Perhaps everything we know about consciousness isn't at all what we think.

# Consciousness and Thought are Two Separate Experiences

As we go about our daily lives, our behaviors and experiences appear to be a continuous stream of present-moment events. This is partly because human senses, such as visual, auditory, and other kinds of sensory information move throughout the world and our nervous system at different times. In fact, consciousness is often “the last to know” what’s going on.

For instance, the light waves and sound waves emitted when the tennis ball makes contact with your racket do not arrive at your eyes and ears at the same time. Additionally, the impact felt by your hand holding the racket occurs at yet another interval. It is only after all the relevant input has been received by the brain that the signals enter your conscious experience through a process called “binding,” which allows you to see, hear, and feel the ball hit the racket all at the same time. Neurologist David Eagleman explains it this way: “Your perception of reality is the end result of fancy editing tricks: the brain hides the difference in arrival times. How? What it serves up as reality is actually a delayed version. Your brain collects up all the information from the senses before it decides upon a story of what happens.” As a result, “our conscious awareness lags behind the physical world.”

There are several studies that have allowed us to look into the timing of our reactions and perceptions. As a result, they’ve raised many questions surrounding how much conscious thought goes into our actions, which then leads us to question how much our actions are controlled by instinct. Imagine a self-driving car that hits a pedestrian. The response to this event would depend on why the car didn’t stop. Perhaps the sensors malfunctioned, maybe it couldn’t detect a pedestrian in a dark winter coat, or perhaps it hit the pedestrian because it was avoiding colliding with a crowded bus and pushing it into oncoming traffic.

Depending on the reason the car hit the pedestrian determines our perception of the situation. If the car malfunctioned, we would view the incident as the result of a flaw in the technology. But if it was avoiding the crowded bus, then it would certainly be a technological success. The brain can be viewed similarly when it comes to conscious will. For instance, knowing *why* someone committed a violent act will always be relevant. Additionally, your brain can be compared to that self-driving car. You see, even though your conscious may go through the conscious experience, it isn't necessarily controlling the system. Instead, your brain is in the driver's seat and your consciousness is only in the passenger seat, experiencing the system.

Consciousness is also often associated with complex thought; however, when you take a closer look, you will see that the two are unrelated. For instance, try the following experiment: Sit in a quiet place and make the choice to lift either your arm or your foot. Make the decision before a given time - like before the second-hand reaches the six. Do this over and over again and observe your moment-to-moment experience. What choices did you make? Did you make the decision yourself? Or was the thought delivered to you? What made you choose your arm over your foot? Generally speaking, we have little control over the thoughts that come and go into our minds. In other words, our moment-to-moment choices are more a result of automatic brain functions and less of a result of consciousness.

# Consciousness and the Self

As you now know, the brain is responsible for creating a number of illusions for itself. For instance, many times we are under the illusion that we are making conscious decisions for ourselves, or the illusion that we receive sensory information at the same moment. We have what feels like a unified experience, with events in the world unfolding for us in an integrated way.

Some people, however, experience this lack of synchronicity and the binding processes become interrupted. This is due to neurological disease or injury and the lack of binding leaves the sufferer in a confusing world where sights and sounds are no longer synced, a condition called disjunctive agnosia. Another condition called visual agnosia occurs when familiar objects are seen for their parts but are unrecognizable.

Healthy brains can sometimes experience small glitches in the binding process that shed light on the illusion it normally creates for us. For example, author Annaka Harris once awoke in the middle of the night to get a glass of water. As she was walking to the kitchen, she heard a loud crash outside, but due to being half-asleep, she experienced the incident in an unusual way. She noticed her body's startled response *before* she heard the sound of the crash. For a brief instant, she felt herself responding to something that she had not yet heard.

Binding allows us to have a sense of “self,” which is the perception that the “self” is the subject of everything we experience - all that we are aware of seems to be happening to or around the self. However, in some circumstances, the connection between self and consciousness comes apart. In fact, such an experience is not uncommon in meditation. Through meditation, some people can achieve a certain state in which they have full awareness of the usual sights, sounds, feelings, and thoughts, but are absent of the sense of self.

There are other ways to suspend the sense of self too, such as the use of the drug LSD. For example, when people take psychedelic drugs, people report experiences such as “floating and finding inner peace” or “distortions in time and a conviction that the self is disintegrating.” You see, while many people believe that consciousness and the experience of self go hand in hand, people report feeling a loss of self; meanwhile, consciousness remains fully present. Ultimately, the self is simply a mental construct that is related to our perceptions of the world around us. As these perceptions change, so does our sense of self. Therefore, our consciousness and our sense of self must stay separate, since one can exist without the other.

# Panpsychism Could be the Theory That Provides Us with the Answers we Seek

Now that we have learned about all the complexities of consciousness, it's time to ask whether or not it is possible for consciousness to exist in non-humans. After all, "if we can't point to anything that distinguishes which collections of atoms in the universe are conscious from those that aren't, where can we possibly draw the line? Perhaps a more interesting question is why we should draw a line at all." Therefore, at this point, we must consider the possibility that *all* matter is instilled with consciousness, a view referred to as panpsychism.

A term coined by the Italian philosopher Francesco Patrizi, panpsychism describes consciousness as separate from matter and composed of some other substance. Today, there is a branch of modern panpsychism that proposes that consciousness is intrinsic to all forms of information processing, even inanimate forms such as technological devices. Another branch suggests that consciousness stands alongside other fundamental forces and fields of physics, like gravity and electromagnetism. While this may sound crazy at first, it is actually scientifically sound. For instance, since we are able to identify the matter that human beings are made of, we can prove that we are made up of the same exact matter as everything else in the universe - everything from plants on earth to the distant stars in the galaxy.

Those who disagree with panpsychism typically assume that the theory is suggesting that something as simple as a rock experiences consciousness like a human. But this is not what panpsychism is trying to prove at all. Instead, it is simply suggesting that there are countless forms of consciousness, some of which humans may never be able to understand. Of course, panpsychism is still far from being widely accepted. Even some scientists who are willing to consider the theory refuse to accept that a kidney or liver would have its own consciousness. Yet, there is scientific

evidence that proves that multiple consciousnesses can exist within the same human being.

Such scientific evidence comes from split-brain studies. In the 1960s, research conducted by Roger Sperry and Michael Gazzaniga at Caltech showed that patients with epilepsy underwent a surgical procedure called the corpus callosotomy. In this procedure, the corpus callosum is cut, either partially or fully, separating connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain in an effort to prevent seizures from spreading. Surprisingly, the procedure didn't seem to have serious consequences, but the patients did experience some interesting changes.

After surgery, split-brain patients experience something called "hemispheric rivalry." You see, the right hemisphere of the brain controls the left-side limbs of the body, while the left hemisphere controls the right-side limbs. Therefore, a hemispheric rivalry may cause a person to simultaneously open and close a door with opposite hands, or attempt to hug their spouse with one arm while pushing them away with the other. As a result, we can see that it is possible for two different conscious experiences to exist in one body.

These split-brain studies show that consciousness can adapt when there are changes to the information it receives; therefore, it is possible that human consciousness is simply the result of the combining of matter, which would have its own, less complex consciousness. Ultimately, while consciousness still poses many questions, it has become more important than ever to keep our minds open about the intricacies and complexities of consciousness.

## **Final Summary**

Consciousness is both complex and mysterious. With all its complexities, we can agree that being conscious means that you are having an experience and that human beings possess it. Unfortunately, we don't know much more than that. However, scientists have found that consciousness may not be related to human thought and behavior at all. In fact, consciousness may reside in all things. When we begin to think of consciousness in this way, we can begin to open ourselves to the theory of panpsychism, which claims that consciousness is simply an inherent element of all matter.





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