

# *Philosophy Ripped From The Headlines!*



**Issue #8, April 2018**

**Compiled & Edited by *Philosophy Without Borders***

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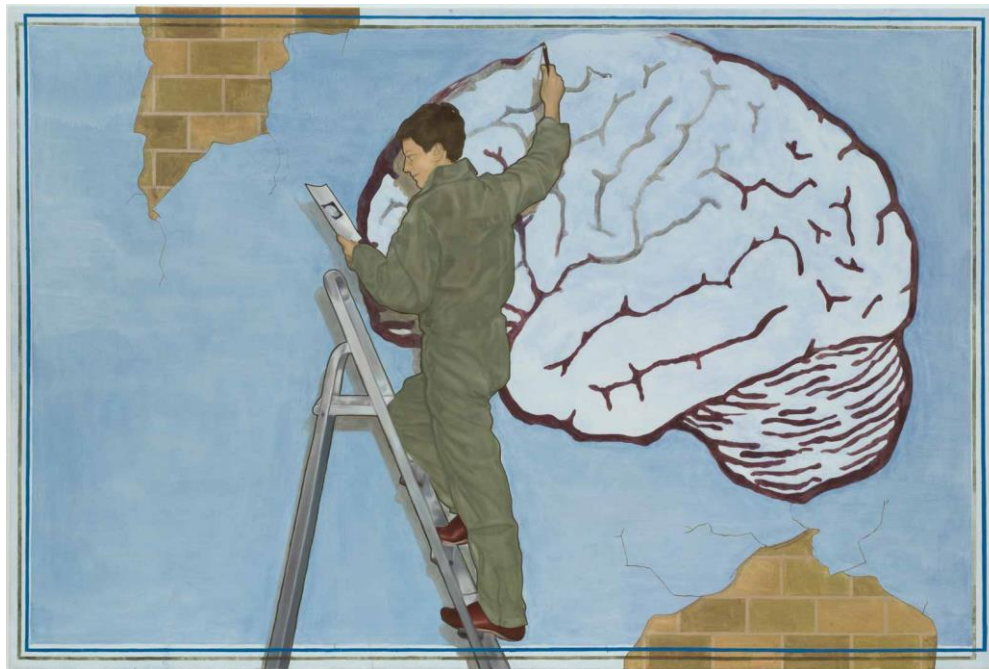
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# 1. “The Consciousness Deniers”

By Galen Strawson

*The New York Review of Books*, 13 MARCH 2018

URL = <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/13/the-consciousness-deniers/>



Lucy McKenzie: *Untitled*, 2002

What is the silliest claim ever made? The competition is fierce, but I think the answer is easy. Some people have denied the existence of consciousness: conscious experience, the subjective character of experience, the “what-it-is-like” of experience. Next to this denial—I’ll call it “the Denial”—every known religious belief is only a little less sensible than the belief that grass is green.

The Denial began in the twentieth century and continues today in a few pockets of philosophy and psychology and, now, information technology. It had two main causes: the rise of the behaviorist approach in psychology, and the naturalistic approach in philosophy. These were good things in their way, but they spiraled out of control and gave birth to the Great Silliness. I want to consider these main causes first, and then say something rather gloomy about a third, deeper, darker cause. But before that, I need to comment on what is being denied—consciousness, conscious experience, experience for short.

What is it? Anyone who has ever seen or heard or smelled anything knows what it is; anyone who has ever been in pain, or felt hungry or hot or cold or remorseful, dismayed, uncertain, or sleepy, or has suddenly remembered a missed appointment. All these things involve what are

sometimes called “qualia”—that is to say, different types or qualities of conscious experience. What I am calling the Denial is the denial that anyone has ever really had any of these experiences.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that most Deniers deny that they’re Deniers. “Of course, we agree that consciousness or experience exists,” they say—but when they say this they mean something that specifically excludes qualia.

Who are the Deniers? I have in mind—at least—those who fully subscribe to something called “philosophical behaviorism” as well as those who fully subscribe to something called “functionalism” in the philosophy of mind. Few have been fully explicit in their denial, but among those who have been, we find Brian Farrell, Paul Feyerabend, Richard Rorty, and the generally admirable Daniel Dennett. Ned Block once remarked that Dennett’s attempt to fit consciousness or “qualia” into his theory of reality “has the relation to qualia that the US Air Force had to so many Vietnamese villages: he destroys qualia in order to save them.”

One of the strangest things the Deniers say is that although it *seems* that there is conscious experience, there isn’t *really* any conscious experience: the seeming is, in fact, an illusion. The trouble with this is that any such illusion is already and necessarily an actual instance of the thing said to be an illusion. Suppose you’re hypnotized to feel intense pain. Someone may say that you’re not really in pain, that the pain is illusory, because you haven’t really suffered any bodily damage. But to seem to feel pain *is* to be in pain. It’s not possible here to open up a gap between appearance and reality, between what *is* and what *seems*.

Some people not only deny the existence of consciousness; they also claim not to know what is being presumed to exist. Block responds to these deniers by quoting the reply Louis Armstrong is said to have given to those who asked him what jazz was (some people credit Fats Waller): “If you got to ask, you ain’t never gonna get to know.” Another response is almost as good, although it’s condemned by some who follow Wittgenstein. If someone asks what conscious experience is, you say, “You know what is from your own case.” (You can add, “Here’s an example,” and give them a sharp kick.) When it comes to conscious experience, there’s a rock-bottom sense in which we’re fully acquainted with it just in having it. *The having is the knowing*. So when people say that consciousness is a mystery, they’re wrong—because we know what it is. It’s the most familiar thing there is—however hard it is to put into words.

What people often mean when they say that consciousness is a mystery is that it’s mysterious how consciousness can be simply a matter of physical goings-on in the brain. But here, they make a Very Large Mistake, in Winnie-the-Pooh’s terminology—the mistake of thinking that we know enough about the physical components of the brain to have good reason to think that these components can’t, on their own, account for the existence of consciousness. We don’t.

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The first cause of the Denial, behaviorism, took off about a hundred years ago as a methodological research program in experimental psychology. Psychologists had found that they couldn’t properly study consciousness because the data provided by introspection were

irremediably vague. In order to be a proper science, psychology had to stick to publicly observable behavioral phenomena that are precisely measurable. The foundational text is generally agreed to be John Watson's 1913 paper "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It."

Methodological behaviorism was a good and fruitful idea. For a few years, all went well. Then philosophers came on the scene, and morphed a methodology into a metaphysics. They took moderate *methodological* behaviorism, which puts consciousness aside and limits the scientific study of mind to behavior, and blew it up into mad *metaphysical* behaviorism that claims consciousness is nothing more than behavior and dispositions to behavior. As the philosopher C.D. Broad put it in 1925, this is a form of "reductive materialism."

Proponents of this view insist that their position does not *eliminate* consciousness, but instead *reduces* it to something else. They're right, formally speaking: to reduce X to Y isn't to say that X doesn't exist. It's simply to say that X is "really just" Y, that X is "nothing more than" Y, that X is "nothing over and above" Y. And since Y is assumed to exist, X is also held to exist. For although X is nothing *more* than Y, it's also nothing *less* than Y. When you reduce chemical processes to physical processes, you don't deny that chemical processes exist.

All true. And yet, to reduce consciousness to behavior and dispositions to behavior is to eliminate it. To say that consciousness is really nothing more than (dispositions to) behavior is to say that it doesn't exist. Reductionists may continue to deny this, or claim that it begs the question—that it assumes the truth of the conclusion for which it's arguing. Formally speaking, it does beg the question, and begging the question is a well-known theoretical sin. Sometimes, however, it is the correct response.

To see this, it helps to compare the behaviorists' reductionist theory of consciousness with the Pizza-ists' reductionist theory of consciousness: that consciousness is really just pizza. Formally speaking, the Pizza Theory fully allows that consciousness exists, for pizza certainly exists. So, too, philosophical behaviorism fully allows that consciousness exists, because behavior certainly exists. But to say that experience is just pizza *is* to deny that consciousness exists, for we know that conscious experience exists, we know what it is like, and we know that it isn't just pizza. So, too, for the claim that consciousness is just behavior.

This, then, is *philosophical* behaviorism, the first main version of the Denial. It was already stirring when Russell published *The Analysis of Mind* (1921), and was clearly on the table when Broad excoriated it in *The Mind and its Place in Nature* (1925), worrying that he might "be accused of breaking a butterfly on a wheel." It may be that relatively few psychologists fell into outright philosophical behaviorism, but there was cross-infection. In 1923, the psychologist Karl Lashley aimed "to show that the statement, 'I am conscious' does not mean anything more than the statement that 'such and such physiological processes are going on within me.'" Still, even an austere experimentalist like E.G. Boring, one of the leading "operationist" psychologists in the mid-twentieth century, held firmly in 1948 to the view that experience or "consciousness is what you experience immediately."

Two years later, however, Brian Farrell judged Boring's claim to be a "comical and pathogenic remark." Farrell thought better times were coming. If Western societies were truly to assimilate

the work of the relevant sciences, “then it is quite possible that the notion of ‘experience’ will be generally discarded as delusive.” As things are, it’s only by “restricting the use of the word ‘experience’ to ‘raw feels’ [that we can] go on defending the view that ‘experience’ and ‘behavior’ are not identical; and this line of defence is hopeless.” In the present state of our language, “the notion of ‘experience’ can be shown to resemble an occult notion like ‘witchcraft’ in a primitive community that is in the process of being acculturated to the West.” Fortunately, science “is getting to the brink of rejecting [experience]... as ‘unreal’ or ‘non-existent.’”

At this point, the philosophers had left the psychologists in the dust in the race to folly. Farrell’s thoughts were echoed by, among others, the radical philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend (1962) and Richard Rorty (1965); and they were influential in the vast upsurge of discussion of consciousness that followed the publication of the psychologist Ullin Place’s paper “Is Consciousness a Brain Process?” (1956), and the Australian philosopher Jack Smart’s paper “Sensations and Brain Processes” (1959). But, by now, something else was in play. For philosophers were not—or not primarily—motivated by behaviorist considerations in their denial of the existence of consciousness. Their line of thought was, in one striking respect, far worse. For it does at least follow from philosophical behaviorism that consciousness doesn’t really exist, whereas these philosophers were motivated by something—a commitment to naturalism—from which it doesn’t even begin to follow that consciousness doesn’t exist.

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Naturalism states that everything that concretely exists is entirely natural; nothing supernatural or otherwise non-natural exists. Given that we know that conscious experience exists, we must as naturalists suppose that it’s wholly natural. And given that we’re specifically *materialist* or *physicalist* naturalists (as almost all naturalists are), we must take it that conscious experience is wholly material or physical. And so we should, because it’s beyond reasonable doubt that experience—what W.V. Quine called “experience in all its richness... the heady luxuriance of experience” of color and sound and smell—is wholly a matter of neural goings-on: wholly natural and wholly physical.

It’s true that we can’t understand how experience can be wholly a matter of neural goings-on, when we start out from the way the brain appears to physics or neurophysiology. Crucially, though, there’s no reason to give the way the brain appears to physics or neurophysiology priority over the way it appears to the person having the experience. Rather the reverse, as Russell pointed out as early as 1927: he annoyed many, and incurred some ridicule, when he proposed that it was only the having of conscious experience that gives us any insight into the intrinsic nature of the stuff of the brain. His point was simple: first, we know something fundamental about the essential nature of conscious experience just in having it; and second, conscious experience is literally part of the physical stuff of the brain, if materialism is true.

Genuine naturalists, then, are outright realists about consciousness, who accept that they are, in many ways, profoundly ignorant of the fundamental nature of the physical. They understand the respect in which the great naturalistic project, spearheaded by physics, hasn’t decreased our ignorance, but *increased* it—precisely because of its advances and successes. We don’t

understand quantum mechanics, or “dark energy,” or “dark matter,” or a host of other things. So be it.

But then—in the middle of the twentieth century—something extraordinary happens. Members of a small but influential group of analytic philosophers come to think that true *naturalistic materialism rules out realism about consciousness*. They duly conclude that consciousness doesn't exist. They reach this conclusion in spite of the fact that conscious experience is a wholly natural phenomenon, whose existence is more certain than any other natural phenomenon, and with which we're directly acquainted, at least in certain fundamental respects. These philosophers thus endorse the Denial.

The problem is not that they take naturalism to entail materialism—they're right to do so. The problem is that they endorse the claim that *conscious experience can't possibly be wholly physical*. They think they know this, although genuine naturalism doesn't warrant it in any way. So they, like the behaviorists, claim that consciousness doesn't exist, although many of them conceal this by using the word “consciousness” in a way that omits the central feature of consciousness—the qualia, the “heady luxuriance.”

The situation grows stranger when one reflects that almost all their materialist forebears, stretching back over 2,000 years to Leucippus and Democritus, completely reject the view that experience can't be physical, and hold instead (as all serious materialists must) that experience is wholly physical. Russell made the key observation in 1927: “We do not know enough of the intrinsic character of events outside us to say whether it does or does not differ from that of ‘mental’ events”—whose nature we do know. He never wavered from this point. In 1948, he noted that physics simply can't tell us “whether the physical world is, or is not, different in intrinsic character from the world of mind.” In 1956, he remarked that “we know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events except when these are mental events that we directly experience.” But the Deniers weren't listening, and they still aren't.

Why do the Deniers ignore a long line of distinguished materialist predecessors and ally themselves with Descartes, their sworn enemy, in holding that experience can't possibly be physical—thereby obliging themselves to endorse the Denial? The answer appears to be that they share with Descartes one very large assumption: that we know enough about the physical to be certain that experience can't be physical.

It's easy to see how, in Descartes's day, these two assumptions might have seemed plainly right. Matter, according to the “corpuscularian” mechanics of the day, consisted of little particles of various shapes bumping into and hooking up with each other in various ways. There was nothing more to it, and it seemed evident that it couldn't possibly be, or account for, conscious experience. The intuition seems more excusable then than today, when quantum field theory has done away with the gritty particles of the past.

The Cartesians, then, “established it as a principle that we are perfectly acquainted with the essence of matter,” as Hume put it in 1738. This was a great mistake, and 250 years later, the leading materialist philosopher David Lewis made the same mistake, claiming “that the physical nature of ordinary matter under mild conditions is very well understood.” True, this isn't a claim

of perfect acquaintance, but it is a version of the Cartesian view, and it is assumed to justify the claim that we know enough about the physical to know that experience can't be physical. For naturalistic materialists the conclusion follows immediately and inexorably: consciousness doesn't really exist.

One of the strangest things about the spread of the naturalism-based Denial in the second half of the twentieth century is that it involved overlooking a point about physics that was once a commonplace, and which I call "the silence of physics." Physics is magnificent: many of its claims are either straightforwardly true or very good approximations to truth. But all of its claims about the physical are expressed by statements of number or equations. They're truths about quantities and relational structures instantiated in concrete reality; and these truths tell us nothing at all about the ultimate nature of the *stuff* of reality, the stuff that has the structure that physics analyzes. Here is Russell again (in 1948): "the physical world is only known as regards certain abstract features of its space-time structure... we know nothing about the events that make matter, except their space-time structure." Stephen Hawking agrees in 1988: physics is "just a set of rules and equations," which leaves open the question "what... breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe." Physics has nothing to say about things that can't be expressed in general rules and equations.

This is the silence of physics—a simple point that destroys the position of many of those today who, covertly or overtly, endorse the Denial. When we grasp the silence of physics, and ask, with Eddington, "what knowledge have we of the nature of atoms that renders it at all incongruous that they should constitute a thinking [i.e., conscious] object?" The answer is simple: none. The false naturalists appear to ignore this point. They rely instead on an imaginative picture of the physical, a picture that goes radically beyond anything that physics tells or could tell us. They are in Russell's words "guilty, unconsciously and in spite of explicit disavowals, of a confusion in their imaginative picture" of reality. This picture is provably incorrect if materialism is indeed true because, in that case, experience is wholly physical yet excluded from the picture.

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The facts of the Denial are before us, and we have an account of how they arose: first, from a mistaken interpretation of behaviorism; then, from a mistake about what a naturalistic outlook requires. But I believe we still lack a satisfactory explanation of the Denial as long as we lack a satisfactory explanation of how these mistakes could have been made. How could anybody have been led to something so silly as to deny the existence of conscious experience, the only general thing we know for certain exists?

The explanation is as ancient as it is simple. As Cicero says, there is "no statement so absurd that no philosopher will make it." Descartes agrees, in 1637: "Nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher." Thomas Reid concurs in 1785: "There is nothing so absurd which some philosophers have not maintained." Louise Antony puts it like this in 2007: "There is... no banality so banal that no philosopher will deny it."



Descartes adds that when it comes to speculative matters, “the scholar... will take... the more pride [in his views] the further they are from common sense... since he will have had to use so much more skill and ingenuity in trying to render them plausible.” Or as C.D. Broad says, some 300 years later: some ideas are “so preposterously silly that only very learned men could have thought of them... by a ‘silly’ theory I mean one which may be held at the time when one is talking or writing professionally, but which only an inmate of a lunatic asylum would think of carrying into daily life.”

We know that silliness happens, but we may still wonder how it is possible. Perhaps we should turn to individual psychology: it can seem exciting to hold views that seem preposterously contrary to common sense—there’s something Oedipally thrilling about it when the father is an old gentleman called Ordinary Opinion. Herbert Feigl adds another psychoanalytic note: “Scholars cathect [or invest] certain ideas so strongly and their outlook becomes so ego involved that they erect elaborate barricades of defenses, merely to protect their pet ideas from the blows (or the slower corrosive effects) of criticism.”

These observations may account for why, as Hobbes notes in 1645, “arguments seldom work on men of wit and learning when they have once engaged themselves in a contrary opinion.” Descartes is right again when he says:

It frequently happens that even when we know that something is false, we get used to hearing it, and thus gradually get into the habit of regarding it as true. Confident assertion and frequent repetition are the two ploys that are often more effective than the most weighty arguments when dealing with ordinary people or those [including philosophers] who do not examine things carefully.

This is what psychologists now call “the familiarity effect” or “mere-exposure effect.” And here, Sir Francis Bacon steps in, writing in 1620:

Once the human mind has favoured certain views, it pulls everything else into agreement with and support for them. Should they be outweighed by more powerful countervailing considerations, it either fails to notice these, or scorns them, or makes fine distinctions in order to neutralize and so reject them.

Very well, but how is it possible to deny the existence of consciousness? Russell thinks it’s the fault of philosophy. There are things that “only philosophers with a long training in absurdity could succeed in believing.” But it isn’t just philosophers, as Mark Twain notes: “There isn’t anything so grotesque or so incredible that the average human being can’t believe it.”

This is how philosophers in the twentieth century came to endorse the Denial, the silliest view ever held in the history of human thought. “When I squint just right,” Dennett writes in 2013, “it *does* sort of seem that consciousness must be something in addition to all the things it does for us and to us, some special private glow or *here-I-am-ness* that would be absent in any robot... But I’ve learned not to credit the hunch. I think it is a flat-out mistake, a failure of imagination.” His position was summarized in an interview in [The New York Times](#): “The elusive subjective conscious experience—the redness of red, the painfulness of pain—that philosophers call [qualia](#)?

Sheer illusion.” If he’s right, no one has ever really suffered, in spite of agonizing diseases, mental illness, murder, rape, famine, slavery, bereavement, torture, and genocide. And no one has ever caused anyone else pain.

This is the Great Silliness. We must hope that it doesn’t spread outside the academy, or convince some future information technologist or roboticist who has great power over our lives.

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## **ONE Follow-Up:**

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. “Panpsychism” is the view that the mental is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world, i.e., that the natural world is as much mental as it is physical.
2. “Reductive materialism” (one version of The Great Silliness of consciousness-denial) is the view that the mental is nothing over and above the physical, which is essentially different from the mental.
3. “Eliminative materialism” (the other version of The Great Silliness) is the view that the mental is nothing at all, i.e., that the mental does not really exist.
4. I know I have consciousness, because I am directly acquainted with my own subjective experiences, and therefore mental events, properties, and facts really exist.
5. Reductive materialism is false, because (by 4.) the mental is what it is, namely consciousness or subjective experience, and therefore it is not nothing over and above something that is essentially different from the mental.
6. Eliminative materialism is false, because (by 4.) the mental really exists.
7. Mental events, properties, and facts are identical to physical events, properties and facts.
8. So the mental is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world, i.e., the natural world is as much mental as it is physical, and panpsychism is true.

## ONE Link:

1. "Panpsychism"

URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/panpsychism/>

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## 2. “Are ‘You’ Just Inside Your Skin or is Your Smartphone Part of You?”

By Karina Vold

*Aeon*, 26 FEBRUARY 2018

URL = <https://aeon.co/ideas/are-you-just-inside-your-skin-or-is-your-smartphone-part-of-you>

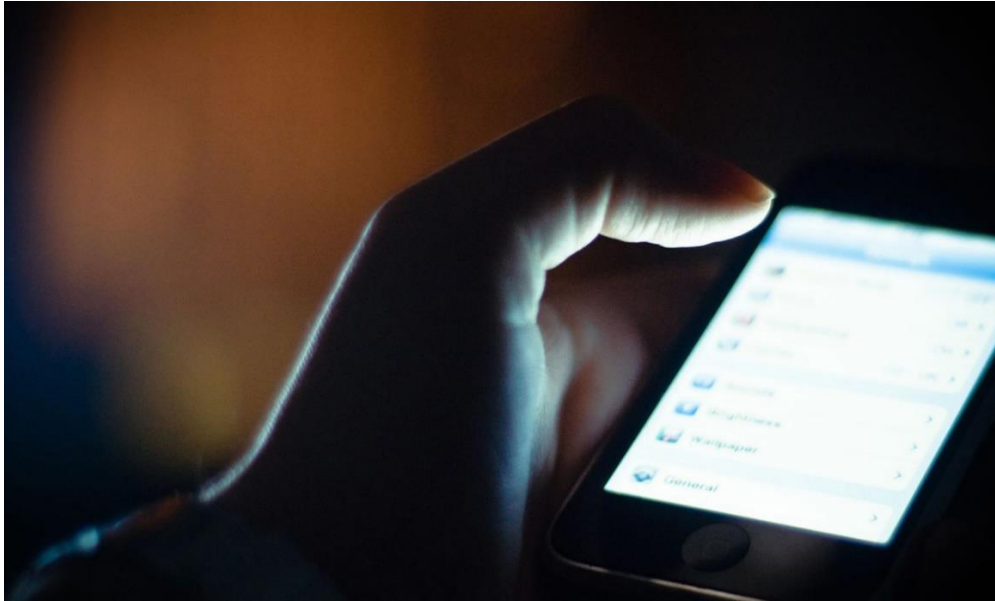


Photo by Andy Rennie/Flickr

In November 2017, a gunman entered a church in Sutherland Springs in Texas, where he killed 26 people and wounded 20 others. He escaped in his car, with police and residents in hot pursuit, before losing control of the vehicle and flipping it into a ditch. When the police got to the car, he was dead. The episode is horrifying enough without its unsettling epilogue. In the course of their investigations, the FBI reportedly pressed the gunman’s finger to the fingerprint-recognition feature on his iPhone in an attempt to unlock it. Regardless of who’s affected, it’s disquieting to think of the police using a corpse to break into someone’s digital afterlife.

Most democratic constitutions shield us from unwanted intrusions into our brains and bodies. They also enshrine our entitlement to freedom of thought and mental privacy. That’s why neurochemical drugs that interfere with cognitive functioning can’t be administered against a person’s will unless there’s a clear medical justification. Similarly, according to [scholarly opinion](#), law-enforcement officials can’t compel someone to take a lie-detector test, because that would be an invasion of privacy and a violation of the right to remain silent.

But in the present era of ubiquitous technology, philosophers are beginning to ask whether biological anatomy really captures the entirety of who we are. Given the role they play in our lives, do our devices deserve the same protections as our brains and bodies?

After all, your smartphone is much more than just a phone. It can tell a more intimate story about you than your best friend. No other piece of hardware in history, not even your brain, contains the quality or quantity of information held on your phone: it ‘knows’ whom you speak to, when you speak to them, what you said, where you have been, your purchases, photos, biometric data, even your notes to yourself – and all this dating back years.

In 2014, the United States Supreme Court used this observation to justify the decision that police must obtain a warrant before rummaging through our smartphones. These devices ‘are now such a pervasive and insistent part of daily life that the proverbial visitor from Mars might conclude they were an important feature of human anatomy’, as Chief Justice John Roberts observed in his written [opinion](#).

The Chief Justice probably wasn’t making a metaphysical point – but the philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers were when they argued in ‘The Extended Mind’ (1998) that technology is actually *part* of us. According to traditional cognitive science, ‘thinking’ is a [process](#) of symbol manipulation or neural computation, which gets carried out by the brain. Clark and Chalmers broadly accept this computational theory of mind, but claim that tools can become seamlessly integrated into how we think. Objects such as smartphones or notepads are often just as functionally essential to our cognition as the synapses firing in our heads. They augment and extend our minds by [increasing](#) our cognitive power and freeing up internal resources.

If accepted, the *extended mind thesis* threatens widespread cultural assumptions about the inviolate nature of thought, which sits at the heart of most legal and social norms. As the US Supreme Court [declared](#) in 1942: ‘freedom to think is absolute of its own nature; the most tyrannical government is powerless to control the inward workings of the mind.’ This [view](#) has its origins in thinkers such as John Locke and René Descartes, who argued that the human soul is locked in a physical body, but that our thoughts exist in an immaterial world, inaccessible to other people. One’s inner life thus needs protecting only when it is externalised, such as through [speech](#). Many researchers in cognitive science still cling to this Cartesian conception – only, now, the private realm of thought coincides with activity in the brain.

But today’s legal institutions are straining against this narrow concept of the mind. They are trying to come to grips with how technology is changing what it means to be human, and to devise new [normative](#) boundaries to cope with this reality. Justice Roberts might not have known about the idea of the extended mind, but it supports his wry observation that smartphones have become part of our body. If our minds now encompass our phones, we are essentially cyborgs: part-biology, part-technology. Given how our smartphones have taken over what were once functions of our brains – remembering dates, phone numbers, addresses – perhaps the data they contain should be treated on a par with the information we hold in our heads. So if the law aims to protect mental privacy, its boundaries would need to be pushed outwards to give our cyborg anatomy the same protections as our brains.

This line of reasoning leads to some potentially radical conclusions. Some philosophers have argued that when we die, our digital devices should be handled as [remains](#): if your smartphone is a part of who you are, then perhaps it should be treated more like your corpse than your couch. Similarly, one might [argue](#) that trashing someone’s smartphone should be seen as a form of

‘extended’ assault, equivalent to a blow to the head, rather than just destruction of property. If your memories are erased because someone attacks you with a club, a court would have no trouble characterising the episode as a violent incident. So if someone breaks your smartphone and wipes its contents, perhaps the perpetrator should be punished as they would be if they had caused a head trauma.

The extended mind thesis also challenges the law’s role in [protecting](#) both the *content* and the *means* of thought – that is, shielding what and how we think from undue influence. Regulation bars non-consensual interference in our neurochemistry (for example, through drugs), because that meddles with the contents of our mind. But if cognition encompasses devices, then arguably they should be subject to the same prohibitions. Perhaps some of the techniques that advertisers use to [hijack](#) our attention online, to nudge our decision-making or manipulate search results, should count as intrusions on our cognitive process. Similarly, in areas where the law protects the means of thought, it might need to guarantee access to tools such as smartphones – in the same way that freedom of expression protects people’s right not only to write or speak, but also to use computers and disseminate speech over the internet.

The courts are still some way from arriving at such decisions. Besides the headline-making cases of mass shooters, there are thousands of instances each year in which police authorities try to get access to encrypted devices. Although the Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution protects individuals’ right to remain silent (and therefore not give up a passcode), judges in several states have ruled that police can forcibly use fingerprints to unlock a user’s phone. (With the new facial-recognition feature on the iPhone X, police might only need to get an unwitting user to look at her phone.) These decisions reflect the traditional concept that the rights and freedoms of an individual end at the skin.

But the concept of personal rights and freedoms that guides our legal institutions is outdated. It is built on a model of a free individual who enjoys an untouchable inner life. Now, though, our thoughts can be invaded before they have even been developed – and in a way, perhaps this is nothing new. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman used to say that he thought *with* his notebook. Without a pen and pencil, a great deal of complex reflection and analysis would never have been possible. If the extended mind view is right, then even simple technologies such as these would merit recognition and protection as a part of the essential toolkit of the mind.

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## ONE Follow-Up:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. The “extended mind thesis” says that technology outside the human brain and human body—e.g., our smart phones, tablets, and laptops—can and does become literally part of our thinking.

2. If the extended mind thesis is true, then various kinds of moral and legal principles based on classical or neo-classical notions of the internality, brain-boundedness, or body-boundedness of the human mind should be radically revised.
3. Technology outside the human brain and human body—e.g., our smart phones, tablets, and laptops—does indeed causally affect us and significantly shape our thinking.
4. But, even though technology outside the human brain and human body does indeed causally affect us and significantly shape our thinking, it does not follow that this technology is literally part of our thinking; on the contrary, human thinking itself occurs exclusively in and through the human brain and body.
5. Therefore, we have no sufficient reason for accepting the extended mind thesis, and, correspondingly, no sufficient reason to make radical revisions to various moral and legal principles based on classical or neo-classical notions of the internality, brain-boundedness, or body-boundedness of the human mind.

## **ONE Link:**

1. “The Extended Mind”

URL = <http://consc.net/papers/extended.html>

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### 3. “Disarming the Weapons of Mass Distraction”

By Madeleine Bunting

*New York Review of Books*, 15 MARCH 2018

URL = <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/15/disarming-the-weapons-of-mass-distraction/>



An image from a series by [Kamil Kotarba](#) titled *Hide and Seek*, 2015

“Are you paying attention?” The phrase still resonates with a particular sharpness in my mind. It takes me straight back to my boarding school, aged thirteen, when my eyes would drift out the window to the woods beyond the classroom. The voice was that of the math teacher, the very dedicated but dull Miss Ploughman, whose furrowed grimace I can still picture.

We’re taught early that attention is a currency—we “pay” attention—and much of the discipline of the classroom is aimed at marshaling the attention of children, with very mixed results. We all have a history here, of how we did or did not learn to pay attention and all the praise or blame that came with that. It used to be that such patterns of childhood experience faded into irrelevance. As we reached adulthood, how we paid attention, and to what, was a personal matter and akin to breathing—as if it were automatic.

Today, though, as we grapple with a pervasive new digital culture, attention has become an issue of pressing social concern. Technology provides us with new tools to grab people’s attention. These innovations are dismantling traditional boundaries of private and public, home and office, work and leisure. Emails and tweets can reach us almost anywhere, anytime. There are no cracks



left in which the mind can idle, rest, and recuperate. A taxi ad offers free wifi so that you can remain “productive” on a cab journey.

Even those spare moments of time in our day—waiting for a bus, standing in a queue at the supermarket—can now be “harvested,” says the writer Tim Wu in his book *The Attention Merchants*. In this quest to pursue “those slivers of our unharvested awareness,” digital technology has provided consumer capitalism with its most powerful tools yet. And our attention fuels it. As Matthew Crawford notes in *The World Beyond Your Head*, “when some people treat the minds of other people as a resource, this is not ‘creating wealth,’ it is transferring it.”

There’s a whiff of panic around the subject: the story that our attention spans are now shorter than a goldfish’s attracted millions of readers on the web; it’s still frequently cited, despite its questionable veracity. Rates of diagnosis attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children have soared, [creating an \\$11 billion](#) global market for pharmaceutical companies. Every glance of our eyes is now tracked for commercial gain as ever more ingenious ways are devised to capture our attention, if only momentarily. Our eyeballs are now described as capitalism’s most valuable real estate. Both our attention and its deficits are turned into lucrative markets.

There is also a domestic economy of attention; within every family, some get it and some give it. We’re all born needing the attention of others—our parents’, especially—and from the outset, our social skills are honed to attract the attention we need for our care. Attention is woven into all forms of human encounter from the most brief and transitory to the most intimate. It also becomes deeply political: who pays attention to whom?

Social psychologists have researched how the powerful tend to tune out the less powerful. One study with college students showed that even in five minutes of friendly chat, wealthier students showed fewer signs of engagement when in conversation with their less wealthy counterparts: less eye contact, fewer nods, and more checking the time, doodling, and fidgeting. Discrimination of race and gender, too, plays out through attention. Anyone who’s spent any time in an organization will be aware of how attention is at the heart of office politics. A suggestion is ignored in a meeting, but is then seized upon as a brilliant solution when repeated by another person.

What is political is also ethical. Matthew Crawford argues that this is the essential characteristic of urban living: a basic recognition of others.

And then there’s an even more fundamental dimension to the *politics of attention*. At a primary level, all interactions in public space require a very minimal form of attention, an awareness of the presence and movement of others. Without it, we would bump into each other, frequently.

I had a vivid demonstration of this point on a recent commute: I live in East London and regularly use the narrow canal paths for cycling. It was the canal rush hour—lots of walkers with dogs, families with children, joggers as well as cyclists heading home. We were all sharing the towpath with the usual mixture of give and take, slowing to allow passing, swerving around and between each other. Only this time, a woman was walking down the center of the path with her eyes glued to her phone, impervious to all around her. This went well beyond a moment of

distraction. Everyone had to duck and weave to avoid her. She'd abandoned the unspoken contract that avoiding collision is a mutual obligation.

This scene is now a daily occurrence for many of us, in shopping centers, station concourses, or on busy streets. Attention is the essential lubricant of urban life, and without it, we're denying our co-existence in that moment and place. The novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, writes that the most basic requirement for being good is that a person "must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims."

Attention is what draws us out of ourselves to experience and engage in the world. The word is often accompanied by a verb—attention needs to be grabbed, captured, mobilized, attracted, or galvanized. Reflected in such language is an acknowledgement of how attention is the essential precursor to action. The founding father of psychology William James provided what is still one of the [best working definitions](#):

It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others.

Attention is a limited resource and has to be allocated: to pay attention to one thing requires us to withdraw it from others. There are two well-known dimensions to attention, explains Willem Kuyken, a professor of psychology at Oxford. The first is "alerting"—an automatic form of attention, hardwired into our brains, that warns us of threats to our survival. Think of when you're driving a car in a busy city: you're aware of the movement of other cars, pedestrians, cyclists, and road signs, while advertising tries to grab any spare morsel of your attention. Notice how quickly you can swerve or brake when you spot a car suddenly emerging from a side street. There's no time for a complicated cognitive process of decision making. This attention is beyond voluntary control.

The second form of attention is known as "executive"—the process by which our brain selects what to foreground and focus on, so that there can be other information in the background—such as music when you're cooking—but one can still accomplish a complex task. Crucially, our capacity for executive attention is limited. Contrary to what some people claim, none of us can multitask complex activities effectively. The next time you write an email while talking on the phone, notice how many typing mistakes you make or how much you remember from the call. Executive attention can be trained, and needs to be for any complex activity. This was the point James made when he wrote: "there is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time... what is called sustained voluntary attention is a repetition of successive efforts which bring back the topic to the mind."

Attention is a complex interaction between memory and perception, in which we continually select what to notice, thus finding the material which correlates in some way with past experience. In this way, patterns develop in the mind. We are always making meaning from the overwhelming raw data. As James put it, "my experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos."

And we are constantly engaged in organizing that chaos, as we interpret our experience. This is clear in the [famous Gorilla Experiment](#) in which viewers were told to watch a video of two teams of students passing a ball between them. They had to count the number of passes made by the team in white shirts and ignore those of the team in black shirts. The experiment is deceptively complex because it involves three forms of attention: first, scanning the whole group; second, ignoring the black T-shirt team to keep focus on the white T-shirt team (a form of inhibiting attention); and third, remembering to count. In the middle of the experiment, someone in a gorilla suit ambles through the group. Afterward, half the viewers when asked hadn't spotted the gorilla and couldn't even believe it had been there. We can be blind not only to the obvious, but *to our blindness*.

There is another point in this experiment which is less often emphasized. Ignoring something—such as the black T-shirt team in this experiment—requires a form of attention. It costs us attention to ignore something. Many of us live and work in environments that require us to ignore a huge amount of information—that flashing advert, a bouncing icon or pop-up.

In another famous psychology experiment, Walter Mischel's [Marshmallow Test](#), four-year-olds had a choice of eating a marshmallow immediately or two in fifteen minutes. While filmed, each child was put in a room alone in front of the plate with a marshmallow. They squirmed and fidgeted, poked the marshmallow and stared at the ceiling. A third of the children couldn't resist the marshmallow and gobbled it up, a third nibbled cautiously, but the last third figured out how to distract themselves. They looked under the table, sang... did anything but look at the sweet. It's a demonstration of the capacity to reallocate attention. [In a follow-up study](#) some years later, those who'd been able to wait for the second marshmallow had better life outcomes, such as academic achievement and health. One New Zealand study of 1,000 children found that this form of self-regulation was a more reliable predictor of future success and wellbeing than even a good IQ or comfortable economic status.

What, then, are the implications of how digital technologies are transforming our patterns of attention? In the current political anxiety about social mobility and inequality, more weight needs to be put on this most crucial and basic skill: sustaining attention.

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I learned to concentrate as a child. Being a bookworm helped. I'd be completely absorbed in my reading as the noise of my busy family swirled around me. It was good training for working in newsrooms; when I started as a journalist, they were very noisy places with the clatter of keyboards, telephones ringing and fascinating conversations on every side. What has proved much harder to block out is email and text messages.

The digital tech companies know a lot about this widespread habit; many of them have built a business model around it. They've drawn on the work of the psychologist B.F. Skinner who identified back in the Thirties how, in animal behavior, an action can be encouraged with a positive consequence and discouraged by a negative one. In one experiment, he gave a pigeon a food pellet whenever it pecked at a button and the result, as predicted, was that the pigeon kept pecking. Subsequent research established that the most effective way to keep the pigeon pecking

was “variable-ratio reinforcement.” Give the pigeon a food pellet *sometimes*, and you have it well and truly hooked.

We’re just like the pigeon pecking at the button when we check our email or phone. It’s a humiliating thought. Variable reinforcement ensures that the customer will keep coming back. It’s the principle behind one of the most lucrative US industries: slot machines, which generate more profit than baseball, films, and theme parks combined. Gambling was once tightly restricted for its addictive potential, but most of us now have the attentional equivalent of a slot machine in our pocket, beside our plate at mealtimes, and by our pillow at night. Even during a meal out, a play at the theater, a film, or a tennis match. Almost nothing is now experienced uninterrupted.

Anxiety about the exponential rise of our gadget addiction and how it is fragmenting our attention is sometimes dismissed as a Luddite reaction to a technological revolution. But that misses the point. The problem is not the technology per se, but the commercial imperatives that drive the new technologies and, unrestrained, colonize our attention by fundamentally changing our experience of time and space, saturating both in information.

In much public space, wherever your eye lands—from the back of the toilet door, to the handrail on the escalator, or the hotel key card—an ad is trying to grab your attention, and does so by triggering the oldest instincts of the human mind: fear, sex, and food. Public places become dominated by people trying to sell you something. In his tirade against this commercialization, Crawford cites advertisements on the backs of school report cards and on debit machines where you swipe your card. Before you enter your PIN, that gap of a few seconds is now used to show adverts. He describes silence and ad-free experience as “luxury goods” that only the wealthy can afford. Crawford has invented the concept of the “attentional commons,” free public spaces that allow us to choose where to place our attention. He draws the analogy with environmental goods that belong to all of us, such as clean air or clean water.

Some legal theorists are beginning to conceive of our own attention as a human right. One former Google employee [warned](#) that “there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have.” They use the insights into human behavior derived from social psychology—the need for approval, the need to reciprocate others’ gestures, the fear of missing out. Your attention ceases to be your own, pulled and pushed by algorithms. Attention is referred to as the real currency of the future.

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In 2013, I embarked on a risky experiment in attention: I left my job. In the previous two years, it had crept up on me. I could no longer read beyond a few paragraphs. My eyes would glaze over and, even more disastrously for someone who had spent their career writing, I seemed unable to string together my thoughts, let alone write anything longer than a few sentences. When I try to explain the impact, I can only offer a metaphor: it felt like my imagination and use of language were vacuum packed, like a slab of meat coated in plastic. I had lost the ability to turn ideas around, see them from different perspectives. I could no longer draw connections between disparate ideas.

At the time, I was working in media strategy. It was a culture of back-to-back meetings from 8:30 AM to 6 PM, and there were plenty of advantages to be gained from continuing late into the evening if you had the stamina. Commitment was measured by emails with a pertinent weblink. Meetings were sometimes as brief as thirty minutes and frequently ran through lunch. Meanwhile, everyone was sneaking time to battle with the constant emails, eyes flickering to their phone screens in every conversation. The result was a kind of crazy fog, a mishmash of inconclusive discussions.

At first, it was exhilarating, like being on those crazy rides in a theme park. By the end, the effect was disastrous. I was almost continuously ill, battling migraines and unidentifiable viruses. When I finally made the drastic decision to leave, my income collapsed to a fraction of its previous level and my family's lifestyle had to change accordingly. I had no idea what I was going to do; I had lost all faith in my ability to write. I told friends I would have to return the advance I'd received to write a book. I had to try to get back to the skills of reflection and focus that had once been ingrained in me.

The first step was to teach myself to read again. I sometimes went to a café, leaving my phone and computer behind. I had to slow down the racing incoherence of my mind so that it could settle on the text and its gradual development of an argument or narrative thread. The turning point in my recovery was a five weeks' research trip to the Scottish Outer Hebrides. On the journey north of Glasgow, my mobile phone lost its Internet connection. I had cut myself loose with only the occasional text or call to family back home. Somewhere on the long Atlantic beaches of these wild and dramatic islands, I rediscovered my ability to write.

I attribute that in part to a stunning exhibition I came across in the small harbor town of Lochboisdale, on the island of South Uist. Vija Celmins is an acclaimed Latvian-American artist whose work is famous for its astonishing patience. She can take a year or more to make a woodcut that portrays in minute detail the surface of the sea. A postcard of her work now sits above my desk, a reminder of the power of slow thinking.

Just as we've had a slow eating movement, we need a slow thinking campaign. Its manifesto could be the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke's beautiful "Letters to a Young Poet":

To let every impression and the germ of every feeling come to completion inside, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, in what is unattainable to one's own intellect, and to wait with deep humility and patience for the hour when a new clarity is delivered.

Many great thinkers attest that they have their best insights in moments of relaxation, the proverbial brainwave in the bath. We actually need what we most fear: boredom.

When I left my job (and I was lucky that I could), friends and colleagues were bewildered. Why give up a good job? But I felt that here was an experiment worth trying. Crawford frames it well as "intellectual biodiversity." At a time of crisis, we need people thinking in different ways. If we all jump to the tune of Facebook or Instagram and allow ourselves to be primed by Twitter, the danger is that we lose the "trained powers of concentration" that allow us, in Crawford's

words, “to recognize that independence of thought and feeling is a fragile thing, and requires certain conditions.”

I also took to heart the insights of the historian Timothy Snyder, who concluded from his studies of twentieth-century European totalitarianism that the way to fend off tyranny is to read books, make an effort to separate yourself from the Internet, and “be kind to our language... Think up your own way of speaking.” Dropping out and going offline enabled me to get back to reading, voraciously, and to writing; beyond that, it’s too early to announce the results of my experiment with attention. As Rilke said, “These things cannot be measured by time, a year has no meaning, and ten years are nothing.”

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A recent column in *The New Yorker* cheekily suggests that all the fuss about the impact of digital technologies on our attention is nothing more than writers’ worrying about their own working habits. Is all this anxiety about our fragmenting minds a moral panic akin to those that swept Victorian Britain about sexual behavior? Patterns of attention are changing, but perhaps it doesn’t much matter?

My teenage children read much less than I did. One son used to play chess online with a friend, text on his phone, and do his homework all at the same time. I was horrified, but he got a place at Oxford. At his interview, he met a third-year history undergraduate who told him he hadn’t yet read *any* books in his time at university. But my kids are considerably more knowledgeable about a vast range of subjects than I was at their age. There’s a small voice suggesting that the forms of attention I was brought up with could be a thing of the past; the sustained concentration required to read a whole book will become an obscure niche hobby.

And yet, I’m haunted by a reflection: the magnificent illuminations of the eighth-century *Book of Kells* has intricate patterning that no one has ever been able to copy, such is the fineness of the tight spirals. Lines are a millimeter apart. They indicate a steadiness of hand and mind—a capability most of us have long since lost. Could we be trading in capacities for focus in exchange for a breadth of reference? Some might argue that’s not a bad trade. But we would lose depth: artist Paul Klee wrote that he would spend a day in silent contemplation of something before he painted it. Paul Cézanne was similarly known for his trance like attention on his subject. Madame Cézanne recollected how her husband would gaze at the landscape, and told her, “The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.” The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes a contemplative attention in which one steps outside of oneself and immerses oneself in the object of attention.

It’s not just artists who require such depth of attention. Nearly two decades ago, a doctor teaching medical students at Yale was frustrated at their inability to distinguish between types of skin lesions. Their gaze seemed restless and careless. He took his students [to an art gallery](#) and told them to look at a picture for fifteen minutes. The program is now used in dozens of US medical schools.

Some argue that losing the capacity for deep attention presages catastrophe. It is the building block of “intimacy, wisdom, and cultural progress,” argues Maggie Jackson in her book *Distracted*, in which she warns that “as our attentional skills are squandered, we are plunging into a culture of mistrust, skimming, and a dehumanizing merging between man and machine.” Significantly, her research began with a curiosity about why so many Americans were deeply dissatisfied with life. She argues that losing the capacity for deep attention makes it harder to make sense of experience and to find meaning—from which comes wonder and fulfillment. She fears a new “dark age” in which we forget what makes us truly happy.

Strikingly, the epicenter of this wave of anxiety over our attention is the US. All the authors I’ve cited are American. It’s been argued that this debate represents an existential crisis for America because it exposes the flawed nature of its greatest ideal, individual freedom. The commonly accepted notion is that to be free is to make choices, and no one can challenge that expression of autonomy. But if our choices are actually engineered by thousands of very clever, well-paid digital developers, are we free? The former Google employee Tristan Harris [confessed in an article](#) in 2016 that technology “gives people the illusion of free choice while architecting the menu so that [tech giants] win, no matter what you choose.”

Despite my children’s multitasking, I maintain that vital human capacities—depth of insight, emotional connection, and creativity—are at risk. I’m intrigued as to what the resistance might look like. There are stirrings of protest with the recent establishment of initiatives such as the [Time Well Spent](#) movement, founded by tech industry insiders who have become alarmed at the efforts invested in keeping people hooked. But collective action is elusive; the emphasis is repeatedly on the individual to develop the necessary self-regulation, but if that is precisely what is being eroded, we could be caught in a self-reinforcing loop.

One of the most interesting responses to our distraction epidemic is mindfulness. Its popularity is evidence that people are trying to find a way to protect and nourish their minds. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who pioneered the development of secular mindfulness, draws an analogy with jogging: just as keeping your body fit is now well understood, people will come to realize the importance of looking after their minds.

I’ve meditated regularly for twenty years, but curious as to how this is becoming mainstream, I went to an event in the heart of high-tech Shoreditch in London. In a hipster workspaces with funky architecture, excellent coffee, and an impressive range of beards, a soft-spoken retired Oxford professor of psychology, Mark Williams, was talking about how multitasking has a switching cost in focus and concentration. Our unique human ability to remember the past and to think ahead brings a cost; we lose the present. To counter this, he advocated a daily practice of mindfulness: bringing attention back to the body—the physical sensations of the breath, the hands, the feet. Williams explained how fear and anxiety inhibit creativity. In time, the practice of mindfulness enables you to acknowledge fear calmly and even to investigate it with curiosity. You learn to place your attention in the moment, noticing details such as the sunlight or the taste of the coffee.

On a recent retreat, I was beside a river early one morning and a rower passed. I watched the boat slip by and enjoyed the beauty in a radically new way. The moment was sufficient; there

was nothing I wanted to add or take away—no thought of how I wanted to do this every day, or how I wanted to learn to row, or how I wished I was in the boat. Nothing but the pleasure of witnessing it. The busy-ness of the mind had stilled. Mindfulness can be a remarkable bid to reclaim our attention and to claim real freedom, the freedom from our habitual reactivity that makes us easy prey for manipulation.

But I worry that the integrity of mindfulness is fragile, vulnerable both to commercialization by employers who see it as a form of mental performance enhancement and to consumer commodification, rather than contributing to the formation of ethical character. Mindfulness as a meditation practice originates in Buddhism, and without that tradition's ethics, there is a high risk of it being hijacked and misrepresented.

Back in the Sixties, the countercultural psychologist Timothy Leary rebelled against the conformity of the new mass media age and called for, in Crawford's words, an "attentional revolution." Leary urged people to take control of the media they consumed as a crucial act of self-determination; pay attention to where you place your attention, he declared. The social critic Herbert Marcuse believed Leary was fighting the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom, which Marcuse defined as the ability "to live without anxiety." These were radical prophets whose words have an uncanny resonance today. Distraction has become a commercial and political strategy, and it amounts to a form of emotional violence that cripples people, leaving them unable to gather their thoughts and overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy. It's a powerful form of oppression dressed up in the language of individual choice.

The stakes could hardly be higher, as William James knew a century ago: "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will." And what are we humans without these three?

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## **ONE Follow-Up:**

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Technology outside the human brain and human body—e.g., our smart phones, tablets, and laptops—causally affects us and significantly shapes our thinking.
2. In particular, the specific personal, business, and political social practices and institutions associated with the by-now nearly ubiquitous internet-based technology of smart phones, tablets, and laptops, etc., has had the effect of significantly shaping our cognitive capacity for attention.



3. This effect is very bad for us, all-around, because it constitutes a widespread diminution, disruption, and distortion of that cognitive capacity. For convenience, let's call the collection of those malign results *techno-distraction*.

4. Therefore, we ought to change our lives, social practices, and social institutions in significant ways in order to counteract and reverse techno-distraction.

## **ONE Link:**

1. "A New Theory of Distraction"

URL = <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/a-new-theory-of-distraction>

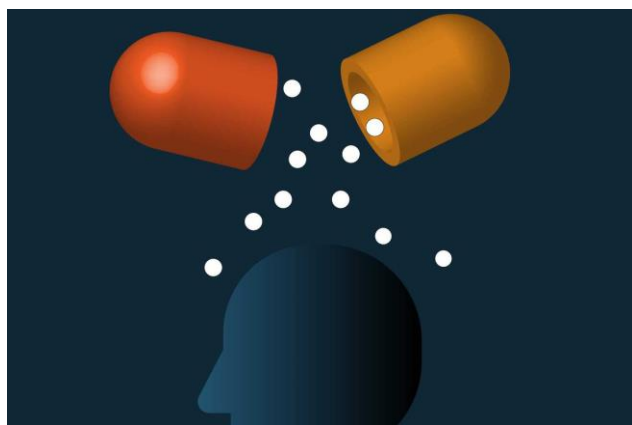
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## 4. “People Are Dying Because We Misunderstand How Those With Addiction Think”

By Brendan de Kennessey

Vox, 16 MARCH 2018

URL = [https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/3/5/17080470/addiction-opioids-moral-blame-choices-medication-crutches-philosophy?\\_prclt=cjdMSczd](https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/3/5/17080470/addiction-opioids-moral-blame-choices-medication-crutches-philosophy?_prclt=cjdMSczd)



Javier Zarracina/Vox

The American opioid epidemic claimed [42,300 lives](#) in 2016 alone. While the public policy challenge is daunting, the problem isn't that we lack any effective treatment options. The data shows that we could save many lives by expanding [medication-assisted treatments](#) and adopting harm reduction policies like [needle exchange programs](#). Yet neither of these policies has been widely embraced.

Why? Because these treatments are seen as indulging an addict's weakness rather than “curing” it. Methadone and buprenorphine, the most effective medication-assisted treatments, are [“crutches,”](#) in the words of felony treatment court judge Frank Gulotta Jr.; they are [“just substituting one opioid for another,”](#) according to former Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price.

And as county Commissioner Rodney Fish voted to [block a needle exchange program](#) in Lawrence County, Indiana, he quoted the Bible: “If my people ... shall humble themselves ... and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin.”

Most of us have been trained to use more forgiving language when talking about addiction. We call it a disease. We say that people with addiction should be helped, not blamed. But deep down, many of us still have trouble avoiding the thought that they could stop using if they just tried harder.

Surely *I* would do better in their situation, we think to ourselves. We may not endorse the idea — we may think it is flat-out wrong — but there’s a part of us that can’t help but see addiction as a symptom of weak character and bad judgment.

Latent or explicit, the view of addiction as a moral failure is doing real damage. The stigma against addiction is “the single biggest reason America is failing in its response to the opioid epidemic,” [Vox’s German Lopez concluded](#) after a year of reporting on the crisis. To overcome this stigma, we need to first understand it. *Why* is it so easy to see addiction as a sign of flawed character?

We tend to view addiction as a moral failure because we are in the grip of a simple but misleading answer to one of the oldest questions of philosophy: Do people always do what they think is best? In other words, do our actions always reflect our beliefs and values? When someone with addiction chooses to take drugs, does this show us what she truly cares about — or might something more complicated be going on?

These questions are not merely academic: Lives depend on where we come down. The stigma against addiction owes its stubborn tenacity to a specific, and flawed, philosophical view of the mind, a misconception so seductive that it ensnared Socrates in the fifth century BC.

### **Do our actions always reflect our preferences?**

In a dialogue called the *Protagoras*, Plato describes a debate between Socrates and a popular teacher named (wait for it) Protagoras. At one point their discussion turns to the topic of what the Greeks called *akrasia*: acting against one’s best judgment.

*Akrasia* is a fancy name for an all-too-common experience. I know I should go to the gym, but I watch Netflix instead. You know you’ll enjoy dinner more if you stop eating the bottomless chips, but you keep munching nevertheless.

This disconnect between judgment and action is made all the more vivid by addiction. Here’s the testimony of one person with addiction, reported in Maia Szalavitz’s book [Unbroken Brain](#): “I can remember many, many times driving down to the projects telling myself, ‘You don’t want to do this! You don’t want to do this!’ But I’d do it anyway.”

As pervasive as the experience of *akrasia* is, Socrates thought it didn’t make sense. I may *think* I value exercise more than TV, but, assuming no one is pressuring me, my behavior reveals that when it comes down to it, I, in fact, care more about catching up on *Black Mirror*. As [Socrates puts it](#): “No one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better.”

Now, you might be thinking: Socrates clearly never went to a restaurant with unlimited chips. But he has a point. To figure out what a person’s true priorities are, we usually look to the choices they make. (“Actions speak louder than words.”) When a person binges on TV, munches chips, or gets high despite the consequences, Socrates would infer that they must care more

about indulging now than about avoiding those consequences — whatever they may *say* to the contrary.

(He isn't alone: Both the [behaviorism](#) movement in 20th-century psychology and the ["revealed preference"](#) doctrine in economics are based on the idea that you can best learn what people desire by looking at what they do.)

So for Socrates, there's no such thing as acting against one's best judgment: There's only *bad judgment*. He draws an analogy with [optical illusions](#). Like a child who thinks her thumb is bigger than the moon, we overestimate the value of nearby pleasures and underestimate the severity of their faraway consequences.

Through this Socratic lens, it's hard *not* to see addiction as a failure. Imagine a father, addicted to heroin, who misses picking up his children from school because he's shooting up at home. In Socrates's view, the father must be doing what he believes to be best. But how could the father possibly think that?

I see two possibilities. As Socrates's illusion analogy suggests, the father could be grievously mistaken about the consequences of his actions. Perhaps he has convinced himself that his kids can get home on their own, or that he'll be able to pick them up while high. But if the father has seen the damaging effects of his behavior time and again — as happens often to long-term addicts — it becomes harder to see how he is not complicit in this illusion. If he really believes his choice will be harmless, he must be willfully, and condemnably, self-deceived.

Which leads us to the second, even more damning possibility: Perhaps the father knows the consequences shooting up will have on his children, but he *doesn't care*. If his choice cannot be ascribed to ignorance, it must reveal his preferences: The father must care more about getting high than he cares about his children's well-being.

If Socrates's model of the mind is right, these are the only available explanations for addictive behavior: The person must have bad judgment, bad priorities, or some combination of the two.

**Our philosophy of addiction shapes our treatment of it — whether we realize it or not**



Lawrence K. Ho/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

It's not exactly a sympathetic picture. But I suspect it underlies much of our thinking about addiction. Consider the popular idea that someone with addiction has to hit "rock bottom" before she can begin true recovery. In the Socratic view, this makes perfect sense. If addiction is due to a failure to appreciate the bad consequences of getting high, then the best route to recovery might be for the person to experience firsthand how bad those consequences really are. A straight dose of the harshest reality might be the only cure for the addict's self-deceived beliefs and shortsighted preferences.

We could give a similar Socratic rationale for punishing drug possession with decades in jail: If we make the consequences of using *bad enough*, people with addiction will finally realize that it's better to be sober, the thought goes. Once again, we are correcting their flawed judgment and priorities, albeit with a heavy hand.

Socrates's view also makes sense of our reluctance to adopt medication-assisted treatment and needle exchange programs. These methods might temporarily mitigate the damage caused by addiction, but on the Socratic view, they leave the underlying problem untouched.

By giving out clean needles or substituting methadone for heroin, we may prevent some deaths in the short term, but we won't change the skewed priorities that caused the addictive behavior in the first place. Worse, we may "enable" someone's bad judgment by shielding her from the worst effects of her actions. In the long run, the only way to save addicts from themselves is to make it harder, not easier, to pursue the lifestyle they so clearly prefer.

Is Socrates right? Or can we find a better, more sympathetic way of thinking about addiction?

To see things differently, we need to question the fundamental picture of the mind on which Socrates's view rests. It is natural to think of the mind as a unified whole and identify ourselves with that whole. But this monolithic view of the mind leads to the Socratic view of addiction. Whatever I choose must be what my mind wants most, and so what *I* want most. The key to escaping the Socratic view, then, is to realize that the mind has different parts — and that some parts of my mind are more *me* than others.

### **The "self" is not a single, unitary thing**

This "divided mind" view has become popular in both philosophy and psychology over the past 50 years. In psychology, we see it in the rise of "dual process" theories of the mind, the most famous of which comes from Nobel laureate [Daniel Kahneman](#), who divides the mind into a part that makes judgments quickly, intuitively, and unconsciously ("System I") and a part that thinks more slowly, rationally, and consciously ("System II").

More pertinent for our purposes is research on what [University of Michigan neuroscientist Kent Berridge](#) calls the "wanting system," which regulates our cravings for things like food, sex, and drugs using signals based in the neurotransmitter dopamine. The wanting system has powerful control over behavior, and its cravings are insensitive to long-term consequences.

Berridge's research indicates that addictive drugs can "[hijack](#)" the wanting system, manipulating dopamine directly to generate cravings that are far stronger than those the rest of us experience. The result is that the conscious part of a person's mind might want one thing (say, to pick his kids up from school) but be overruled by the wanting system's desire for something else (to get high).

You might be hoping for me to draw you a picture of the brain with "The Self" outlined in thick black ink: a country with its own sovereign territory. Things aren't quite that simple. Though some parts of the brain (prefrontal cortex) appear to be Selfier than others (cerebellum), conscious and unconscious processes are too deeply intertwined for us to expect to find a clean neurobiological break between them.

The question of how to find the self in the mind is more a philosophical question than a neurobiological one. Even if we had a high-definition map of every neural firing in your brain, we would still have to take a stand on what in this flurry of electrical activity constitutes *you*.

Over the past half-century, philosophers have turned to this question with new vigor, trying to make sense of the idea that some of a person's desires (to get sober and care for her children) represent what *she* cares about — her true self — in a way that other desires (to get high) do not.

The desires that represent my true self are, on different theories, the desires that I want myself to have ([Harry Frankfurt](#)), the desires that align with my judgments of what is valuable ([Gary Watson](#)), the desires that cohere with my stable life plans ([Michael Bratman](#)), or the desires that are supported by rational deliberation ([Susan Wolf](#)).

More important than the differences between these views is one critical similarity: These philosophers are united in rejecting the Socratic view. None of them thinks that what I really want is just a matter of what desire wins out over my behavior. To see what my true self wants, we should look not to my actions but to my reflective judgments about the kind of person I want to be and the life I want to lead.

Putting these two strains of thought together, we can see the heroin-addicted father in a different light. As the father decides whether to shoot up or go pick up his kids, two parts of his mind are battling for control: the part that wants heroin more than anything else, and the part that cares far more about his kids. But the father is not a mere bystander in this conflict: He is a *participant* in it. The father is fighting on the side of the part that cares about his children.

### **Drugs that reduce cravings don't "enable" addiction. They give people with addiction an ally.**

I would go further and say that the father *is* the part of his mind that cares more about his children. For if we asked him to tell us what, on reflection, he really cares about, he would say that he wants to get sober and take care of his kids. And in this case, words speak louder than actions.

When the desire for heroin unfortunately wins out, that doesn't mean that the father cares more about getting high than he cares about his children. It means that he *lost* the struggle: His behavior is being controlled by a part of his mind that is not his true self.

This is the possibility Socrates failed to recognize: A person might judge one thing to be best and yet do another. The plight of addiction is that of having a powerful part of your mind push you relentlessly and automatically toward behaviors you do not actually want to do. An addicted person behaves the way she does not because she has bad judgment or skewed priorities, but because she is blocked from acting on her true values by her supercharged “wanting system.”

I don't mean to suggest that no one ever endorses the choice to do drugs. Indeed, as the philosopher Hanna Pickard [has argued](#), addictive behavior is often initiated and maintained by the purposes it serves in someone's life, often as self-medication for physical or psychological trauma. Nor am I saying that addictive behavior is compulsive, irresistible, or completely out of the person's control. After all, many people manage to recover from addiction without the help of medication or even clinical intervention.

The messy truth about addiction is that it lies somewhere *in between* [choice and compulsion](#). Addictive cravings work in much the same way as the cravings that everyone experiences — for Netflix or chips, say. They do not simply take over one's muscles like an internal puppeteer. Instead, they pull one's choices toward the craved object, like a psychological kind of gravity.

But as Berridge's research suggests, the neurochemical effects of addictive drugs make the cravings addicts experience far, far stronger than those the rest of us have to contend with in our daily lives. It may not be *impossible* to resist these cravings, but it is extraordinarily difficult. And given how hard it is to resist cravings of *normal* strength — just think of those bottomless chips — we should not blame someone with addiction for failing to overcome her neurobiologically enhanced cravings.

*This* is why addiction is not a moral failure. The addicted person need not be shortsighted or selfish; she may have the very same priorities as anyone else. Nor need she be any worse at self-control than the rest of us are. She is just faced with cravings that are far harder to resist.

Seeing addiction this way also helps us think more clearly about treatment. Emphasizing the bad consequences of using, whether by pushing someone to rock bottom or by threatening her with prison, is ineffective because the part of the mind that drives addiction can overpower thoughts about consequences.

The problem is not that a person with addiction does not understand the consequences of her actions, but that she is unable to use this understanding to control her behavior. Thus, we should not be worried about “enabling” her addiction by protecting her from its worst effects — for example, by providing her with clean needles.

The paradigm shift is most dramatic for medication-assisted treatment. While the Socratic view paints these treatments as crutches that leave the basic problem unaddressed, the divided mind view shows this to be wrongheaded. If the source of addiction is overly strong automatic

cravings, then the *most direct* way to treat addiction would be to weaken or satiate these cravings in a non-damaging way.

And that is [exactly what methadone and buprenorphine do](#). By satiating the wanting system's cravings, these medications put the addicted person back in the driver's seat, allowing her to control her life again.

Plato himself eventually came to understand that the mind was more divided than his teacher thought. While he always used Socrates as his star character, Plato began to strike out on his own in later work. And so it is revealing that in one of his later dialogues, the *Phaedrus*, Plato takes a different view. The soul, Plato writes, is [like a chariot](#).

The charioteer, Reason, tries his best to guide the chariot along the road of virtue. But his horse, Appetite, is stubborn, “deaf as a post” and may gallop off the road at any moment. “Chariot-driving in our case,” Plato concludes, “is inevitably a painfully difficult business.” If we take *that* to heart, maybe we will start giving the addicted what they need to get their lives back under control.

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## ONE Follow-Up:

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Socrates says that virtue is knowledge, and that people always desire what they take to be good. So if people have bad characters or do bad things, then this is always because they either have bad judgment or wrong opinions about what is good, both of which are forms of culpable ignorance. And in particular, choosing or acting contrary to one's judgment is irrational.
2. By contrast, the “divided mind” view says that people are made up of different sorts of capacities—consciousness, perceiving, remembering, imagining, feeling, desiring, choosing, acting, thinking, self-conscious, judgment, reasoning, etc.—that may (or may not) be in conflict with one another, and that selfhood (and personal life) is a dynamic process of trying to resolve these conflicts and create a unified psychological structure for themselves both at particular times and also over time. And in particular, it is really possible to desire what one takes to be bad (which Augustine calls “the perversity of the will”), and also to choose and act contrary to one's judgment without being irrational. E.g., your judgment might tell you “I ought to obey my boss, and do X, if I want to keep my job and have a steady income” but you might spontaneously choose to do Y instead and tell your



boss to take his job and shove it, simply because your heart demands this, even though this means losing your job, along with the bad consequences of that.

3. Addiction is generally a bad thing for people, and drug addiction in particular has many bad personal, interpersonal, and social consequences.

4. If one takes the Socratic view, then addiction is a moral failure, and therefore addicts should be blamed accordingly and treated punitively.

5. If one takes the divided mind view, then addiction is just a specific instance of the general fact of human internal conflict and the struggle to create a unified self, therefore addicts in general and drug addicts in particular should be viewed with empathy and treated leniently, with an eye to helping them resolve their own inner conflicts and create unified selves.

6. The Socratic view is mistaken and the divided mind view is correct, therefore addicts in general and drug addicts in particular should be viewed with empathy and treated leniently, with an eye to helping them resolve their own inner conflicts and create unified selves.

## **ONE Link:**

1. "Excusing Addiction"

URL = <http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/mprg/WatsonEA.pdf>

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## 5. “John Paul Stevens: Repeal the Second Amendment”

By John Paul Stevens

*The New York Times*, 27 MARCH 2018

URL = <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/opinion/john-paul-stevens-repeal-second-amendment.html>



A musket from the 18th century, when the Second Amendment was written, and an assault rifle of today. CreditTop, MPI, via Getty Images, bottom, Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Rarely in my lifetime have I seen the type of civic engagement schoolchildren and their supporters demonstrated in Washington and other major cities throughout the country this past Saturday. These demonstrations demand our respect. They reveal the broad public support for legislation to minimize the risk of mass killings of schoolchildren and others in our society.

That support is a clear sign to lawmakers to enact legislation prohibiting civilian ownership of semiautomatic weapons, increasing the minimum age to buy a gun from 18 to 21 years old, and establishing more comprehensive background checks on all purchasers of firearms. But the demonstrators should seek more effective and more lasting reform. They should demand a repeal of the Second Amendment.

Concern that a national standing army might pose a threat to the security of the separate states led to the adoption of that amendment, which provides that “a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” Today that concern is a relic of the 18th century.

For over 200 years after the adoption of the Second Amendment, it was uniformly understood as not placing any limit on either federal or state authority to enact gun control legislation. In 1939 the Supreme Court [unanimously held](#) that Congress could prohibit the possession of a sawed-off shotgun because that weapon had no reasonable relation to the preservation or efficiency of a “well regulated militia.”

During the years when Warren Burger was our chief justice, from 1969 to 1986, no judge, federal or state, as far as I am aware, expressed any doubt as to the limited coverage of that amendment. When organizations like the National Rifle Association disagreed with that position and began their campaign claiming that federal regulation of firearms curtailed Second Amendment rights, Chief Justice Burger [publicly characterized](#) the N.R.A. as perpetrating “one of the greatest pieces of fraud, I repeat the word fraud, on the American public by special interest groups that I have ever seen in my lifetime.”

In 2008, the Supreme Court overturned Chief Justice Burger’s and others’ long-settled understanding of the Second Amendment’s limited reach by ruling, in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, that there was an individual right to bear arms. I was among the four dissenters.

That decision — which I remain convinced was wrong and certainly was debatable — has provided the N.R.A. with a propaganda weapon of immense power. Overturning that decision via a constitutional amendment to get rid of the Second Amendment would be simple and would do more to weaken the N.R.A.’s ability to stymie legislative debate and block constructive gun control legislation than any other available option.

That simple but dramatic action would move Saturday’s marchers closer to their objective than any other possible reform. It would eliminate the only legal rule that protects sellers of firearms in the United States — unlike every other market in the world. It would make our schoolchildren safer than they have been since 2008 and honor the memories of the many, indeed far too many, victims of recent gun violence.

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## **ONE Follow-Up:**

Is the following argument sound? If so, why? If not, why not?

1. Gun violence in the USA is a moral scandal that is in its own way as morally wrong as slavery, because the primary function of guns is coercion, and coercion is always morally wrong.
2. It’s reasonable to hold, not only that the original intent of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution was to restrict the right to keep and bear arms to well-regulated militias, and not extend it to individuals, but also that until quite recently, it was generally interpreted by the courts in this way.

3. But even if that is incorrect and the original intent of the Framers of the US Constitution was also to extend the right to keep and bear arms to individuals, nevertheless gun violence is still a moral scandal that is in its own way as morally wrong as slavery.

4. Therefore, since slavery was abolished because it was a moral scandal, by means of amending the US Constitution, therefore, since gun violence is a moral scandal that is in its own way as morally wrong as slavery, keeping and bearing guns, at the very least by individuals, should *also* be abolished, by means of repealing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment.

### **ONE Link:**

1. "It's Time for a Gun Abolition Movement"

URL = <https://www.pressherald.com/2018/02/25/maine-voices-yes-we-want-to-take-away-your-guns-the-case-for-civilian-disarmament/>

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