

THE NEUROSCIENTIST PARADOX

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The Liar Paradox is familiar to most philosophers. This *semantic* paradox is usually exemplified by a Cretan claiming that all Cretans lie, but the same paradox arises if a Swedish person claims that all Swedes lie. The structure of the paradox can be exemplified in a variety of ways. The fact that a Cretan has become the paradigm example may be due to the fact that the Bible says: “One of their own, a prophet, said: ‘Cretans are always liars and are beasts, gluttons and lazy’” (Titus 1:12). I will initially present this paradox, and then in a way that is pedagogical in relation to the actual purpose of this paper, which is to show that there is an analogous *epistemic* paradox that justifies the designation “The Neuroscientist Paradox”.

Let us imagine a patriotic and honorable Cretan in ancient times who discovers, to his horror, that a terrible number of Cretans lie terribly often. If this Cretan were to say: “A terrible number of Cretans terribly often lie”, no paradox would arise. And perhaps this is what he really wants to say when he sometimes in despair exclaims: “All Cretans always lie”. But if he says the same thing to a semantically pedantic person (i.e., one who says “all” actually means ALL!), then the liar paradox arises for the latter. For this person, the statement also becomes self-referential, i.e., it also concerns the utterer himself and what he says. If what the Cretan claims is true, then he is lying, but if he is lying, then his statement is in accordance with the statement, and is in that sense a verification of the statement. Semantically paradoxical.

Much philosophy has been written about this paradox, and I have also myself contributed to the body of this literature (2003, section 7). But as I said, this paradox is not what this paper primarily is about. It is written to make clear that there is an analogous modern but overlooked paradox, the neuroscientist paradox.

Let us imagine a contemporary ambitious, highly intelligent, and in empirical experiments very skilled neuroscientist. In the combined light of three types of sources, this brilliant researcher concludes that people radically underestimate what in their perceptions are – like hallucinations – pure brain products, i.e., that what is perceived has no existence independent of their brain. The three sources are: (i) traditional philosophy’s and perception psychology’s examples of perceptual illusions, (ii) modern neurological studies of strange perceptions in people who have, seen from the layperson’s perspective, neurological impairments, and (iii) the ultramodern research that, with the help of VR and AR glasses, creates complicated previously unthinkable perceptual situations. If this neuroscientist proclaims to a science interested audience “Neuroscience has shown that an awful lot of ordinary perceptions are not perceptions of something that has an existence independent of the brain,” no paradox arises. But if the neuroscientist instead states “All perceptions (both adequate and illusory) are hallucinations,” then epistemic complications arise, at least for an epistemically pedantic person like me.

The word “all” makes the neuroscientist’s claim refer to the empirical research of all neuroscientists, and so it becomes self-referential in relation to the speaking neuroscientist’s own research. If precisely all perceptions are hallucinations, then the neuroscientists’ empirical research must also be hallucinations created by the neuroscientists’ brains. Which means that

their talk about pure brain products in test subjects cannot refer to anything existing independently of the neuroscientists' own brains. The neuroscientist's last, completely general claim allows us to say as follows. If the neuroscientist is right, then neuroscience completely lacks empirical support in the traditional sense, i.e., observations of facts that are partly independent of the researcher. But if he is wrong, then neuroscience seems to have significant empirical support for his opinion. Epistemically paradoxical.

I have long been of the opinion that many neuroscientists and neuroscientifically well-informed people speak and write – but without saying it explicitly – as if they believe that empirical neuroscience has shown that really everything in our perceptions is hallucinatory. See, for example, Lisa Feldman Barrett, *Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain* (2020). But I have not previously wanted to be philosophically pedantic and make a fuss about the matter. Neuroscientists are undeniably producing not only new knowledge in general, but also medically valuable knowledge. Therefore, it is perhaps foolish to try to get them to devote time also to metaphysical questions. But now my motivation has changed.

Recently (2024), the neuroscientist Anil Seth's book *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (2021) was published in Swedish. In addition to his presentations of neuroscientific studies, Seth also explicitly claims that *everything* that *everyone* perceives is a hallucination. The usual distinction between perceptions and hallucinations becomes for him a distinction between two kinds of hallucinations, which he calls controlled and uncontrolled, respectively. Here are three statements from the (English) book:

Following this idea [of the book] all the way through, we will see that the contents of consciousness are a kind of waking dream – a controlled hallucination – that is both more than and less than whatever the real world really is.

You could even say that we're all hallucinating all the time.

[This makes it clear] that normal perception – in the here and now – is indeed a form of controlled hallucination.

Seth wants with his book replace the classical neuroscientific approach with a new one. In the classical approach, perceptions are seen as created by sensory information first given to the body and then interpreted by the brain. In his own, perceptions are to be seen as arising from the brain first making predictions about future sensory information, and then encountering this information. But there is no need to go into the details of this research program here. This paper is not a review, I only want to point out that Seth's book in an unusually clear way exemplifies what I call the neuroscientist paradox, namely that an established neuroscientist claims that he correctly presents neuroscientific research results at the same time as he claims that all neuroscientists, i.e., including himself, always hallucinate. The paradoxical element can briefly be stated as follows: A neuroscientist claims that all neuroscientists hallucinate.

Some of the ancient Cretans should have paused for a moment before making too general statements about the lying of their countrymen, and some of today's neuroscientists should pause for a moment before making too general statements about the metaphysical implications of neuroscience.¹

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Literature

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