

Why Red Doesn't Sound Like a Bell: Understanding the feel of consciousness

By J. Kevin O'Regan

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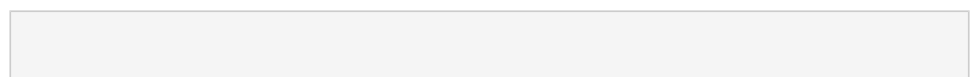
This book proposes a novel view to explain how we as humans -- contrary to current robots -- can have the impression of consciously feeling things: for example the red of a sunset, the smell of a rose, the sound of a symphony, or a pain.

The book starts off by looking at visual perception. Our ability to see turns out to be much more mysterious than one might think. The eye contains many defects which should seriously interfere with vision. Yet we have the impression of seeing the world in glorious panavision and technicolor. Explaining how this can be the case leads to a new idea about what seeing really is. Seeing is not passively receiving information in the brain, but rather a way of interacting with the world. The role of the brain is not to create visual sensation, but to enable the necessary interactions with the world.

This new approach to seeing is extended in the second part of the book to encompass the other senses: hearing, touch, taste and smell. Taking sensory experiences to be modes of interacting with the world explains why these experiences are different in the way they are. It also explains why thoughts or automatic functions in the body, and indeed the vast majority brain functions, are not accompanied by any real feeling.

The "sensorimotor" approach is not simply a philosophical argument: It leads to scientifically verifiable predictions and new research directions. Among these are the phenomena of change blindness, sensory substitution, "looked but failed to see", as well as results on color naming and color perception and the localisation of touch on the body.

The approach is relevant to the question of what animals and babies can feel, and to understanding what will be necessary for robots to become conscious.



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Editorial Review

Review

For readers of Perception, O'Regan's Why Red Doesn't Sound Like a Bell provides for a well-argued criticism of and a strong alternative to deterministic perspectives on perception and its role in consciousness. Perception

About the Author

Kevin O'Regan is director of one of France's most influential experimental psychology laboratories. He is most cited today as the originator of the sensorimotor approach to consciousness. He is also one of the discoverers of the much discussed phenomenon of "change blindness", and well known for his work on eye movements in reading.

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Jean Taylor:

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