

Being You
A New Science of Consciousness ©2021

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Prologue
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Five years ago, for the third time in my life, I ceased to exist. I was having a small operation and my brain was filling with anesthetic. I remember sensations of blackness, detachment, and falling apart . . .

General anesthesia is very different from going to sleep. It has to be; if you were asleep, the surgeon's knife would quickly wake you up. States of deep anesthesia have more in common with catastrophic conditions like coma and the vegetative state, where consciousness is completely absent. Under profound anesthesia, the brain's electrical activity is almost entirely quieted—something that never happens in normal life, awake or asleep. It is one of the miracles of modern medicine that anesthesiologists can routinely alter people's brains so that they enter and return from such deeply unconscious states. It's an act of transformation, a kind of magic: anesthesia is the art of turning people into objects.

The objects, of course, get turned back into people. So I returned, drowsy and disoriented but definitely there. No time seemed to have passed. Waking from a deep sleep, I am sometimes confused about the time, but there is always the impression that at least some amount of time has gone by, of a continuity between my consciousness then and my consciousness now. Under general anesthesia, things are different. I could have been under for five minutes, five hours, five years—or even fifty. And “under” doesn't quite express it. I was simply not there, a premonition of the total oblivion of death, and, in its absence of anything, a strangely comforting one.

General anesthesia doesn't just work on your brain, or on your mind. It works on your consciousness. By altering the delicate electrochemical balance within the neural circuitry inside your head, the basic ground state of what it is to “be” is—temporarily—abolished. In this process lies one of the greatest remaining mysteries in science, and in philosophy too.

Somehow, within each of our brains, the combined activity of billions of neurons, each one a tiny biological machine, is giving rise to a conscious experience. And not just any conscious experience, *your* conscious experience, right here, right now. *How does this happen? Why do we experience life in the first person?*

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