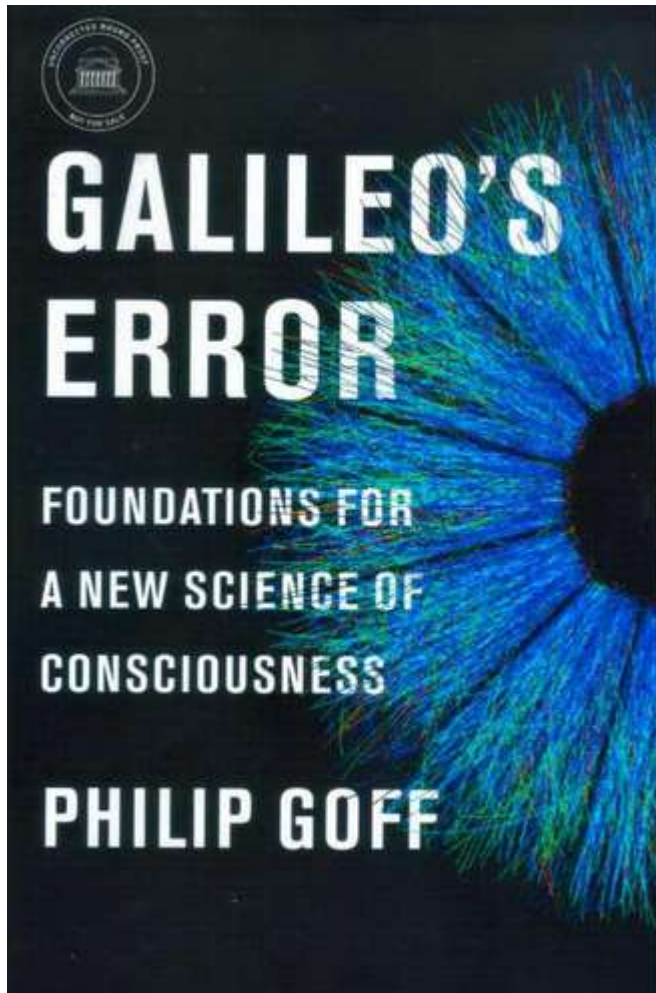


‘Galileo’s Error’ good stuff – if you are into this sort of thing

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“Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness” by Philip Goff. New York: Pantheon Books, 2019, 256 pages, \$26.90 (hardcover).



“Physical science has a dismal track record in explaining consciousness,” Philip Goff explains near the beginning of “Galileo’s Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness,” his new treatise on one of the most elusive quests ever to face the human species. “But the track record of physical science in explaining pretty much everything else is impressive. Many scientists and philosophers take this to be good evidence that, in spite of current disappointments, neuroscience will one day crack the mystery of consciousness.”

“Popular myth tells us that Newton was the first person to realize that apples fall to the ground,” he continues a little later in the inaugural chapter. “Of course, he wasn’t. But he was the first person to entertain the idea that what makes apples fall to the ground is the same thing that keeps the moon in orbit around the earth. It had not previously occurred to anyone that a single force might be responsible for both of these phenomena. What now seems to us so natural was at the time an inspired leap of the imagination.”

So begins Goff’s foray into something that most of us have wondered about from time to time, although it doesn’t typically dominate our casual interactions: What does it mean to be conscious? Obviously, the answer to this simple but deceptively complex question has potential consequences that extend far beyond its quasi-religious inferences. Consciousness is at the heart of the ongoing debate about what it means to be human – and that has implications for fields as widely diverse as artificial intelligence, medical science and social justice. Can machines think? Are other animals self-aware? What is the nature of pain? Is there a higher consciousness?

For some unknown reason, I have always been curious about the consciousness problem. About 20 years ago, my interest was piqued by “Explaining Consciousness: The Hard Problem,” a book edited by Jonathan Shear, which contained a chapter by Francis Crick and Christof Koch titled “Why Neuroscience May Be Able to Explain Consciousness.” Their thesis was innovative at the time, but not nearly as revolutionary or insightful as the present attempt to take our understanding to a new level. Other investigators have taken on the challenge over the last few decades; indeed there is an entire section in most bookstores devoted to explaining what it means to be self-aware. Most of those efforts, however, do not come anywhere close to Goff in advancing our collective knowledge in this still-evolving line of inquiry.

Structurally, “Galileo’s Error” consists of five chapters: “How Galileo Created the Problem of Consciousness,” “Is There a Ghost in the Machine?,” “Can Physical Science Explain Consciousness?,” “How to Solve the Problem of Consciousness” and “Consciousness and the Meaning of Life.” Goff covers the subject matter at hand comprehensively from a variety of perspectives. Clearly, those with a background in, or a familiarity and interest in the basic concepts which form the architecture of this thought-provoking volume will find it fascinating and somewhat revolutionary. Conversely, those who don’t spend much time reflecting on fundamental questions about the meaning of life might find it difficult to navigate.

Still, Goff’s literary style is accessible to a wide audience; i.e., you don’t necessarily need a degree in philosophy, physics or neuroscience to appreciate his prose or the fairly dense arguments he makes with some regularity. He has a certain self-effacing charm that permeates the narrative and serves to remind the reader that the author is certainly self-aware. Witness the following from the third chapter (and one of my personal favorites):

“What has this got to do with materialism? I get bored very easily at social events, and I often try to engage the nearest person in a philosophical discussion. Sometimes this is welcome, although in an equal number of cases I sense my interlocutor waiting for the most convenient opportunity to politely excuse him- or herself. In any case, I have discovered via such discussions that many people are under a profound misapprehension as to what materialism is. Many people take materialism to be the view that the brain produces consciousness, as though consciousness were some peculiar kind of gas that the physical workings of the brain brings into being. However, such a view would not be materialism, as it implies that consciousness is something over and above the physical workings of the brain.”

Side note: If you are still with me – and I’m pretty sure I lost a few readers about midway through that last paragraph – then you might actually enjoy “Galileo’s Error.” It’s probably not everyone’s cup of tea.

Goff, an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at Durham University in England, is a leading authority on the Russell-Eddington theory of consciousness. He has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Reading.

By the way, Goff does not shy away from the political ramifications that he sees as being innately linked to philosophical and scientific realities. In the final chapter, for instance, he devotes an entire section to the environmental concerns suggested by his core propositions: “Could our philosophical worldview be partly responsible for our inability to avert climate catastrophe?” he asks. “Imagine that we discovered tomorrow that a meteor was on course to hit our planet in 15 years’ time and was set to cause the kind of devastation we know to be associated with climate change. No doubt governments would get together to see if there was any way in which this tragedy could be averted.”

As Goff notes on his website (www.philipgoffphilosophy.com), “I argue that the traditional approaches of materialism (consciousness can be explained in terms of physical processes in the brain) and dualism (consciousness is separate from the body and brain) face insuperable difficulties. On the basis of this I defend a form of panpsychism, the view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of the physical world. It sounds a bit crazy, but I try to show that it avoids the difficulties faced by its rivals.” Good stuff – if you are into this sort of thing.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.