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### Eric Schwitzgebel, 'The Weirdness of the World'

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**Eric Schwitzgebel.** *The Weirdness of the World*. Princeton University Press 2024. 376 pp. \$32.00 USD (Hardcover 9780691215679); \$32.00 USD (eBook 9780691239309).

In the analytical tradition, the importance of common sense was championed in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by G.E. Moore, Susan Stebbing, and others, and the idea that philosophical theories should be able to make sense of the truth of ordinary judgments – for instance, judgments about objects in the immediate physical environment, and our claims to know such judgments to be true – continues to influence contemporary thinking. But how seriously should common sense figure in developing substantive philosophical theories in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind? What is common sense, anyway? And how should we proceed if the world turns out to be *weird* or *bizarre*, to fly in the face of our commonsense beliefs?

Eric Schwitzgebel's excellent *The Weirdness of the World* touches on each of these questions, often in interesting and thought-provoking ways. *The Weirdness of the World* is written in a clear, engaging style, and aside from being of scholarly interest, would be a superb choice for courses centered on mind, reality, and knowledge. It consists of 12 chapters, most of which draw from Schwitzgebel's previously published articles (the articles have been revised and together form a reasonably coherent whole). Like much of Schwitzgebel's previous work, the discussions in *The Weirdness of the World* frequently challenge widely held assumptions about the nature of the world and our knowledge of its contents. The discussions are often exploratory, raising more questions than they answer. I view this (mostly) as a merit.

Most chapters in *The Weirdness of the World* concern either (a) issues in philosophy of mind centered on consciousness or (b) issues concerning the nature of physical reality and our epistemic access to this reality or (c) some combination of (a) and (b).

Concerning (a), after a brief "praise of weirdness" in Chapter 1, Schwitzgebel argues in Chapter 2 that all extant theories in the metaphysics of mind are *bizarre*: they directly conflict with common sense or can be seen to have implications that conflict with common sense (17-18). Putting this together with the thesis that no theory in the metaphysics of mind is epistemically compelling (that all theories are *dubious*), we get the result that the metaphysics of mind is a *theoretical wilderness* (ibid). This conclusion works into several of the later discussions. For instance, Schwitzgebel argues in Chapter 3 – drawing from thought experiments involving fantastical hypothetical creatures – that materialist views of consciousness most likely imply that



the United States is a distinctive conscious subject, with its own distinctive stream of conscious experiences (47-48). We might make a *modus tollens* inference, based on the commonsense view that the United States is *not* a distinctive conscious subject, to conclude that materialism is *false*; and we might premise the commonsense view that the United States is *not* a distinctive conscious subject on prior common sense judgments against conscious entities being composed of further conscious entities (an “anti-nesting” principle; 63, 261). However, this reasoning becomes problematic if *all* views in the metaphysics of mind conflict with common sense.

These issues recur when Schwitzgebel addresses how we might define ‘consciousness’ (Chapter 8), along with the extent of consciousness in nature (Chapter 10). While his discussions are somewhat open-ended, I believe they raise issues that those working on consciousness—in philosophy, but also in the sciences—ought to take very seriously. One of these issues, again, concerns conflicts with common sense judgments about the extent of consciousness and the implications of philosophical and scientific positions about the nature of consciousness (see, for instance, pp. 64-66, 39-42, and 220-225). Do we side with the philosophical or scientific theory? Do we side with common sense? Do we play a cost/benefit game? How can we get started theorizing about consciousness without secure prior commitments concerning what things are and are not conscious?

Schwitzgebel forces the reader to grapple with these questions, and does not offer very much by way of positive guidance. Nonetheless, he hopes that we will not fall into intellectual despair or turn to quietism, and will continue to engage with questions in the metaphysics of mind in something like a rational manner (see p. 71 and Chapter 12, “Weirdness and Wonder”). An alternative reading, however, is that these problems suggest that there is something fishy about the very concept of consciousness employed in these contexts; problems suggested, for instance, by our apparent ability to attribute predicates like ‘x is phenomenally conscious’ to just about anything without making a conceptual mistake. While Schwitzgebel does discuss how we might define ‘consciousness’, he essentially develops an ostensive approach, which provides little direction when deciding on difficult cases. Generally, while Schwitzgebel describes himself as advocating “philosophy that opens” as opposed to “philosophy that closes” (7-8), in some cases it really is not clear how we ought to rationally proceed, given his conclusions. For instance, the idea that neither common sense, nor scientific theorizing, nor rational reflection can provide a secure epistemic ground for any position in the metaphysics of mind would seem to mandate rethinking just what we

are doing when we engage in debate and discussion about these topics. Schwitzgebel does offer some suggestive remarks in Chapter 12, but this strikes me as an issue that warrants further discussion.

Regarding (b), several of the chapters focus on skeptical possibilities and the nature of the physical world, sometimes approaching these issues through the lens of virtual reality and artificial intelligence (similar Chalmers in *Reality+*): Chapter 4 discusses the salience of skeptical possibilities for our everyday engagement with the world; Chapter 5 works through issues concerning virtual reality scenarios and the Kantian idea that space and time are in some manner creations of our minds; Chapter 6 provides an empirical case against radical solipsism; Chapter 7 explores our causal interaction with things, such as ‘counterparts’ of ourselves, across vast swaths of space and time; Chapter 9 discusses ideas related to our perceptual representation of physical reality; Chapter 11 addresses the ethical treatment of sophisticated artificial intelligence systems.

While I found these discussions less cohesive than the discussions of consciousness and the metaphysics of mind, they would be excellent fodder, as above, for courses in philosophy.

In some places, there is perhaps room for further interaction between (a) and (b). For instance, Chapter 3 discusses our commonsense judgments about consciousness in spatially scattered entities, our hesitance to ascribe conscious experiences to entities scattered over space and perhaps time (Schwitzgebel thinks this is basically ungrounded prejudice, reflecting our very limited human perspective). It would be interesting to consider how issues concerning the reality of space and time work into this (if at all): what should we make of our commonsense hesitance to ascribe consciousness to spatially and perhaps temporally scattered entities if space and time are not real, or in any case are nothing like how we understand them from our common sense perspective?

From a critical perspective, I felt that Schwitzgebel could have been more rigorous concerning just what counts as common sense, and why. He states that a view *conflicts* with common sense when “most people without specialized training confidently, but perhaps implicitly, believe it to be false” (15). While this can do some work—for instance, it can go some distance in distinguishing widely-held belief from common sense—it leaves room for further analysis. For instance, when engaging with the metaphysics of mind, Schwitzgebel seems to treat intuitive reactions to thought experiments to be part of common sense (20-21); in some places, he takes what might be thought to be sophisticated judgments about the causes of our behavior to be part of common sense (28-30). It is not clear to me that these sorts of things ought to be classified as common sense, in the same way

that Moore held that judgments about the immediate physical environment, and our knowledge of propositions about the immediate physical environment, are part of common sense. Similarly, when it comes to the general application of common sense to different views in the metaphysics of mind, one might raise questions concerning the extent to which metaphysical views about the nature of consciousness can fall within the purview of common sense at all—whether it would be appropriate to call *any* metaphysical view about the nature of consciousness ‘common sense’.

While I do not think these concerns present an unsurmountable obstacle to Schwitzgebel’s project, they do raise questions, for instance, about the claim that all views in the metaphysics of mind are contrary to common sense. In my view, without a more circumscribed conception of just what counts as common sense, and why, it is not entirely clear what this claim amounts to, or how we should proceed if we think it is true.

These are, in any case, things to think about. *The Weirdness of the World* should be of interest to both scholars and students, and provides accessible, thought-provoking discussions of topics concerning mind, reality, and knowledge. It will make you think.

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