

NOTE: Attached is the *first version* of a book proposal I sent to five presses. Two presses were uninterested and three were interested.

I received editorial feedback and then feedback from reviewers on how to improve the proposal. Since the final versions of the proposal reflect others' intellectual contributions, I am sharing only this draft, along with comments about some ways in which I now believe it could have been improved.

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April 1, 2020

Dear XXX:

I hope you're managing all right amid the chaos of the pandemic.

I am ready to start working on my next book. The working title is *The Weirdness of the World*, and the central idea is that fundamental facts about consciousness and metaphysics defy both common sense and our best science. Something bizarre must be true about the basic structures of the world, but we have no near-term way to know which among a variety of bizarre possibilities is correct.

Most of the chapters will be based on previously published essays of mine, revised, updated, and integrated so as to form a coherent monograph developing that single idea at length. The target audience will be primarily professional philosophers and secondarily the educated public.

MIT Press published my first three monographs, including recently *A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures*. I have been relatively happy with them, but I am not committed to continuing to work with them. I will also be contacting a few other elite presses with this proposal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Eric Schwitzgebel".

Professor of Philosophy
University of California at Riverside

NOTE: I think this paragraph wasn't quite right. Probably the biggest weakness of the proposal is that it looks too much like stapled-together previously published essays, and the first sentence of this paragraph feeds into that. If I were writing it again I would instead emphasize that the book will be the culmination of a research project that I have been publishing on in a series of papers since 2014. Also, the second sentence of this paragraph needlessly omits the book's possible interest to scholars in fields other than philosophy.

When writing editors with whom I had discussed the book idea, the cover letter briefly mentioned our previous discussion.

Book Proposal for XXXX [Here I put the name of the press.]

Eric Schwitzgebel

April 1, 2020

Working Title: The Weirdness of the World

Projected Length: 86,000 words

Main Idea: NOTE: One editor wanted a much meatier discussion of the main idea. Fundamental facts about consciousness and metaphysics defy both common sense and our best science. Something bizarre must be true about the basic structures of the world, but we have no near-term way to know which among a variety of bizarre possibilities is correct.

Audience: Note: "book" would be preferable to monograph if you're aiming for a non-specialist audience. My primary aim is to write a great monograph of academic philosophy. My secondary aim is to make the monograph interesting and accessible to non-philosophers interested in metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind. Given the broad interest of the topic and my experience writing for popular audiences, I believe that these aims can be simultaneously achieved. My aspiration is to write a book with the scholarly and popular reach of Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained*, David Chalmers' *The Conscious Mind*, Nick Bostrom's *Superintelligence*, or Paul Bloom's *Descartes' Baby*. It is of course unrealistic to expect such enormous success, but those are the models I have in mind.

About the Author:

Eric Schwitzgebel is professor of philosophy at University of California, Riverside. He has published three monographs with MIT Press, most recently *A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures* (2019). He has published in some of the most elite venues in philosophy (*Philosophical Review*, *Mind*, and *Noûs*), psychology (*Cognition*, *Mind & Language*, and *Child Development*), and science fiction (*F&SF*, *Clarkesworld*, and the well-known science journal *Nature*). He also has extensive experience with popular writing on his blog, The Splintered Mind (about 50,000 pageviews/month), and for venues such as *The Los Angeles Times*, *Aeon Magazine*, and *Salon*. NOTE: Your charming, self-effacing modesty is a disadvantage in this context. Toot your horn and state your big aspirations!

1. In Praise of Weirdness.

Weirdness is celebrated and I discuss how I came to the philosophical perspective articulated in this book.

Word count: 2,000 NOTE: Probably I should have written more about Ch. 1.

2. There Has Never Been a Commonsense Metaphysics of the Mind and What to Do About That.

Call a theory "bizarre" if it sharply violates common sense. Call a theory "dubious" if we have no compelling epistemic reason to accept it. Every single approach to the metaphysics of mind in the history of world philosophy has been both bizarre and dubious. The best explanation of universal bizarreness is that people's common sense understanding of the mind is incoherent at

NOTE: Chapter descriptions can be a bit more technical than other aspects of the proposal, but to the extent possible, you should make them comprehensible to non-specialists.

NOTE: Probably (?) the biggest weakness of this proposal is my highlighting of where the chapters will be adapted from. In *my* mind, it's a strength of the proposal that most of the ideas have been developed and tested in journal articles in good journals, but it risks making the proposal look like unconnected, lightly revised reprints, and so no well-developed theory can respect every aspect of it. The best explanation of universal dubiety is that we have only weak epistemic tools for addressing the biggest metaphysical questions about the mind. Empirical science, for example, offers little near-term hope of addressing metaphysical disputes of this sort. What remains after we accept universal bizarreness and universal dubiety is a "disjunctive metaphysics" in which we distribute our credence across a variety of wonderfully weird possibilities.

Word count: 13,000

Adapted from:

- "The Crazyist Metaphysics of Mind", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2014,
- "Against the Mind Package View of Minds", *Mind & Language*, forthcoming.

3. If Materialism Is True, the United States Is Probably Conscious.

Among the metaphysical possibilities described in Chapter 2, one option is mainstream materialism, according to which everything in the universe is fundamentally composed of material or physical stuff and there are no immaterial souls or properties. Mainstream materialism is scientifically plausible, but its bizarre consequences have not yet been fully appreciated. One such consequence is that under the right conditions people interacting in groups might literally give rise to a stream of conscious experience over and above the consciousness of the individual group members. But what are the right conditions for group consciousness? Perhaps surprisingly, most mainstream materialist theories appear to imply that those conditions are already met by the United States, conceived of as a group entity with people as parts. If we set aside our morphological prejudices against spatially distributed group entities, we can see that the United States has all the types of properties that materialists tend to regard as characteristic of conscious beings. Therefore, we can either (a) accept that there's a good chance that the United States is conscious, (b) reject mainstream materialism, or (c) hope for a plausible version of materialism that avoids this consequence.

Word count: 12,000

Adapted from:

- "If Materialism Is True, the United States is Probably Conscious", *Philosophical Studies*, 2015.
- "Is the United States Phenomenally Conscious? Reply to Kammerer", *Philosophia*, 2016.
- "Tononi's Exclusion Postulate Would Make Consciousness (Nearly) Irrelevant", blog post at *The Splintered Mind*, 2014.

4. 1% Skepticism.

Radically skeptical scenarios are scenarios in which you are radically mistaken about a wide swath of ordinary beliefs that you normally take for granted – scenarios, for example, in which you are currently dreaming or living inside of a tiny, simulated world. Such scenarios cannot be wholly eliminated from the disjunction of bizarre metaphysical possibilities described in Chapter 2. I argue that it's reasonable to have a 1% credence that some such radically skeptical scenario obtains, and I explore the psychological and decision-theoretical consequences of 1% skepticism.

Word count: 10,000

NOTE: Probably the second biggest weakness of this proposal is that I don't do enough to show how the chapters are integrated into a single vision. I did that better in a revised version with a larger "main idea" section and also by adding sentences to the chapter descriptions that better show how each chapter arises

Adapted from:

from the
previous

- "1% Skepticism", *Noûs*, 2017.

ones.

5. Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World.

According to radical solipsism, my mind is the only entity that exists. All the physical objects and all the people that I seem to see and hear around me are mere hallucinations or features of my imagination. In a series of three experiments, I attempt to refute radical solipsism scientifically. In the first experiment, I exhibit unreliable judgment about the primeness or divisibility of four-digit numbers, in contrast to a seeming Excel program. In the second experiment, I exhibit an imperfect memory for arbitrary-seeming three-digit number and letter combinations, in contrast to my seeming collaborator with seemingly hidden notes. In the third experiment, I seem to suffer repeated defeats at chess. In all three experiments, the most straightforward interpretation of the experiential evidence is that something exists in the universe that is superior in the relevant respects – theoretical reasoning (about primes), memorial retention (for digits and letters), or practical reasoning (at chess) – to my own solipsistically-conceived self. Chapter 4 thus sets a lower bound in my credence in radical skepticism, while Chapter 5 sets an upper bound on my credence in one form of radical skepticism.

Word count: 9,000

Co-authored with Alan T. Moore

Adapted from:

- "Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 2015.

6. Kant Meets Cyberpunk.

If the external world exists (Chapter 5), its fundamental metaphysical structures might be very different than we normally assume. Chapters 2, 3, and 4, gave us some grounds to refrain from entirely committing to mainstream metaphysical materialism. One historically important metaphysical alternative is transcendental idealism. According to transcendental idealism, the fundamental nature of reality is unknowable to us, and spatiality is something that arises from our minds rather than being a fundamental feature of things as they are in themselves. I explore and articulate a version of transcendental idealism using the "cyberpunk" possibility that we are living inside of a computer simulation in a fundamentally non-spatial computer. Transcendental idealism is not necessarily preferable to mainstream materialism, but it deserves consideration as a live metaphysical possibility.

Word count: 8,000

Adapted from:

- "Kant Meets Cyberpunk", *Disputatio*, forthcoming.

7. Does Visual Experience Resemble Reality?

Can we empirically assess the likelihood that transcendental idealism is true (Chapter 6)? Not with any high confidence. However, the empirical exploration of visual experience does suggest some ways in which we cannot trust that our experience closely matches the structure of

underlying physical reality. I illuminate this issue through extended attention to the surprisingly complicated question of whether objects viewed in passenger-side rearview mirrors are (as the U.S. Department of Transportation insists) “closer than they appear”.

Word count: 3,000

Adapted from:

- “The Problem of Known Illusion and the Resemblance of Experience to Reality”, *Philosophy of Science*, 2014.

8. A Snail’s-Eye Perspective on the Sparseness or Abundance of Consciousness in the Universe.

On a radically abundant view of consciousness, consciousness exists everywhere or almost everywhere in the universe that there is a bit of interesting complexity. On a radically sparse view of consciousness, consciousness arises only in specific functional or physical conditions that are rarely instantiated. Between these two extremes lies a wide range of intermediate possibilities. Through a close examination of puzzles raised by the delightfully weird behavior and physiology of garden snails, I argue that we lack the epistemic tools we need to decide among the theoretical alternatives.

Word count: 10,000

Adapted from:

- “Is There Something It’s Like to Be a Garden Snail?”, *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming.

9. Phenomenal Consciousness, Defined and Defended as Innocently as I Can Manage.

Maybe the reason we are (or at least I am) led into such confusion in Chapters 2, 3, 7, and 8 is that the concept of “consciousness” that I have been employing is a broken concept, laden with erroneous theoretical presuppositions. In this chapter I define consciousness in the most theoretically innocent way I can: by pointing to examples. I discuss why consciousness resists good definition by means other than pointing to examples and what conditions must be met for a definition by example to succeed.

Word count: 5,000

Adapted from:

- “Phenomenal Consciousness, Defined and Defended as Innocently as I Can Manage”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2016.
- “Inflate and Explode”, submitted.

10. Will Future AI Be Conscious? Will It Deserve Rights?

The epistemic problems about consciousness become even more severe when we consider possible futures of Artificial Intelligence. Our commonsense models of the mind might break down even more sharply and radically than they do for phenomena that are currently more familiar – and they might do so before we can achieve a good scientific consensus understanding of AI minds, especially AI consciousness. This would throw us into a moral quandary. If the AIs are conscious like us, they will deserve moral consideration similar to us. If they are not

conscious like us, they will not deserve such moral consideration. If they are in some ways similar to us and in some ways radically different, then our usual moral categories might fail to determinately apply. If our ignorance about AI consciousness leads us to choose wrongly among these possibilities, the result could be a huge moral catastrophe for AIs, humans, or both, unless we adhere to a conservative policy of designing only AI whose moral status is clear in advance.

Chapters 8-10 together suggest that on one of the most fundamental questions about the structure of the universe – how widespread is consciousness? – we occupy a radically poor epistemic position, with a variety of weird and wonderful possibilities open. I recommend reacting not with disappointment but with awe.

Word count: 8,000

Mostly new, with portions adapted from:

- *A Theory of Jerks and Other Philosophical Misadventures*, MIT Press, 2019.
- “A Defense of the Rights of Artificial Intelligences”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 2015.
- “Designing AI with Rights, Consciousness, Self-Respect, and Freedom”, in M. Liao, ed., *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Acknowledgements and References.

Word count: 6,000

NOTE: This proposal doesn't include a concluding chapter, instead sticking a semi-conclusion to the end of Chapter 10. In a revised version, I substantially refocused Chapter 10 and added a short concluding Chapter 11 that highlighted themes of doubt, wonder, and awe.