

Questions without Answers

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Abstract

As we explore the biological foundations of consciousness we are confronted with a confounding mystery. The many layers of our inquiry are two fold— how do the biological underpinnings of the machinations of our brains give rise to the phenomenology of experience and relatedly, how do our thoughts and emotions affect our biology? While Descartes posited that we can “know” reality through his famous, “I think, therefore I am”, current neuroscience inquiries suggest that “we feel, therefore we know we exist”. In this paradigm we can safely assume that animate life is distinguished from inanimate existence due to the capacity to feel. Thus, some level of consciousness exists in all living things and with this acknowledgment, we can re-establish the value of life. This concept dovetails nicely with Spinoza’s assertion that God permeates everything and there is no separation between God and creation, linked by relationship between self and other.

Keywords: Consciousness, belief, self and others, God, collective coherence, Peace, Shalom.

Consciousness is a connectivity between the experience of the self, which is “me” and the ability to share that experience with someone else. You cannot have consciousness without relationship to what is non self. So consciousness is the vehicle to bridge the gap between the experience of “self” and the experience of something “other than self”.

Materialists define consciousness as being purely biological, that the concept of mind is an epiphenomenon, an illusion. A basic principle of science is that if you can’t measure something, it doesn’t exist.

I think there is more mystery than reality here, that the most amazing quality of the human brain is our intense desire to understand itself and a reckoning here is that the concept of belief is fundamental to consciousness. We understand our lives retrospectively and live our lives going forward predicated on the belief we know things based upon experience. In every encounter there is a predicative element, nothing is really certain is it? So we use a belief system, the brain’s operational manual to interpret experience based upon belief.

Karl Friston, a professor at the Institute of Neurology, University College, London, summarized this succinctly, “By equipping agents with a shared generative model—of a shared world—one can effectively distribute or federate Bayesian belief” (Friston et al., 2024).

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Our internal sense of self, i.e., interoception, a type of background noise- an incessant internal dialogue that interprets phenomenology based upon our unique experiences. Belief is phenomenal construct, characterized by a feeling state where the psychological concept believing is an active, physical state.

Once we realize that our entire operation system is belief based, including the central tenets of science, it gives us a degree of freedom- we are responsible to believe what we choose to believe. Belief rests on the inherent value of subjective experience, the acceptance of the notion that consciousness is a collapse of probabilistic dynamics, rather than deterministic.

In our quest for absolute certainty and objectivity we have diminished the value of subjective experience. We have commodified our existence to the point that we have become the commodity ourselves. This dovetails with the development of technologies that have taken over the normal operations of our brains.

GPS, search tools, social media and AI are technologies that Hanna Arendt observed in her seminal book, *The Human Condition* (2018): “In this case, it would be as though our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts, were unable to follow what we do , so that from now on we would indeed need artificial machines to do our thinking.”

Technologies have no feeling states, in stark contrast to the experience of being alive- a state of feeling. Feeling is believing and there is a restlessness we feel, a vague sense that we have sacrificed our core beliefs for the sake of expediency.

As a neurologist, I have struggled with these questions about the meaning of faith and consciousness on the front lines of patients who are directly staring at the abyss of the unknown. It’s unsettling to recognize that we know what we know, we know what we don’t know, but we don’t know what we don’t know. In this latter domain, we are more likely to discover, invent, and evolve into an understanding that is beyond ourselves.

From a neuroscience perspective, our brains are truly split between the left brain- objective, logical and purely quantitative. In balance, the right brain is where we have qualitative understanding, the perception of elements beyond ourselves, the capacity to understand in a qualitative manner. Yet, we have sterilized this aspect of consciousness, it has become atrophic as a result of our over reliance to let machines do our thinking for us.

If we want to truly understand belief, faith, subjectivity we find its best clues in art, in poetry, and in music. These traits originate in the right hemisphere of the brain, which orients us into time and space. Without relationship- there is no time and without time there is no relationship. The collective embodiment of subjective consciousness originates in areas of the brain that are active and ubiquitous across human cultures. Music processing in the brain rest on the human brain's fundamental capacity for prediction as a fundamental element of consciousness. Returning to the question of the function of consciousness, it can be defined as a state of collective coherence. A state of knowing something together.

In the Abrahamic tradition, the word Peace- Shalom- is considered the highest level of consciousness, even being called God's favorite name. The exploration of the unknown is where we gather as an antidote to the great uncertainty of our existence. We "know" God by the knowledge of each other and God loves us measured by the degree we love each other.

References

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