

Friday, June 25, 2010

The Biological Nature of Consciousness

In May of this year, I got into a discussion with a Christian who posts under the moniker “danielj” over on [Choosing Hats](#) regarding the biological nature of consciousness. Throughout the discussion danielj, a Christian, was trying to find ways to challenge my view that consciousness is biological, but he never was able to demonstrate that consciousness is something *other than* biological.

In this post, I have pasted my contributions to this discussion, since numerous issues were raised that are of significance to the proper understanding of the nature of consciousness. Since the nature of consciousness is of central concern to my anti-apologetic critique of the Christian worldview, this post will make available in one source many ideas pertaining to the nature of consciousness which inform a significant concern in the overall critique of theistic worldviews.

It all started with a question posed by danielj on 10 May 2010:

Does consciousness not exist?

My response to this was:

Yes, consciousness does exist. You need to be conscious just in order for you to ask the question. None of the points which I have raised is incompatible with this fact.

However, consciousness does **not** hold metaphysical primacy.

danielj apparently did not understand what the issue of metaphysical primacy is, for he then asked:

If consciousness exists how is it that it is exempted from the primacy extended to every other existing thing?

When did consciousness start existing if not with every other existing thing?

My responses to danielj thus follow:

Consciousness exists only in relationship to some object. Consciousness is consciousness of something, of some object. Hence we have the subject-object relationship. To affirm the primacy of consciousness is to affirm the primacy of the subject in the subject-object relationship, which is to affirm subjectivism.

There is no evidence which suggests that consciousness has always existed with every other existing thing. Consciousness is an attribute only of a certain class of existents, namely living organisms. Rocks, for instance, do not possess consciousness. Planets do not possess consciousness, nor do asteroids, quasars, protons, etc.

If you think consciousness holds metaphysical primacy, can you explain why, and point to some evidence which supports your view (especially without committing the fallacy of the stolen concept)?

Danielj wrote: “How exactly did things without any sort of proto consciousness (rocks, protons, etc.) combine to form consciousness and where does this ‘consciousness’ reside?”

Generally speaking, they did this by means of causality. What is the specific process? That is a scientific question. I am not a scientist, and I do not profess to know. I don’t see what relevance it has to the issue. Regardless of how some biological organisms developed the attribute of consciousness, consciousness is still consciousness of something and therefore still exists in a relationship with an object (or many objects, as the case may be). Do you suppose there’s such a thing as consciousness of nothing? How could it qualify as consciousness?

Danielj: “It must reside outside the bounds of ‘existence’ since the things that human beings are made of have no consciousness in and of themselves.”

The notion that something “reside[s] outside the bounds of existence” is incoherent. This is saying that

something exists but yet is not included in the sum total of what exists. Also, that consciousness “must reside outside the bounds of ‘existence’” does not follow from the fact that the various parts which make up human beings are not themselves conscious. My spleen, for instance, does not have its own consciousness, and neither does my elbow. These are attributes of me as an entity, just as consciousness is. Consciousness, mind you, is not an entity in itself, but an attribute of some entity (namely biological organisms).

Danielj wrote: “How does the combination of biology and causality produce consciousness?”

The question essentially answers itself: The process by which an organism develops consciousness of objects is both biological and causal. You have flat out denied that consciousness develops, but did not provide an argument for this. When a fetus develops in the womb, it develops from a fertilized egg. At the stage of a fertilized egg, there is no heartbeat, but eventually it develops a heart. At the stage of a fertilized egg, it has no sensory organs, so it has no means of perceiving anything, and thus has no capacity for consciousness. But it does develop these organs, and these organs are what give it the capacity to perceive, to be conscious of objects. Why would you think that a biological organism does not develop consciousness? Do you think that an organism was conscious before it existed?

Danielj: “If consciousness is indeed reducible to biology...”

I don’t think consciousness “reduces” to biology; to say this would imply that consciousness is non-biological. Consciousness *is* biological. How could it be otherwise? All organisms which possess consciousness have in common the fact that they have sensory organs which give the organism the capacity to be conscious of objects.

Danielj: “and it is merely a scientific question then we are just plants.”

Human beings are not plants. But both human beings and plants are biological organisms. I don’t think there are any plants that possess the attribute of consciousness. But many species in the animal kingdom do.

Danielj: “Concept formation is photosynthesis and free will is an illusion.”

Incorrect. Concept-formation is not photosynthesis. Anyone who understands both would know this. Concept-formation is volitional and requires a consciousness capable of selectively isolating specific objects and integrating them into mental units. This is not the task of photosynthesis.

Danielj: “You’ve denied proto consciousness and proto intentionality as well.”

Hmmm... I don’t recall doing so. Where do you think I “denied proto consciousness and proto intentionality”?

Danielj: “There is no 1/2 consciousness or self-consciousness by your own method.”

Specifically, what do you know of my method? What makes you suppose that there’s no self-consciousness “by my own method”? With higher organisms (such as human beings), consciousness can be a secondary object - i.e., consciousness of itself. We are exhibiting this ability right here in our discussion. What makes you think my position denies this? Or do you find it expedient to put words into my mouth for some reason?

Danielj: “It does not follow from the intentionality of consciousness that existence has metaphysical primacy no matter how many times and in how many ways you repeat it.”

The primacy of existence is not a conclusion of prior inference. It does not “follow” from some prior set of affirmations. Rather, it is implicit in any affirmation (which is part of the reason why theism is self-contradictory at the fundamental level.) I’ve written much on axioms. Apparently you’ve not examined what I’ve said, or you did not read it very carefully.

Danielj: “Consciousness is not a sufficient condition for existence? So what?”

Existence is not borne on conditions. Those conditions would have to exist. To say that certain conditions had to be met for existence to exist, would be to say that those conditions had to exist in order for existence to exist. The idea commits the fallacy of the stolen concept.

Danielj: “Existence isn’t a sufficient condition for consciousness either.”

So, you think something other than existence needs to exist in order for consciousness to exist? Please elaborate.

Danielj: "If existence isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness than [sic] consciousness simply could not have sprung into existence since no thing can 'begin' to exist according to your own philosophy."

Consciousness begins the same way that other types of activity begin. When an organism senses an object, this is an action which begins at a certain point in time. The same for when an organism perceives. The same for when a man thinks. These are all species of a type of action. Consciousness is inherently active.

Danielj: "If you refuse to attribute eternal existence to consciousness you render your own system incoherent,"

How so? What would justify attributing eternal existence to consciousness? I know consciousness only as an attribute of some biological organisms, including but not restricted to man. Where do we find an eternally existing consciousness? Biological organisms procreate and die. Find one that is eternally conscious.

Danielj: "but, if you do attribute it, then you've admitted its 'co-primacy' at the very least."

Even if you assume that consciousness is eternal, this would not validate the notion that the subject and object share metaphysical "co-primacy." I suspect that you do not fully understand the issue of metaphysical primacy. Perhaps you could explain what "co-primacy" between consciousness and its objects would be like.

Danielj: "Please correct any errors in my thinkin' here."

I've pointed out quite a few already.

I wrote: "Consciousness, mind you, is not an entity in itself, but an attribute of some entity (namely biological organisms)."

Danielj: "In light of the above - should you let it stand unrefuted - I consider this begging the question."

How so? How is consciousness not an attribute of the entity which possesses it? Also, what conclusion am I assuming in the premises of any argument that I have presented?

Danielj: "Either consciousness exists or it doesn't. If it does, than [sic] it has always existed like everything else in existence."

Can you explain how you think this is supposed to follow?

Danielj: "How is it that only the 'universe' is eternal? What exactly do you even mean by 'existence' exists if things like biology and consciousness are allowed to simply spring into existence out of non-existence?"

I've written on many of these topics on my blog. You might want to check it out as you've stumbled quite severely if you think your statements have been representative of my position.

I wrote: "You have flat out denied that consciousness develops, but did not provide an argument for this."

Danielj responded: "You denied it. There is nothing in between consciousness and unconsciousness so there can be nothing that leads up to consciousness."

Where did I deny that consciousness develops? Didn't you read what I wrote?

I wrote: "When a fetus develops in the womb, it develops from a fertilized egg. Why would you think that a biological organism does not develop consciousness?"

Danielj responded: "You're missing the point."

Which point am I missing? Please be specific, especially if you're going to level accusations like this.

Danielj asked: "Does consciousness equal sensation like you appear to be saying here?"

Sensation is one form of consciousness. Do you think that sensation is not a form of consciousness?

I wrote: "Consciousness *is* biological."

Danielj responded: "Then the will is not free."

What do you mean by "free," and how does your claim follow from the fact that consciousness is biological? It's not self-evident.

I asked: "How could it be otherwise?"

Danielj responded: "Well, gee.... Think about that for a second. How could the universe possibly be otherwise? Does ANYBODY here have any theories?"

Do you have any arguments to back up your claims? Or just questions? If you do not think consciousness is biological, what is it? Do you think it's supernatural? If so, just say so. Let's see how well you understand the matter. It's clear that you do not accept the primacy of existence. Why not go all the way?

I wrote: "All organisms which possess consciousness have in common the fact that they have sensory organs which give the organism the capacity to be conscious of objects."

Danielj asked: "So? How do you know that consciousness follows sensation?"

Sensation is a form of consciousness. If an organism is sensing something, it is conscious of that something in sensory form. It's not a matter of consciousness "following" sensation.

Danielj asked: "Or are you equating the two?"

Again, sensation is a form of consciousness. So is perception. So is conceptualization. There are many forms of consciousness. This is basic stuff. Ask yourself this, Danielj: Are you conscious of your surroundings? By what means are you conscious of them? In what form are you conscious of them? How are you conscious of them? Do you perceive them? When you are perceiving, are you still unconscious? What is your understanding of consciousness? Get it out in the open. Quit hiding.

Danielj wrote: "Even if it does, it doesn't mean that is the only possible way that it could."

What else do you have in mind? Again, please be specific. Inform your point.

Danielj continued: "One does not necessarily follow from the other."

And as you can see, now that you're learning a little more about my position (perhaps for the first time), I am not arguing that.

I wrote: "Anyone who understands both would know this. Concept-formation is volitional and requires a consciousness capable of selectively isolating specific objects and integrating them into mental units. This is not the task of photosynthesis."

Danielj asserted: "If it is simply biology it cannot be volitional."

Why not? What is your argument for this? What assumptions of yours are driving conclusions like this? I'm biological, and I have a volitional form of consciousness. Why can't it be biological? Is it just that your conception of biological is so narrow that it arbitrarily excludes volition? Or do you think there's a legitimate reason for this? If so, please state it.

Danielj asked: "How do the fetus' organs add up to volition?"

I don't understand the question. I don't think I said that "organs *add up* to volition." The sensory organs are the means by which an organism senses an object. This activity - sensation - is a form of consciousness.

Danielj asked: "How does biology give rise to volition?"

Are you asking for a blow by blow explanation of all the causal activity which allows a consciousness to regulate

itself? If so, that's well beyond the scope of a comments section discussion. You might start with Binswanger's *The Metaphysics of Consciousness* at least to clear up some profound misunderstandings about consciousness. Once that's done, there are other sources available for you to start investigating. But until you've corrected some of your more fundamental misunderstandings, you're not ready for that.

Danielj asked: "Were there ever non-volitional humans?"

I don't think so, given my definition of man. But on a broader definition, perhaps. But you're asking about something which written history has not recorded, so this would require a lot of input from the sciences which I do not have at my disposal.

Danielj asserted: "Biology isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness."

Got any argument for this? Oh wait, take a look at what you wrote next:

Danielj wrote: "Do you understand this? Biology isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness. Biology isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness. Let it sink in..."

I guess you're a student of the Sunday School understanding of reality: repeat a claim long enough until it "sinks in" and you *believe* it. You're showing us your preferred method. No wonder you have so many misunderstandings.

Since you know so much about the necessary conditions for consciousness, can you identify them for us? If biology is not a sufficient condition for consciousness, can you tell us what is? Watch the stolen concepts!

I asked: "Specifically, what do you know of my method? What makes you suppose that there's no self-consciousness 'by my own method'?"

Danielj responded: "From what I read on your blog and in objectivist 'literature'."

Where did anything I write or that you found in the Objectivist literature deny man's capacity for self-consciousness? That is the view you attributed to me. Where did you read this? Please, show me. I want to see.

Danielj wrote: "From henceforth, I shall refrain from attributing anything to you. It was hasty and wrong of me and bordering on a violation of the 9th."

You're showing that you're at least a little teachable. But seriously, where did I deny man's capacity for self-consciousness? If you did not read this in something that I wrote or that some other Objectivist wrote, why did you attribute this position to me? If you're having difficulty being honest in our discussion, please say so. I see no reason to continue on with someone who will not be honest.

I wrote: "With higher organisms (such as human beings), consciousness can be a secondary object - i.e., consciousness of itself."

Danielj: "Now you are defining into existence 'secondary' objects."

You seem to have a real difficulty understanding my position. Do you understand what I mean by "secondary object" in the context of what I stated? I'm not "defining into existence 'secondary' objects." My point is that consciousness must first be conscious of objects other than itself in order for it to be possible for consciousness to have itself as an object. This again is basic Objectivist 101 stuff. I don't think you've read much Objectivist literature. Perhaps you've read criticisms of Objectivism; I have too: it's not a good way to learn about what Objectivism really teaches.

Danielj asked: "Do these secondary objects exist?"

Consciousness exists. In the context of what I stated, consciousness would be the secondary object - an object of itself, consciousness turned inward on itself, just as we do when we contemplate how we became aware of something. But first we had to become aware of that something before we could contemplate how we became aware of it. There's a hierarchical sequence of activity here. I didn't realize that you needed such rudimentary information about what Objectivism teaches. What specifically have you read on Objectivism? (You intimated

above that you've read Objectivist literature. Is that true?)

Danielj asked: "Is consciousness an object?"

It can be. Just as it is in our discussion. Do you understand what Objectivism means by 'object'? Or, are you again trying to interpret Objectivism on your own unstated assumptions? What will that profit you?

I wrote: "We are exhibiting this ability right here in our discussion. What makes you think my position denies this? Or do you find it expedient to put words into my mouth for some reason?"

Danielj wrote: "Of course putting words into your mouth would be expedient (and I've got some very choice words for you) and funny, but I'll refrain."

Now that you've been caught red-handed, you've decided to refrain from this bad habit. Let's see how long you can control it.

I wrote: "The primacy of existence is not a conclusion of prior inference."

Danielj wrote: "It isn't a valid conclusion"

It's not a conclusion to begin with, Danielj. Do you not understand such basic issues?

Danielj wrote: "and is certainly, at the very most, a trivial 'axiom' as I pointed out in my last comment."

Do you not recognize that you're assuming the primacy of existence right here in this statement? Do you understand what the primacy of existence is?

Danielj wrote: "It is a stolen concept."

Actually, the very charge that the primacy of existence is a stolen concept itself commits the fallacy of the stolen concept.

I suspect that you really don't understand what you're talking about, otherwise you'd not make such blunders.

Danielj had written: "If you refuse to attribute eternal existence to consciousness you render your own system incoherent,"

I asked: "How so?"

Danielj responded: "Then it wouldn't be an object, wouldn't fall under the 'existence exists' axiom and it wouldn't exist."

Are you assuming that something must be eternal to be an object? I'm not sure how else to understand where you're coming from here. It's certainly not what Objectivism teaches. So again I suspect you've not really ever read any Objectivist literature, at least on the present topic.

I wrote: "Even if you assume that consciousness is eternal, this would not validate the notion that the subject and object share metaphysical 'co-primacy'. I suspect that you do not fully understand the issue of metaphysical primacy. Perhaps you could explain what 'co-primacy' between consciousness and its objects would be like."

Danielj wrote: "Consciousness either exists or it doesn't."

It does.

Danielj wrote: "If it exists then it is just as 'prime' as existence. If it isn't an object than it doesn't exist."

Danielj, you clearly do not understand the issue of metaphysical primacy. It's important for you to recognize this now before you go on making such blunders like this.

Danielj wrote: "Consciousness is not a sufficient condition for existence and neither is existence a sufficient condition for consciousness, therefore, they are co-prime."

Again, you're not addressing metaphysical primacy here. None of this is. The issue of metaphysical primacy pertains to the proper orientation between a subject and its objects in the subject-object relationship. What you're talking about here has nothing to do with this. You're not even in the ball park, let alone on the playing field.

I asked: "How is consciousness not an attribute of the entity which possesses it?"

Danielj asked: "What kind of attribute is it?"

A kind which belongs to the entity which possesses it. Consciousness is its own type of attribute.

Danielj wrote: "I already brought this up and you chose not to address it."

I've addressed everything you've stated that seem to bear on the topic at hand. Much of what you have stated suggests very strongly that you're unfamiliar with even the basic tenets of Objectivism on the topic at hand. It's unclear even what your position is, if it were laid out explicitly. For instance, when asked how consciousness is not an attribute of the entity which possesses it, you fail to deliver any kind of reasoning for your view, and instead just ask a question ("What kind of attribute is it?").

Danielj wrote: "It isn't observable in anyway [sic]"

Do you mean that consciousness is not observable "in *any* way"? Why do you suppose this? I'm observing my own consciousness introspectively. If I were not able to do this, I'd never be able to form concepts of consciousness. But clearly I have.

Danielj wrote: "and does not exist by that standard."

Well, that just blew your position out of the water.

Danielj asked: "Does it smell funny? Is it orange? Is it hot?"

You seem to be assuming that only concepts which pertain to the level of sensation should be allowed to apply. But why? Are you stuck at that level of consciousness? Have you not explored your own consciousness beyond the level of sensations? I almost feel sorry for you.

Danielj : "Either consciousness exists or it doesn't. If it does, than [sic] it has always existed like everything else in existence."

I asked: "Can you explain how you think this is supposed to follow?"

Danielj wrote: "Firstly, please don't pull that [sic] crap unless it is truly essential to your argument."

I'll do whatever the hell I want, even if you disapprove. Don't get sore at me if you don't understand the difference between "then" and "than."

Danielj wrote: "It follows from your axiom Dawson. Existence exists. The universe exists and has always existed. Nothing can 'begin' to exist, come into existence, or 'develop'. Maybe you need to better explain what you mean by existence exists instead of just sweeping your arms around in a grand gesture?"

I've explained this in numerous places on my blog. It's in the Objectivist literature that you said you've read. And still you make some very boneheaded blunders. I thought you said you had read up on this stuff. Your statements clearly show otherwise.

I wrote: "I've written on many of these topics on my blog. You might want to check it out as you've stumbled quite severely if you think your statements have been representative of my position."

Danielj wrote: "Well, maybe they aren't then. I certainly don't wanna misrepresent you and I'm sorry if I did."

What is that you thought you were doing? What is that you want to do, if not misrepresent my position? I would accept your apology if you showed some genuine interest in avoiding this bad habit. But I've not seen it yet. You haven't got any of the basics down, and flail away at straw men.

Danielj: "I'd prefer to watch objectivists struggle for dear life over at the Maverick Philosophers page."

Yes, I remember that guy. He had a lot of trouble getting the basics of Objectivism correct. See for instance here: <http://katholon.com/Vallicella.htm>

You'll see that even Vallicella is prone to misrepresenting Objectivism.

Danielj: "I don't have any time to waste on your blog."

You're like a lot of theists. Suddenly you're out of time when it comes to interacting with a position that poses a challenge to their theism.

Next?

I asked: "Where did I deny that consciousness develops? Didn't you read what I wrote?"

Danielj responded: "What are the necessary elements of consciousness Dawson?"

Notice that Danielj does not show where I allegedly deny that consciousness develops. He said that I denied "proto consciousness," but anyone who examines the record will see that I did not do this. It's not even been discussed beyond his broaching of the notion.

As for the necessary elements of consciousness, I would list the following as bare minimums:

- To be conscious, an organism needs some means by which it acquires awareness of objects, e.g., sensory organs, a nervous system, a brain, etc.
- Consciousness requires an object to be conscious of (the notion of "consciousness of nothing" is a non-starter)
- Consciousness requires a purpose, e.g., as a means of survival for the organism possessing it.

Danielj asked: "Do you, or do you not agree that biology is not sufficient for consciousness?"

It's not entirely clear to me what exactly this question is asking. Since consciousness is a biological phenomenon, an organism must have certain biological structures in order for it to be conscious. But not all biological organisms have these structures. So saying "biology is sufficient for consciousness" is somewhat broad and may be misunderstood. But if the biological organism has certain structures which give it consciousness of objects, then its biology is clearly sufficient in such cases.

I wrote: "Where did I deny that consciousness develops? Didn't you read what I wrote?"

Danielj responded: "You didn't explicitly deny it."

No, I didn't. I didn't implicitly deny it either. My points about a fetus developing the organs needed for consciousness should clearly indicate that consciousness does develop, just as do heartbeat, respiration, circulation, etc. Consciousness is a biological function, just as these other functions are biological functions. Show us a non-biological entity which has consciousness (and actually exists). I am unaware of any.

Danielj wrote: "You equated sensation with it, then, you proceed to declare sensation a type of consciousness."
"

My points have all along been consistent with the view that sensation is a type of consciousness.

Danielj wrote: "I believe that you do it implicitly and unintentionally."

I asked you to show me where I denied a position, not what you happen to believe. At any rate, I hope you understand now.

I asked: "Do you think that sensation is not a form of consciousness?"

Danielj wrote: "No. I believe sensation is a part of and not a form of consciousness."

For developed human beings, sensation is definitely part of our conscious experience. But this does not constitute a point of evidence against the recognition that sensation is a form of consciousness. Many organisms have not reached the perceptual level of consciousness, and have only sensation as their means of acquiring consciousness of objects. On Danielj's view, these organisms are apparently not conscious. But this is arbitrary.

I asked: "What do you mean by "free," and how does your claim follow from the fact that consciousness is biological? It's not self-evident."

Danielj responded: "I mean that biology is not sufficient for volition (or, freedom) which means that biology is not sufficient for consciousness."

Notice that Danielj does not address my question. Instead, he simply asserts that "biology is not sufficient for volition," without argument, perhaps because he "believes" that "biology is not sufficient for consciousness," again a position for which he has provided no argument at all. I'm guessing that's because he has a faith to defend.

Danielj continued: "I don't think consciousness is biology. I'm accusing you of that belief which I believe to be an absurd belief."

Either you do not understand what you read, or you are simply careless. I stated very clearly that consciousness is biological, not biology proper. Biology includes many other things, such as musculature, circulation, respiration, etc. So it's unclear what you're calling "an absurd belief." Besides, on theistic grounds, what could possibly be "absurd"? You must be borrowing from my worldview. That would account for your clumsy use of the concept.

I asked: "Do you have any arguments to back up your claims? Or just questions?"

Danielj responded: "You know the arguments. You've proved you are capable of transcendental argumentation."

I was specifically asking for you to provide some sort of argument (something more substantial than merely your belief or unsupported assertion) for the view that *if* consciousness is biological, "then the will is not free." I've asked you to define your term "free," which you failed to do, and I asked you to provide an argument for the view you have affirmed. But you produce no argument. Are you stalling so that you can think of one?

I wrote: "If you do not think consciousness is biological, what is it?"

Danielj responded: "It is a God given soul that supervenes on biology, or something. I don't know exactly."

Your god is imaginary, Danielj. If you choose to be honest to yourself one day, you will recognize this. I realize that it's difficult right now.

I wrote: "It's clear that you do not accept the primacy of existence. Why not go all the way?"

danielj stated: "You're a genius! I've already tipped my hand in a wildly gesticulatory manner. I don't accept the unequalled primacy of existence but I don't go all the way on a first date Dawson."

Again, I find I need to ask this: do you know what the primacy of existence means? To say that the primacy of existence is not true is in fact to assume its truth. Do you understand why? I've explained this from a variety of perspectives in a variety of contexts on my blog.

I wrote: "Sensation is a form of consciousness."

Danielj asked: "How do you know that?"

By means of reason.

I wrote: "It's not a matter of consciousness 'following' sensation."

Danielj wrote: "Then it is a matter of consciousness following biology, which, as I've already tried to explain, is a dog that doesn't hunt because biology isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness."

Your "explanation" has so far consisted simply of your unsupported denials. Do you think that dog hunts?

I wrote: "Again, sensation is a form of consciousness. So is perception. So is conceptualization."

Danielj responded: "So one could sense without perceiving or conceptualizing?"

Yes. Many organisms have not reached the perceptual level of consciousness (and therefore not reached the conceptual level of consciousness as well). Moreover, many organisms have reached the perceptual level of consciousness, but have not achieved the ability to conceptualize.

Danielj wrote: "Conceptualize without seeing or perceiving?"

Human beings who have been blind from birth have been able to conceptualize without seeing, but they had to perceive in some form in order to conceptualize. Rand's study of Helen Keller is remarkable on this topic.

Danielj wrote: "It seems to me that they all 'add up' to consciousness."

You're assuming strictly human consciousness. Human consciousness is not representative of the type of consciousness which all organisms possess. All biological organisms which possess consciousness have at least the level of sensations; many have the ability to perceive objects qua objects; so far as we can firmly establish, only human beings have achieved the conceptual level of consciousness. But all three levels are types of consciousness. Sensation is the most primitive species of consciousness; perception is more primitive than conceptual consciousness. Perceptual consciousness would not be possible without sensations, and conceptual consciousness would not be possible without perceptual consciousness.

I wrote: "There are many forms of consciousness."

Danielj asked: "What else besides those three?"

When you get to the perceptual level, there is memory. Dogs, which operate on the perceptual level of consciousness, can remember how to get back to their owners homes, for instance. When you get to the conceptual level of consciousness, in addition to memory there is something called imagination. Many worldviews fail to equip their adherents to distinguish between reality and imagination properly.

I asked: "Are you assuming that something must be eternal to be an object?"

Danielj responded: "No."

Then I'm having difficulty understanding what you stated.

Danielj asked: "Are do you assume that existence must be eternal for objects to be temporal?"

No. Did you think I was?

Danielj asserted: "If it is simply biology it cannot be volitional."

I asked: "Why not? What is your argument for this? What assumptions of yours are driving conclusions like this? I'm biological, and I have a volitional form of consciousness. Why can't it be biological? Is it just that your conception of biological is so narrow that it arbitrarily excludes volition? Or do you think there's a legitimate reason for this? If so, please state it."

Danielj wrote: "Biology is not sufficient for consciousness. Do you deny this?"

See above.

Danielj wrote: "If you do then I would suggest to you that plants are sentient and conscious and that alone serves as a reductio of your entire worldview."

Again, see above.

Danielj wrote: "If you don't then I would suggest to you that consciousness is biology in addition to something else."

No, organisms which possess consciousness are still biological organisms. There's no "in addition" here.

I wrote: "You might start with Binswanger's *The Metaphysics of Consciousness*"

Danielj wrote: "I'll check it out."

You will?

Danielj wrote: "I was thoroughly disappointed with your last recommendation to me (or perhaps it was recommended by somebody who frequents your blog), Piekoff's *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*."

That's a great book!

I asked: "Where did anything I write or that you found in the Objectivist literature deny man's capacity for self-consciousness? That is the view you attributed to me. Where did you read this? Please, show me. I want to see."

Danielj wrote: "Let's get off this whole train. I was simply affirming in my own way that you (and all objectivists) deny the 'primacy of consciousness' as you call it. It was unimportant and isn't truly germane."

So, are you taking back your claim that I deny man's capacity for self-consciousness?

I wrote: "My point is that consciousness must first be conscious of objects other than itself in order for it to be possible for consciousness to have itself as an object."

Danielj wrote: "Please define object."

For the purposes of the topic of our conversation, an object is any thing (be it an entity, an attribute, an action, a relationship, etc.) of which one is conscious, whether by means of sensation, perception or conceptualization.

Danielj asked: "Do believe in proto consciousness of any kind?"

It depends on what "proto consciousness" refers to. This has not been explained.

Danielj wrote: "Do you believe in proto consciousness now?"

Again, it depends on what it is taken to refer to. At this point it is just as undefined as when you first introduced it. Do you ever explain your terms?

Danielj wrote: "Strange, since you are an objectivist, that you didn't start with two here."

Why do you find that strange? I was not listing them in any particular order. All three are necessary elements.

Danielj asked: "So consciousness is biology plus an object (which would reduce to existence in my opinion) plus a purpose?"

Purpose is concurrent with biology, Danielj. Non-living things are not inherently purposive.

Danielj wrote: "That is still just biology Dawson."

Yep. As I said: consciousness is biological. I've asked for you to name one non-biological thing which actually exists and possesses consciousness. You've not produced it.

Danielj wrote: "You've also introduced the superfluous notion of 'purpose' as well."

You asked me to identify the criteria necessary for consciousness. How is purpose superfluous? Purpose is concurrent with biology because goal-orientation is inherently biological. Living organisms pursue goals; this is part of their living condition. It is not superfluous in any way. Non-living things do not pursue goals.

Danielj wrote: "Purpose isn't an object and it does not exist. It is a convenient, ad-hoc invention of yours."

You're speaking autobiographically here, showing us how little you understand about purpose. Purpose refers to a condition which is present in biology.

Danielj wrote: "The extremely simple question: Is biology alone a sufficient condition for consciousness?"

And I addressed this. Let me spell it out for you: if an organism possesses consciousness, then clearly its biology is a sufficient condition for consciousness. Try to understand that there's a context here.

I wrote: "But not all biological organisms have these structures. So saying "biology is sufficient for consciousness" is somewhat broad and may be misunderstood."

Danielj wrote: "That is because it isn't a sufficient condition for consciousness."

Again, you're misleading yourself. We can only address the question on a case by case basis, taking into account the particulars of an organism's biology (since that's what the question is asking about). A plant for instance lacks the necessary biological structures for sensation. Thus, its biology is insufficient for consciousness. A dog, however, does have the biological structures which give it the ability to perceive. Thus its biology clearly is sufficient for perception. You're arbitrarily looking for a one-size-fits-all rule which ignores the context of various situations found in nature.

It's like asking: "Is biology sufficient for flight?" Well, some organisms' biology is sufficient for flight, while others are not. To salvage any hope for objective meaning to your question, it should be revised. For instance, *which* organism's biology is sufficient for consciousness? Answer: those organisms which possess consciousness. Show me an organism which possesses consciousness and yet whose biology is insufficient for consciousness. If you can't do this, then my position on the matter remains unchallenged.

I wrote: "But if the biological organism has certain structures which give it consciousness of objects, then its biology is clearly sufficient in such cases."

Danielj responded: "That just does not follow from the simple fact that it is not sufficient in other cases."

Again, you're looking for something completely arbitrary here. Why wouldn't we take into account the particulars of each case, from species to species, in considering the question? Each organism has its own biological identity. Why arbitrarily ignore this fact?

I wrote: "For developed human beings, sensation is definitely part of our conscious experience. But this does not constitute a point of evidence against the recognition that sensation is a form of consciousness. Many organisms have not reached the perceptual level of consciousness, and have only sensation as their means of acquiring consciousness of objects. On Danielj's view, these organisms are apparently not conscious. But this is arbitrary."

Danielj wrote: "So, sensation isn't a sufficient condition for perception or concept-formation? Sensation, in addition to what, is sufficient for perception?"

There is a profound distinction between sensation and perception, just as there is a profound distinction between perception and conceptualization. A minimum requirement for perception is the ability to integrate sensations into a single unit, giving an entity awareness of entities qua entities. This ability is biological, but not all organisms have this. A minimum requirement for conceptualization is the ability to integrate percepts into open-ended unities by a process of abstraction. This ability is biological, but not all organisms have this.

I asked: "So, are you taking back your claim that I deny man's capacity for self-consciousness?"

Danielj responded: "No, because what I ultimately meant was that you deny, what you would call, the primacy of consciousness."

Oh, of course I deny the primacy of existence. Performatively, you do too. Only you don't realize it yet.

But if you're equating self-consciousness with the primacy of consciousness, or somehow think these are one and the same, or suppose that denying the primacy of consciousness entails or is tantamount a denial of

self-consciousness, then clearly you're confused on the meaning of at least one of these concepts. From what I've seen, it's very possible that you're confused on both.

I asked: "No. Did you think I was?"

Danielj wrote: "You don't believe that existence exists and has done so eternally?"

Of course, existence is eternal. Time presupposes existence.

But that is not what you were asking. You asked: "Are do you assume that existence must be eternal for objects to be temporal?" And in response to this question, I answered no, because I don't assume that existence must be eternal (in order) for objects to be temporal.

I wrote: "the notion of 'consciousness of nothing' is a non-starter."

Danielj asked: "I'm not sure I agree with this either. Isn't 'nothing' a concept? Isn't 'things that don't exist' a concept as well?"

You're confusing yourself. I was not stating that consciousness *of the concept 'nothing'* is a non-starter. Rather, my point was that the notion of a consciousness without an object to be conscious of is a non-starter. It's a contradiction in terms. You wouldn't say that an organism is conscious, and then say "Well, it's not conscious of anything." If it's not conscious of anything (i.e., no objects), how can one say it's conscious?

I wrote: "Purpose is concurrent with biology, Danielj. Non-living things are not inherently purposive."

Danielj asked: "Purpose, like purposeful? Like volitional?"

Not all purpose is volitional. In fact, statistically speaking, very little is volitional. For instance, your heart beats for a purpose, but it is not regulated by volition. A plant's roots pull water and nutrients from the ground for a purpose, but this action is not volitionally initiated.

I wrote: "And I addressed this. Let me spell it out for you: if an organism possesses consciousness, then clearly its biology is a sufficient condition for consciousness. Try to understand that there's a context here."

Danielj asked: "You'll now admit that consciousness reduces to biology?"

I've addressed this already. My position has not changed. Scroll up and read again if you did not catch it the first time.

I wrote: "For instance, your heart beats for a purpose, but it is not regulated by volition."

Danielj asked: "What purpose is that? To pump blood? For what purpose is the heart pumping blood? Are you admitting final causes here?"

I thought you said you had read Objectivist literature. You don't seem familiar with Objectivism at all.

"...admitting final causes..."? What do you mean "admitting"? With rhetoric like this, you make it sound like you think I'm making some kind of concession here. But if you were familiar with Objectivism, you wouldn't do this (unless you simply insisted on being dishonest).

According to Objectivism, life is an end in itself. The organism's actions are purposive in that they serve to meet the goal of living life.

Danielj wrote: "If human beings are purely and entirely circumscribed by their biology,"

I'm not sure what you mean by "purely and entirely circumscribed by their biology." You make it sound as though human beings were some kind of alien substance encased in meat, implying that they are really something other than biological. If you do not think human beings are biological organisms, would you state this explicitly for the record? You don't have to explain why - I already know that you embrace the primacy of consciousness.

Danielj wrote: "I fail to see how you aren't just a run-o-the-mill materialist."

Yes, there is much that you fail to see, Danielj. I submit that this is because you ascribe to a worldview which systemically stifles your understanding of reality.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Consciousness](#), [Metaphysics](#), [Primacy of Existence](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [9:30 AM](#)

11 Comments:

[NAL](#) said...

A plant for instance lacks the necessary biological structures for sensation.

Hmmm, does not a sunflower orientate itself towards the sun? Is that not an extremely rudimentary form of sensation?

[June 25, 2010 6:51 PM madmax](#) said...

A plant for instance lacks the necessary biological structures for sensation.

Dawson, did you mean to write perception here? I think plants do experience sensations.

As to the debate with DanielJ, I found it very helpful. Many theists are wedded to the idea that consciousness is supernatural and that if it weren't then we would not have free will. This is DanielJ's position although you had to pull teeth to get it. Not surprisingly DanielJ is a fan of the "Maverick Philosopher". So in DanielJ we see another case of a theist using AnalPhil to defend theism.

[June 26, 2010 11:44 AM](#)

[Andrew Dalton](#) said...

Plants respond to their environment through hormonal mechanisms, which are much slower to act than what we would typically consider sensations in primitive animals. For example, a plant is basically "blind" to a flash of bright light, but it will respond to many minutes or hours of sustained light.

A very few plants, such as the Venus flytrap, do have the ability to detect and respond to short-term stimuli.

[June 26, 2010 8:05 PM Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello everyone,

Thanks for your messages. Very interesting topic - whether or not plants can sense. When I stated that "a plant for instance lacks the necessary biological structures for sensation," I had in mind those biological structures which we commonly associate with sensory ability, such as eyes, ears, tastes buds, olfactory nerves, the presence of nerve cells, a nervous system, etc. From my understanding (and if I'm wrong on this, I'm open to correction), plants do not have these - they don't have nerve cells, a nervous system, sensory organs, etc.

Of course, there may be exceptions to this, such as the Venus fly trap. I was not thinking of such specimens, simply because they seem to be the exception, not the norm. These plants seem to sense, or at least react to, minute vibrations. Is that an example of sensation in plants? I don't know. Nal mentioned the sunflower, how it tracks the movement of the sun throughout the day. Is this movement a response to sensation?

Do these same plants which, due to their reactions to external stimuli, seem to experience sensation, also experience pain? When I mow my lawn, it does not at all seem that the blades of grass which were lopped off experience pain. They don't seem to react at all. Does a sunflower recoil when slashed with a knife? Does a Venus fly trap try to move away from intense heat? These are tests that I might perform to determine whether plants really do experience sensation, but perhaps they are not appropriate. A botanist should be able to shed light on the matter.

We must keep in mind that many things react to external causes. But such reactions do not necessarily imply sensory experience. Metals expand and contract depending on temperature; dust moves when wind blows it; coffee makers brew coffee when turned on. However, none of these things are capable of sensation. I suspect that much of what we might take as indicators of sensation in plants may be more along the lines of such mechanistic reactions than actual sensation, or like what Andrew mentions about reactions to light. But I may be wrong on this. If anyone has access to scientific research on this, let me know.

As for consciousness being supernatural, or at least evidence of the supernatural, this is in fact very common among theists, as madmax indicates. Theists tend to view consciousness as an entity rather than the activity of an entity, and often assume that a non-supernaturalistic account of consciousness automatically nullifies free will. This is a consequence of supposing that non-supernaturalistic worldviews are forced into supposing that consciousness is at best mechanistic in the sense of a billiard ball reacting to another ball which strikes it. This view takes for granted the event-based model of causality, which I have criticized elsewhere (see [here](#)). When it is understood that volition is itself a type of causation, as Objectivism understands it, the problems which occupy theists' attention do not arise.

Madmax is right that danielj had a hard time coming out and announcing his own position and defending it. This is common among theistic apologists: they are reluctant to take a stand. Instead, they prefer to sit on the sidelines and criticize anything that comes over the horizon, taking a skeptical approach, assuming without any argument that hard skepticism needs to be taken seriously, as if it provided some kind of viable standard. And yes, Anal Phil comes in very handy in such endeavors, since it allows a thinker to get lost in a tangle of non-essentials which effectively obscure one's sight of facts.

Regards,
Dawson

[June 28, 2010 9:45 AM](#)

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

Recent scientific studies have shown that plants actually react to the presence of predators and communicate chemically with each other. So yes, I think the case for plant sensation is well established.

[July 08, 2010 2:38 PM](#)

[Jason](#) said...

In his remarks, Danielj keeps claiming over and over the same point: that you are saying that consciousness is solely biological. He is implying that there is a dichotomy between matter and mind, fact and value, the physical and the intellectual (i.e., spiritual); that the biological (i.e., science, facts, observation, physical things) has one set of properties and the intellectual (i.e., values, morals, ideas) another.

If Danielj is reading this: there is no dichotomy between the physical (i.e., biological) and the intellectual (i.e., spiritual). It's not one or the other.

Your consciousness is directly integrated with physical reality. You start with sense perception and then abstract using your mind to form this worldly concepts and values.

[July 18, 2010 10:54 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Jason,

Thanks for your comments.

Yes, Danielj repeatedly tried to raise controversy over the view "that consciousness is solely biological." My question is: solely biological *as opposed to what*? He could not give much substance here, other than to say "It is a God given soul that supervenes on biology, or something. I don't know exactly." In addition to how uninformative this is, it does

not square well with what Christianity typically teaches. Dogs, rats, orangutans and dolphins are conscious, but are their consciousnesses "God given souls" as well? Christians have historically taught that man is the only earthly being which has a soul. Then again, Mark 16:15 does attribute the following commandment to Jesus: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." I remember the story of one Christian who had to be rescued from a lion exhibit at a zoo because he tried to preach the gospel to some lions.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 18, 2010 10:46 PM](#)

[midasvuik](#) said...

Dawson, I have a kind request for your next post. I know you've done this before, but the relevant blogs are a bit scattered. Is it possible for you to write a good, detailed paper on what Anton Thorn calls "The Argument from the Fact of Existence." It's the argument which contends that any theism involving a creator god is in conflict with the primacy of existence. I am currently researching this argument to see if it's sound, so if you could make some post sometime in the near future where you formalize the argument, defend it, and explain the Objectivist terminology employed (i.e. primacies of consciousness and existence), it would be greatly appreciated not only by me, but by others curious about the argument as well. Like I said, I am aware that you have done this before, but it would be convenient and more helpful if all the content of the blogs pertaining to the matter were in one place. Thanks.

[July 19, 2010 4:44 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello midasvuik,

Thank you for your comment, and for your interest in the argument from existence. You are correct: this argument is a discovery of Anton Thorn's. Unfortunately his site seems to have disappeared from the face of the internet, and I do not know if he has uploaded his expanded version of this argument elsewhere.

An abbreviated version of Thorn's argument can be found here:
http://www.strongatheism.net/library/atheology/argument_from_existence/

There are very few Christian reactions that I have seen against this argument, and none of them bring any worthy challenge against it that I have seen.

If you want to examine Thorn's argument as he originally presented it, let me know. I believe I have a copy of it somewhere in my archives (though no promises - but I think I have it somewhere). It is possible for me to write my own paper on the argument from existence, but I've done so many posts on how theism is in conflict with the primacy of existence, I'm not sure how else it needs to be explained. Then again, I see everything in terms of its implications for metaphysical primacy, so I expect I will incorporate elements of the argument from existence in future papers, from whichever perspective is required by the case.

Meanwhile, I suggest two blogs of my own which address essentially the same issues as those raised by Thorn's argument. They are:

[The Inherent Subjectivism of God-belief](#)

and

[How Theism Violates the Primacy of Existence.](#)

You seem to be aware that I have addressed these issues in previous writings of mine, but complained that they are scattered. I am hoping one day to revise [my website](#), so I may dedicate a specific area to just this argument, including the blogs I linked to above.

I hope that helps! If you have any specific questions about the argument, please let me know and perhaps that will motivate me to develop a blog post which addresses your concerns.

Regards,
Dawson

[July 23, 2010 9:32 AM](#)

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