

4. *Consciousness is a biological faculty*

Consciousness is not only an action but also a living action. Living action is goal-directed. [BINSWANGER, 1990 & 1992] An organism's actions are adapted to securing its survival. Consciousness, like the heartbeat, is a biological activity that evolved because it promotes survival. But few philosophers in history have regarded consciousness that way.

The Judeo-Christian thinkers regard "things of the spirit" and "things of the flesh" as opposites, as belonging to different realities. Consciousness is an implant of the supernatural in man, religionists proclaim, and consciousness offers man, in their view, nothing but an intractable conflict with his "all too human" body.

Even Plato was attracted to this view: he describes the body as the tomb of the soul. But to Aristotle, this was nonsense: he recognized that the body is a living body and that the soul (i.e., consciousness) is the "form" ("entelechy") of the body — i.e., an expression of bodily powers. Death, he recognized, ends the life of body *and* soul. Human consciousness is an activity of a person, involving his body's interaction with the external world. The living body is not the tomb of anything; it is the enabler of consciousness. And when a person dies, what had been his body becomes a corpse.

Where does the soul go when you die? To the same place as your heartbeat.

Conscious activities, whether sensory or conceptual, have, like the heartbeat, a biological function. Man has eyes for the same reason he has a heart: to sustain his life; vision is an adaptive, biological, life-sustaining capacity. The same is true for the other sense modalities: each provides a man with life-sustaining information about the world.

And the same is true of the faculty of reason. The mind, the reasoning intellect, is a vital organ. A biologist could not understand the heart if he did not know its biological function, and a philosopher cannot understand reason, or any other faculty of consciousness, if he ignores the biological function of that faculty.

The heart serves the organism's survival by circulating the blood. In what way does consciousness serve survival? What does sight, for example, do for sighted animals?

First, note what makes an animal an animal. In simplest terms, the distinguishing characteristics of animals are the faculties of locomotion and consciousness. In contrast to a plant, an animal perceives the world and moves itself through the world. But the deeper issue concerns how the animal makes its living — how it gets nourishment.

Plants synthesize their own nutrients; animals feed on plants or on other animals which, ultimately, have fed on plants. Animal life depends on plants having photosynthesized the basic nutrients that animals need.

Putting it as simply as possible: animals eat. If they eat plants, the food supply within reach is soon exhausted, so they must move around: they graze. If they eat other animals, they need to catch their prey, which again means they must move around: they hunt. Whether they graze or hunt, animals need to find their food. Consciousness is their means of doing so.

(There is an exception to animal motility, and a telling one: There are some sea-animals, such as oysters, that do not move themselves through their environments during most of their lifespans, since their food floats to them. And oysters have no eyes.)¹⁵

In general, animals have to move to get food; consciousness enables them to locate their food. It also enables them to avoid being eaten, but food is the fundamental: life is not fundamentally the avoidance of death but the gaining of the materials for self-sustenance. Consciousness does also enable animals to attain other goals, e.g., to find mates for reproduction, but getting food is the fundamental.

That's the simplified overview. Now let's look in more detail.

Consciousness does several things, each of which contributes to the organism's survival.

1. Consciousness enables the animal to integrate all the various parts of its body to pursue its overall goal in relation to the perceived environment as a whole. When the lion undertakes the chase, all its muscular activity is coordinated to that single effort. And the lion chases its prey through a terrain, not as a simple stimulus-response mechanism. A plant's parts react "locally" — the leaf may curl to preserve heat on a cold day, but a plant cannot pull up roots and move to a warmer locale.

2. Consciousness enables the animal to bridge space, in the sense that the animal can respond to distant objects. The lion sees and smells its distant prey, crouches down, and begins to stalk.

3. Consciousness enables the animal to bridge time, by responding now and over a span of time to a goal that it will not reach and utilize until later.

15 If you can imagine an oyster with eyes, an oyster that lies motionless on the sea bottom, passively watching the passing scene, year in and year out, you have the exact opposite of my view of consciousness. I am not merely saying that eyes would have no survival value for oysters (and so did not evolve); I am saying that vision without locomotion would not actually be vision. Vision is connected with and depends upon self-produced movement (see CHAPTER 2).