

Is Consciousness an “Emergent Property”?

Richard Oxenberg

I. Emergent Properties

One way metaphysical materialists have tried to resolve the mind-body problem is by suggesting that consciousness might be understood as an "emergent property" of matter.

An “emergent property” is a property of a system that arises due to the interaction of the elements of that system, where none of the elements have that property by themselves. For instance, harmony might be said to be an emergent property of a choir’s singing. None of the individual voices in the choir have the property of harmony by themselves, but when all of the voices combine in a certain way, harmony is produced.

The idea is that when matter arranges itself in a particular dynamic form (such as a living brain) consciousness, for some mysterious reason, emerges as a "property" of that material form.

But the more one reflects on this idea, the more one realizes it to be seriously flawed. Indeed, it would make more sense to think of matter as an emergent property of consciousness.

II. Consciousness and Properties

To understand this we need to consider what we mean by 'property.'

There are basically two ways to think of a 'property':

A 'property' may be thought of as the way something appears (to a consciousness) under certain circumstances. Thus, H₂O has the property of liquidity when it appears to a human consciousness at room temperature. If something the size of an electron were conscious, and were wandering around within a bowl of H₂O, the H₂O would not appear to it as liquid; it would not have the ‘property’ of liquidity.

Similarly, the harmony of a choir exists as such only for one who hears it. The ‘property’ of harmony results from the way the combined voices affect the listening consciousness.

A ‘property,’ in this sense, is an appearance to a consciousness.

To say that consciousness is an emergent property of matter, in this sense, would be to say that matter will appear (to consciousness) *as* consciousness when organized in a certain manner. But this makes no sense, for consciousness would already have to be there in order for matter to appear to it in any way at all. Consciousness cannot first emerge *as* an appearance to consciousness.

But we might mean by 'property' - not the way something *appears* under certain circumstances - but the way something *functions* under certain circumstances.

In this sense, digestion is a 'property' of the human gastrointestinal system. It is an *emergent* property in that all the elements of the system must work together for digestion to occur. It is not a property of any of the system's elements considered in isolation.

To say that consciousness is an emergent property, in this sense, would be to equate consciousness with the physical operations of the system in which it occurs.

But this also makes no sense, for consciousness is not reducible to a physical operation.

We might fully describe the electro-chemical operations of the brain without learning anything at all about the nature of the consciousness associated with those operations. This is not true of digestion. To fully describe the physical operations of the gastrointestinal system *is* to describe digestion.

Thus, the notion that consciousness might be an emergent property of matter is based on a flawed analogy. Either it conceives of consciousness as an *object* of consciousness, or as a series of physical interactions. But consciousness is clearly neither.

III. Is Matter an Emergent Property?

Indeed, it would make more sense to conceive of matter as an emergent property of consciousness.

In this case, we would be saying that consciousness itself appears (to human consciousness) as matter under certain circumstances. This is a way of conceiving of the relationship between consciousness and matter that, anyway, would be true to the "emergent property" analogy.

Thus, we would posit that everything in the universe - including what appears to us as matter - is a configuration of consciousness. Under certain circumstances - the circumstances of human existence - some part of this fundamental consciousness appears as matter to human consciousness.

In other words, our experience of the objective world as having the properties we associate with materiality *emerges* from the manner in which our own subjective consciousness interacts with what we might call "objective consciousness," i.e., the objective world.

This suggests that consciousness, at base, is not the ethereal, insubstantial, thing we generally take it to be - but rather the very substance of the universe.

It also suggests that human consciousness is but a form of a more fundamental and universal consciousness that likely has attributes, characteristics, and a basic ontology that is only partially on display in human consciousness.

This seems to me the only plausible solution to the "mind-body problem."