What if every subconscious module in the brain is an independent consciousness?

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We know from Roger Sperry’s split brain experiments that it’s possible to have two independent consciousnesses associated with the same brain. For example, a doctor may cut the bundle of nerves (corpus callosum) that connects the left and right brain hemispheres, as a treatment for severe epilepsy, resulting in two independent consciousnesses.

But what if there were many more? What if every subconscious module in the brain was independently conscious?

If this were true, we humans would resemble a small community of advisors all whispering advice to the main consciousness, or “I”. I would be free to ignore their advice, yet even if I heed their advice most of the time, the relationship between each consciousnesses would be that of one person communicating with another. Simply because I can’t resist my advisors very well doesn’t mean I don’t have free will. I don’t subject my advisors to a Turing test to prove they are indeed conscious and intelligent; I simply trust that they are. Their language to me resembles grunts and gestures more than a fully-fledged language, to the degree that I notice.

In this scenario, my choices and desires don’t “bubble up” from my advisors; they are supplied as advice, as from a friend. The heart wants what it wants, so to speak, but the heart is a separate consciousness from “I”. Despite evidence (from Libet and others) that our desires and decisions are made subconsciously many seconds before they appear to our conscious awareness, if indeed all subconscious processes are really conscious, that argument against free will is negated.

If every subconscious module in the brain is actually conscious, how then do we define consciousness?

Imagine observing another planet from a distance and seeing a lump of matter spontaneously rise up and leave the planet surface, circle a nearby moon, only to return to its original location on the planet. What sort of matter exists on this planet to perform such maneuvers? The answer is consciousness, as when mankind invents a rocket and launches it from Earth to the moon.

Consider a world without consciousness, such as Earth before life appeared. Two rocks collide, a volcano erupts, yet there is no memory or record of the occurrence aside from a few waves of light, sound, and gravity, rapidly dispersing all directions. There is no system independent from the thing-in-itself to represent it and allow a movable perspective through time and space to allow for planning, perception, prediction, simulation, and understanding of cause-and-effect. (Of course it is literally impossible to imagine a world without consciousness, because without consciousness there are no concepts like rocks or eruptions; there are only fleeting local interactions.)

Despite all odds, the universe invented consciousness (using only matter at its disposal, and the process of natural selection) to retain its memories and causalities, and to allow playback from different perspectives. I believe any sufficiently complex system that can deeply represent our corner of the universe is conscious.

Consciousness is profound. It is literally the being-ness of a parallel world outside of – but highly synchronized with – reality, where concepts are represented with rich interrelationships to allow predictions to be made. That world resonates in harmony with reality, as its internal concepts and representations are constantly compared with each other, to maintain internal consistency. The feeling of consciousness comes from inhabiting this simulation of reality and navigating through multiple perspectives, back and forth in time, allowing for predictions and maintaining causality. None of this was possible in the pre-conscious world.

Not all matter is conscious and panpsychic; only matter that exhibits these qualities of internal and external resonance. In the brain, neurons fire 200 times a second, constantly readjusting with inputs from our senses, seeking internal stability of concepts, resonating like a giant tuning fork or Kalman filter. Consciousness is not the shallow artificial intelligence (AI) that can defeat humans at games like chess. It is about resonance with reality, representation of concepts in time and space, simulation of cause-and-effect, and the ability to have a movable perspective independent from reality. The missing ingredient in AI is the resonance found when a rich representation of concepts and their interactions harmonize in a simulation of complex multidimensional reality. Oscillators, harmonizers, resonance. These should be the words we use to describe artificial intelligence.

Consciousness must also align with our genetics, that wormhole to our evolutionary past. How is one conscious of the snake? How can we manifest an innate fear of snakes in our DNA and bring it to consciousness? I would suggest that our innate concepts are readable from DNA tape and converted to brain structure, and back again. Our experiences and perceptions (e.g. perception of a snake) must be converted into mental concepts in a universal way across humans to allow an innate disposition toward them. For example, every human must perceive a snake the same way, perhaps as a characteristic number, such that the innate proclivity (fear of snakes) can be read from DNA and applied to the perception. We know that simple concepts can travel across the corpus callosum from one brain hemisphere to the other. Perhaps any concept can be serialized to allow transfer throughout the brain – from one conscious brain module to another – and perhaps stored back into the DNA of individual neurons. Furthermore, as there is a distribution of traits across society (some are born introverts, some are born extroverts), this diversity of stable traits must also be represented as DNA, and readable from that tape into consciousness.

In summary, if subconscious modules in the brain are really independent consciousnesses, we can resolve open questions of free will, and work toward a common model of consciousness.