



Sentience: The Overlooked Foundation of Existence

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Here Michael argues that ‘our conscious, verbalising selves depend upon these mundane but absolutely essential biological processes occurring beneath awareness’ and that consciousness is essentially a feeling. It is sentience rather than consciousness that is fundamental.

Consciousness is not nearly as important as we presume. There, I’ve thrown down the gauntlet. True, your conscious mind is enabling you to read these words and understand my meaning. And your consciousness will allow you to reflect on what I subsequently propose. But the bulk of what you are doing right now is not reading, not thinking, not reflecting. What *are* you doing? You’re breathing, for a start. And much more: your cells are metabolising, your blood is flowing, your neurons are firing, electrochemical signals are being exchanged between your brain and the rest of your body, and your digestive tract is likely working on the remains of a meal. Additionally, your immune system is somewhere between active and quiescent, your proprioceptive system is continuously calibrating your balance and position in space, and your senses are likewise monitoring the environment so that anything out of the ordinary – a dog’s bark, an itch, an odd smell – will come into clarity.

Our conscious, verbalising selves depend upon these mundane but absolutely essential biological processes occurring beneath awareness. All of that makes possible what we notice, imagine, love, fear, anticipate, and regret – the *mélange* that neuroscientist Antonio Damasio dubbed “the feeling of what happens.”¹ Yes, consciousness at its essence is a feeling. The truth of the matter is acknowledged by more of Damasio’s colleagues all the time; just consider the title of Christof Koch’s 2020 volume, *The Feeling of Life Itself*.² Indeed, the contemporary verdict is that Descartes had it wrong. We ‘are’ primarily because we feel, not because we think. Put another way (by the late novelist Milan Kundera), “I think, therefore I am’ is the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches.”³

Sentience is Fundamental

Just as the left side of our brain, which traffics in language, normally dominates the right side, so we don’t fully appreciate the extent to which the activity that comprises ‘us’ takes place unconsciously. Our consciousness is, to borrow a common metaphor, akin to the upper part of an iceberg: perhaps 10 percent visible and the rest under the water line. From an evolutionary standpoint, the neocortex, which enables us to have fully self-conscious experience, is an upstart. It is predated by the limbic portions of the brain, which register and govern emotion; those structures grew out of the brainstem, the seat of fundamental functions such as breathing, metabolism, instinct, and reflex. One can posit, as Damasio has, that self-awareness is nothing more or less than a way to “mind the body.”⁴ Consciousness, then – the pinnacle of development – remains inexorably tethered to, and dependent upon, a raft of bodily processes that are literally out of sight. (They are not out of mind, though, if we consider the mind to be the amalgam of everything needed to make the living of our lives conscious.)

For these reasons, we can say that *sentience* is fundamental, not consciousness. Sentience references that which we physically sense but may not apprehend, what we feel in our marrow but may not be able to articulate, what we dream but cannot remember, and what we may intuit but do not know for certain. A baby that cries because it is hungry, thirsty or tired is not necessarily conscious but it is most definitely sentient. The same can be said for a person who is comatose or who has lost most of her or his faculties due to advanced age. The more we learn about other animals (since human beings *are* animals), the more we appreciate that they are sentient,

too, regardless of their degree of self-consciousness.

Movement

All sentient creatures are animate. Self-generated movement is, in fact, the most elementary (though not infallible) way to distinguish a living thing. Movement connotes life; an animal that is immobile is either asleep, depressed, dead or playing dead.

What generates movement? Energy, obviously – the energy produced in living cells. Whether we're referencing electron, photon, phosphate, or sodium electricity, it is generated as ions move through the membranes of different cell constituents. In the all-important process of oxidative phosphorylation, the movement of electrons in a transport chain releases energy, which in turn pumps protons from the mitochondria (the power stations of the cell) through the membrane of ATP synthase, an enzyme that then makes ATP (adenosine triphosphate, the cell's all-purpose energy currency). Some of the ATP is used to pump sodium out of the cell, producing the electricity that ultimately powers us. Without these fundamental ingredients and processes, creatures could not sense, move nor feel, let alone possess higher degrees of self-consciousness and personal agency.

Here's an intriguing question, posed by biochemist Nick Lane.⁵ Could even the simplest life forms, such as bacteria, 'feel' something when ions pass across their single cell membrane, and the electrical charge across that membrane changes? It's quite a conceptual leap. But if we imagine, with Lane, that feelings emanate from the electrochemical pulse of life, then we can view sentience as compatible with the energetic metabolism of living things. A bacterium, of course, would have the most primitive 'experience' possible. The prospect yields a conception of all life along a continuum, with some degree of sentience fundamentally built in throughout but with greater capacity for thought, deliberation, memory, reasoning, and imagination accruing to creatures, like ourselves, blessed with more complex brains and nervous systems.

Beyond Panpsychism

The possibility also opens up to something like panpsychism – the ancient idea that the universe is alive, or at least contains the seeds of aliveness. But the concept we are considering here is slightly (though meaningfully) different. Only living things would qualify on the sentience scale, not rocks nor mountains nor streams. While Heraclitus was undoubtedly correct in asserting that one can never step into the same river twice – indeed, that all of nature changes, from continents drifting to stars going supernova – we are accepting

inorganic matter from the possibility of having an experience.

Now, your intellect might protest that highlighting sentience somehow denigrates consciousness, in effect celebrating the proletariat over the elite. But to point out the vastness of sentience is not to make self-consciousness any less marvelous. If fact, it opens up a most intriguing possibility for our conscious inspection.

In her 2019 book *Conscious*, Annaka Harris suggested that consciousness is built into the cosmos similar to spacetime, gravity, and electromagnetism – as a continuous, pervasive field.⁶ Such a field would give rise to a multitude of experiential possibilities as it interacts with matter. Harris takes, as an evident example, our feeling differently moment to moment and place to place, especially as we're affected by other people's consciousness (in particular, their words and actions). The encompassing prospect she raises is of a cosmos teeming with types and degrees of experience – “flickering in and out, overlapping, combining, separating, flowing, in ways we can't quite imagine.”⁷

(Here, a side note. All of Harris' references are to consciousness, not sentience. But, in a Twitter exchange, she agreed that sentience is the more appropriate term.⁸ I've had a similar brief conversation with Koch, who concurs – with the understanding that “there is no Rubicon between sentience and consciousness.”⁹ I agree, but will continue to deploy *sentience* as a means of distinguishing the kind of preconscious activity of which we're generally unaware.)

A Universal Field of Sentience?

If there is a universal field of sentience, I suggest that animate beings participate in it largely through their preconscious activity, as this makes up the greater part of who and what they are. It would mean that all manner of primarily sensory and emotional experience that doesn't register consciously – hopes, fears, intimations, dim recollections – is the 'stuff' that conveys. It would also mean that the sentient content of other creatures is part of the mix, just as ours is.

Is there evidence? I believe there is, in the form of synchronicities or 'meaningful coincidences' whose hallmark is to take us unawares. In considering these, the first thing to realise is that meaning is typically *felt* – it has a resonant, emotional truth. Furthermore, synchronicities tend (as in dreams) to present a symbol or image connected with what we're concerned with at that juncture. As psychologists, artists and advertisers all know well, feeling lends itself to imagery. The images evoked can be highly personal, highly communal, or both. But the stronger the feeling, the more affecting and widely understood that image is likely to be.

Anyone who's ever experienced a seeming synchronicity knows how it tends to shake you up. You're left wondering: what just happened? Carl Jung, who propounded the concept with Wolfgang Pauli, referred to it as something numinous. Perhaps that impression owes to the lack of appreciation our conscious minds have for the vastness and depth of sentience. Just as each of us is continuously 'placed' in spacetime and affected in unseen ways by gravity and electromagnetism, so we could be, in effect, bobbing in an ocean of sentience. It's a humbling prospect for our conscious selves to consider. But human presumptions have been humbled before, and we're no worse for wear. In fact, our conscious universe is all the richer for it.

Notes

1. Damasio, Antonio. (1999). *The Feeling of What Happens*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
2. Koch, Christof. *The Feeling of Life Itself*. (2020). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
3. Kundera, Milan. *Immortality*. (1999). New York: HarperPerennial.
4. Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error*. (1994). New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 159.
5. Ball, Philip. “The Big Thinker.” *Nautilus*. September 7, 2022. <https://nautil.us/the-big-thinker-238542/>.
6. Harris, Annaka. *Conscious*. (2019). New York: HarperCollins.
7. Harris, Annaka. “Consciousness Isn't Self-Centered.” *Nautilus*. February 26, 2020. <https://nautil.us/consciousness-isnt-self-centered-237720/>.
8. Harris, Annaka. August 27, 2020. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/annakaharris/status/1299182885782450176>.
9. Koch, Christof. Email correspondence with author. September 27, 2020.

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