

Human Consciousness/Self-Awareness – Blessing or Curse?

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Individual human existence is but a blip on the screen of life in the universe, yet we place so much emphasis on the meaning of this life – mostly because we are “blessed” with consciousness of our existence and therefore have the ability to promote the idea that we are special and somehow important as both individuals and as a species. But our awareness may well be but an artifact – an accident – of our species development and even a sidelight distraction in overall evolution. We make so much of consciousness and self-awareness, assuming it is very significant when in fact we do not know this is the case at all! With this ability to critically consider ourselves and our position in the world, we seem to have the option to systematically retain the past and anticipate the future, and so to plan and evaluate. This seems an ability that sets humans apart from other species and distinguishes us in terms of species “progress.” We elect to make a great deal of this difference; yet this difference also allows us to avoid living in the present and to make ourselves miserable with carrying the baggage of the past and living only for the future. It is so easy to miss the opportunity of where we are in the bottleneck between our encumbered past and overblown future.

In this context of our self-awareness in what appears to be a time continuum, we appear to have free will and to be able to make choices that influence our future. But free will may be but another illusion created by our limited perceptual and conceptual ability. Because we cannot discern all of the connections that make up the web of our existence, it is entirely possible that even our most minuet actions are in fact entirely predictable, and the notion that our “planning” results in activities that alter the flow of events is entirely false.

It is not at all clear just how useful consciousness is to us individually or as a species. Self-awareness/consciousness easily carries us to the extremes first, of literal religious dogmatism and fundamentalism [out of our intuitive capability] and second, of scientific materialism and positivism [out of our rational or intellectual capability]. Modern humankind dwells in the midst of the ragging debate between the camps that represent the extremes of our capabilities, just because we are aware of these capabilities, because we can seek to understand what the existence they reveal “means,” and because we get so wrapped up in one side or the other of this debate over meaning. We spend so much effort in this debate that we miss most of our opportunities to really use these two abilities in a balanced way to be creative in meeting our individual and

species needs. So, if we have free will, we make precious little constructive use of it. Mostly we seem to be an experiment that may have great possibilities that has weighed itself down in the process and taken us only to the gateway of our full potential. To date, our minimal use of our consciousness suggests that the tail is wagging the dog rather than acting as the light illuminating existence before us.

Perhaps modern humankind is just immature in its development of its polar capabilities within consciousness. This would be the optimistic view – that at some point we humans will “get it” and move beyond the current childish debate. Or equally possible, our experiment as a species will continue to spin in the dark-age circles of our present childish conflict until we spin “out” as a species. Or, consciousness itself may be an illusion and irrelevant and whatever our capabilities as a species may be, we are just “fussing” within this illusion.

As an existentialist and a humanist, I am finally an optimist; but I have to keep the bigger potential range of possibilities in mind. Such a view can serve to keep us appropriately humble, and maybe help us to crawl out of the immature spin we are in.