

The Certainty of the Existence of Consciousness

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This is a rather free translation of a talk given as my introduction to a panel discussion (with Ulf Danielsson and Åsa Wikforss) in Kalmar, 19 October 2015. The discussion had been given the title **Language, Consciousness and Non-material Reality. Atheist Perspectives**; all of us in the panel believe consciousness exists. The main organizer was the secular humanist organization Humanisterna i Kalmar.

All religions take it for granted that human consciousness exists. Does this mean, that a consistently thought through secular humanism must end up in the claim that only matter exists? No, by no means. The dividing line is *not* the existence or non-existence of consciousness, but whether or not the death of a person is the inevitable end of that person's consciousness. This notwithstanding, one can of course try to take a stand on the issue whether or not only matter exists. Unfortunately, the task is not as easy as it may seem, since it turns out that it is impossible simply to trust either philosophy, the neurosciences, or the secular humanist movement. I will return to this fact at the end of the talk. First my own personal reflections.

I do not believe there is a God. Neither do I believe in a life after death. On the other hand, I do believe in the existence of moments of consciousness, some short-lived and some long-lived. Taking the liberty of turning the noun 'consciousness' into an adjective, I will call them *consciousness phenomena*. However, using the word 'believe' might be misleading. I am *firmly convinced*, that there is neither a God nor a life after death. But I'm even more firmly convinced that there are consciousness phenomena!

The best argument I know of for the existence of consciousness phenomena has great similarities with Descartes' famous expression and inference 'I am thinking, therefore I am'. Descartes tried to cast doubt on everything, but concluded that it was impossible to doubt that he exists when he thinks. If we are more careful with the noun-concept of an enduring ego, and there are reasons to be so, we should confine ourselves to make this inference: 'Now I am thinking, therefore there exists now a consciousness phenomenon'.

To make for you, as secular humanists, my absolute certainty about the existence of consciousness even clearer, let me state my conviction like this: from a *theoretical* point of view, I can *in principle* doubt my atheism, but I cannot even in this way doubt the existence of consciousness phenomena. Why? Well, the doubt in question is itself a consciousness phenomenon.

A second best argument for the existence of consciousness phenomena is the difference between dreamless sleep and dreaming. That is, when seen from one's own first-person perspective. Seen from the outside, sleep researchers can rightly say that the difference consists in the existence of different kinds of brain activities. But from within yourself, the difference is that you have consciousness when you are dreaming, and you have no consciousness when you sleep without dreaming. Of course, the brain can solve problems even when we are sleeping without dreaming, but such thought processes are not consciousness phenomena.

An argument on the same footing is to point at the difference between not receiving and receiving a local anesthetic at an operation. The processes in the body are partly different in the two cases, but from your own personal perspective, the remarkable difference is that you do feel or you do not feel pain, respectively. Those who deny the existence of consciousness phenomena have become so object absorbed, that they keep outside of their thinking their own first-person perspective.

To repeat, nothing can make me stop believing in the existence of consciousness phenomena. However, I am also firmly convinced that there can be no such phenomena without a neurological basis. I do not think there can be consciousness phenomena that are wholly cut off from bodies. Certain types of neurological structures are *conditions of existence* for consciousness phenomena, but no consciousness phenomena are *identical* with such neurological structures.

For me, the question of the existence of consciousness phenomena is not a purely theoretical question. It affects how I look upon some of my actions. If there are no consciousness phenomena, I can see no need to discuss ethical issues. If there is no consciousness that can suffer and feel pain, then moral questions become for me of no importance at all. Those who care about ethical principles but deny the existence of consciousness phenomena make to me a logical somersault.

But if there is no awareness, there is, in my view, neither any reason to worry about what the head organizer of this discussion, Carl Gustaf Olofsson, has close to his heart: *existential questions discussed from an atheistic point of view*. Existential questions are questions for a consciousness. Therefore, atheists who deny the existence of consciousness phenomena do often also regard existential questions as pseudo-questions. But I do not.

This claim of mine is put forward in full knowledge of the fact, that in all probability the neurosciences will in the future give us much new and valuable knowledge of what the relationships between different brain processes and different consciousness phenomena look like. Of course, this may in turn affect both how the existential problems are conceived, and what the proposal for solutions will look like. However, I do not think that the neurosciences can in themselves resolve all the issues. There will always be some scope for existential brooding.

Moreover, since I am more than 70 years old, I will not have any of my existential problems solved by hints at presumed future findings in neuroscience. I need some kind of answers here and now.

Let me conclude with some words about the state of the discussion of the existence of consciousness phenomena. I have many prominent contemporary philosophers on my side when I claim that consciousness phenomena exist (e.g., John Searle, Thomas Nagel, and David Chalmers), but there are also many prominent philosophers who claim that there are no such phenomena (e.g., Patricia Churchland and David Armstrong). Similarly, there are both prominent neuroscientists who believe that consciousness phenomena exist (e.g., Giulio Tononi and Christof Koch), and those who believe that there are only brain processes in the ordinary natural-scientific sense (e.g., Michael Graziano and McFadden). The question of the existence of consciousness phenomena divides both philosophy and the neurosciences.

Even worse, the secular-humanist movement is divided, too. There are both prominent atheists who claim that the belief in consciousness is a myth (e.g., Daniel Dennett), and those who, like me, think that we know for sure that consciousness phenomena exist (e.g., Sam Harris).

This means, that if you try to take a stand on the issue of the existence of consciousness, you cannot simply rely on philosophy as an academic discipline, on the neurosciences as academic disciplines, or on secular humanism as an international movement. You have to do some substantive thinking yourself. Therefore, I would like to end with the admonition that Immanuel Kant wanted as the motto of the Enlightenment:

“Have the courage to use *your own* reason!”