

# Review of: "On the subject part I: what is the subject?"

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## Comments On the subject part I: what is the subject?

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I found this a most interesting discussion though as will be clear from my comments below - listed in the order they were prompted as I read through the article - it is limited by the excessive compression of the argument; as the author acknowledges this is just a preparation for a trilogy of articles, so I guess this is why it reads a bit like 'notes to myself' in parts. There is a tendency to use concepts like 'sense', 'subjectivity' and 'awareness' in novel, 'expanded' ways without first defending these unconventional uses, or to use them first to arrive at a conclusion, and only then sketch a defence of the unconventional premise. I think the argument is on the right lines, particularly because it takes biology and evolution and practical involvement in the world seriously, which so much writing on this topic in philosophy and avant-garde social theory ignores, but the author's position on ontology is unclear.

### Specific points:-

'Compatible freedom' acknowledges that freedom depends on practically-adequate knowledge of the world that we encounter. This can grow with evolution and learning but 'transcendental freedom' is a non-starter. We can't break through the noumenal wall or get closer to doing so but we can manage well enough without doing so anyway. The difference, in critical realist terms, between the intransitive and transitive dimensions can't be overcome.

Re: "The emergence of intersubjective human awareness and agency are called science and technology." Science and technology are *part* of the emergence of intersubjective human awareness and agency but not the whole. E.g. there is also language.

Some other points are too cryptic to be convincing. E.g. "In reality, there is no such thing as a "wall." According to both Kant's transcendental philosophy and quantum mechanics, there is not even time or space. Obviously, we are far removed from reality in our subjective experience, even when we are not intoxicated. And yet, we do not only know about quantum mechanics. Increasingly, we are learning how to utilize this knowledge. One

must marvel at this discrepancy. " 'Wall' is a highly practically-adequate concept: to adapt a famous quote by the boxer Mike Tyson: any philosopher can doubt the reality of a punch until one hits them in the face. We would be foolish to affect

doubt about the object of the concept wall's existence. Yes we can acknowledge that we can't get outside our understandings to see how they match their objects, but the point cancels all the way through. We can still often distinguish better/more truthful/more practically-adequate representations/understandings from worse ones.

It's not always clear what is the author's view and what is Kant's (or others') view. When the Kant or others are cited, it would be helpful to be told whether this is just a bit of philosophical background, or a view endorsed by the author.

What are we to make of putting "reality" in scare quotes? Why not just say 'perceived reality'? Does the author support a transitive/intransitive distinction? Don't real objects have properties independently/regardless of what an observer might think?

Figure 1 is right, but it omits intransitive objects including other beings, human or otherwise, as subjects. Subjectivity (transitivity) is a subset of the intransitive world that has the power to develop representations of that intransitive world.

For a critique of Dawkins, see also Mary Midgley *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene*.

I agree very much with the refusal of any consciousness v animation binary. This is fundamental.

Re: a "bacterium must sense its world and act to avoid toxins and to obtain food". Kaufmann stretches the usual meaning of 'sense' here in a way that devalues the term. Why not just say the bacterium is capable of reacting differently to this critical difference in its environment in a way that will tend to support its internal organization and prolong its life. The discrimination is non-conscious, as Kaufmann evidently admits.

Alternatively, it would be better to precede this point with a discussion of what 'sensing' - and 'subjectivity', and 'awareness' - might cover, making distinctions between simple homeostatic processes involving no consciousness, and reactions that involve conscious awareness, and others that involve awareness of awareness.

In other words ,it gets us into ideas about what defines living things. But it is one thing to acknowledge that, as Mary Midgley says, you can't have a plant or an animal without certain definite things being good or bad for it, and another to say that they sense this.

Re: "it is not a stretch of the imagination to say that where there is awareness of the outside in animation there is subjective awareness in the universe. This, after all, is literally the only thing that we do know with absolute certainty from direct experience." I disagree. It may be simply a causal reaction produced by the conjunction of a given internal causal power or susceptibility of the organism and a given environmental causal power. (Such interactions exist *within* many organisms as part of their self-regulation systems.)

p.7 How does the author understand and explain 'emergence', and 'strong emergence'?

The author oscillates between realism and idealism. It's vital to distinguish between construing the world and constructing it. The latter only works insofar as the constructors use practically-adequate understandings of the pre-existing materials - physical and conceptual - of the materials they use in the process of construction. I may construe the world in various ways, but it can remain unaffected and impact on me regardless.

I recommend exploring what neuroscience has to say about consciousness (including proprioception and interoception). E.g. See Damasio's *The Sense of What Happens*.

Overall - a stimulating article. I look forward to the trilogy.