

# The Neutrality of Evolution for Theories of Consciousness

William S. Robinson

wsrob@iastate.edu

Iowa State University

Presented as poster at ASSC 10, Oxford, June 25, 2006.

Full paper available at: <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~wsrob/EvoEpi.pdf>

## One Question:

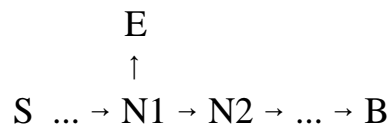
Why do we have experiences  $E_i$  in circumstances  $C_i$  ?

## Three Answers:

Key to Diagrams: S: Stimulus      Ni: Neural events  
E: Experience      B: Behavior  
Arrows show causation

### (1) Epiphenomenalism

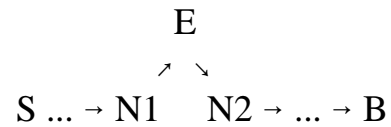
Experiences (which are non-physical) have no effects



Evolution selects for neural events. In view of the laws of psychophysical nature, these neural events cause experiences. That is why we have the conscious experiences that we do have.

(2) Interactionism

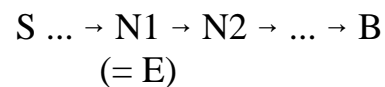
Experiences (which are non-physical) have effects on neural events



Putative advantage is direct selectability for experiences – which requires neural events that have no adequate *physical* cause.

(3) Physicalism

Phenomenal properties *just are* neural properties



Natural selection for neural properties just is selection for experiential properties. E.g., phenomenal red is the same property as neural event of kind K. (Concepts are different, but what falls under them is same property.)

Two Claims:

1. NONE OF THESE ANSWERS ARE *EXPLAINED BY* EVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES

Evolutionary explanations *presuppose* laws of nature. They explain properties of organisms by relying on the laws of nature and do not explain why those laws are what they are.

2. NONE OF THESE ANSWERS ARE *EXPLAINED BY* THE THEORIES THAT REST ON THEM

- Physicalist Retort

No explanation is needed for identity of experiential properties and neural properties.

Identities can never be explained. E.g., there is no answer to why Cicero is Tully – and none is needed.

- Rejoinder

We can explain how Cicero *can be* Tully. (Bodies move and can be given different labels in different circumstances.)

But there is no analogous explanation of how, e.g., experiential redness *can be* neural property K.

## One Complication:

William James (1890) refers to “the well known fact that pleasures are generally associated with beneficial, pains with detrimental, experiences”

This suggests that the target for explanation is not experiential properties, but rather *hedonic match*, i.e, the association between pleasure and benefit (and between displeasure and disbenefit)

## Response:

Pleasure is either

(a) whatever tends to enhance repetition of behavior (in similar circumstances) – and analogously for displeasure

or

(b) a particular kind of event in us that serves the function in (a)

## IF (a), THEN

ALL three theories can evidently explain the hedonic match – events that tend to enhance repetition of beneficial behavior (discourage repetition of deleterious behavior) should be selected for (given the laws of nature or identity)

## IF (b), THEN

NONE of the three theories can explain the hedonic match. Not epiphenomenalism or interactionism, because they can't explain the laws that relate pleasure to neural events. And not physicalism, because it can't explain how pleasure could just be a neural event property.

## Three Conclusions:

1. ALL 3 THEORIES ARE COMPATIBLE WITH EVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES
2. EACH OF THE 3 THEORIES NEEDS TO MAKE A CLAIM THAT NEITHER IT NOR EVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES CAN EXPLAIN

So,

3. EVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES ARE NEUTRAL AS REGARDS THESE 3 THEORIES

## RELATED WORK:

"Causation, Sensations and Knowledge", *Mind* (1982) 91:524-40.

"Evolution and Self-evidence", *Philosophica* (1996) 56:35-53.

"Epiphenomenalism", article in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epiphenomenalism>. (1999; revised 2003)

"Knowing Epiphenomena", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (2006) 13:85-100.

*Understanding Phenomenal Consciousness*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.