

Three Worries about Cosmelli & Thompson's (forthcoming) "Embodiment or Envatment"

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My Worries

- 1) Causal/constituency problems
- 2) The sensorimotor vat
- 3) The appeal to autonomy

The Orthodox Account

- Background and enabling conditions = causal
- Total realizer of consciousness = causal
- Core realiser = constitutive of consciousness

- BIV thought experiment sits nicely in this account
 - substitute all or most of the causal stuff...

“In dense nonlinear systems where all state variables interact with each other, any change in an individual variable becomes inseparable from the state of the entire system. In such cases, **the distinction between regular causes (regularities in the system’s behavior) and singular causes (unique nonrepeatable events that change the system’s behavior) becomes meaningless (Wagner 1999), and there is arguably no core realizer for a given property or behavior less than the system itself.**” (p.8, my emphasis)

“If certain brain processes simply could not be realized in the absence of the body, and these brain processes included those crucial for consciousness, then we would have reason to believe that the body is not merely causally enabling for consciousness, but also constitutive. The argument of this paper is that the brain-in-vat thought experiment, when spelled out with the requisite detail, suggests precisely this result.” (p. 9, my emphasis).

Viewing the problem through
orthodox lens...

**... if it would make sense to claim that a part
of the brain is constitutive of
consciousness then we ought to conclude
that the body is also constitutive (rather
than merely causal) of consciousness...**

Summary of first worry

I am not clear as to what kind of account of consciousness they are seeking to give. They explicitly reject the orthodox account of consciousness and the metaphysical notions of causality and constitution which are enmeshed in this account in favour a non-linear dynamical systems account in which causality and constitution have no real meaning. However, they continue to talk in terms of causality and constitution throughout the paper. This could be for three possible reasons:

- a) *They are trying to show that even within the orthodox framework the philosopher's brain in a vat makes no sense.*

- b) *The orthodox terminology is so entrenched in us that it is difficult to get an explanation across in purely dynamical terms.*

- c) *Purely dynamical explanations seem to miss something vital out which we can grasp nearer using orthodox terminology.*

Second Worry: The Sensorimotor Vat

- The philosophers' brain in vat, will not do...
- If we want to talk of brains in vats kept up and running and conscious then we must include explanations of the systems that they are part of...
- Once we do this, we are effectively no longer talking of a brain in a vat, but rather a biologically autonomous, sensorimotor agent: "a body in a world".

- The organismic regulatory system is only a subsystem of the biologically autonomous sensorimotor agent which we must now substitute for the philosophers' brain in a vat.
- consciousness is a system-level property of the autonomous sensorimotor system
- The evidence for this is developmental
- That being an autonomous sensorimotor agent is required for consciousness to develop is a weaker claim than the one I am assuming that C&T want to make

2 Interpretations of what the BIV argument is being used for here...

- 1) To see what is required for a BIV to have exactly the same conscious experience as me:

I don't believe that this is what the experiment is being used for here...

If it were, orthodox defenders of the philosophers BIV would object that the original thought experiment allows for all this.

2) The experiment could be being used to see what the minimal constitutive base for conscious experience is...

An autonomous system however does not need to be a sensorimotor system, and the BIV that C&T want to leave us with is fully sensorimotor as well as autonomous.

The non-sensorimotor but still organismically regulating system would seem to be the minimal constituent base for conscious experience.

Summary of Second Worry

Autonomous systems do not need to be sensorimotor. The evidence that sensorimotor regulation is linked to consciousness is convincing developmentally, but not constitutively. Although C&T state explicitly that they are not interested in the constitutive question, (1) as my first worry explained it is not clear that this is the case all the way through, and (2) the developmental evidence that they consider seems to lead them to the conclusion that rather than a “brain in a vat” being the null hypothesis of the constitutive basis for consciousness, it should be a “body in a world”, i.e. an autonomous, sensorimotor agent. However, if we ignore the developmental stories, the evidence just shows that the minimal constitutive base for consciousness is a brain in a sub-body, i.e. an autonomous but non-sensorimotor system.

Third Worry - The Appeal to Autonomy

- If the body ought to be seen as part of the constitutive base for consciousness because it is so tightly coupled to the brain that it constitutes a system, **why ought we not to see oxygen as part of the constituent base too**, after all oxygen is just as tightly coupled.

-> **Dense coupling does not necessarily entail autonomy**

Nothing less than an autonomous system is required as the constitutive base for consciousness.

“In an autonomous system, the constituent processes (i) recursively depend on each other for their generation and their realization as a network, (ii) constitute the system as a unity in whatever domain they exist, and (iii) determine a domain of possible interactions with the environment.” (Varela, 1979, p. 55). (p.65 Mind in Life)

“What counts as the system in any given case, and hence whether it is autonomous or heteronomous, is context-dependent and interest-relative.” (p. 72, Mind in Life)

Reminder of the three worries

1. C&T continue to talk in terms of **constitution** which might be indicative of an inadequacy of explanation in the dynamical systems approach.
2. The evidence given for a **sensorimotor BIV** is developmental which leads to a weaker claim about consciousness than I think they want to make.
3. The appeal to **autonomy** may not be able to stop the explanatory spread of consciousness into the environment.