

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A BIRD?

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Once upon a time a peculiar animal inhabited the earth. Curiosity compelled these creatures to compile and critically contemplate anything and everything their imagination could consider. When they had exhausted their imagination, they started investigating the imagination itself.

One day, one of these creatures called *Self* said to *Skepticus*: “Standing on the rocks today, with the wind blowing through my hair, I felt like a bird flying through the sky.” Pausing to consider, *Skepticus* answered: “That must have been a great feeling but, to be sure, you didn’t actually feel like a bird, right? You only had a pleasurable feeling that you associate with flying.” “No really,” said *Self*, “it wasn’t just some holistic moment. It was a real bird experience.” “Oh yeah,” replied *Skepticus*, “if that is so, let us now go to the rocks and make you have another bird experience. I will believe you only if during your bird experience, you can communicate with other birds.” “Sure,” said *Self*, “you are the scientist, you want to know things for certain. Let us go to the rocks.”

When *Self* and *Skepticus* arrived at the rocks the winds blew and the birds flew. After half an hour, *Self* had another bird experience: “I’m feeling it. I feel like a bird right now!” “Then do it! Do it!” *Skepticus* screamed, “Communicate with them!” *Self* closed his eyes and started making squeaky sounds. Then, all the birds came down from the sky sitting around him and *Skepticus*. Within minutes, *Self* and the birds were debating a wide range of topics, such as the origins of mind, the existence of free will, and the difficulties involved in self-reflection. *Skepticus* was astonished. Quickly, he ran back to the village to return fifteen minutes later with a friend of his, *Neurologist*.

“Look,” *Skepticus* said, “I’m still not convinced that you are actually experiencing what birds experience, so I got my friend *Neurologist*. If you and the birds show similar neural activity, I promise, then I will believe you. Would surgery be an option?” *Self* agreed to the proposal and found one exceptionally friendly bird willing to participate. *Neurologist* got out his scalpel, cut open both heads, and looked inside. He then frowned.

“Hmm,” Neurologist said, “it is hard to say. I see both similarities and differences. For example, Self possesses some brain regions that are absent in the bird but, on the other hand, there are also vast similarities in neurotransmitter activity. What counts as more important, I guess, depends mostly on perspective.” ... “Oh no!” cried Scepticus, “now I will *never* know whether humans can have actual bird experiences. It might all be an illusion.” Self – his skull still wide open – was deeply annoyed now: “You should just believe me Scepticus. Why are neurological measurements better proof than the fact that I tell you? We’re talking about experiences here!” “But measurements are more real”, Scepticus answered, “they are objective and replicable.” Silence overcame them.

Scepticus, Self, and Neurologist sat down on the rocks and, without exchanging a word, looked at the shimmering sea. When it got dark and cold, all three got up and went back to the village. As they walked, the wind whispered softly: ‘Know thyself’, ‘Know thyself’. Scepticus looked behind him and thought: “What is more mysterious than the self?”

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