Consciousness: Not an Inevitable Result of Evolution

We’ve witnessed evolution, the generational change in inheritable characteristics, give rise to conscious beings. Yet, I think that due to mass extinctions, competition, and a lack of direction towards complexity, consciousness is not an inevitable consequence of evolution. Let’s define consciousness as subjective experience, where one’s aware of them self and their surroundings, and I will look at evolution over an infinite time frame, given a specific environment.

It’s important to think about the environment when discussing evolution as many evolutionary concepts, like mass extinction, are founded on relationships between organisms and their environment. Now what if we had a mass extinction of all organisms? Although we don’t know how common these events are in our theoretical environment, given the infinite time frame they could happen before the first conscious organism exists. That’s not to say that this should happen, but that this is a counter example to the inevitableness of consciousness under evolution.

Competition between organisms for survival is also unavoidable under evolution; those best fit for their environment survive. However, consciousness alone doesn’t lend to greater fitness. Many equate greater intelligence, the ability to learn/adapt to one’s environment (and hence survive), with higher consciousness. Consciousness just requires awareness, not understanding, and hence, not learning. Though intelligence and consciousness are correlated, it’s still possible to have unconscious organisms that are better fit for almost all environments, ones that don’t need to adapt, outcompeting conscious organisms for resources; showing evolution isn’t absolutely inevitable.

From neuroscientist Christof Koch’s point of view, consciousness must come to exist in complex enough informational processing systems (28). Any self-referencing system with sensory receptors and the ability to process this input must have some complexity. The definition of “complex enough” is irrelevant as a rise in complexity isn’t inevitable under evolution. Let’s define complexity as a function of many parts (with irregular arrangements) working together (Mcshea 304). We haven’t found any evidence of evolution having a direction towards more complex organisms (Mcshea 303). Evolution is a game of survival, organisms increase or decrease in complexity, and hence consciousness, to fit their environment.

Counter examples centered around extinction and competition, as well as a lack of direction toward complexity, help demonstrate the non-inevitability of consciousness under evolution. Though not inevitable, consciousness could still be a likely outcome of evolution, and this makes me wonder what odds we endured to be alive reading this paper today.

References
