



Consciousness May Exist in Unfamiliar Forms, Researchers Discover

Description

Philosophers are seriously exploring a provocative question: Does consciousness need a physical body? This inquiry is highlighted in a new paper by Eric Schwitzgebel, a philosophy professor at the University of California, Riverside, and his former student Jeremy Pober.

Their research suggests that consciousness might emerge in forms of life that are fundamentally different from humans. For example, they envision life forms similar to the rock-skinned, crystal-brained alien from the film *Project Hail Mary*. While they do not define consciousness or assert that alien minds exist, they focus on whether consciousness must be linked to Earth's specific biology.

Their argument is built on the concept of "substrate flexibility." This means that certain properties can be achieved with various materials. Just as a cup can be made of glass or plastic and still hold water, consciousness may also be realizable through different physical structures.

Given the vastness of the universe, which houses approximately a trillion galaxies, the researchers estimate that at least a thousand sophisticated civilisations could have developed throughout cosmic history. It seems unlikely that all successful life forms would have identical biochemical makeups, especially when conditions vary greatly.

Schwitzgebel and Pober reference the Copernican principle, which suggests humanity is not the centre of the universe. They argue that assuming consciousness is limited to beings like ourselves reflects an unjustified belief in human uniqueness.

The discussion also touches on artificial intelligence (AI). Pober cautions that substrate flexibility does not guarantee that all materials, like silicon, can support consciousness. Schwitzgebel, however, believes that dismissing silicon solely due to its composition is increasingly hard to justify. Ultimately, they aim to uncover what kinds of systems can actually become conscious.

Comprehension Questions

Multiple Choice

1. What is the primary question being explored by the philosophers?
Option: Does consciousness require a physical body?
Option: Is consciousness unique to humans?
Option: Can consciousness exist without life?



Option: Do aliens have consciousness?

2. Which film is referenced in the paper to illustrate a different form of life?

Option: Blade Runner

Option: Project Hail Mary

Option: The Matrix

Option: Arrival

3. What principle do Schwitzgebel and Pober reference?

Option: Galilean principle

Option: Copernican principle

Option: Newtonian principle

Option: Einsteinian principle

4. What does 'substrate flexibility' refer to?

Option: The ability of biology to evolve

Option: Different materials can achieve certain properties

Option: The flexibility of consciousness

Option: The structure of the universe

5. What type of civilizations do the researchers estimate could have developed?

Option: A million

Option: A hundred

Option: A thousand

Option: Ten thousand

6. What material does Schwitzgebel believe could support consciousness?

Option: Oxygen

Option: Carbon

Option: Silicon

Option: Hydrogen

True-False

7. The paper defines consciousness in detail.

8. The researchers believe all life forms must have similar biochemical makeups.



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9. The concept of 'substrate flexibility' suggests that consciousness is limited to organic materials.
 10. The discussion includes thoughts on artificial intelligence.
 11. Eric Schwitzgebel and Jeremy Pober are from Harvard University.
 12. The Copernican principle implies that humanity is not the center of the universe.

Gap-Fill

13. Philosophers are exploring whether consciousness needs a physical body and _____.
14. The researchers envision life forms similar to the _____ alien.
15. Consciousness may be realizable through different _____ structures.
16. According to Schwitzgebel, dismissing silicon as a consciousness-supporting material is _____.
17. The argument is built on the concept of _____ flexibility.
18. The universe has approximately a trillion _____.

Answer

Multiple Choice: 1. Does consciousness require a physical body? 2. Project Hail Mary 3. Copernican principle 4. Different materials can achieve certain properties 5. A thousand 6. Silicon

True-False: 7. False 8. False 9. False 10. True 11. False 12. True

Gap-Fill: 13. a physical structure 14. crystal-brained 15. physical 16. increasingly hard to justify 17. substrate 18. galaxies

CATEGORY

1. Sci/Tech - LEVEL5

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2. consciousness
3. ESL learning
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5. Level 5
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Date Created

2026/06/21

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