

**Brain in a Vat or Body in a World?
On the Biological Requirements for Phenomenal Selfhood**

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Abstract:

According to certain philosophical analyses, phenomenal selfhood necessarily includes a prereflective and intransitive (non-object-directed) type of self-consciousness. Phenomenologists argue that this type of consciousness is a minimal requirement for a conscious self and is closely related to awareness of the body as subject. What are the minimal biological requirements for this type of phenomenal selfhood? One way to approach this issue is by re-evaluating the notorious philosophical thought experiment of a brain in a vat. Most theorists who ponder this thought experiment treat the brain as a stimulus-driven machine whose behavior can be both dictated from the outside and decoupled from the body. Yet various neurobiological considerations suggest (1) that brain activity is largely endogenously and spontaneously generated; (2) that this activity requires massive resources and regulatory processes from the rest of the body; and (3) that this activity plays a crucial role in life-regulation processes of the whole organism. We can therefore propose as a null hypothesis that the vat would have to be in effect a surrogate body in any brain-in-a-vat setup sufficient for phenomenal selfhood. And this proposal suggests in turn as a null hypothesis that the minimal biological substrate of phenomenal selfhood is not particular brain regions or areas, or even the brain alone, but some crucial subset of interactive brain-body systems.