

Ed Subitzky

## *The Experiment*

*A writer's contribution  
to the consciousness debate*

In the non-toil moments, when no one else was near, Vadel liked to hover around the experiment. He had created it, patiently garnered the funding, and managed the entire construction process, and he was immensely proud of his accomplishment. As long as no one was watching, he felt free to send waves of satisfaction rippling through his ionized plasma body and his quantum-field brain.

This time, though, someone was approaching, someone who might catch him in a moment that could almost be taken for haughtiness. He relaxed when he realized that the entity was Eubel, not merely the colleague who had helped him frame the experiment, but also a friend.

‘Be aware of it,’ Vadel communicated. ‘Three spatial dimensions only, but suffused with radiation. In particular, fix attention on the surfaces of the spheres. Observe what is happening on several of them. Behaviour, evolution, interaction. And yet, with so few parameters. With physical laws so basic and so primitive.’

‘I must be honest with you,’ Eubel communicated. ‘When I do so, I experience concern.’

‘Why?’ Although Vadel was posing the question, he already knew the answer. Eubel had brought the topic up before, although never as directly as now. ‘The ethics committee approved it, did they not?’

‘Yes. It is true that they did.’

Correspondence:  
[edsubz@earthlink.net](mailto:edsubz@earthlink.net)

‘They are smart and they are kind,’ Vadel assured his friend. ‘And cautious.’

Eubel sent an empathy signal that he understood what Vadel had communicated. ‘But still,’ he communicated back, ‘What if they do possess it?’

‘Possess what?’ Once again Vadel knew what Eubel’s answer would be, but still felt a need to request the communication.

‘Consciousness,’ Eubel said. Eubel walked over and turned on the scope that let them view the experiment in close detail. He played with the electrostatics column until the shape of a creature came to the display, a four-limbed being with an ovoid on top where its information processing took place.

‘Here,’ Eubel continued, ‘is one of the most complicated structures within the apparatus. Maybe you are right about the other kinds. Maybe they don’t have anything like consciousness, but this particular example just might. Let yourself be aware of it, really be aware.’

The small figure was making strange wailing emanations.

‘Its lifetime mate has been obliterated in a fire,’ Eubel said. ‘Surely it is feeling genuine grief.’

‘No’ Vadel corrected him. ‘It is giving the signs of grief. It is making physical movements associated with grief, and vocalizations of grief. But there is nothing going on inside it. We know this. It does not have the complexity necessary for consciousness.’

‘But how can we be sure?’

‘Science is never sure.’ Vadel answered now in a milder mode of communication. ‘But we have the Rigel-Watel equation of consciousness. Several of us at the institute are able to understand it. And the computer concurs. This model of computer has never made any mistake that we know of, and it assures us, absolutely, positively, that these creatures are not conscious.’

‘What about that one?’ Eubel had focused the scope in another direction. One of the creatures was lying down on a soft pad, and liquid was running out of the things that gave it a sense it called vision.

‘Help me, someone,’ it intoned. ‘I can’t stand the pain any longer.’ It paused, gasped, and said, ‘I’m afraid to die, but I must die now. I must.’

‘We’re doing everything we can,’ another of the creatures assured it.

‘Just motion and molecular vibrations,’ Vadel said. ‘That level of mind cannot be conscious. Yes, it can be convincing. It can be convincing to us. We are decent entities, we care and we have compassion. If I believed for a moment they were suffering in any genuine sense, do you think I would allow the experiment to continue?’

‘No,’ Eubel said. ‘I know you well. You would not.’

‘Then let’s not let them fool us. Let’s not fall into that trap.’

Eubel had turned the scope to a cold place, white with ice and snow, where a single creature was located in a wide, craggy area. The creature had fallen and broken one of its four limbs and was screaming for help even though it had to realize that no one was nearby to react. Finally the creature stopped screaming and just lay silently on the ground.

‘They can’t fool us,’ Eubel communicated with low amplitude. ‘But what if they can fool themselves?’

Vadel hardly sensed the remark. To his relief, Eubel was moving away now. Vadel settled his awareness again on the electromagnetically rich object in the laboratory corner, and his plasma body fairly glowed with pride.