

Book Review

Review of Robert Lanza & Bob Berman's Book: *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness Are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe*

Stephen P. Smith*

ABSTRACT

Lanza's book is not a rigorous scientific treatment, but the science he refers to is rigorous. Neither is his book a comprehensive philosophical development. Rather, Lanza has a colloquial style that is typical of good popular books, and his book can be understood by non-experts. This is a very important book for the right audience. You can find this book at Amazon http://www.amazon.com/Biocentrism-Consciousness-Understanding-Nature-Universe/dp/1933771690/ref=cm_cr-mr-title .

Key Words: biocentrism, life, consciousness, universe.

Robert Lanza (page 30) writes about his boyhood curiosity: "I rolled logs looking for salamanders and climbed trees to investigate bird nests and holes in the trees. As I pondered the larger existential questions about the nature of life, I began to intuit that there was something wrong with the static, objective reality, I was being taught in school. The animals I observed had their own perceptions of the world, their own realities. Although it wasn't the world of human beings - of parking lots and malls - it was just as real to them."

Lanza then turns to the question of consciousness, and what looks to be reality. He (page 36) writes: "Some may imagine that there are two worlds, one out there and a separate one being cognized inside the skull. But the two worlds model is a myth. Nothing is perceived except the perceptions themselves, and nothing exists outside of consciousness. Only one visual reality is extant, and there it is. Right there. The outside world is, therefore, located within the brain or mind. Of course, this is so astounding for many people, even if it is obvious to those who study the brain, that it becomes possible to over-think the issue and come up with attempted refutations."

Lanza (page 38) notes Benjamin Libet's famous timing experiment, where "unconscious, unfelt, brain electrical activity occurred a full half second before there was any conscious sense of decision-making by the subject," and then Lanza misinterprets the results (in my view) by clinging to the classical notion of cause-and-effect. Lanza (page 39) writes: "What, then, do we make of all this? First, that we are truly free to enjoy the unfolding of life, including our own lives, unencumbered by the acquired, often guilt-ridden sense of control, and the obsessive need to avoid messing up. We can relax, because we'll automatically perform anyway. " In other words, we are free because we are not free! And this tacit support for a one-sided cause-and-effect comes even as Lanza later claims that time is an illusion and while he is found rejecting an irreversible and on-flowing continuum of events (where cause precedes effect)! Clearly, if cause-and-effect is declared real enough to interpret Libet's findings, then time must also be real enough.

Correspondence: Stephen P. Smith, Ph.D., Visiting Scientist, Physics Department, University Of California at Davis, CA
E-mail: hucklebird@aol.com

Nevertheless, Lanza does come to a correct conclusion in regard to Libet's experiments. He (page 39) writes: "Modern knowledge of the brain shows that what appears out there is actually occurring within our own minds... Our external and internal perceptions are inextricably intertwined. They are different sides of the same coin and cannot be separated."

Without saying it, Lanza is found endorsing a type of idealism (the belief that mind is fundamental), seemingly as extreme as George Berkeley's idealism. It is this idealism that Lanza calls "biocentrism," and it is the wellspring of life.

Lanza turns to quantum mechanics to support his view of idealism. He (page 49) writes: "When studying subatomic particles, the observer appears to alter and determine what is perceived. The presence and methodology of the experimenter is hopelessly entangled with whatever he is attempting to observe and what results he gets. An electron turns out to be both a particle and a wave, but how, and more importantly, where such a particle will be located remains dependent upon the very act of observation."

Lanza explains the fine tuning of universal constants. He (page 90) writes: "If the universe is in a non-determined state until forced to resolve by an observer, and this non-determined state included the determination of the various fundamental constants, then the resolution would necessarily fall in such a way that allows for an observer, and therefore the constants would have to resolve in such a way as to allow life. Biocentrism therefore supports and builds upon John Wheeler's conclusions about where quantum theory leads, and provides a solution to the anthropic problem that is unique and more reasonable than any alternative."

After treating quantum theory and relativity theory, Lanza (page 106) asserts that time is an illusion: "That time is a fixed arrow is a human construction. That we live on the edge of all time is a fantasy. That there is an irreversible, on-flowing continuum of events linked to galaxies and suns and the Earth is an even greater fantasy. Space and time are forms of animal understanding - period. We carry them around with us like turtles with shells."

To say that time is not well understood is one thing, but to assert that time is therefore an illusion seems unfounded to me. When forced to summarize his conclusion, he (page 111) backtracks from the bolder statements and writes only that: "Time does not have a real existence outside of animal-sense perception. It is the process by which we perceive changes in the universe." I could add that time is real because mind and change are real.

Lanza treats space the same way he treats time. He (pages 112-113) writes: "... Space and time are neither physical nor fundamentally real. They are conceptual, which means that space and time are of a uniquely subjective nature. They are modes of interpretation and understanding. They are part of the mental logic of the animal organism, the software that molds sensations into multidimensional objects."

Lanza (page 181) writes: "Sights, tactile experience, odors - all these sensations are experienced inside the mind alone. None are out there except by the convention of language. Everything we observe is the direct interaction of energy and mind. Anything that we do not observe directly exists only as potential - or more mathematically speaking - as a haze of probability."

The danger is to over prescribe Lanza's brand of idealism, while ignoring more generalized varieties like Hegel's idealism, or the monistic idealism described in Amit Goswami's "The Self-Aware Universe." The danger is to get caught up in word games, e.g., asserting that time and space are

illusions because they are in the mind and while claiming the primacy of mind that underwrites idealism thereby partly contradicting the assertion. One can start with idealism and then immediately fall into a solipsism that asserts that the only real mind out there is my own; all others being illusions with time and space. The distinction between "materialism" and "idealism" is equally troubling because ultimately mere definitions are secondary to what is intended and what is self-evident. It may be productive to skirt this distinction, and merge Lanza's idealism with a A.N. Whitehead's panpsychism. Good references would be Christen de Quincey's "Radical Nature," and Henry P. Stapp's "Mindful Universe."

Lanza's book is not a rigorous scientific treatment, but the science he refers to is rigorous. Neither is his book a comprehensive philosophical development. Rather, Lanza has a colloquial style that is typical of good popular books, and his book can be understood by non-experts. This is a very important book for the right audience.

References

Robert Lanza & Bob Berman, 2009, *Biocentrism: How Life and Consciousness Are the Keys to Understanding the True Nature of the Universe*, BenBella Books.