

Consciousness #13



NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF THE MIND

research project 2015-2017

 UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



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Foundation

newdirectionsproject.com

Notice

Next week (2 March) the seminar will run from 4pm to 5pm only.

Seminar 13

1. Recap: phenomenal and access, reality of conscious content
2. Making content explicit and determinate
3. Contents and 'vehicles'

1. Recap: phenomenal and access, reality of conscious content

(a) Block's distinction

(b) one kind of consciousness or many?

(c) the reality of conscious content

Block's distinction

‘**Phenomenal consciousness** is experience; the phenomenally conscious aspect of a state is what it is like to be in that state.’

‘The mark of **access-consciousness**, by contrast, is availability for use in reasoning and rationally guiding speech and action.’

Ned Block, ‘On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness’
Behavioral and Brain Sciences 1995

A correction to last week

‘A-consciousness requires being broadcast, not merely being available for use.’

Ned Block, ‘On a Confusion about a function of Consciousness’ (1995)

But....

‘Actual global broadcasting does not itself require that any ‘consuming’ machinery actually process the broadcast representation, so it is a notion involving potentiality.’

Ned Block, ‘Consciousness and Cognitive Access’ (2008)

What Block is distinguishing is real..

‘Suppose that you are engaged in intense conversation when suddenly at noon you realize that right outside your window, there is—and has been for some time—a pneumatic drill digging up the street. You were aware of the noise all along, one might say, but only at noon are you consciously aware of it. That is, you were P-conscious of the noise all along, but at noon you are both P-conscious and A-conscious of it.’

Ned Block, ‘On a Confusion about a function of Consciousness’ (1995)

Block's distinction (ctd.)

‘Of course, there is a very similar string of events in which the crucial event at noon is a bit more intellectual. In this alternative scenario, at noon you realize not just that there is and has been a noise, but also that you are now and have been hearing the noise. In this alternative scenario, you get "higher order thought" as well as A-consciousness at noon.’

Ned Block, ‘On a Confusion about a function of Consciousness’ (1995)

Block's distinction (ctd.)

‘So on the first scenario, the belief that is acquired at noon is that there is and has been a noise, and on the second scenario, the beliefs that are acquired at noon are the first one plus the belief that you are and have been hearing the noise. But it is the first scenario, not the second that interests me.’

Ned Block, ‘On a Confusion about a function of Consciousness’ (1995)

Access consciousness is not higher-order thought

A mental state's being access consciousness is not the same thing as its being an object of a higher-order thought

Rosenthal: 'in general, our being conscious of something is just a matter of our having a thought of some sort about it' ('Two Concepts of Consciousness' 1986: 335).

How many kinds of consciousness?

‘it is customary to distinguish five forms of consciousness’ (Hill 2009)

1. agent consciousness: ‘the patient regained consciousness’

2. propositional consciousness: ‘S is conscious that p’

3. introspective consciousness: ‘his affection for me is fully conscious, his hostility is not’

4. relational consciousness: ‘x is conscious of y’

5. phenomenal consciousness: ‘presenting qualitative characteristics such as pain and the taste of oranges’

6. ? experiential consciousness: having an experience (Hill)

7. ? access consciousness: Block’s notion

A simpler approach

Phenomenal consciousness — things or mental states **appearing** or **seeming**, in the broadest possible sense, to the subject

(Not phenomenal consciousness in precisely Block's or Hill's sense)

The other kinds of consciousness should be understood in terms of this notion

This includes conscious thinking

The reality of conscious thinking

Conscious thinking is occurrent, involving episodes in the 'stream of consciousness'

I said it is 'making explicit some aspect of your world view'

Semantic content = propositions model aspects of conscious or unconscious psychological reality

Phenomenal content = how things are actually represented to the subject in a conscious episode

2. Making content explicit and determinate

The representation in the subject's unconscious world view is not explicit in every respect

This is why there is no sharp distinction between making up your mind and finding out what you believe about a subject

Functionalism and the world view

(The world view can be thought of in functionalist terms, in terms of a massively interlinked network of dispositions. Propositions can 'model' nodes of the network.)

Making explicit

Thinking in words is an example of making content explicit

For example: describe what you are seeing right now

‘if asked to give you my perceptual beliefs of a moment, I may have to work a bit to formulate them, yet the perceptual representation was what it was before I was asked. The representationality — the intentionality — of something (e.g. a belief or perception) is compatible with its being vague or indeterminate in some respects. The effort of retrieval is often an effort to formulate a sentence that is an approximation of a belief, and we are often distressed by the hard edge of determinacy our verbal output substitutes for the fuzziness of our convictions.’

Daniel C. Dennett, ‘Brain Writing and Mind Reading’ (1975)

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Why content?

Why think that what is special about this activity is making content explicit, rather than selecting a certain vehicle for the content that is already there?

3. Contents and ‘vehicles’

What is the most general notion of content, and how are my notions of semantic and phenomenal content related to it?

The content of perceptual experience

Content of experience, according to Susanna Siegel:

‘what is conveyed to the subject by her perceptual experience’

‘The Contents of Perception’ SEP 2005/2010

Conscious content in general

‘what is conveyed to the subject in a conscious episode’

(i.e. including thought, imagination, perception, etc.
— maybe even including sensation)

Conscious and unconscious content

how a mental state represents the world in a given psychological mode

this applies to semantic and phenomenal content, in my senses

‘Most philosophers of language these days think that the meaning of an expression is a certain sort of entity, and that the job of semantics is to pair expressions with the entities which are their meanings. For these philosophers, the central question about the right form for a semantic theory concerns the nature of these entities.’

Jeff Speaks, ‘Theories of Meaning’ (SEP 2014)

The semantic content of a sentence = the sentence's **propositional content**, or **truth-conditions**

The semantic content of sub-sentential constituents = their **systematic contribution** to truth-conditions

(e.g. objects, functions, sets etc.)

‘Semantics with no treatment of truth-conditions is not semantics’

David Lewis, ‘General Semantics’ (1970)

‘The basic aim of semantics is to characterize the notion of a true sentence (under a given interpretation)’

Richard Montague ‘Universal Grammar’ (1970)

Frege distinguished three things:

reference (Bedeutung)

sense (Sinn)

idea (Vorstellung)

‘the inner world of sense-impressions, of creations of [the] imagination, or sensations, of feelings and moods, a world of inclinations, wishes and decisions ... I want to collect all these, with the exception of decisions, under the word “idea”.’

Gottlob Frege ‘The Thought’ (1918-19)

Some attributions (models) are better at describing how the subject's conscious mind is configured (the subject's **ideas**)

The facts about how the subject's conscious mind is configured are facts about what I call **phenomenal content**

(cf. Husserl: the 'real' content of an act as opposed to its ideal content)

To be continued...

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