

Consciousness Clarified

August 1, 2007

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You ever notice how when you learn a new word you begin seeing it used everywhere? Lately I've been feeling that way about consciousness. I knew the word before, obviously, but lately I've clarified my thoughts about what it *is* and sloppy usage of the term sticks out like a sore thumb.

"Consciousness", the dictionary kindly explains, is "the state or condition of being conscious." And we all basically know what it means to be conscious. You poke someone awake and ask "Are you conscious?" You get hit on the head by a large rock and you get knocked unconscious. Being conscious, in short, means being awake, being aware of your surroundings, seeing colors and feeling pinches and hearing songs.

Now there's something weird about being conscious — something so weird, in fact, that I've found many people are bizarrely tempted to deny it. Consciousness is what the philosopher John Searle calls "ontologically subjective". That is, when you see the color red, while it's true that all sorts of complicated things happen in your eyes and brains, a particular experience — the one we call "seeing red" — happens only to you. If aliens with the most powerful viewing technology possible beamed down to earth and peeked inside your brain, they'd still have no idea what the color red looked like. They'd see that a certain wavelength of light triggered certain electrical impulses in certain centers, but they'd never see *red*. It's just not there.

Now we don't know for sure what *causes* consciousness (it's an ongoing research project) but whatever the answer is, it must be caused by *something*. Yet this obvious fact is continually missed by laypeople who make bizarre comments like "as soon as computers become self-aware, they might become conscious".¹ This is as absurd as saying that as soon as computers are told about food, they might start digesting things.

Consciousness isn't some vague property of things that look smart to us. It has a real, physical meaning: feeling things. I suppose it's logically possible that a talking robot might start feeling things, but the chances seem awfully remote.

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1. Example: [This week's New York Times Magazine](#) suggests "a robot might exhibit the first glimmers of consciousness, 'namely, the reflexive ability of a mind to examine itself over its own shoulder.'"