

PHILOSOPHY 101

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CONFUSION ABOUT THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

CONSCIOUSNESS – WHAT, WHY, & HOW

- Distinguish three questions:
 1. What is consciousness (what is its nature)?
 2. Why is there consciousness (what is its function)?
 3. How could there be beings with consciousness (given assumptions about what kinds of things there could be)?

THE "TARGET REASONING" CONCERNING FUNCTIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

- Consciousness has a function
- We can find out what the function of consciousness is by studying the cognitive psychology of patients with specific cognitive impairments or abnormalities

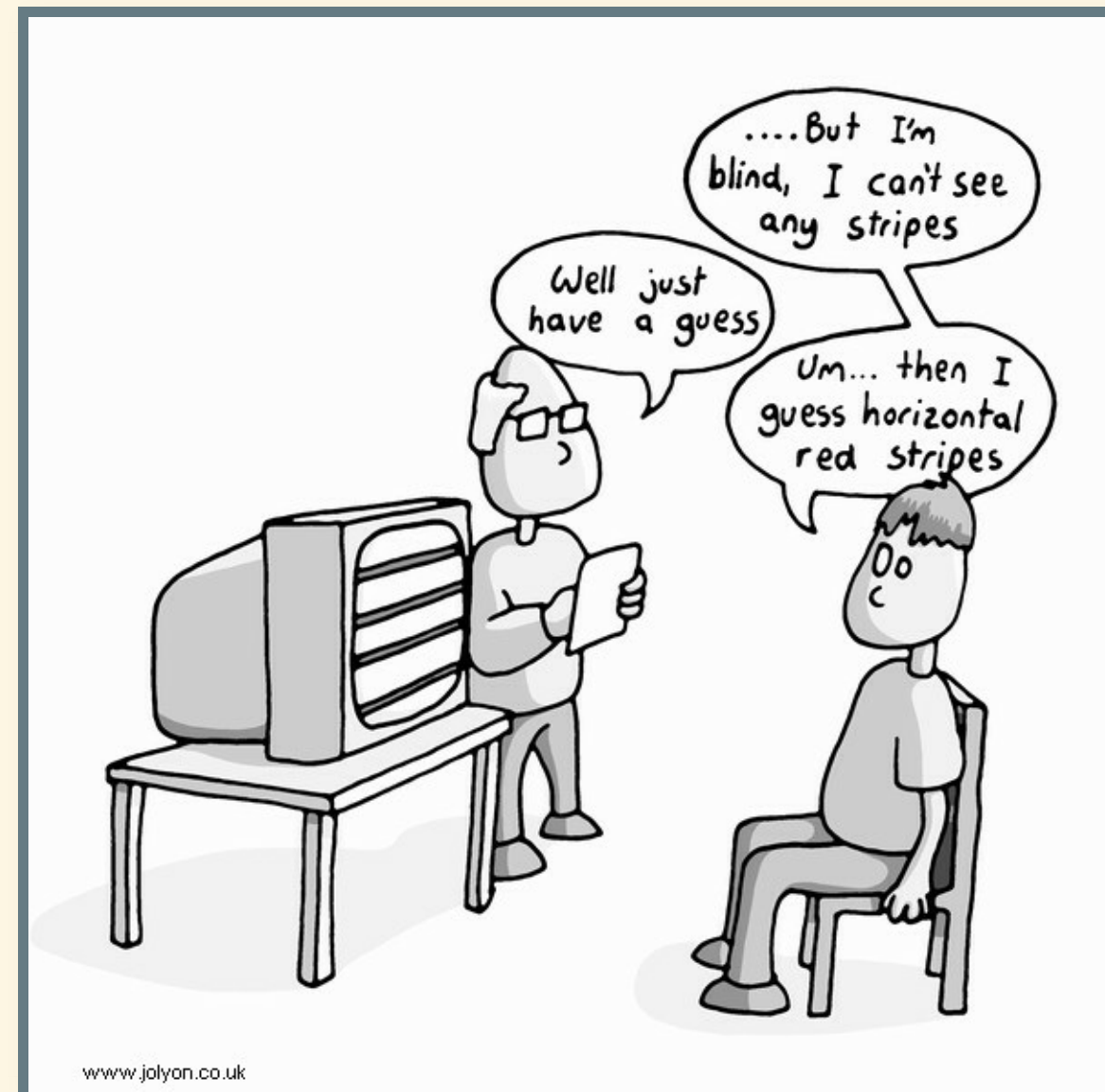
CONSCIOUSNESS & ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY

TWO INSTANCES OF ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY

- Blindsight
- Epileptic Seizure
 - 'petit mal' or 'absence' seizure

BLINDSIGHT

Blindsight is a syndrome involving patients who have brain damage in the first stage of visual processing, the primary visual cortex. These patients seem to have “holes” in their visual fields. If the experimenter flashes stimuli in these holes and asks the patient what was flashed, the patient claims to see nothing but can often guess at high levels of accuracy, choosing between two locations or directions or whether what was flashed was an X or an O (Block, 278)



The Blindsighted Patient

- 'Blindsighted' patients lack consciousness (in some sense) of regions of their visual field but have a better than chance ability to discriminate objects in those "blind" parts of the visual field

ABSENCE SEIZURES

In such cases [of epileptic seizure], electrical disorder leads to a loss of function in the higher brain stem...As a result the patient suffers a loss of conscious experience in the phenomenal sense although he can continue to react selectively to environmental stimuli (Block, 239)

- 'Absent' patients continue to exhibit complex behaviour towards parts of their environment, though they lack "awareness" (in some sense) of this environment

THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

1. Abnormal psychological conditions, such as blindsight and "absent" seizures, may indicate the function of consciousness
2. When consciousness is missing under such conditions, subjects cannot
 - report or reason about the relevant nonconscious representations, nor use them in guiding action
 - exhibit flexibility and creativity in their thought and action
3. ∴
Consciousness enables information represented in the brain to be used in reasoning, reporting, and rationally guiding action
4. ∴
Consciousness promotes flexibility and creativity in thought and action

