

PHILOSOPHY 101

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CONFUSION (PART II)

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

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 (blindsight)
 - exhibit flexibility and creativity in their thought and action (absence seizures)
3. \(\therefore\) Consciousness enables information represented in the brain to be used in reasoning, reporting, and rationally guiding action
4. \(\therefore\) Consciousness promotes flexibility and creativity in thought and action

CONFUSION ABOUT CONSCIOUSNESS

THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS A 'MONGREL' CONCEPT

- The concept <consciousness> is a 'mongrel' in the sense that it is ambiguous between a number of different and independent notions of being 'conscious'

THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIOUSNESS IS A 'MONGREL' CONCEPT

1. **Sentience:** being able to discriminate, categorize, and react to environmental stimuli
2. **Wakefulness:** being awake and capable of attending to something
3. **Autonomy:** deliberate control of one's behavior
4. **Introspection:** the internal accessibility of one's mental states
5. **Communicability:** the reportability of one's mental states
6. **Phenomenal consciousness:** first-person experience — what it is like to be something

TWO KINDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Phenomenal Consciousness:

A mental state with "experiential properties" that constitute "what it is like" to experience something

- A state is P-conscious if it has experiential properties
 - We have P-conscious states when we see, hear, smell, taste, and have pains
- The totality of the experiential properties of a state are "what it is like" to have it

TWO KINDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Access Consciousness:

A mental state that is poised for free use in reasoning and for direct “rational” control of action and speech.

- Construes mental states in terms of information and its transfer, not what it is like to have or be in a mental state
 - Believing that the desk is brown on the basis of seeing that the desk is brown
 - Perception of visual form on the basis of belief or suggestion

ACCESS CONSCIOUSNESS



Old Woman



Young Woman

BLOCK'S WORRY

- Cognitive scientists and philosophers often begin discussion consciousness by pointing to phenomena involving P-consciousness.
- But the theories they construct to explain the relevant phenomena typically end of addressing cognitive issues involving A-consciousness
- Phenomenal and access consciousness are distinct kinds of consciousness but are easily confused in both philosophy and in empirical research on consciousness

ACCESS WITHOUT PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS

TWO EXAMPLES OF A WITHOUT P-CONSCIOUSNESS

- Phenomenal 'Zombies'
- Cases of 'super' blindsight

PHENOMENAL 'ZOMBIES'

If there could be a full-fledged phenomenal zombie, say a robot computationally identical to a person, but whose silicon brain did not support P-consciousness, that would do the trick. I think such cases conceptually possible, but this is controversial. (Block, 172)

- Possesses A-consciousness
- *Global* lack of P-consciousness
- Information available to the 'Zombie' is poised for use in rational control of thought and action
- Behaviorally indiscriminable from a regular person

BLINDSIGHT

- Lacks visual 'consciousness' of some region of their visual field
- Is nevertheless sensitive to information contained in regions of the blank visual field
- Has a better than chance basis to correctly answer questions

Does the blindsighted patient have access consciousness?

- Block says 'no' — Why?
 - not 'globally' available for rational control of thought and action
 - blindsighter's access requires external prompting
 - a thirsty blindsighted patient won't reach for a glass of water in their 'blind' visual field

SUPER-BLINDSIGHT

Now imagine something that may not exist, what we might call super-blindsight. A real blindsight patient can only guess when given a choice from a small set of alternatives. But suppose...that a blindsight patient could be trained to prompt himself at will, guessing what is in the blind field without being told to guess. The super-blindsighter spontaneously says ‘‘Now I know that there is a horizontal line in my blind field even though I don't actually see it.” Visual information from his blind field simply pops into his thoughts in the way that solutions to problems we've been worrying about pop into our thoughts, or in the way some people just know the time or which way is north without having any perceptual experience of it (Block, 283)

FEATURES OF SUPER-BLINDSIGHT

- No P-Consciousness
- Spontaneous access (the super-blindsighter is "self-prompting")
- Information available to the blindsighter is poised for use in reasoning and rational action
- The super-blindsighter plausibly has A-consciousness but no P-consciousness

PHENOMENAL WITHOUT ACCESS CONSCIOUSNESS

THREE EXAMPLES

1. Brain damaged animals
 - still have phenomenal awareness but such states play no role in reasoning or the rational control of action
2. Cognitive subsystems (e.g. visual or auditory)
3. Lack or conflicts of attention

ATTENTION – THE CONVERSATION AND THE DRILL

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 (Block, 285).

ATTENTION – THE CONVERSATION AND THE DRILL

- Subject is in a state that is P-conscious
 - state has 'experiential properties'
- P-conscious state is not, for some stretch of time, accessed/accessible

