

Philosophy 101

Block on Confusions of Consciousness

September 9, 2014

Block on
Confusions of
Consciousness

Review

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Access without
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Review

Question 1

Is this argument valid?

- ① If my dog is barking \rightarrow someone is at the door
- ② Someone is at the door
- ③ \therefore My dog is barking

A. Yes

B. No

Question 2

According to Nagel's conception of objectivity

- A. *objective facts must be physical facts*
- B. *objective facts are relative to perceivers*
- C. *objective facts are those that are 'there anyway'*
- D. *objective facts are available from multiple points of view*

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” — 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 Kinds 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)

Blindsight



Figure: The Blindsighted Patient

Blindsight

- '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

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 A. report or reason about the relevant nonconscious representations, nor use them in guiding action B. exhibit flexibility and creativity in their thought and action
- 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:** the 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.

- understands 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

Block on
Confusions of
Consciousness

Review

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Access without
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Access Consciousness



Figure: Old Woman

Block on
Confusions of
Consciousness

Review

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Access without
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Access Consciousness



Figure: Young Woman

Block's Worry

- Phenomenal and Access consciousness are distinct kinds of consciousness but are easily confused in both philosophy and in empirical research on consciousness

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

Access without Phenomenal Consciousness

Two Examples of A without P-Consciousness

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

Blindsight

- lack visual 'consciousness' of some region of their visual field
- are nevertheless sensitive to information contained in regions of the blank field
 - better than chance basis to correctly answer questions
- *does the blindsighted patient have access consciousness?*

Blindsight

- Block says 'no' — Why?
 - not 'globally' available for rational control of thought and action
 - 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