

Philosophy 101

The Function of Consciousness (III) & The Puzzle of Representation

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The Function of
Consciousness
(III) & The
Puzzle of
Representation

Review

Criticizing the
“Target
Reasoning”
Representation

Review

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

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

Two Kinds of Consciousness

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

Access Consciousness: A mental state that is poised for free use in reasoning and for direct "rational" control of action and speech.

Two Distinct Kinds of Consciousness?

- Block needs to demonstrate the independence of the two kinds of consciousness
 - Access without phenomenal consciousness
 - Phenomenal without access consciousness

Access without Phenomenal Consciousness

Phenomenal 'Zombies'

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

Access without Phenomenal Consciousness

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

- Brain damaged animals
- Cognitive subsystems (e.g. visual or auditory)
- Lack or conflicts of attention

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Penfield's Cases of 'Absent' Seizures

- In some cases of epileptic seizure, a subject loses consciousness but retains the ability to perform complex goal-directed behavior
 - driving a car
 - playing a musical instrument

Block's Objection

- Why suppose that P-consciousness is missing in 'Absent' seizure cases?

For example, Searle, quoting Penfield, describes the epileptic walker as "thread[ing] his way" through the crowd. Doesn't he see the obstacles he avoids?

Suppose he gets home by turning right at a red wall. Isn't there something it is like for him to see the red wall—and isn't it different from what it is like for him to see a green wall? (Block, 188)

Block's Objection

- ① In Penfield's seizure cases it is the subject's thought processes that are most obviously deficient, including a clear lack of A-consciousness
- ② P-consciousness is a feature of mental *states* not *subjects*
- ③ There is no reason to think that the states which occur in the subjects of Penfield cases lack P-consciousness
- ④ \therefore There is no reason to think that a function of P-consciousness is to make possible flexible and creative complex behavior

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

The Blindsight Case:

Conscious awareness of a water fountain to my right will lead me to drink from it if I am thirsty. But the thirsty blindsighted person will make no move towards the fountain unless pressed to do so. The inference to the best explanation is that conscious awareness of the environment facilitates semantic comprehension and adaptive motor actions in creatures like us (Flanagan, quoted in Block, pp. 192-3)

The Argument from Blindsight Cases:

- ① In blindsighted subjects consciousness is missing
- ② Information that the subject in some sense possesses is not used in reasoning, guiding action, or in reporting about the subject's states, acts, or environment
- ③ \therefore The function of consciousness must be to allow information gathered by the senses to guide or otherwise inform action

Block's Objection

- ① Assume that, in blindsighted subjects, *both* A and P-consciousness are missing
- ② The explanation of the blindsighter's degraded behavior only requires an appeal to A-consciousness and its absence
- ③ A-consciousness and P-consciousness are at least conceptually distinct
- ④ \therefore Nothing can be inferred in the blindsight case concerning the function of P-consciousness

Is P-Consciousness Necessary for A-Consciousness?

- It is possible that P-consciousness is necessary for A-consciousness, and that it is a necessary condition for creative flexible behavior
 - But analysis of abnormal psych cases cannot show this
- P and A-consciousness may be closely linked biologically
 - evidential support for this based on no recorded cases of "super"-blindsight

Is P-Consciousness Necessary for A-Consciousness?

- We need to distinguish the cognitive/information processing aspects of our mental life from the less obviously cognitive, and more explicitly phenomenal aspects

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Representation

What is a Representation?

Representation: something that represents something (either itself or something else)

- goes proxy; stands for; symbolizes something
- refers to something; is accurate/inaccurate; is true/false

Examples of Representational Kinds

- Pictorial Representation
- Linguistic Representation
- Mental Representation

Two Questions

- ① How does a representation represent?
- ② Are some kinds of representation more fundamental than others?

Test Cases

- ① How does a representation represent?
 - resemblance
- ② Are some kinds of representation more fundamental than others?
 - pictorial representation