

Philosophy 101

Block on a Confusion of Consciousness

February 12, 2015

Block on a
Confusion of
Consciousness

Review

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Access without
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Phenomenal
without Access
Consciousness

Criticizing the
"Target
Reasoning"

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

A phenomenal zombie is:

- A. really good at being a zombie*
- B. a being lacking neurological states*
- C. a being lacking phenomenal consciousness*
- D. behaviorally distinguishable from a normal person*

Question 3

In studying abnormal psychology, cognitive scientists think that one possible function of consciousness is to:

- A. make us better at doing habitual activities*
- B. make us smarter than non-conscious beings*
- C. promote creativity and flexibility in our behaviour*
- D. make life more enjoyable*

Consciousness — What, Why, & How

- ① What is consciousness (what is its nature)?
- ② Why is there consciousness (what is its function)?
- ③ How does consciousness come about?

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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 "Target Reasoning" Concerning Functions 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

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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

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Figure: Old Woman

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Figure: 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

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

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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)

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 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?*

Blindsight

- 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

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Phenomenal without Access Consciousness

Three Examples

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

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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)

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