

# Philosophy 101

## Block on the Function of Consciousness

February 6, 2014

Block on the  
Function of  
Consciousness

Block on  
Consciousness

Separating  
Access from  
Phenomenal  
Consciousness

Criticizing the  
"Target  
Reasoning"

## Block on Consciousness

## Two Kinds of Consciousness

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

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

## 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.

## Differences Between P & A-Consciousness

- ① P-conscious content is phenomenal, whereas A-conscious content is representational (But many P-conscious contents are also representational)
- ② A-consciousness is a functional notion, while P-consciousness is not
- ③ A-conscious content is system-relative: what makes a state A-conscious is what it does in a system—i.e. it is "poised" to rationally guide action and reasoning
- ④ There is such a thing as a P-conscious type or kind of state. But any particular token thought that is A-conscious at a given time could fail to be accessible at some other time

## Conflating Kinds of Consciousness

- 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

## 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
  - ① report or reason about the relevant nonconscious representations, nor use them in guiding action
  - ② 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

Block on the  
Function of  
Consciousness

Block on  
Consciousness

Separating  
Access from  
Phenomenal  
Consciousness

Criticizing the  
"Target  
Reasoning"

# Separating Access from Phenomenal Consciousness



# 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

## Features of Super-Blindsight

- No visual 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 '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, 283)*

# 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 non-zombie

## P without A-Consciousness

- 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

## P without A-Consciousness

### 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).*



## P without A-Consciousness

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

Block on the  
Function of  
Consciousness

Block on  
Consciousness

Separating  
Access from  
Phenomenal  
Consciousness

Criticizing the  
"Target  
Reasoning"

## Criticizing the "Target Reasoning"

## 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' 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)*

## Polling Questions

- ① In the Penfield case the epileptic walker is capable of a variety of complex behaviors, including avoiding obstacles. Is there a sense in which he "sees" the obstacles he avoids?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. *Not sure*

## Polling Questions

- ② Is there something it is like for him to see the obstacles he avoids?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. *Not sure*

## 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 In blindsighted subjects we can assume that *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