

PHIL 101

Block on Consciousness

January 30, 2014

Questions about Nagel on Consciousness

Question 1

Nagel's discussion of consciousness concerns which of the following notions:

- A. Wakefulness*
- B. Sentience*
- C. Phenomenal experience*
- D. Autonomy*

Question 2

Nagel intends his argument to show that physicalism is ...

- A. *True*
- B. *False*
- C. *Mysterious*

Question 3

Nagel's argument concerning consciousness crucially depends on which of the following?

- A. *Primary qualities*
- B. *The accessibility of objective entities from different points of view*
- C. *Bats*
- D. *Secondary qualities*

Block on
Consciousness

Questions
about Nagel on
Consciousness

**The Function of
Consciousness**

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Separating
Access from
Phenomenal
Consciousness

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

Block on
Consciousness

Questions
about Nagel on
Consciousness

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Separating
Access from
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Consciousness & Abnormal Psychology

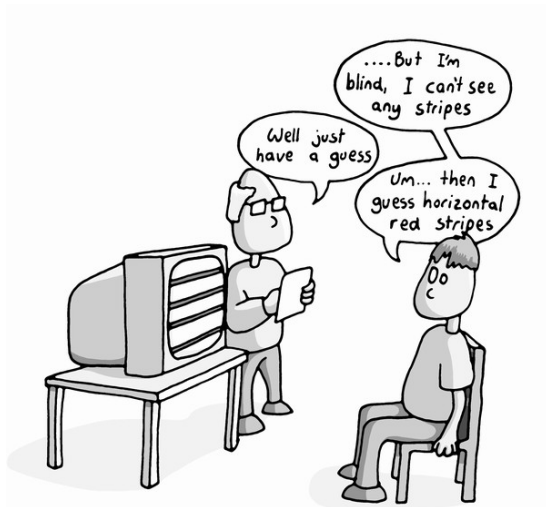
Two Kinds of Abnormal Psychology

- 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



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 'absence' seizures, may indicate the function of consciousness
- ② When consciousness is missing under such conditions, subjects cannot
 - report or reason about the relevant non-conscious representations, nor use them in guiding action
 - 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 (Phenomenal) Consciousness promotes flexibility and creativity in thought and action

Block on
Consciousness

Questions
about Nagel on
Consciousness

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Separating
Access from
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Confusion about Consciousness

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

Access Consciousness



Figure : Old Woman

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 on
Consciousness

Questions
about Nagel on
Consciousness

The Function of
Consciousness

Consciousness
& Abnormal
Psychology

Confusion
about
Consciousness

Separating
Access from
Phenomenal
Consciousness

Separating Access from Phenomenal Consciousness

A without P-Consciousness

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

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

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