

Session 1: **Phenomenal Consciousness and Access Consciousness**

Ned Block (1995), 'On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 227-47.

Consciousness as a philosophical problem

No mental phenomenon is more central than consciousness to an adequate understanding of the mind. Nor does any mental phenomenon seem more stubbornly to resist theoretical treatment. (Rosenthal 1986, 329)

Are both of these claims true? Origin of the English term 'consciousness' in roughly the sense we use it: Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), a fellow of Christ's College and a member of the so-called 'Cambridge Platonists' (together with Henry More—also at Christ's—and, a bit later, Anne Conway). What mental phenomenon does Cudworth call 'consciousness'?

that *Duplication*, that is included in the Nature of *synaesthesia*, *Con-sense* and *Consciousness*, which makes a Being to be Present with it self, Attentive to its own Actions, or Animadversive of them, to perceive it self to Do or Suffer, and to have a *Fruition* or *Enjoyment* of it self. (Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of The Universe*)

Two questions are central in the philosophical discussion about consciousness:

1. What is consciousness?
2. How is consciousness possible?

(Note, the latter seems to be a so-called 'how-possible question', see Quassim Cassam's work on such questions. It presupposes some *prima facie* obstacle. Note also the distinction between *creature* consciousness and *state* consciousness, see e.g. Rosenthal)

Blindsight and the function of consciousness

Ned Block has identified a controversial line of reasoning in much of (20th century) empirical psychology of consciousness, and in philosophical interpretations thereof.

Take the phenomenon of *blindsight*:

Patients with damage in primary visual cortex typically have "blind" areas in their visual fields. If the experimenter flashes a stimulus in one of these blind areas and asks the patient what he saw, the patient answers "nothing." The striking phenomenon is that some (but not all) of these patients are able to "guess" reliably about certain features of the stimulus, features having to do with motion, location, direction (e.g., whether a grid is horizontal or vertical). In "guessing," they are able to discriminate some simple forms. If they are asked to grasp an object in the blind field (which they say they cannot see), they can shape their hands in a way appropriate to grasping it, and there are some signs of color discrimination.

The problematic line of reasoning

1. Clearly, in blindsight consciousness is missing
2. Information from the senses that the patient in some sense possesses is not used in reasoning, guiding action, or verbal report
3. Hence, the function of consciousness must somehow be to allow information from the senses that a subject somehow possesses to be used in reasoning, guiding action, or verbal report

Block thinks this is confused, because we should distinguish at least conceptually between phenomenal consciousness (P-consciousness, “experience”) and access consciousness (A-consciousness, “rational access to information in reasoning, action, or report”).

Some examples:

- A. P-consciousness / A-consciousness: ordinary book reading
- B. ~~P-consciousness~~ / ~~A-consciousness~~: blindsight
- C. P-consciousness / ~~A-consciousness~~: simple animals, inattentiveness, Sperling experiments
- D. ~~P-consciousness~~ / A-consciousness: ‘phenomenal zombies’, superblindsight

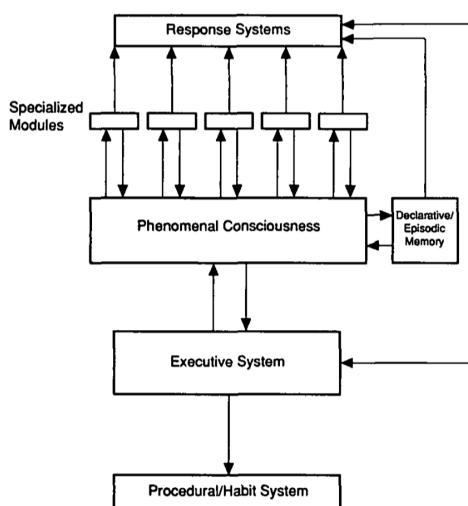


Figure 1. Schacter's Model

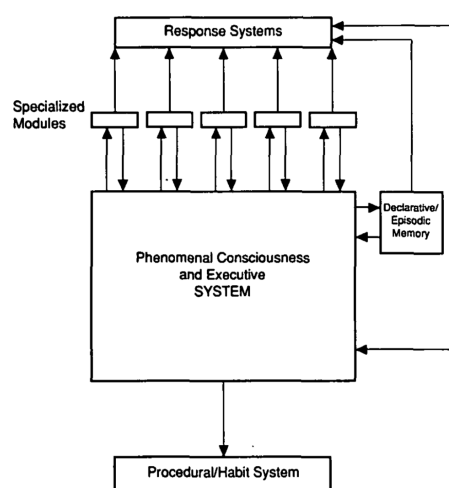


Figure 2. The Collapse Hypothesis, in which the Executive System and the Phenomenal Consciousness System are one and the same.

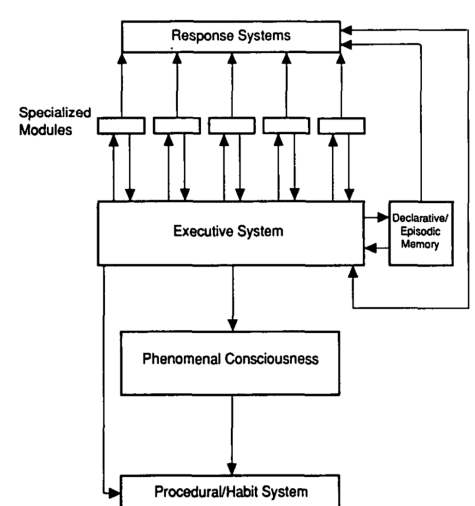


Figure 3. Epiphenomenalism: The Executive System and the Phenomenal Consciousness System transposed.

Questions

How controversial is Block's interpretation of the experimental data he uses to motivate his views?

How controversial are the “fanciful thought-experiments” Block exploits, e.g. the scenario of superblindsight or that of a phenomenal zombie? How much work do they do in motivating the conceptual distinction between P-consciousness and A-consciousness?

How controversial is Block's interpretation of the experimental data he uses to motivate his views?

Is the distinction between P-consciousness and functional forms of consciousness (A-consciousness) a good one? Can't we also understand P-consciousness functionally?

Even if we accept that P-consciousness is conceptually distinct from A-consciousness, then how exactly should we think of P-consciousness? Should we really think of it as a *psychological* process or phenomenon, as Block assumes?