

Consciousness

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Abstract: Consciousness is sometimes viewed as a particular parametric factor in the analogy of blood pressure or electric charge. The paper argues that this is an erroneous conception because becoming conscious involves a varied assortment of different phenomena that have no single unified commonality. And so even as 'abnormal psychology' has to be a disjointed assembly of diverse specialties so will 'consciousness studies' have to be.

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1. What Is Consciousness? The Basic Issue

Think of a door contrived to open automatically when a sensor detects an approaching person. We have here an effectively functional stimulus-response system. But there is no consciousness. The sensor detects but does not feel; the device responds appropriately but does not realize it. The system can be said to obtain information (a person's approach) and to initiate appropriate action in response (in arranging for the door's opening), but something crucial is absent.

So just what is missing? There is one thing that clearly is – the intervention of a functioning mind. Only mind-endowed beings can be conscious.¹

Even denying that consciousness ever exists would comment one to having to specify what consciousness is – i.e. just what it would be if it actually did exist. Before inquiry about where consciousness is present and how it works, one ought really to begin by asking just exactly what consciousness actually is. And here it is helpful first to spell out a few things that consciousness is not, and what consciousness clearly is not includes such features as being:

- a substance (like air)
- a property of things (like their weight)
- a state of things (like liquidity)

Instead, consciousness is a capacity, a facility for having the awareness needed for a neutral grasp on things. It is a condition of mind through which creatures are open to a wide range of experience seeing that mental activity is (as least) tripartite in relation to the endorsement of beliefs affective pro/con evaluation, and the inauguration of actions. For the mind not only processes

¹ Some philosophically sophisticated discussions regarding consciousness that are relevant to the contextualizing of this paper are given in the References listed at the end.

information, it processes affectivity as well, seeing that we have pro- or con-reactions to many acknowledged facts. (We not only accept that snake in the corner, but are horrified about it.) And moreover the mind can initiate action – as in situations of pre-planning.

Consciousness is a mental-response capacity for developed beings. It is part of a dual reactivity. Stuck with a pin your body will react by withdrawal, your mind will react by feeling pain. This capacity is a gift of evolution. Like arithmetical computation or linguistic communication – or indeed intelligence itself – consciousness is something that emerges at a certain stage of complexity and sophistication in the course of organic evolutionary development. It is present only well up on the natter of evolutionary development. In this regard it is in the same boat as various other higher-level mental components, such as intelligence, reason, and evaluative effectivity and (very possibly) free will.

Self-consciousness is a particularly sophisticated version of consciousness, a reflexive version that encompasses the functioning of self-awareness. This is a facility that has certainly evolved in humans but presumably not in lower animals. When you toss them bread crumbs you surely come to realize that sparrows can be aware of environmental developments. However, as best we can tell, there is no self-consciousness here. (You would find it hard to embarrass or insult them.)

Conscious reactions can be *evoked* by physical stimuli but they are not *constituted* by them. Physical developments may be prominent in their causation but mental developments are paramount for their constitution.

In humans factual knowledge (informative knowledge that in contrast to performative how-to knowledge) is always verbalized. But consciousness can outrun verbalization, and is thereby broader than factual cognition. The information that our consciousness places at our disposal is too extensive, complex, and convoluted for verbalization. There is no prospect of setting it out in linguistically explicit completeness. Conceivably, any individual item that figures in our consciousness can be verbalized in some way, but neither time nor space is available to deal with the entire lot. (Think here of the game of musical chairs: any one participant is in principle seatable, but one can never seat the whole lot.)

2. Consciousness as a Capacity

“I shall now count slowly to ten, and when I reach seven I shall wiggle the fingers of my left hand.”

Here there is consciousness of myself as cogent, as well as awareness of certain performatory resources at my command (finger motion) and of my power of agency (of acting under pre-set considerations). These capabilities and capacities are not aspects of my physical make-up or physical nature – they relate not to how I am constituted but to what I can do.

Without the brain the mind cannot operate, but without the mind the brain is functionally helpless. In providing the brain/mind complex nature has, through evolution, created a collaborative partnership. Consciousness is an evolved capacity of mind-endowed creatures to become aware of the aspects of their setting. Its most developed form is self-awareness – explicit awareness of oneself with no self-conception can in principle be conscious of things.

Consciousness is a *disjunctive* conception. To be conscious is to be able to perform any one of a long inventory of consciousness-indicative things. A wide variety of performances are inherently conscious-indicative: one can do them only when (fully) conscious:

- recognize a friend
- categorize something as instance of a type
- understand a verbal communication
- answer a question
- describe a feeling
- ‘get’ a joke
- solve a puzzle.

A person can be said to be actively or occurrently conscious when engaged in any one of many and varied consciousness-indicative operations. And it doesn't seem as though this list can ever actually be completed.

It is one thing to have consciousness – to be *capable* of its exercise, and quite another to be actively engaged therein. (Conscious beings can sleep!) And consciousness-involving performances are interconnected – not invariably but at least statistically: when one can do one of them one also can so various others. To be a conscious being one must be able to perform some of them. But the range of the consciousness-indicating operations at the disposal of a consciousness capable being can be larger or lesser, varying both with the individuals and with the species. Both dogs and humans can function consciously, but humans can tell jokes while dogs cannot. Consciousness is clearly present whenever the mind does any of a considerable variety of things.

But at this point a big question arises: Is consciousness some one particular sort of common factor or feature (except consciousness itself) that is present throughout the whole range of its occurrences? Or is consciousness something like combustibility – a feature possessed alike by wood, kerosene, oxygen, rubber, etc. which lack any other fact of unifying commonality. Is there some pervasive linking factor such that consciousness is the effect of its presence or is consciousness itself the unifier of its occurrences?

By all available indications there is no unified consciousness producer: consciousness is a matter of the uniformity of product and not of any uniformity

of production. To all visible appearances, consciousness represents a uniformity of product rather than a uniformity of production. The unity of consciousness is not collective but distributive – a unity not of resulting but of result. The prospect of providing a set of necessary and sufficient indications for the presence of consciousness – apart from the circularity redundant indications of consciousness itself – is a hopeless proposition.

What has to be going on for someone to be conscious of something? There just is no *particular* answer here – the appropriate response is simply: Any one of a considerable variety of things. There is no uniform route to consciousness: its presence is nowise a uniformity of productive process but merely a uniformity of result. Our initial question is like asking: What has to go on for someone to be wealthy. Once we get beyond tautology – respectively “he has to be aware of something,” “he has to have a lot of money” – there is nowhere else to go. There are just too many different ways to get there from here. The condition at issue – call it *X* – is such that there just is no uniform *X*-making factor or feature. The quest for any single definitive ‘basis of consciousness’ is quixotic and – to put it bluntly – pointless.

With respect to its nature as a conception, *mental consciousness* is thus rather akin to *mental illness*. There are many and highly varied ways of being mentally ill and they can have very little to do with one another – indeed they all fail to fit any generally common features apart from qualifying as mental illnesses. And the same goes for consciousness. There just is no single uniform mental process that qualified as ‘being conscious.’

3. Consciousness: Not a Process of Procedure

Our conscious-awareness functions sequentially, now this, now that. The result is the conception of a ‘stream of consciousness.’ This expression however, suggests a problematic continuity. What is actually at issue seems more like a set of discrete steps or links than a continuous stream.

There are many things a conscious-capable being can do only when activity conscious. To be sure, breathing and perspiring are not among them, but remembering and joking certainly are.

Like feeling, being conscious of something just happens – without pre-planning or pre-arrangement. One can no more write an instruction book about feeling than one can about being aware of something.

The question “How do I know that I am aware that there is a cup on the table?” is a lot like the question “How do I know that I feel cold?” or “How do I know that I don’t believe in the Tooth Fairy?” There simply is no “How I go about securing such knowledge,” no procedure for verifying that these things are so. I “just realize” these things, and the end of it. There is no definite process I use to acquire such knowledge, no procedure I follow for its realization. Awareness of things is not something I *acquire* by doing something, it is something that I *have*

in the circumstances. It comes to me automatically as a free gift of my capacities as an intelligent being.

4. Consciousness Requires Correlative Brain Activity

There is no question but that consciousness of something is the (invariable) accompaniment of correlative brain activity by doing something. But this does not mean that consciousness reduces to brain activity from a causal and productive standpoint.

The coordinate consciousness with brain activity and to have it that these cannot be conscious without suitable brain activity is not to say that consciousness is the causal result of brain processes. Coordination is not causality. People are coordinated with those finger prints: different prints different people. But that does not mean that the finger prints cause persons to be the individuals they are.

Consider a group of ball-bearings spread out on a stretched rubber sheet. You now have a clearly correlative system – move the ball bearings and the shape of the sheet changes; alter the shape of the sheet and the ball bearings will move accordingly. To all visible appearances mind and the brain are coordinated in this way. Processual inaguring is a two-way street: sometimes as the mind functions the brain responds correspondingly; sometimes as the brain functions, the mind responds. There is always coordinative agreement, but sometimes the one potency is in control of change and sometimes the other. Brain activity often controls the mind's thought, but thought sometimes inaugurates brain responses.

Brain activity and thought proceedings are interrelated in a complex relationship that exhibits the following features:

1. Every thought process has a corresponding counterpart in brain-activity: there are no 'spooky' (brain independent) thought processes.
2. Some brain-activities have no corresponding counterparts at the level of thought at all – neither in conscious or unconscious thought.
3. Not every brain-activity has a corresponding counterpart at the level of *conscious* thought. There is such a thing as an unconscious thinking. Moreover,
4. Some brain activities cause thought responses (thought activities) that would not exist without them. Here brain-activity is the causal inaugurator of thought.
5. Some thought activities cause brain responses: here thought is the causal inaugurator of brain-activity.

In the operating of the brain/mind complex, the brain is the invariable participant in the overall processuality of what goes on. It is thus the senior partner of the enterprise. But it is not the invariable *inaugurator* of what goes on: the direction of initiative is left open. And this will work sometimes in the one direction and sometimes in the other. (The two factors are interlinked but which

is the free and which the dependent variable will be a matter of case-by-case determination.)

The relation of brain/mind in relation to activity is like the situation of plane/pilot in relation to location. The pilot's location is always coordinate with the plane: he does not go his separate way. But while their location change is generally managed by the plane itself (via its autopilot) it is occasionally managed by the pilot when he happens to take control. The initiative can work both way. Analogously, it is sometimes mind rather than brain that is the change-initiating operative.

5. Mistakes in Awareness

There are certainly abnormal states of consciousness – in dreaming, say, or under the influence of drugs. One can certainly have the mistaken impression of being aware of things in the ordinary way. Unconsciousness is not the only alternative to consciousness, there is sub-consciousness and mis-consciousness (i.e., faux consciousness) as well. But only for beings capable of authentic consciousness can consciousness possibly malfunction.

As a more or less typical experience consider a pin-prick and its associated withdrawal response. Unless numbed by anesthetic or otherwise lapsed into an “abnormal” condition we are certainly aware of such a development. Presumably it can be counter indicated by extra-ordinary intervention (such as posthypnotic suggestion), so that what ordinarily would be a normal response is evoked in abnormal circumstances. But even an abnormally produced pinprick sensation is still a perfectly real sensation, however extra-ordinary the mechanics by which it is evoked. And – be it authentic or inauthentic – it could certainly not be evoked in a being incapable of feeling, of mental experience, of consciousness.

There is nothing automatically veridical about consciousness. Misimpressions can exist. We can take ourselves to be aware of a cat on the mat when it is actually a puppy. I can mistake one person as another. That tree we take ourselves to see may be a thing of smoke and mirrors. What we think of the things we are experiencing may fail to reflect their reality.

But even being mistaken is a version of mental acuity: even misunderstanding is a mode of understanding and even thinking mistakenly is still thinking.

Ordinarily cat sightings are produced by cats, pin-pricks by pins, shivers by cold. And such responses standardly occur via consciously apprehensible eventuations like cat-encounters or pin pricks. It is perfectly possible, however, that certain putatively cognitive experiences could be produced in a matter that is unwarrantedly and systematically inappropriate – that, for example, in a phantom limb situation someone feels as though he was receiving the handshake of a muscular friend. This sort of ‘sensory malfunction’ is certainly conceivable in various sorts of unusual circumstances. But that should prevail systematically – always, unavoidably, and with everyone – is effectively inconceivable given the

way in which human capacities evolve. Sense experience is our ground to action in this world, and if it were to mislead us standardly and systematically we would not be here to tell the tale.

The question, “Can awareness be mistaken?” calls for drawing a crucial distinction.

In ascribing to someone awareness of a particular state of affairs, we automatically concede correctness.

Thus when I say that “Smith realizes that the cat is on the mat” or “Smith is aware of the cat’s being on the mat” I commit myself to the fact that the cat is on the mat. To put this factual commitment into suspension I would have to say that “Smith thinks (or believes) that the cat is on the mat” or “Smith is under the impression that the cat is on the mat.” These ways of facilitating the matter are commitment neutral regarding the declarer’s own position. And in this regard they differ from the negative extreme: “Smith mistakenly thinks there is a cat on the mat” or “Smith hallucinates a cat on the mat.”

And the same sort of thing holds in one’s own case. The statement “I am aware of the tiger in the room” stakes the dual claim: “There indeed is a tiger in the room and I realize that this is so.” To be epistemically more cautious about it would require saying something like “I am aware that there is a large creature in the room and I take it to be a tiger” or even more indefinitely “Something is going on in the room which I construe as the shape of a large tiger.” However, unqualified awareness contentions carry verticality-claims in their wake. And we must thus distinguish between

- the fact of awareness

and

- the awareness of fact.

When I take myself to be aware of a cat on the mat, I cannot be mistaken about the fact of awareness itself – about my belief that there is a cat on the mat. It makes no sense to say “I believe there is a cat on the mat but might be wrong in thinking that I believe it.” I might be wrong in thinking what I believe, but cannot be wrong in thinking that I believe it. Of course that belief itself may very well be wrong: I could well mistake a small dog for a cat and a towel for a mat. The fact I claim to be aware of may be all wrong. But the fact of my having this awareness remains untouched by its error.

The language works in such a way that certain experiences are self-certifying. “I am conscious of its raining outside” might well be wrong – that pitter-patter could be a scrabbling squirrel. But “I am conscious of a strong odor” is something else again. Subjectivity stands on secure ground. When I am under the impression that there is a cat on the mat, I can be mistaken about the cat (and indeed the mat as well), but I cannot be mistaken about the impression.

What I am under the impression of may well be amiss, but my being under this impression stands secure, wholly unaffected by this mistake.

6. Evidentiating Consciousness

There is no public access-way to an individual's subjectivity. Feelings and impressions are private property. The individual agent himself is the only one able to observe what is transpiring on the stage of his conscious awareness: anyone else knows this only through inference or by second-hand reportage. Second-party observations is impracticable. *Brain activity* can be monitored by observers, but *awareness content* cannot.

This observational inaccessibility of a large section of cognition is an awkward roadblock to 'cognitive science.' The easy out for its practitioners is thus simply a 'fox and grapes'-reminiscent course of denying that it exists. It is, however, simply a 'fact of life.'

One cannot be conscious without being conscious *of* something any more than one can be afloat without floating *on* something. Feeling pain – one's own pain, a pinprick for example – is a quintessential mode of awareness. This is not just a matter of an aversion/evasion response: that response does not *constitute* my pain experience, but rather *evidentiates* it for all to see.

How can I tell what *you* are aware of? I cannot of course appropriate your experience: experience as such is not interpersonally transferrable. But you will have little difficulty in finding out a great deal about what I am aware of. For not only can I tell you a great deal about it, but often actions speak louder than words. When one voices an insult about me and I react angrily, you can be pretty sure my being aware of what was said. And when you tell a joke and I laugh you can be pretty sure I was aware of the utterance and 'got the point.'

Consciousness is in many respects like gravity. We experience it alright but one certainly doesn't *observe* it. What we observe is its effects and what one can know of it has to be inferred therefrom. As far as we are concerned gravity is what it does. And this of course does not automatically make us well-informed regarding either its nature or its origins. And consciousness is much like this. It manifests itself through its effects: primarily awareness and lived experience.

Lives there a man with soul so dead who never to himself has said "I am aware that there is a cat on the mat over there?" And there is just no getting around this. The *truth* of the claim at issue rests on two facts. (1) That there is a cat on yonder mat, and (2) that the agent realizes that this is so. Of course if that cat turns out to be an error (it was a dog that was on the mat) or even an illusion (say a strange shadow) the agent will have to change his tune: "I mistakenly took something over there to be a cat." But he need retract neither the awareness (of something going on) nor his impression (that he took this to be a cat).

7. Why Consciousness Seems Problematic/ Mysterious

Many things are visible; many things are combustible. But they are not so through any across-the-board possession of some shared feature or fact constitutive of visibility or combustibility. There just is no initial condition of constitutes this condition, no visibility-producing or combustibility-engendering constituent. The only commonality among all visible (or combustible) things just the fact of this visibility itself. The only commonality there is is ex post facto and retrospective. And just this is the case with consciousness as well. The only thing common to all items that figure is our consciousness in that very fact of consciousness-involvement itself.

Consciousness is not some type of stuff (like metal) not even a certain state of things (like magnetic attraction). It is, rather, a broad and diverse range of phenomena of different and diverse sorts – variable things gather together under a common instance of communicative convenience.

And so, just as there is not and cannot be any uniformly focused science of mental illness, there cannot be any uniformly focused science of consciousness. Even as ‘abnormal psychology’ has to be a disjointed assemblage of diverse specialties, so will ‘consciousness studies’ have to be. Neither constitutes a unified science. The manifold sort of conscious activity are certainly open to fruitful scientific study in their distinctive particularity. But consciousness itself is not, seeing that what is at issue with this idea lacks the integrity of thematic focus requisite for such an integrated enterprise.

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