

The Nature of Consciousness
Handout [23]
Georges Rey: A Question about Consciousness

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§ The Goals:

- 1. To examine the notion of consciousness in the light of the actual details of our mental life.**
- 2. To argue that we really don't have any good definition of "consciousness."**
- 3. To suggest the possibility that there is no such thing as consciousness.**

[Rey's theoretical basis: functionalism]

§ Intentionality and Computers

*** Rey's Basic Assumption:**

___ **One of the soundest reasons for taking a particular description of an object seriously is that the object obeys laws in which the description figures.... Similarly, an object can be regarded as literally possessing a mental life insofar as it obeys psychological laws.**

*** The Strategy:**

- ___ **1. Construct a machine that could think.**
- ___ **2. With all the following necessary conditions met, the machine is still not conscious.**
- ___ **3. Therefore, nothing is added to the mental life by consciousness.**

[Condition 1] **the alphabet, formation, and transformation rules for quantified modal logic with indexicals (as its language of thought).**

[Condition 2] **the axioms for a system of inductive logic, and an abductive system of hypotheses, with a "reasonable" function for selecting among them for a given input.**

[Condition 3] **the axioms for decision theory, with some set of basic preferences.**

[Condition 4] **in addition to the usual keyboard, various transducers (e.g. a television camera) for supplying inputs to (2).**

[Condition 5] **devices (e.g. printers, mechanical hands) that permit the machine to realize its outputs (e.g. its "most preferred" basic act descriptions).**

[Condition 6] **the recursive believer system.**

[Condition 6'] the recursive believer system with self-reference.

[Condition 7] a fragment of English adequate to describe/express the mental states entered in executing (1) - (6), descriptions which are produced as a reliable consequences of being in those states.
= introspection

Rey's Claims:

___ The trouble with these sorts of processes as candidates for consciousness is that they don't make any further demands whatsoever on a machine of the sort we've been considering.

___ Sensations, pain, etc. can all be given a similar functional analysis such that these machines can have them. (Discuss pp. 469-70)

§ Rey's Argument:

Call the further non-cognitive condition, be it neurophysiological or otherwise, condition K.

- ___ 1. It would follow from the psychological theories we have been considering, together with an insistence on K, that it would be metaphysically possible for someone to believe she is in a particular sensory state without actually being in it: for it would be metaphysically possible for her to be in the position of our computer, satisfying (1) - (7) without satisfying K.
- ___ 2. But this amounts to an extraordinary contribution to anesthesiology. For it would then be open to surgeons, or others adept at dealing with K, to eliminate K without disturbing a patient's cognition. A patient might undergo an operation fully believing that she was in intense pain and very much preferring she wasn't, but be reassured by the surgeon that nevertheless, lacking K, she wasn't actually experiencing any sensations at all. She only thought she was....
- ___ 3. This consequence seems clearly unacceptable.
- ___ 4. Therefore, appeal to condition K is unacceptable.

[Condition 8] The Cartesian Intuition:

___ the view about the infallibility of first-person present-tense beliefs about consciousness.

Q: What more is required? In particular, what further properties other than those provided by (1) - (8) can we reasonably demand as a necessary condition on consciousness?

§ Rey's Question:

Once we have accounts of the various processes I have mentioned, *what is added by consciousness?* What further light does this inner light shed upon our minds? What phenomena is unexplained without it?

§ Rey's Conclusion:

This absolutely *private* consciousness (as presented by the Cartesian Intuition) is like angels that has no explanatory role in our view of the world. We have no non-question-begging reason to postulate such properties. (It's is like a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it.)