

The Nature of Consciousness

Handout [25]

Alvin Goldman: *Consciousness, Folk Psychology, and Cognitive Science*

JeeLoo Liu

§ The Goals:

1. To find the best definition of 'consciousness' that fits the ordinary sense of the consciousness concept.
2. To argue that phenomenal awareness has an essential role to play in explaining the execution of a very common cognitive task.

§ Defining Consciousness

(1) total state consciousness:

___ A person is conscious, in this sense, if he or she is in a generalized condition of alertness or arousal: being awake rather than asleep or in a coma.

(2) partial state consciousness:

___ A partial psychological state is conscious if and only if it involves phenomenal awareness, that is, subjective experience or feeling.

(3) *de re* consciousness:

___ To be conscious *of* an object, *x*, is to be in some (partial) state of phenomenal awareness which includes a representation of *x*.

§ [Three Proposed Definitions]:

[1] to define consciousness (semi-) operationally, by reference to the sort of behavior that would provide public or external evidence for consciousness.

e.g. verbal reportability.

Criticisms:

___ (i) Verbal reportability is not a necessary condition for a state to be conscious (e.g. speech impairments, animals, or state of awareness that are too brief, too confused, or too temporally removed from report possibilities).

___ (ii) Verbal reportability is not a sufficient condition for consciousness.

[2] to define consciousness in terms of its function, for example, informational accessibility.

e.g. [Baars]: global workplace

___ A conscious representation is one whose message is "broadcast" to the system as a whole, not just to some local or specialized processors.

Criticisms:

___ (i) This idea of global broadcast may accurately describe a notable characteristic of human consciousness as studied by cognitive science, but it is unlikely to capture the ordinary grasp of the consciousness concept.

___ (ii) Moreover, we can easily conceive of a (nonhuman) system in which informative representations are distributed to all subsystems yet those representations are totally devoid of phenomenal awareness. Therefore, the combination of global broadcast and informativeness is not sufficient for consciousness.

[3] to define consciousness in terms of self-knowledge, self-monitoring, or higher-order reflection.

e.g. "State S of a system is conscious if and only if the system possesses a "higher-order" belief that it is in S" [Armstrong, Lycan, Rosenthal, Johnson-Laird].

Criticisms:

___ (i) circular definition.

___ (ii) infinite regress.

___ (iii) Couldn't there be a robot or "zombie" that totally lacks phenomenal awareness or subjective feeling but nonetheless has higher-order beliefs about its other internal states? [Therefore, higher-order thought is not a sufficient condition for consciousness.]

*** [Summary]:**

___ **It is noteworthy that each of the failed attempts thus far examined offers a *relational* definition of consciousness.... The failure of such proposals leads one to suspect that no relational proposal will succeed.**

§ A Fourth Definition: Intrinsicism (e.g. Block)

___ **Consciousness reside in features that conscious states have in themselves, not in relations they bear to other states.**

[Argument]:

___ **Inverted Spectrum**

[Goldman's Claim]:

___ **Only the phenomenal notion of consciousness is the one intended in common usage.**

[Question]: Is this true?

§ Challenges to the Folk-Psychological Concept of Consciousness

Q: Why should the scientific study of consciousness pay any heed to folk-psychological understanding?

(1) P.S. Churchland:

___ the *elimination* of consciousness.

(2) Allport:

___ There is no unitary entity of 'phenomenal awareness' -- no unique process or state, no one, coherently conceptualizable phenomenon for which there could be a single, conceptually coherent theory.

(3) Dennett: [eliminativism]

___ the elimination of *qualia*

(4) Flanagan: [the method of triangulation]

___ It is wise to expect relevant evidence for consciousness to come from multiple sources: phenomenology, psychology and neuroscience.

§ Goldman's View: Intrinsic Qualities of Consciousness

*** Goldman's Argument:**

- ___ 1. There seems to be an informational asymmetry in the knowledge of mental states that favors first-person over third-person knowledge rather than the reverse.
- ___ 2. People seem to have a different, and better, form of access to their own mental states than to the states of others. Such self-attribution of mental states is usually reliable.
- ___ 3. The best explanation of this cognitive-linguistic activity is the genuine occurrence of events of phenomenal consciousness which are categorized in intrinsic rather than relational terms.
- ___ 4. Therefore, consciousness is best characterized as an intrinsic property.

*** Goldman's Claims Concerning the Mind and the Brain:**

___ Obviously a great deal of information processing does occur at subpersonal levels within the organism. When the processing is purely subpersonal, thought, it seems that no verbal labels are generated that are recognizably "mental."

___ Only when psychological or neurological events give rise to conscious sensations, such as thirst, felt heat, and the like, or to other conscious mental events, does a primitive verbal label get introduced or applied.

___ We seem to be left, then, with qualitative or phenomenal properties, that is, qualia, as the intrinsic properties that permit mentalistic classification.

___ Thus, it looks as if the most promising psychological model of how one's own mental states are classified is by detecting phenomenal properties of these states, for example, the itchiness of the itch.

___ If this is right, phenomenal awareness has an essential role to play in explaining the execution of a very common cognitive task.