

The Nature of Consciousness

Handout [8]

Ned Block: *On a Confusion about a Function of Consciousness*

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§ 1. The Goals:

1. To argue for a confusion about the function of consciousness.
2. To point out that the basis of the confusion is the conflation of the two concepts of consciousness: A-consciousness and P-consciousness.
3. To examine the fallacy of a target reasoning.
4. To conclude from the above examination that it is fallacious to assign a "function" to P-consciousness.

§ 2. Case Studies

1. Blindsight
2. Prosopagnosia
3. Petit Mal Seizure

§ 3. The Target Reasoning: (the reasoning that Block attacks)

- ___ 1. In the above cases, when consciousness is missing, subjects cannot report or reason about the nonconscious representations or use them to guide action.
- ___ 2. What is not working during unconsciousness must be the function of consciousness.
- ___ 3. Therefore, a function of consciousness is to facilitate reasoning, reporting and guiding action.

§ 4. P-Consciousness vs. A-Consciousness

[1] P-Consciousness: phenomenal consciousness

(i) P-consciousness is experience. P-conscious properties are experiential properties. P-conscious states are experiential states, that is, a state is P-conscious if it has experiential properties. The totality of the experiential properties of a state are "what it is like" to have it.

(ii) We have P-conscious states when we see, hear, smell, taste, and have pains. P-conscious properties not only include experiential properties of sensations, feelings, and perceptions, but also include thoughts, wants, and emotions.

(iii) P-conscious properties ≠ any cognitive, intentional, or functional property.

Cognitive = essentially involving thought;

Intentional properties = properties in virtue of which a representation or state is about something;

Functional properties = e.g., properties definable in terms of a computer program.

(iv) P-consciousness is whatever properties in our consciousness that is posited by the "explanatory gap".

Block's question: (to be discussed in class)

___ **Why couldn't there be brains functionally or physiologically just like ours, including oscillation patterns, whose owners' experience was different from ours or who had no experience?**

[2] A-Consciousness: access consciousness

(i) A state is A-conscious if it is *poised* for direct control of thought and action [poised vs. available for use].

(ii) A-consciousness is involved in information processing, computation, and control of behavior.

(iii) No state is A-conscious in virtue of its intrinsic properties; what makes it A-conscious is what it controls.

§ 6. Three Main Differences between P-consciousness and A-consciousness

[1] P-conscious content is phenomenal, whereas A-conscious content is representational. (But many P-conscious contents are also representational.)

[2] A-consciousness is a functional notion, and so A-conscious content is system-relative: what makes a state A-conscious is what a representation of its content does in a system.

___ P-consciousness is not a functional notion.

[3] There is such a thing as a P-conscious type or kind of state. But any particular token thought that is A-conscious at a given time could fail to be accessible at some other time.

[Questions:]

___ **Is this distinction a factual distinction or merely a conceptual distinction?**

___ **Are the two kinds of consciousness two kinds of mental states or merely two aspects of the same mental state?**

___ **If the two kinds of consciousness are always intertwined, then is there still a need to make the distinction?**

§ 6. Two Competing Approaches: Computational vs. Neurological

(A) The computational approach:

___ It supposes that all of the mind (including consciousness) can be captured with notions of information processing, computation and function in a system. According to this view (often called functionalism by philosophers), the level of abstraction for understanding the mind is one that allows multiple realizations, just as one computer can be realized electrically or hydraulically. Their bet is that the different realizations don't matter to the mind, generally, and to consciousness specifically.

(B) The biological approach:

___ It bets that the realization does matter.

If P = A, the information processing side is right. But if the biological nature of experiences is crucial, then realizations do matter, and we can expect that P and A will diverge.

[Why?]

§ 7. Applications of the Two-Concept Distinction

1. Blindsight

___ The thirsty blindsight patient would not reach for a glass of water in the blind field.

No P-consciousness or A-consciousness.

2. Super Blindsight:

___ 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.

With A-consciousness, but no P-consciousness. (Such a case doesn't exist though.)

3. Suppose that you are engaged in intense conversation when suddenly at noon you realize that right outside your window, there is -- and has been for some time -- a pneumatic drill digging up the street.

With P-consciousness, but no A-consciousness of the noise before noon.

4. Zombies or robots that think but don't feel.

With A-consciousness, but no P-consciousness.

5. Prosopagnosia

A disorder of A-consciousness, not P-consciousness.

6. "Capgras delusion":

___ a syndrome in which patients claim that people they know (usually relatives) have been replaced by doubles who look just like them.

A disorder of A-consciousness, not P-consciousness.

7. "Anosognosia"

___ A neurological syndrome that involves an inability to acknowledge or have access to information about another neurological syndrome. A patient might have anosognosia for, say, his prosopagnosia while complaining incessantly about another deficit.

Anosognosia is primarily a defect in A-consciousness, not P-consciousness.

8. "Petit Mal Seizures"

___ during petit mal seizures, patients continue walking or driving home or playing the piano.

We only have evidence of a deficiency in A-consciousness; no evidence of a deficit in P-consciousness.

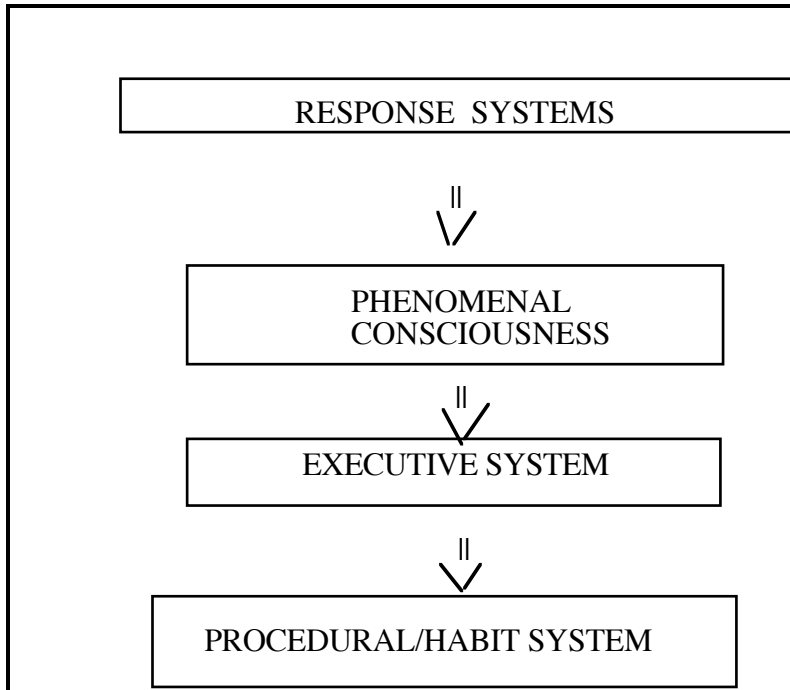
§ 8. The Fallacy of the Target Reasoning

This is the fallacy: In the blindsight patient, both P-consciousness and A-consciousness of the glass of water are missing. There is an obvious explanation of why the patient doesn't reach for the glass in terms of the information about it not reaching mechanisms of reasoning and rational control of speech and action, the machinery of A-consciousness. More generally, A-consciousness and P-consciousness are almost always present or absent together, or rather this seems plausible.... But is just a mistake to slide from a function of the machinery of A-consciousness to any function at all of P-consciousness.

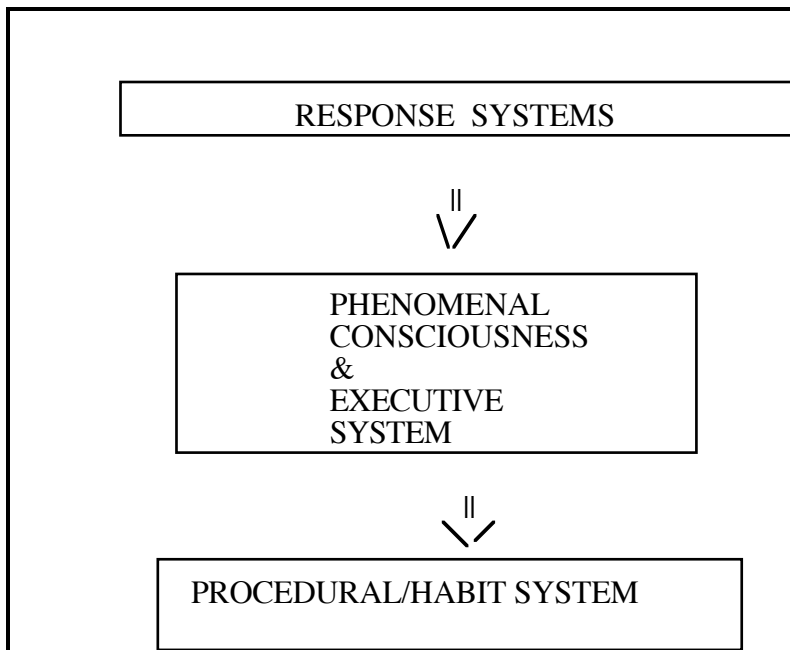
If the distinction were seen clearly, the relevant possibilities could be reasoned about. Perhaps the lack of P-consciousness causes the lack of A-consciousness. Or perhaps the converse is the case: P-consciousness is somehow a product of A-consciousness. Or both could be the result of something else. If the distinction were clearly made, these alternatives would come to the fore. The fallacy is failing to make the distinction, rendering the alternatives invisible.

§ 9. Can We Distinguish Among Different Models?

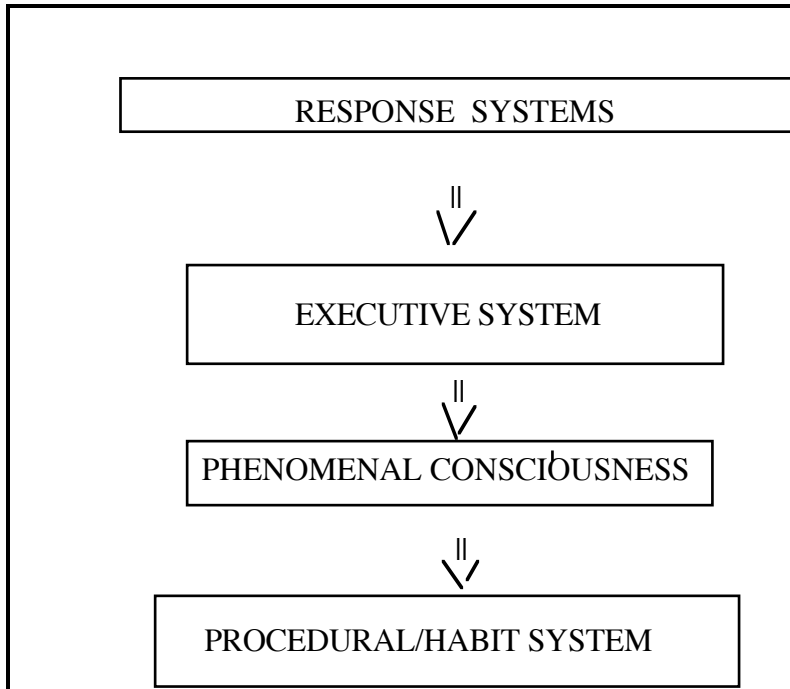
Model 1 (Schacter's Model):



Model 2 (the Collapse Hypothesis):



Model 3 (the Reverse Model):



___ Model 3 is a variant on Model 1 in which the Executive module and the P-consciousness module are reversed. Model 1 clearly gives P-consciousness a function in controlling action. Model 3 clearly gives it no function.

___ Model 2 is just like Model 1 except that the Executive System and the P-consciousness system are collapsed together. Model 2 can be interpreted in a variety of ways, some of which (identifying P-consciousness with some information processing) give P-consciousness a function, others of which (treating P-consciousness as an "epi-phenomenon") do not.

§ 10. Block's Final Choice

1. He rejects Model 2 (the Collapse Model).

Reasons:

___ (i) There might be cases of A-consciousness without P-consciousness.

e.g. familiar phenomenon of the solution to a difficult problem just popping into P-consciousness.

___ **(ii) There might be cases of P-consciousness without A-consciousness.**

e.g. "icon" visual information.

e.g. hypnotic analgesia (hypnosis blocks a patient's access to pain, say from an arm in cold water or from the dentist's drill. Pain must be P-conscious, but access is blocked by the hypnosis).

e.g. general anesthesia (I know of no reports that would suggest diminished P-consciousness.... So if there are P-conscious states under general anesthesia, they may be states of more or less normal P-consciousness with diminished A-consciousness.)