

Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*
Handout [6]
Ned Block: *Concepts of Consciousness*

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§ The Goals:

1. To argue for a confusion about the function of consciousness: The word 'consciousness' connotes a number of different concepts and denotes a number of different phenomena.
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.

§ Two Concepts of Consciousness: P-Consciousness and 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.**

Block's claims:

1. **P-conscious properties are distinct from 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 [in terms of teleological or causal roles].

2. **P-consciousness is whatever properties in our consciousness that is posited by the "explanatory gap".**

___ think of Jackson's Mary case, or Nagel's Bat case.

Block's question:

___ 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 rational 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.**

§ 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 (e.g. the kind of pain). But any particular token thought that is A-conscious at a given time could fail to be accessible at some other time.

The paradigm *P*-conscious states are sensations, whereas the paradigm A-conscious states are “propositional attitudes” states like thoughts, beliefs and desires, states with representational content expressed by “that” clauses.

[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?

§ Two Competing Approaches: Computational vs. Biological**(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.

§ Applications of the Two-Concept Distinction

___ The main point of this paper is that these two concepts of consciousness are distinct and quite likely have different extensions yet are easily confused.

To show: It is at least conceptually possible, if not actually possible, to have one form of consciousness without the other.

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. (hypothetical case)

With A-consciousness, but no P-consciousness.

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 (face-blindness)

___ the inability to recognize faces, even though there is no malfunction with other visual perceptions

___ there is estimated 0.5 to 2 % of the population with this problem

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

6. "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.

§ The Target Reasoning:

- ___ 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.

§ 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 it 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.

§ Conclusion

My view is that 'consciousness' is actually an ambiguous word.

All of us have some tendency to use 'conscious' and related words in both ways, and our failure to see this causes a good deal of difficulty in thinking about "consciousness."