

## Varieties of Consciousness

### 1. Where are we?

We've been talking as though 'consciousness' referred to just one thing...

What if that's not true?

Background questions and projects in play here:

- Do we *need* consciousness for anything? Does it have inseparable informational value?
- Is consciousness synonymous with awareness? Are the two (conceptually / empirically) separable?
- What is the place of consciousness within the mind? How much mental activity is conscious?

### 2. Block's distinction between Access and Phenomenal Consciousness

A state is **phenomenally conscious** if there's something it's like to be in that state... Phenomenal consciousness is a subjective state of awareness, the kind of consciousness which gives rise to the explanatory gap.

Paradigm state: sensations

A state is **access conscious** "if it is posed for direct control of thought and action...for free use in reasoning and for direct "rational" control of action and speech." (p.382)

Paradigm state: propositional attitudes.

Block identifies 3 main differences between A- and P- consciousness:

- i. P-conscious content is phenomenal, whereas A-conscious content is representational. It's involved in reasoning and only representational content can figure in reasoning
- ii. A-consciousness is a functional notion. P-consciousness is not a functional notion.
- iii. There is such a thing as a p-conscious type / kind of state, e.g. pain, whereas any particular token thought that is A-conscious at a given time could fail to be accessible at some other time.

A and P consciousness are distinct but they interact.

- What perceptual information is being accessed can change figure to ground in a way that affects one's phenomenal state (e.g. attending to the feel of your shirt against your neck switches background to foreground, thereby changing one's phenomenal state)

### 3. How they come apart

#### A-consciousness without P-consciousness

- Zombies
- Superblindsight (a blindsighter who is trained to prompt himself at will to guess what is in his blind field, such that visual information just pops in to his mind)
  - o Would that ability acquire its own phenomenology?
  - o But why *isn't* there superblindsight? The observation that there isn't drives the target reasoning described below...
    - Block's point is that it is a conceptual possibility.

"Is there actually such a thing as superblindsight? Humphrey (1992) describes a monkey (Helen) who despite near-total loss of the visual cortex could nonetheless act in a somewhat normal way (as if seeing) in certain circumstances, without any "prompting". One reason to doubt that Helen is a case of superblindsight is that Helen may be a case of sight."

## P-consciousness without A-consciousness

The drill case

“Suppose 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 deafening pneumatic drill digging up the street. You were aware of the noise all along, but only at noon are you *consciously* aware of it. That is, you were P-conscious of the noise all along, but at noon you are both P-conscious *and* A-conscious of it.”

### 4. Why does Block draw this distinction?

Block aims to dismantle a certain style of argument which he terms “**the target reasoning**”

Because subjects who appear to lack consciousness cannot perform some range of activities, consciousness has some function in the brain, e.g. of somehow enabling information represented in the brain to be used in reasoning, reporting, and rationally guiding action.

Block’s concern: this relies on conflating A and P consciousness. It’s the P-consciousness that’s absent, but it’s the A-consciousness that (uncontroversially) performs the relevant functions.

This target reasoning gives rise to a **fallacy**: sliding from an obvious function of A consciousness, to a non-obvious function of P-consciousness

Examples...

- **Blindsight**: information absent from the target field fails to play a rational role because it isn’t conscious. Therefore, a function of consciousness is to facilitate reasoning, reporting and guiding action.
- “**Petit mal**” seizures
  - “The epileptic seizure rendered the patient totally unconscious, yet the patient continued to exhibit what would normally be called goal-directed behavior. . . . In all these cases, we have complex forms of apparently goal-directed behavior without any consciousness. Now why could all behavior not be like that? Notice that in the cases, the patients were performing types of actions that were habitual, routine and memorized . . . normal, human, conscious behavior has a degree of flexibility and creativity that is absent from the Penfield cases of the unconscious driver and the unconscious pianist. Consciousness adds powers of discrimination and flexibility even to memorized routine activities. . . . One of the evolutionary advantages conferred on us by consciousness is the much greater flexibility, sensitivity, and creativity we derive from being conscious. (Searle 1992, pp. 108-9)
  - o Searle assumes P-consciousness is missing. Block objects that there’s no reason to think that it is. They show every sign of normal sensation, it’s the *thought* process, involving A-consciousness that is deficient. And it’s uncontroversial that A-consciousness would play those functional roles.
- “Of course, it could be that the lack of P-consciousness is itself responsible for the lack of A-consciousness. If that is the argument in any of these cases, I do not say “fallacy.” The idea that the lack of P-consciousness is responsible for the lack of A-consciousness is a bold hypothesis, not a fallacy.” Block p.242

### 5. Reservations about Block’s distinction

- On what basis do we ascribe P-consciousness if it comes apart from A-consciousness?
  - o Tim Bayne: we are willing to ascribe something like P consciousness to babies on the basis of A consciousness...
  - o Are there principled reasons for thinking that we could never have reason to posit P in the absence of A?
    - Don’t we always, in principle, need a functional entry point to detect P consciousness?

- If we really separate off P consciousness, do we have to take seriously the possibility of systems having P-consciousness, but no functional system to indicate that?
- Do we need different degrees or types of A-consciousness?
  - Where does the Freudian unconscious fit in? Block says it's A-unconscious because otherwise he could report his desire to kill his father etc., but note that it still motivates behaviour...
- Chalmers: we could reshape A as direct **availability** for global control. That would have the benefits of...
  - Playing down the role of rationality and reasoning, and relegating verbal report to the status of a heuristic
  - Eliminating contents that can be retrieved with some work but that are not conscious from A-consciousness— they are not *directly available*.
  - Can account for Sperling: it's plausible that each of the nine letters were *available* until the process of access destroyed their availability.
  - Understood in that way, P- and A- consciousness might line up more closely.
- Akins: you can't separate phenomenal and representational aspects of experience.
  - We'll consider this more when we come to intentional theories of consciousness.

N.b. Block concedes that A- and P- consciousness are almost always present or absent together. Does he need to account for why that is? He allows that they might amount to the same thing *empirically* whilst differing *conceptually*

#### 6. The Bigger Picture: can consciousness overflow access?

If Block is right that phenomenal consciousness can come apart from access to those conscious states, then you could, more generally, have phenomenally conscious states you don't or can't access.

Potential cases of this happening:

- Sperling arrays
- Inattention blindness
- Change blindness
- Gist perception

But is the effect just retinal or pre-phenomenal? Maybe subjects are just tapping large capacity pre-conscious representations....

Block's response: But binocular persistence only lasts 300 ms *and* it's phenomenal – you continue to see depth, so that doesn't seem capable of account for the phenomenon.

Subjects judge that they have phenomenal experience of all or almost all the shapes presented in the array.

But is that just an instant of the refrigerator light illusion – i.e. you think you do because if you *were* to focus on any of them you'd be able to report it?

Suggested reading:

- \*Block, Ned, 'On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 18, no. 2 (1995): 227-47.
- Phillips, Ian, 'Perception and Iconic Memory: What Sperling Doesn't Show', *Mind & Language*, 26 (2011): 381-411.
- Rosenthal, David, 'Two Concepts of Consciousness', *Philosophical Studies*, 49, no. 3 (1986): 329-59.

