

Review of: "The Study of Consciousness Is Mired in Complexities and Difficulties: Can They Be Resolved?"

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The article submitted by Dr. Jonathan Nash is an important addition to the ongoing discussion on consciousness—what it is and, more precisely, how it should be defined. The task is ambitious and, in my opinion, one he has only partially met.

To briefly recapitulate: the many extant terms used to describe/discuss consciousness are too conflated to provide any real lexical or epistemological clarity. The author calls for greater “semantic lucidity” when it comes to this extraordinarily challenging topic.

I will not address all aspects of the article. I do, however, applaud his drawing attention to the many attempts to elucidate and define consciousness by adding prefixes, suffixes, and/or adjectives—relational consciousness, pure consciousness, phenomenal consciousness, etc.

In their 2020 article, Travis, Nash et al. refer to the nascent field of contemplative neuroscience—i.e., the study of how the mind, brain, and body change due to contemplative practices. I highlight this example to show that qualifying various nouns is tempting, as it may better articulate an author’s intent.

But only when the noun in question is generally (if not wholly) agreed upon, such as “neuroscience.” Providing such qualifiers for the term consciousness, on the other hand, takes a term with no real consensus regarding its meaning and adds another layer of (subjective) meaning on top.

It is also worth noting that even an article devoted to untangling competing terms and ideas to provide much-needed clarity and insight does, at times, commit the same conflation it argues against.

The article describes consciousness from both a medical/physiological perspective and a mental/psychological perspective—i.e., consciousness and Consciousness, respectively. It bears noting that only the former is provided a definition as to its meaning: “i.e., gain or loss of consciousness.” The latter category has no similar definition (at least initially).

The author makes clear that in his conceptualization, the lower-case incarnation of the term (i.e., consciousness) refers to the medical/physiological context, whereas the upper-case incarnation of the term (i.e., Consciousness or “C”) refers to the mental/psychological context.

Yet, in the Summary and Conclusion, point 2 states: Any attempt to formulate an operational definition of “C” needs to

account for both conscious and unconscious states.

The reference to “conscious and unconscious states” implies consciousness, however, not Consciousness. The error simply reinforces the challenges of operationally defining a term that has flummoxed philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, and researchers of all stripes for centuries.

These points aside, I think the article capably and succinctly addresses an important issue. An obvious issue perhaps, but one that is distilled and spelled out in an engaging and informative manner.