[Commentary] A Flaw (in Modern Science)

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Abstract

It is shown that a reasonable, valid operational definition *X* of consciousness would not cover self-consciousness.

“When it comes to science and the explanatory system, explaining focuses on epistemological atoms; the things that are to be explained are measurable entities. Modern science is simply based on concepts that are defined by how they are measured. These operational definitions have the advantage that you always know what you are talking about. It is not for the scientist to understand the concepts.

Concerning consciousness, it is interesting to see the operational definition for what it is, an operational definition (sic!). An operational definition is what it is. If you operationally define consciousness, you do not define something else operationally. Consciousness would be defined according to the operational definition. It would neither be right, nor wrong. If consciousness is defined operationally, the definition is what you are working with. Your own conception of what consciousness is is bypassed. In the explanatory setting based on operational definitions, the intuitive understanding of consciousness and the experienced consciousness are omitted.

While this permits the machinery of the natural sciences to work with consciousness, there is a flaw in the fundamental approach. The flaw does not directly concern consciousness in itself. If we define consciousness operationally with the definition X, we work with the premise that a certain subject in the experimental setting is conscious if X. This “either/or” scenario, though, becomes interesting only when we pair X with some contents. The subject, e.g., is conscious about this or that visual stimulus. Or, the subject is conscious about this or that tactile stimulus. In the experimental setting, we do not ask the subject if it sees or feels this or that. We expose the stimulus operationally, for example, by putting the light on or by stroking the subject's arm. Whether or not the subject is conscious about the light or the stroking, we determine via X. Without X, we conclude that the subject was not conscious about the stimulus.

The flaw is identified when we consider self-consciousness. We cannot present the self to the subject. Accordingly, if the subject is self-conscious or not, we cannot determine via X. We could ask the subject, but then we have already missed the target. For one thing, we then must assume that subjects that do not answer are not self-conscious. Another thing is that we then miss the difference between consciousness and self-consciousness. The subject logically cannot report that it is conscious about something without being self-conscious about it. In conclusion, a reasonably valid operational

definition X of consciousness would not cover self-consciousness." (Revised excerpt from Gamper, 2021.)

Reference

- Gamper, J (2021). Rebooting Science 1.0. BoD. Stockholm, Sweden. https://philpapers.org/rec/GAMRS-2 (Link to the ebook on Amazon and Apple).