

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

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The overall message of this essay – that several etymological, semantic, sociolinguistic, and methodological issues have impeded the progress of consciousness research – is hardly debatable, and the author has laid out a clear explanation of why and how this is so.

The article provides a valuable, if brief, historical review of the origin of the terms ‘conscious’ and ‘consciousness.’ It argues against conflating the two terms, as when ‘conscious’ refers to a physiological state such as being awake, as opposed to its reference to the mental character of subjective experience. Nash offers the specific suggestion that ‘consciousness’ (uncapitalized) should be used with reference to physiological or medical conditions, while ‘Consciousness (capitalized, or simply ‘C’) should be used when the context is mental or psychological. If broadly adopted, this would be a useful convention.

Nash further advocates avoidance of embellishing ‘C’ with qualifying adjectives, prefixes, and suffixes when a clear and straightforward definition would provide more lucidity. As evidence of the semantic chaos that has plagued the definitional problem, he points to the multiplicity of terms and notions that appeared in peer reviews of my article on this topic (Irwin, 2024a). While he measured the frequency of 12 different terms and notions in six different categories of labels used for consciousness, interestingly, the top two categories ranged from at least 65% (for ‘awareness’) to 91% (for ‘subjective experience’ and ‘phenomenology’) more than any other labels, so an argument could be made for avoiding ‘C’ altogether in favor of ‘awareness’, ‘subjective experience’, or ‘phenomenology’, depending on the focus of the study in question, as several authors have done (Barron & Klein, 2016; Ginsburg & Jablonka, 2019; Irwin, 2024b).

I totally concur with the author’s admonition that characterizing consciousness as a ‘thing’ that can be localized in the brain should be avoided in favor of a multifactorial approach to ‘C’ as a ‘process.’ By analogy with wind and fire, which are dynamic and ephemeral phenomena without firm boundaries, consciousness arises from a dynamic process enacted by the brain in congruence with the organism’s environment. He astutely points out a fact that receives too little attention: the constraints that language imposes on conceptualization. It may be that the English word ‘consciousness’ is weighted for historical reasons in the Western tradition with meanings that are either misleading or inadequate indicators of the process that the word is supposed to represent.

In contrast, Nash appears to sympathize with a view that fits more comfortably into the Asian (at least Indian) philosophical tradition, which holds that consciousness may simply be inaccessible through empirical modes of knowing – the ultimate

subject that can never become an object of knowledge. Perhaps the best we can do, Nash argues, is “to nibble away at the fringes of this age-old mystery.” I am less pessimistic about our ability to make inroads into the seemingly “ineffable phenomenon” of either consciousness or ‘C’. Just as we have been able to unravel the fundamental forces of nature, the chemical processes of living systems, and the neuroscience that underlies much of what we know about behavior and neuropathology, I believe, with Churchland (2007), that further research and development of an appropriate vocabulary with greater semantic clarity will yield a better understanding of consciousness and ‘C’ in time.

Nash concludes by stating that, “In the meantime, I think we can do a better job of ‘nibbling’ if we recognize and address existing obstacles in a constructive and collaborative manner.” I completely agree and believe that this essay provides valuable guidance toward that end.

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