

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

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The Study of Consciousness is Mired in Complexities and Difficulties. Can they be Resolved? by Jonathan Nash, reviewed by Anna Aragno

This is a well written, much awaited, and much needed, paper addressing the semantic and definitional problems in the current use of the umbrella term “consciousness.” I believe all in related fields would agree that, to paraphrase T. Reik’s pithy phrase, ‘at times it means one thing, at times another, more often it means nothing at all!’ I am familiar with the eminent author of this paper and given the excellence of scholarship, presentation, and organization of its content, I would not presume to “review” it but will limit myself to a few comments. Moreover, other reviewers have already gone into the details.

Already in the abstract Nash makes quite clear what he intends to cover and despite claiming that this not a ‘review’ it actually is, a very comprehensive review of the topic and its definitional over-extended confusion of tongues. He also states from the outset his advocacy for “greater adherence to the requirements of an operational definition in research” announcing his rejection of the notion of consciousness as a noun, or ‘thing,’ the correlate of which can be localized in the brain. Rather he takes a “process” approach to the study and research of consciousness which, as he makes clear throughout, will probably require a multifaceted array of different approaches for its multiple forms and manifestations. In this he echoes Freud who, already in 1900, found that we may quite possibly find many different kinds and levels (today we would say ‘organizations’) of states of consciousness each quite diverse and unknown to the other. I am in full agreement with all of Nash’s points, so far.

In addition to a thorough coverage of the literature the paper offers an ample amount of relevant ‘quotes’ underscoring the depth of research that went into its preparation. This includes a brief look at the etymology of the word as well as its dictionary definitions. These, however, while of interest in the evolution of the word ‘consciousness,’ only add to the current definitional confusion which begs for more precise and exact definitional distinctions. To this point Nash offers a useful solution for the most basic distinction; the use of lower-case c for the medical/physiological ‘awake’ state, and a capitalized C for the psychological/mental state of conscious awareness, a point to which I will return. In this, again, he is not too far from Freud who, for his first theory of mind (the topographical) initialed the three systems Ucs, Pcs, Conscious, for Unconscious, Preconscious and Conscious.

Nash addresses sociolinguistic factors, even listing counts in the frequency of mentions of six different category-varieties wherein authors equate with c. Towards the end of the paper, he makes a digression turning to the altered states

associated with Eastern religious practices that do not lend themselves to empirical research and for which no adequate descriptives exist in English. And so we come to language.

Whereas nothing seems have been left out on the subject of this paper I would point out that no mention at all here is made of the psychoanalytic dialogue and the meaning of “becoming consciously aware” in the orbit of this specific semantic field. While it is true that Nash does not set out to find solutions or explanations, given the centrality of this term to psychoanalytic work I am surprised by this omission. I have not studied the many different situations in which the term ‘conscious’ is used here cited by Nash but I do know that consciousness of anything entails bringing one’s full attention to it and *naming it in words*. This is the significance of ‘becoming conscious’ in the psychoanalytic dialogue, a specific process created by a semantic interpretive field designed to ‘make the unconscious conscious,’ a situation that I have studied, written about, and am deeply familiar with. In the psychoanalytic dialogue the significance of becoming conscious refers to ‘becoming aware of *being aware*’ as a result of linguistic working-through in the process.

Underlying the semantic problems which are the main focus of this paper there is a far greater problem, which is the lack of a scientific paradigm through which to systematize ‘meaning.’ There is no meaning without signification and no signification without ‘referencing’ a semiotic step along a developmental line. Nash mentions the stream of consciousness only in passing but it is quite central to the whole issue. Consider for a moment what the stream would look like without language to contour its banks? Consciousness is not merely proprioception, or being awake, or even checking out with eyes shut! Being Conscious is always to be *consciously aware* of something specific that language has pointed out in a particular semantic field, and so, a way or a form of knowing. For all else we can have only prefix descriptives. As B. Russel claimed, what is feasible scientifically, is a study of forms. From that premise maybe more discrete distinctions will be found and named thanks to Nash’s having brought the need for ‘definitional specificity’ to our attention.

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