

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

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The author is to be commended for a very thorough job of tracing the history and the many uses and definitions of the term consciousness and its many synonyms and cognates. This history was brought up to the present day by way of his meta-analysis of the reviews of a recent article on animal consciousness. This topic could not be more timely, given the explosion of both empirical brain-scanning research, as well as philosophical inquiry, dealing with this most elusive of concepts. Arguably, much needless debate among consciousness researchers and theorizers is the result of a lack of agreement in defining consciousness, as this article makes abundantly clear.

The separation of the medical and phenomenal conceptions of consciousness is especially useful, and I found the argument for C as a process rather than a thing to be compelling. Bringing in the Whorfian hypothesis, that the availability of words in a particular language can constrain the thinking of a speaker of that language about a particular topic, was certainly appropriate. Concluding with the conception of consciousness within Eastern philosophy was an approach I very much appreciated.

My one disagreement with the positions espoused in this excellent article concerns the second point of the Summary: "Any attempt to formulate an operational definition of 'C' needs to account for both conscious and unconscious states." I am actually *not* uncomfortable with the "corollary that C ceases during unconscious states." Later recalling perceptions that occurred while unconscious does not prove, I believe, that the person possessed Consciousness at the time those perceptions were registered and thus made accessible to later recall. If a Yogi can attain a state of awareness during sleep states, then, I would argue that the Yogi was not unconscious during sleep, and I would expect that the Yogi's brain activity would reflect that and differ from the brain activity normally associated with sleep.

I lean towards the quote from Alan Watts: "Because what consciousness is, is a rather specialized form of awareness. When you look around the room, you are conscious of as much as you can notice, and you see an enormous number of things which you do not notice." He is not using awareness as a synonym for Consciousness, hence the use of the modifier "specialized". Watts's view is consistent with the "spotlight" conception of Consciousness. In that vein, I would define Consciousness more specifically as that mental state that has contents in a spotlight that can be reported on, surrounded by the contents of the preconscious, which may enter the spotlight, and unconscious contents that cannot. Mental states lacking that spotlight of "specialized awareness" are lacking in Consciousness, though the subject may certainly be said to be conscious.

In my opinion, there is a useful distinction to be made between mere sentience and actual Consciousness, and a person can certainly be sentient, at least in terms of reflexes, even while unconscious. In the search for neural correlates, evidence of Consciousness generally relies on contemporaneous verbal reports. I would suggest that a useful definition of C is a mental state that allows a person to reflect on internal and external perceptions and, *in principle*, report on them. Being unable to communicate due to paralysis, for example, would not rule out the person possessing C, nor does the lack of communication that we can understand rule out the possibility of C in infra-human organisms (e.g., whales, dolphins, Great apes, and possibly elephants). Evidence of self-awareness in more highly evolved animals might well be taken as evidence of C in these animals. However, I would not rule out a priori the possibility that C could occur during states defined physiologically as unconscious, which is why the author's distinction between Consciousness and consciousness is so important.

Minor points:

“... everyone innately understands what it is you are writing about, i.e., the meaning of consciousness.” In this context, “i.e.” should be “e.g.”

“Other examples of conflation and diversity of terms in the consciousness literature are listed below.” They are somewhere “below,” but I think it would be clearer to say they are in the next section.

“For example, here is a laundry list of various elements of mentation that have been associated with, or equivocated to, the notion of ‘C’.” Given my understanding of the author's meaning here, I think “equivocated” should be changed to “equated”.