

Review of: "Growing Confidence and Remaining Uncertainty About Animal Consciousness"

Jonathan Nash

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Dear Dr. Irwin,

I admire your courage and determination in attempting to clarify and shed light on this age-old notion of consciousness, the pursuit of a consensual definition of which has eluded the most brilliant minds in Western science, philosophy, and psychology. I have concerns. I found your response to Dr. Martin's review (Feb.15) very much aligned with my concerns:

"The truth is that I don't like to use the term consciousness because of its countless definitions, its various meanings to different observers in different contexts, its variable forms and gradients, and for being such a human-centered concept; but it is so widely used and intuitively understood that I have stuck with it so far. In my own research, I refer to 'subjective experience' or 'phenomenology' as opposed to 'consciousness' whenever I can. I certainly do want to stay away from any implied equivalence between 'consciousness' and 'metacognition'."

I consider your struggles (and you are far from alone in this) to define 'consciousness' and distinguish it from other similar terms such as 'subjective experience', 'phenomenology', 'metacognition', various notions of 'self', etc., as primarily an issue of semantic conflation – what I have dubbed "The Semantic Conundrum Plaguing Consciousness Research" (an unpublished paper in final draft form which I intend to submit to Qeios in the near future).

My thesis is rather simple: that using the term "consciousness" for endeavors such as yours, and especially within projects such as the search for the NCC, is an unfortunate choice of terminology that is easily conflated and therefore fundamentally flawed.

Here are three basic arguments for your consideration:

1. TERMINOLOGY

The term 'consciousness' in Western philosophy and science is a relative newcomer within the broader context of the evolution of human thought and self-reflection; e.g., compare one of the earliest known mentions in Descartes' *Meditations* (1641) to early Hindu treatises on consciousness (*cit*), self (*atman*), and mind (*manus*) found within foundational texts such as the Upanishads from 500-700 BC (more on this later). Over the years, as you have mentioned, it has become a generic term with many usages.

For example, any modern-day doctor, nurse, or EMT can make a diagnosis on-the-spot and declare that a patient has lost 'consciousness' (aka is unconscious), which from a cognitive perspective is equivalent to the loss of conscious

awareness. However, there are also several key neurophysiological diagnostic parameters that accompany this state, which are indicative and measurable, i.e., heart and respiratory rates, blood pressure, pupil dilation, galvanic skin response, etc. (more about this later). Is this the same ‘consciousness’ you are trying to define in your article? Are various states or levels of consciousness associated with the various stages of coma, or general anesthesia, equivalent in meaning to commonly used terms such as waking consciousness, sleep consciousness, altered states of consciousness, phenomenal consciousness, witness consciousness, and consciousness-itself?

To exemplify these concerns, I have highlighted various sections of your paper (please forgive my use of your earlier version, but it still serves as a fitting template for my feedback) which, in my opinion, demonstrate an unfortunate conflation of terms – see attached. My comments can be found under the REVIEW TAB.

1. UNDERSTANDING

Your paper, and all those listed in your References Section, are predicated on the assumption that ‘consciousness’ can be defined, understood, and measured.

However, this is strictly a Western bias. According to Hindu ontology, to which I subscribe, the notion of consciousness (translated as *cit*) is beyond intellectual inquiry and understanding; is not accessible through empirical modes of knowing; cannot be described by human language; is the ultimate subject and therefore it can never become an object of knowledge; and can only be known through the direct experience of an enlightened mind (Gupta, B. 2003. *Cit Consciousness*. New Delhi, Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press pp.21-34). If these assertions are in fact true, they would certainly point to a reasonable explanation for the failure of Western science and philosophy to articulate a cogent and consensual definition.

1. CONSCIOUSNESS AS A MENTAL STATE

Treating ‘consciousness’ as strictly a mental/cognitive phenomenon is insufficient, in my opinion.

Hopefully, the scientific/philosophical community will eventually abandon their futile pursuit of the NCC and instead focus on the notions of conscious and unconscious awareness as comprehensive biological states inclusive of neurophysiological, biochemical, and mental/cognitive parameters.

In conclusion, I found this paper, in its intention to be comprehensive, an unfortunate cacophony of conflated terms and concepts. In your reply to Dr. Martin’s review comments, you justify your use of the term ‘consciousness’ because it is so “widely used and intuitively understood”. However, one could just as easily substitute “widely used and mis-understood”. When you state that “in my own research, I refer to ‘subjective experience’ or ‘phenomenology’ as opposed to ‘consciousness’”, this seems like an admission that you would much prefer to focus on well-defined and measurable aspects of conscious mentation – and I wholeheartedly agree with that.

Since this is intended as an interactive process between author and reviewer, I welcome your reactions, comments, and feedback to my remarks, and hope to hear from you in the near future.



Sincerely,

Dr. Jonathan D. Nash

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