



New Thoughts on Consciousness

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The problem of consciousness in Philosophy of Mind is nothing new; either the materialist side is favoured, and then either the mind becomes the brain or consciousness becomes ineffective, or consciousness itself is favoured and the problem becomes that of explaining how it has any relationship with the physical. I am about to solve this problem (ha, not in my wildest dreams). No, I will not solve the problem, but I will attempt to introduce some new ideas to the equation in the hopes of sparking new life and ideas in the debate. The views of Ned Block, from his paper Concepts of Consciousness, will be examined and taken as a rough example (given that it's all I'm looking at) of current Philosophy of the Mind. It has the benefit of looking at consciousness in a variety of ways which will be analysed. Some phenomenological ideas from the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception will be used as a new approach to consciousness, particularly the notion of generality and his thoughts on sensations. I will also argue that Block's view of consciousness assumes too much under that notion. We will begin with a treatment of his concepts of consciousness.

Phenomenal consciousness (from here on P-consciousness) is the direct experience we have with

things. It is described as the “what it is like”¹ to experience something or to have an experience of something. Those experiences which fall under P-consciousness include “sensations, feelings and perceptions, but... would also include thoughts, wants and emotions.”² These are the properties or contents of P-consciousness because I can experience them: I feel the smoothness of the table with my hand, I hear the voices of people behind me and I prepare or sketch out what I will write through thoughts in my head. To be P-conscious of these things is to know what its like to feel, hear and think them. P-consciousness is also described as being “often – perhaps even always – representational” and “distinct from any cognitive, intentional or functional property”³. P-consciousness must be representational because it has already been described as the ‘what it is like’ character of experience; in order to know what it is like to feel the table I must get a portrayal, a version, an account or a depiction of what it is like to actually feel the table. But P-consciousness is also passively receptive or sponge-like in character; otherwise it would display more active, causal or transmitting features of cognition or mental activity which is purposively directed at things.

The next form of consciousness Block distinguishes is access-consciousness (A-consciousness). A-consciousness is described as “an information processing correlate... [which] mirrors P-consciousness as well as a

¹ Block, Ned. "Concepts of Consciousness." *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. New York: Oxford University press, 2002. Print. P. 206

² Ibid

³ Ibid, 207

non-ad hoc information processing notion can.”⁴ So while P-consciousness is the passive receiver of experiential content, A-consciousness actively takes up this content for cognitive, intentional and functional purposes. What this means is that “a representation is A-conscious if it is broadcast for free use in reasoning and for direct ‘rational’ control of action (including reporting)” or is made “directly available for global control.”⁵ For a representation to become A-conscious some content of P-consciousness is rationally taken up by A-consciousness with intentional and functional purposes. To use an example, I can feel my feet on my shoes; they are warm and sweaty and one shoe is tied slightly tighter. According to this theory I’ve been P-conscious, that is I’ve felt or had a representation, of them the whole time, but only by attending to them now to talk about them have I become A-conscious of them, that is I broadcast the representation so that I could talk about them.

A third type of consciousness identified is monitoring-consciousness (M-consciousness). Some notions that M-consciousness encompasses are of “a form of P-consciousness, namely P-consciousness of one’s own states or of the self...internal scanning... a conscious state as one that is accompanied by a thought to the effect that one is in that state.”⁶ The idea behind M-consciousness is that of consciousness internally reflecting back on itself to examine and take stock of its own thoughts and be aware of itself doing this. Another definition given for M-consciousness is “S is a monitoring-conscious state ↔ S is

⁴ Ibid, 208

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, 214

phenomenally presented in a thought about S.”⁷ M-consciousness is not the same as P-consciousness. If I am being M-conscious it means that I am having a P-conscious thought (that is a passive and not accessed thought) which is reflecting back on my own thoughts, or specifically on the fact that I am M-conscious.

M-consciousness seems to rest on and presuppose some kind of self-consciousness (S-consciousness), given that it is my own thoughts as my own and as being reflected upon. S-consciousness for Block is “the possession of the concept of the self and the ability to use this concept in thinking about oneself.”⁸ That is, I am aware of who and what I am, namely a person constituted by a body, which I differentiate from other people and things around me, with my own thoughts, emotions and perceptions, all of which fall under and are distinguished by a name. And I can bring this, and all that it contains, to bare on itself. This is not a major area of concern for him and seems most relevant here as a ground for M-consciousness (not that it isn’t a unique part of consciousness).

While the efforts to make clear the notion of consciousness by classifying different concepts of consciousness is well intentioned, there are still inconsistencies in it, and so the ambiguity remains. Both A-consciousness and P-consciousness involve representations of P-contents of experience, but the important difference is that it is only broadcast when it has been processed by A-consciousness for reasoning, action or reporting. So what was happening before the

⁷ Ibid, 215

⁸ Ibid, 213

broadcast? To illustrate this Block uses the example of being deeply absorbed in a conversation and only after some length of time suddenly realizing that there has been a pneumatic drill making noise outside. What this is supposed to show is that “you were P-conscious of the noise all along, but at noon you are both P-conscious and A-conscious of it... only at noon is the content of your representation of the drill broadcast”.⁹ The initial temptation would be to say that we were not aware of it until noon. But because it’s P-conscious we have a representation of it. How could we have a representation of it and not be aware of it? To have a representation seems to imply awareness. If we have a P-conscious representation of it that means we were hearing it, yet because it wasn’t processed or broadcast we also were not hearing it; the sound was only reported after it was broadcast by A-consciousness.

It could also be said that we were hearing the drill but we weren’t consciously hearing or consciously aware of it.¹⁰ This notion of having a representation that we don’t consciously recognize still seems dubious. Where is it and what is it doing when we aren’t conscious of it? Is it just hanging out in the brain ready and waiting to be broadcast? It looks like we have these P-contents all along but only consciously when A-consciousness broadcasts them. But in that case there is no more P-consciousness because we only become conscious of its contents when they are accessed, thus making P-consciousness nothing but the passive, unresponsive and unconscious receiving of P-contents. And this was supposed to be the stage of

⁹ Ibid, 212

¹⁰ Ibid

real experience, where we get the 'what it is like' of things. To even have separate P and A-consciousnesses seems pointless now. Why have two types of consciousnesses, one of which is an unconscious receiver, when it would be simpler to have one which both takes in the contents and broadcasts those which are going to be used?

A minor question of perhaps little importance is who or what controls A-consciousness? Who, if anyone or anything, decides what will be broadcast? Of course the most vigorous, forceful and potent phenomena will be thrust into consciousness, but what about all the average and basic ones; what decides when they will be processed? If we have control of it then we should theoretically be able to stop things like pain from being broadcast. If it's an unconscious decision then we have no control over our conscious attention (yes I exaggerate).

On its own P-consciousness is not without its inconsistencies which will now be looked at. To recap, the contents or properties of P-consciousness are sensations, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, wants and emotions. It was also said that they are distinct from any cognitive, intentional or functional property. Expanding on these concepts Block writes "Cognitive = essentially involving thought; intentional properties = properties in virtue of which a representation or state is about something; functional properties = e.g. properties definable in terms of a computer program."¹¹ This is just plain absurd. Are we really supposed to believe that all of the senses have no functional properties, that there is no practical or operative value, means, quality or attribute to being aware of our surroundings; or that perception, the representation of

¹¹ Ibid, 207

which, is not about the thing perceived; and most importantly that thoughts *are distinct from essentially involving thought or properties of thought?* This problem, like some of the problems mentioned above, seems to derive from the differentiation of P and A-consciousnesses into the passive/receptive and active/processing/broadcasting natures of each one. The problem with P-consciousness is that because it is the passive consciousness it is difficult to reconcile that with any phenomenal experience which must necessarily involve some activity.

The main problem with P-consciousness is that it takes perception, emotion and thought and turns them into properties or contents of consciousness when in truth they are capacities in their own right. As we begin to look at the work of Merleau-Ponty we will see what the problem is of reducing a perception to consciousness. He writes “we believed we knew what feeling, sensing and hearing were ... the traditional notion of sensation was not a concept born of reflection, but a late product of thought directed towards objects, the last element in representation of the world”.¹² The representation is not the sensation but a thought about sensation; it is what we get when we try to remember it after it has happened, when we try to represent what it was like to have the experience we had previously. What are represented to us are qualities. In the language of qualities “to see is to have colours or lights, to hear is to have sounds, to sense is to have qualities. To know what sense-experience is, then, is it not enough to have seen a red... But red and green are not sensations, they are the sensed, and quality is not an

¹² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 1981. Print. P.10

element of consciousness, but a property of the object.”¹³ To have a representation of red is to take a quality of an object and to try to reconstruct it in consciousness as an object of its own. But nowhere in our actual experience is red its own isolated object, it is always sensed or perceived as a quality of an object; I can not separate the redness from my notepad and any more than I can its texture or its rectangularity. Thought and emotion, like perception, are not simply isolated objects in consciousness but are ways for me to go out and meet the world and people in it. In the same way that perception is the way I sense and find the world, emotion is the way I feel towards and about people and so is how I meet them, and thought is less a matter of retreating from the world than it is a matter of what I can do in the world;¹⁴ what all three presuppose is an intentional relationship between myself, in one or another given capacity, and the object of my intention insofar as it presents itself to me, for me, in a particular way. Thought, emotion and perception are no longer objects in consciousness but are those capacities that allow for and give rise to consciousness.

Thought, emotion and perception are what Merleau-Ponty calls generalities. On this notion he writes “round the human world which each of us has made for himself is a world in general terms to which one must first of all belong on order to be able to enclose oneself in [a] particular context” that being “my organism, as a prepersonal cleaving to a general form”,¹⁵ and from this I “[develop my] personal acts into stable dispositional

¹³ Ibid, 4

¹⁴ Ibid, 137

¹⁵ Ibid, 84

tendencies.”¹⁶ Generality can be thought of as general possibilities given our human form. We have visual, auditory, tactile possibilities as well as those of love and hate and to think creatively, but these only come about from the generalities of perception, emotion and thought. These generalities come imbued with intentionality; they are directed generally towards objects in the world: perception towards the visual, auditory and tactile qualities of objects, emotion towards being with other people, thought towards action. But these generalities are not fixed as general but develop themselves to greater specificity as our intentions specify. Perception is already developed towards specific qualities of things, but even more so I can develop my hearing towards finding beats and specific sounds in music. In this generality is contained the problem of the pneumatic drill addressed earlier. The sound was pushed into the background because “through this generality we still ‘have [it]’, but just enough to hold [it] at a distance from [me].”¹⁷ Generalities are our capacities which we use and lose ourselves in depending on how the situation is presented to us. Earlier, the conversation was what was most calling us at that time and so the noise of the drill was pushed to the background, held at bay. We were hearing it but it wasn’t important at the time because the conversation was. The problem of representations and whether or not they are broadcast is no longer an issue.

The point of all this is that perhaps it is time so have a fresh view on consciousness. To view consciousness as a generality would be to see it as a

¹⁶ Ibid, 146

¹⁷ Ibid, 162

general feature of the human being. As given, consciousness would be something that can come to be highly specified out of its general being as conscious awareness. At certain times it could resemble P-consciousness becoming aware of the phenomenal aspects of perception, at other times it could resemble S-consciousness being aware of itself as a total being and other times becoming highly aware of its own thoughts etc... However the only way to come to anything close to a position as this is to realize that everything that formed the contents of consciousness, sensations, perceptions, feelings, thoughts, emotions, wants etc... are themselves not objects in consciousness but opportunities for consciousness. Consciousness, as a generality would certainly be related to thought, maybe even identical, but just how similar is the topic of another debate.