

CONSCIOUSNESS: HOW MUCH IS THAT IN REAL MONEY?

DANIEL C. DENNETT

in: Dennet, D.C., *Sweet Dreams*, The MIT Press, 2005 (pp. 173-178)

Consciousness often seems to be utterly mysterious. I suspect that the principle cause of this bafflement is a sort of accounting error that is engendered by a familiar series of challenges and responses. A simplified version of one such path to mystery land runs as follows:

Phil: What is consciousness?

Sy: Well, some things—such as stones and can-openers—are utterly lacking in any point of view, any subjectivity at all, while other things—such as you and me—do have points of view:

private, perspectival, interior ways of being apprised of some limited aspects of the wider world and our bodies' relations to it. We lead our lives, suffering and enjoying, deciding and choosing our actions, guided by this "first-person" access that we have. To be conscious is to be an agent with a point of view.

Phil: But surely there is more to it than that! A cherry tree has limited access to the ambient temperature at its surface, and can be (mis-)guided into blooming inopportunistically by unseasonable warm weather; a robot with video camera "eyes" and micro-phone "ears" may discriminate and respond aptly to hundreds of different aspects of its wider world; my own immune system can sense, discriminate, and respond appropriately (for the most part) to millions of different eventualities. Each of these is an agent (of sorts) with a point of view (of sorts) but none of them is conscious.

Sy: Yes, indeed; there is more. We conscious beings have capabilities these simpler agents lack. We don't just notice things and respond to them; we notice that we notice things. More exactly, among the many discriminative states that our bodies

may enter (including the states of our immune systems, our autonomic nervous systems, our digestive systems, and so forth), a subset of them can be discriminated in turn by higher-order discriminations which then become sources of guidance for higher-level control activities. In us, this recursive capacity for self-monitoring exhibits no clear limits—beyond those of available time and energy. If somebody throws a brick at you, you see it coming and duck. But you also discriminate the fact that you visually discriminated the projectile, and can then discriminate the further fact that you can tell visual from tactile discriminations (usually), and then go on to reflect on the fact that you are also able to recall recent sensory discriminations in some detail, and that there is a difference between experiencing something and recalling the experience of something, and between thinking about the difference between recollection and experience and thinking about the difference between seeing and hearing, and so forth, 'til bedtime.

Phil: But surely there is more to it than that! Although existing robots may have quite paltry provisions for such recursive self-monitoring, I can readily imagine this particular capacity being added to some robot of the future. However deftly it exhibited its capacity to generate and react appropriately to "reflective" analyses of its underlying discriminative states, it wouldn't be conscious—not the way we are.

Sy: Are you sure you can imagine this? Phil: Oh yes, absolutely sure. There would be, perhaps, some sort of executive point of view definable by analysis of the power such a robot would have to control itself based on these reactive capacities, but this robotic subjectivity would be a pale shadow of ours. When it uttered "it seems to me..." its utterances wouldn't really mean anything—or at least, they wouldn't mean what I mean when I tell you what it's like to be me, how things seem to me.

Sy: I don't know how you can be so confident of that, but in any case, you're right that there is more to consciousness than that. Our discriminative states are not just discriminable; they have the power to provoke preferences in us. Given choices between them, we are not indifferent, but these preferences are themselves subtle, variable, and highly dependent on other conditions. There is a time for chocolate and a time for cheese, a time for blue and a time for yellow. In short (and oversimplifying hugely), many if not all of our discriminative states have what might be called a dimension of affective valence. We care which states we are in, and this caring is reflected in our dispositions to change state.

Phil: But surely there is more to it than that! When I contemplate the luscious warmth of the sunlight falling on that old brick wall, it's not just that I prefer looking at the bricks to looking down at the dirty sidewalk beneath them. I can readily imagine outfitting our imaginary robot with built-in preferences for every possible sequence of its internal states, but it would still not have anything like my conscious appreciation of the visual poetry of those craggy, rosy bricks.

Sy: Yes, I grant it; there is more. For one thing, you have metapreferences perhaps you wish you could stop those sexual associations from interfering with your more exalted appreciation of the warmth of that sunlight on the bricks, but at the same time (roughly) you are delighted by the persistence of those saucy intruders, distracting as they are, but . . . what was it ~ you were trying to think about? Your stream of consciousness is replete with an apparently unending supply of associations. As each fleeting occupant of the position of greatest influence gives way to its successors, any attempt to halt this helter-skelter parade and monitor the details of the associations only generates a further flood of evanescent states, and so on. Coalitions of themes

and projects may succeed in dominating "attention" for some useful and highly productive period of time, fending off would-be digressions for quite a while, and creating the sense of an abiding self or ego taking charge of the whole operation. And so on.

Phil: But surely there is more to it than that! And now I begin to see what is missing from your deliberately evasive list of additions. All these dispositions and metadispositions to enter into states and metastases and metametastates of reflection about reflection could be engineered (I dimly imagine) into some robot. The trajectory of its internal state-switching could, I suppose, look strikingly similar to the "first-person" account I might give of my own stream of consciousness, but those states of the robot would have no actual feel, no phenomenal properties at all! You're still leaving out what the philosophers call qualia.

Sy: Actually, I'm still leaving out lots of properties. I've hardly begun acknowledging all the oversimplifications of my story so far, but now you seem to want to preempt any further additions from me by insisting that there are properties of consciousness that are altogether different from the properties I've described so far. I thought I was adding "phenomenal" properties in response to your challenge, but now you tell me I haven't even begun. Before I can tell if I'm leaving these properties out, I have to know what they are. Can you give me a clear example of a phenomenal property? For instance, if I used to like a particular shade of yellow, but thanks to some traumatic experience (I got struck by a car of that color, let's suppose), that shade of yellow now makes me very uneasy (whether or not it reminds me explicitly of the accident), would this suffice to change the phenomenal properties of my experience of that shade of yellow?

Phil: Not necessarily. The dispositional property of making you uneasy is not itself

a phenomenal property. Phenomenal properties are, by definition, not dispositional but rather intrinsic and accessible only from the first-person point of view .

Thus we arrive in mysteryland. If you define qualia as intrinsic properties of experiences considered in isolation from all their causes and effects, logically independent of all dispositional properties, then they are logically guaranteed to elude all broad functional analysis – but it's an empty victory, since there is no reason to believe such properties exist. To see this, compare the qualia of experience to the value of money. Some naive Americans can't get it out of their heads that dollars, unlike francs and marks and yen, have intrinsic value ("How much is that in real money?"). They are quite content to "reduce" the value of other currencies in dispositional terms to their exchange rate with dollars (or goods and services), but they have a hunch that dollars are different. Every dollar, they declare, has something logically independent of its functionalistic exchange powers, which we might call its vim. So defined, the vim of each dollar is guaranteed to elude the theories of economists forever, but we have no reason to believe in it – aside from the heartfelt hunches of those naive Americans, which can be explained without being honored.

Some participants in the consciousness debates simply demand, flat out, that their intuitions about phenomenal properties are a nonnegotiable starting point for any science of consciousness. Such a conviction must be considered an interesting symptom, deserving a diagnosis, a datum that any science of consciousness must account for, in the same spirit that economists and psychologists might set out to explain why it is that so many people succumb to the potent illusion that money has intrinsic value.

There are many properties of conscious

states that can and should be subjected to further scientific investigation right now, and once we get accounts of them in place, we may well find that they satisfy us as an explanation of what consciousness is. After all, this is what has happened in the case of the erstwhile mystery of what life is. Vitalism – the insistence that there is some big, mysterious extra ingredient in all-living things – turns out to have been not a deep insight but a failure of imagination. Inspired by that happy success story, we can proceed with our scientific exploration of consciousness. If the day arrives when all these acknowledged debts are paid and we plainly see that something big is missing (it should stick out like a sore thumb at some point, if it is really important) those with the unshakable hunch will get to say they told us so. In the meantime, they can worry about how to fend off the diagnosis that they, like the vitalists before them, have been misled by an illusion.

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