

Consciousness and Experience

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Introduction

Humans are alleged to have consciousness. I say “alleged” not because I doubt the assertion but because the term “consciousness” is, in my opinion, terribly misused. It has many meanings, and people employing the term don’t usually make clear what meaning they are using; instead they simply assume that others know what they are talking about. A great danger of this approach is that one can use the same term in different senses and thereby assert things that actually make no sense.

I prefer to speak of being conscious rather than of consciousness. “Consciousness” is a noun and implies a static thing, while “being conscious” is a verbal phrase – still a noun (a gerund), but implying some activity. The term “consciousness” connotes a kind of fixity or substantiality that is not in fact found in experience. One’s experience is not a static thing; it is ever changing, a process. When one examines one’s experience one finds no thing that is consciousness. Nevertheless, the term is widely used, so we must make some sense of it. We can say, if we need a noun phrase, that consciousness is the state of being conscious or the capacity for being conscious. But what, then, does “conscious” mean?

“Conscious” and “Consciousness”

The literature on consciousness contains many different meanings of the term. A very good list is found in *Consciousness, A User's Guide*, by Adam Zeman. Zeman says that the origin of the term is the Latin *scio*, meaning “I know” and *cum*, “with”. This implies that consciousness is “knowledge with,” shared knowledge, knowledge shared with another person or knowledge shared with oneself (as when one talks to oneself). The

Latin *conscientia* means a witness to the facts, whether external or in the workings of the mind.¹

The first sense of the term “conscious” is simply being awake. When one is awake one is capable of making a well-integrated response to one’s environment. Humorously one can say that consciousness is that annoying interlude between naps.

The second sense of “conscious” is being aware. To be conscious is to be aware of something. In this sense, “consciousness” is ordinary experience, which is always experience of something, such as people, trees, books, food – all the things around us – or of subjective things such as bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc., the contents of consciousness. Zeman says "The interplay of sensation, memory, emotion and action is the foundation of ordinary experience."² He quotes William James in *Principles of Psychology*, as saying that consciousness is “the current content of perceptual experience.”

However – and here is where the definition of the term gets slippery – sometimes the term “consciousness” means not the content but the container, that which holds or includes the content. Consider phrases such as "It was not in my consciousness ..." and "expanding one's consciousness" Clearly the metaphor is that consciousness contains something else, and if consciousness is expanded it can contain more things or perhaps the same things more vividly.

As quoted in Zeman, James lists several characteristics of consciousness.³ In the following list, substitute for “consciousness” “the content of perceptual experience”. If the sentence does not make sense, substitute “the container of perceptual experience”.

- Consciousness is stable for short periods of time, up to a few seconds. [Content]
- Consciousness is changeful over time. [Content]
- Consciousness is selective, with a foreground and a background, and a limited capacity. [Container, that which has capacity. But also content, in that foreground and background are contents.]
- Attention can be directed, one can shift the focus of consciousness [Container. The container focuses on some of the contents to the exclusion of others.]
- Consciousness ranges over innumerable contents. [Container]
- Consciousness is continuous over time, in the sense that memory allows one to connect what one is conscious of in the present with what one was conscious of in the past. [Container. Certainly the contents vary over time.]
- Consciousness is "intentional," in that it is of something, directed at something. [Container]
- Consciousness is aspectual, with a limited point of view, conditioned by the perspective of one's viewpoint. [Container]
- Consciousness is personal, involving a subject. [This is the most problematic of these assertions. Is the container the subject? Or are some of the contents the subject?]

¹ Zeman, *Consciousness, A User's Guide*, p. 15,

² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

Yet another meaning of the term “consciousness” is mind or the subjective, interior aspect of the human being. Zeman says "...'conscious' in this third sense can be used to report our acquaintance with any state of affairs whatsoever"⁴, whether public or private. In this sense one is conscious of anything that passes through one's mind, and the term "conscious" means "knowing". Consciousness in this sense (the state of knowing) is related to intentions and purposes, as in "a conscious attempt to influence the proceedings"⁵. There is a link between consciousness and volition, the act of willing, or its outcome, deliberate action. This sense of "consciousness" bridges perception and action. One does something deliberately when one knows that one is doing it and plans and intends to do it.

Another meaning is the way one interprets one's world in a more global sense, particularly politically. Marxists talk about “bourgeois consciousness” or “proletarian consciousness,” meaning the categories people in those economic classes use to think about economic or political events or their place in the social order, particularly if those categories are not examined but instead are used uncritically. In this sense “consciousness” refers to characteristics of the container. The container is like a filter or colored lens, such that one pays more attention to certain contents than to others without realizing that one is doing so.

Finally, the term may be used to refer to a conscious being such as a person or even a deity: “He could sense a consciousness somewhere in the distance” or “a vast consciousness watching over us.” Such figurative speech – technically called *synecdoche*, using a part to represent the whole – is not at all how I am using the term, however.

“Self-conscious” and “Self-consciousness”

The relationship between consciousness and self-consciousness is as confused as the meaning of “consciousness”. Some say that self-consciousness is an essential component of consciousness and other say it is not. They are using the terms “consciousness” and “self-consciousness” in different senses.

Zeman helpfully lists several common meanings of the term “self-conscious.” The first is awkward or prone to embarrassment. Self-consciousness is excessive sensitivity to the attention of others when it is directed towards us. An essential element of self-consciousness in this sense is knowing that others are conscious of us.

Another sense of “self-conscious” is self-detecting. One can detect things that are happening to one or are caused by one, as opposed to happening to or caused by someone else. We ascribe this knowledge in greater and greater degree to children as they grow out of infancy. The infant, we surmise, has little self-consciousness in the sense of being able to detect what happens as a result of its own activity as opposed to someone else's. As children grow older they acquire self-consciousness in this sense.

⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

An elaboration of this sense of self-consciousness is self-recognizing. When one is self-conscious, the contents of one's experience include a concept or idea of oneself, a self-representation. This gives rise, says Zeman, to second-order evaluative emotions such as envy, pride, guilt and shame, which require a sense (concept) of oneself as the object of others' attentions. First-order emotions, such as joy, anger, sadness, interest, disgust and fear, do not presuppose any self-representation.

Having an idea of oneself, one can then pay attention to one's experience in a different way, knowing that it is subjective. This is another meaning of "self-conscious": knowing that one is conscious and paying attention not just to the contents of consciousness but to the fact of being conscious as well (which then becomes one of the contents of consciousness). One distinguishes between things that are open to public inspection, such as physical things, and things that are private, such as dreams. One conceives of oneself as subject of experience, not just as a person being observed by others. One pays attention to the subjectivity of experience in addition to the other objects of experience.

Finally, one can speak of being self-conscious in a broader sense as having self-knowledge, one's knowledge of the entire psychological and social context in which one comes to know oneself.

Degrees of Being Conscious

The more complexity of interiority one has, and the higher the degree of focused attention, the more conscious one is.

Being conscious entails vividness of the object of which one is conscious. To be conscious involves the following:

- The world is presented to one with vividness; in other words, one is paying attention to some aspect of the world; and
- At some level one notices, or thinks about, what one is paying attention to (this does not necessarily mean thinking about oneself being conscious); and
- All this happens with sufficient intensity to leave a memory.

Being conscious entails some degree of complexity of interiority, both paying attention to the world and thinking about it or at least having some mental representation of what one is paying attention to.

(There are always pre-conscious mental representations as well, what I call operative⁶ interpretations or perceptual judgments, but what I am referring to here is mental representation sufficiently vibrant to be noticed as such rather than being embedded in the experience so deeply that one does not normally notice it.)

⁶ Something is operative if it is present in and influencing the course of experience, but not focally, not in the "spotlight of attention." "Operative" is contrasted to "thematic," which means "present explicitly" or "focally attended to." See Richard M. Zaner, *The Way of Phenomenology*, p. 115.

There are numerous examples of the opposite of the state of being conscious. One is the so-called consciousness of animals. We cannot know for sure, but we can imagine that the world is presented quite vividly to a dog, but we doubt that the dog thinks about it much. The dog's attention seems to shift quite rapidly as it sniffs at one thing and then barks at another with no behavioral evidence of there being any connection between the two.

Another example is a phenomenon called "highway hypnosis" in which the driver is unable to recall specific moments or events during extended periods of driving.⁷ Certainly one is aware of – in the sense of being responsive to – his or her surroundings, the other cars on the road, the turns and intersections, but one drives automatically or habitually.

You may have had the experience of getting in your car with the intention to go someplace only to find yourself going someplace else, the way you usually go, instead of toward your intended destination. You have spaced out. When one spaces out one's attention goes to something other than the task at hand, for instance to a thought of something different. When one's attention returns to the present-time reality, one does not remember what one did while spacing out. Nor, often, does one remember what one was thinking about. There was not enough attention toward either object of consciousness to produce a lasting memory.

I have had the experience of playing music and being so engrossed in it that afterwards I was unable to remember what I had played. No doubt the music was present quite vividly, but I did not have the presence of mind to think about it. Instead I was wholly enthralled in it.

Once I noticed that while I was doing one of my Qi Gong movements my attention had gone to something else. I had done the movement automatically, without paying attention. After the movement was over I noticed that my mind had wandered and noticed that I had no memory of doing the movement, although I was sure I had done it, as now I was in movement four while previously I had been in movement two. Nor did I remember what I had been thinking about. Some idle thought, no doubt. But I did have enough presence of mind to notice what had just happened. A certain amount of attention was focused on my subjective experience, in addition to attention focused on the external world or the task at hand. This implies that quantity of attention or capacity for attention is an important variable.

All these examples illustrate that what we call conscious experience has some element of thinking about what one is paying attention to. Acute consciousness happens when attention is focused on something – that is, something is present vividly – and at the same time there is some thinking about that same thing. Without the thinking, there is experience, but it is not memorable enough to be called conscious experience.

There is a state in between wide-awake, attentive perception, either of the external world or of the inner world of thought and emotion, and unconscious spacing out.

⁷ TicketSchool.com, defensive driving course. On-line publication; URL = <http://www.ticketschool.com/>.

There are also indistinct and unclear perceptions. There is much more present in any moment of experience than what is focally attended to; with James, it is “the reinstatement of the vague and inarticulate to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.”⁸ Because “being conscious” ordinarily connotes clarity and distinctness of perception, I use “being aware” to denote the broad spectrum of ways we experience and take into account our environment, from clear and distinct perception of publicly-observable Objects⁹ or one’s private ideas to vague and obscure presentations of moods, bodily sensations, the not-fully-attended-to physical environment, etc. I reserve “being conscious” for wakenly and explicitly being aware.

To point out what I mean: until I called it to your attention, you were probably not conscious of the chair pressing against your seat and back. You were not conscious of it, i.e., you were not attending to it, but you were aware of it, it was present in your experience, nevertheless. There is a vast range of objects in one’s experience of which one is not normally conscious – not only the “external horizon”¹⁰ (what one sees out of the corner of one’s eye, background noises, etc.), but also subjective elements such as emotions, moods, bodily sensations, and what Husserl calls “noeses”¹¹ and Peirce calls perceptual judgments¹², operative interpretations that contribute significance to one’s experience such that one experiences an orderly and coherent world of discrete Objects, people, events, institutions, etc., instead of a chaotic flux of sensation. My point is that clear and distinct perception is not the only form of being aware; in fact it is only one end of a continuum, at the other end of which are vague and indistinct presentations, emotional and physical feelings, and finally subliminally or subconsciously presented objects of which one can only with the greatest of difficulty become explicitly conscious.

Consciousness and Self-consciousness

Sometimes being conscious entails thinking about one’s subjective experience while experiencing something, rather than – or in addition to – thinking about the thing itself. One puts some attention on the fact that attention is focused, i.e., that one is conscious of something, as well as on the thing itself. That this type of experience is always vivid and leaves memories leads some to believe that consciousness always entails some degree of self-consciousness.

However I think this is not the case. We need to be careful about the meaning of our words here. Certainly one does not have to have self-knowledge in order to be awake and responsive to one’s surroundings. The question is whether ordinary human

⁸ James, *Psychology*, p. 157

⁹ “Object” with a capital O is a translation of Husserl’s use of the German word *Objekt* as opposed to *Gegenstand*, translated as “object” with a lower-case O (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Dorion Cairns, p. 3, translator’s note 2). An Object (*Objekt*) is public, “there for everyone,” but an object (*Gegenstand*) is simply something present in experience, something of which one is aware in some way. Thus an object (*Gegenstand*) may be public or private.

¹⁰ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, tr. David Carr, p. 162.

¹¹ Husserl, *Ideas*, tr. W. R. Boyce Gibson, pp. 228, 230-231.

¹² C.S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” in *Selected Writings*, pp. 66-67

experience always contains some element – sometimes more pronounced and sometimes less so – of knowledge that one is conscious. I think careful observation of experience will show that sometimes it does and sometimes it does not.

Zeman observes that when we attend most intensely to objects around us or to our own thoughts we speak of “losing ourselves” in our concentration. In such a state one is conscious, but not conscious of oneself or of one’s own state of being conscious.¹³

What we call conscious experience often, but not always, has some element of knowing that one is conscious, of paying attention to what one is doing. What is always present in vivid experience that leaves memories is, in addition to the object being paid attention to, thinking that is vivid enough to be noticed and that bears some relation to the object of attention. The more such thinking is present, the more vivid is one’s ordinary experience and the stronger one’s memory. The thinking may be about the object or it may be about the subjectivity of one’s experience or both. But it is not necessary that it be about one’s subjectivity. It is enough that it be about the object.

Intentionality

Being conscious or being aware always entails being conscious or aware *of* something. This “ofness” is called “intentionality” in the philosophical literature, and the meaning of “intention” is different from its meaning in ordinary usage. “Intention” in the normal sense means one’s plan to make something happen. It is more than just desire; it entails some degree of determination to make it happen and thus some amount of thinking about how to accomplish it. The technical term means something else. Here are two explanations:

‘Intentionality’ is a technical term used by philosophers to refer to that capacity of the mind by which mental states refer to, or are about, or are of objects and states of affairs in the world other than themselves. ... The English technical term comes not from the English ‘intention’ but from the German *Intentionalität* and that in turn from Latin.¹⁴

The standard philosophical term for aboutness is intentionality, and ... it ‘comes by metaphor’ from the Latin, *intendere arcum in*, which means to aim a bow and arrow at (something). This image of aiming or directedness is central in most philosophical discussions of intentionality.¹⁵

Experience

Instead of using “consciousness,” I use the term “experience” to denote the totality of all that is presented to one in one’s subjectivity (the contents) or one’s subjectivity itself (the container). With Steven Pinker we can say that experience (he uses the term

¹³ Zeman, p. 30.

¹⁴ Searle, *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, p. 28.

¹⁵ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 333.

“consciousness”) includes a rich field of sensation, including emotions and thoughts, some of which fall under the spotlight of attention.¹⁶

Of all the concepts relating to mind, I propose that we use *experience* as the most inclusive. It means the subjective aspect of a person's taking into account his or her world. By *subjective* I mean detectable or observable in principle by only one person, the one who is taking his or her world into account. This is in contrast to *objective*, by which I mean detectable or observable by more than one person.

This definition of "experience" is unavoidably a bit circular, as "detect" and "observe" are, if not synonyms, perhaps subsets of "experience." I can't give an ostensive definition of "experience" because our experience (the experience that each of us has) is private; it can't be observed or pointed to by anyone else. At any rate, "experience" is the broadest category, including everything from being awake, focused and alertly paying attention (to something) down to hazily and dimly having a feeling (of something) in the background, so to speak, even so far in the background that it is not present to our attention at all. The latter is what some call "non-conscious experience."

The term “experience,” as I use it, denotes everything of which one is aware. “An experience” means everything of which one is aware at a single moment or over a short period of time; it is a sequence of lived events that has some unity. “The stream of experience” denotes everything of which one is aware over a longer period of time; it connotes change, movement, process. The term “experience” can also mean one’s experiences considered cumulatively, as in “Experience shows that such-and-such is the case.” The term is also used as a verb; “One experiences something” means that one perceives it or is aware of it in some way. Experience is thus a matter of being aware – but not necessarily of being conscious.

Who is Conscious?

All the forms of experience have a similar structure, a structure of intentionality. There is something and it is presented to one who is aware of it in some way. The object may be distinct or indistinct, vivid or lifeless, heard, seen or touched, etc. Now, at this point we do not yet have a clear and unambiguous notion of what “one” means, the one who is aware. I shall use the phrase “pure transcendental consciousness,” and say that in any moment of experience, the objects are presented to pure transcendental consciousness. “Pure transcendental consciousness” means that which is aware (of whatever it may be aware of), that to which the objects of being aware appear, that for which there are objects. I call it “pure” because everything, even the operative noeses of ordinary experience, is an object for it – nothing is “overlooked.” It is “transcendental” because it lies at the base or root of experience; it is that without which there would be no experience, no objects, no being aware. At this point this stipulation of the usage of the phrase “pure transcendental consciousness” is merely

¹⁶ Pinker, Steven, *How the Mind Works*, pp. 134-148.

arbitrary. In other chapters, I outline a path whereby experiential insight into the state of affairs that this definition is meant to express can be achieved.

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Revision History

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1.1	6 November 2008	Bill Meacham	Fix minor typographical error
1.2	16 December 2008	Bill Meacham	Very minor wording change
1.3	16 June 2010	Bill Meacham	Add synecdoche usage
1.4	25 June 2010	Bill Meacham	Minor edits
1.5	23 September 2010	Bill Meacham	Add Marxist usage
1.6	8 May 2012	Bill Meacham	Correct spelling errors and minor grammar errors.

Version	Date	Author	Change
1.7	7 January 2013	Bill Meacham	Minor corrections. Add more definition of “experience.” Add more footnotes. Add “conscious” as leaving memories. Add Zeman on self-consciousness not a prerequisite for consciousness.
1.8	15 January 2013	Bill Meacham	Minor corrections. Add definition of “subjective” and “objective.”