

# Consciousness and Human Excellence

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## Contents

Introduction.....	1
What is Consciousness?.....	2
Self-Consciousness.....	3
Phenomenology .....	4
First-Person Point of View .....	4
Method.....	5
Some Findings .....	5
Second-Order Mentation .....	6
Being-In-The-World.....	8
Summary .....	9
References.....	10
Revision History .....	10

## Introduction

The context of this paper is the fundamental question of philosophy, the search for how to live well. The word “philosophy” comes from Greek words meaning “love of wisdom,” and the wisdom referred to is how to live a fulfilling and happy life. I seek to determine some things about the essence of human nature, about what human beings are, what each one of us is. By determining what human nature is, we can determine what human beings are good for and hence what is good for human beings. Knowing what is good for us, we can then pursue that good and lead a fulfilling life.

One of the things human beings are is conscious. In this paper I examine what it is to be conscious and what that means for living a good life. The paper is in three parts.

- First, I discuss the meaning of the term “consciousness” and how it is used, hoping to dispel some confusion.
- Second, I discuss a method of doing philosophy from the first-person point of view, called Phenomenology.
- Third, from the method and findings of Phenomenology I suggest some implications for how to live well.

## What is Consciousness?

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, which leads to confusion and misunderstanding. One problem with the term is that it is a noun and implies that consciousness is a static thing. But our experience is constantly changing; it is a process, always in flux. I prefer to speak of "being conscious," which is still a noun phrase, but implies some activity. Consciousness is the state of being conscious or the capacity for being conscious. But what, then, does the term "conscious" mean? Adam Zeman, in his excellent *Consciousness, A User's Guide*, lists several meanings:

The first is simply being awake. When we are awake we are capable of making a well-integrated response to our environment. Humorously we can say that consciousness is that annoying interlude between naps.

The second sense is just 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. Zeman quotes William James in *Principles of Psychology* as saying that consciousness is "the current content of perceptual experience."<sup>1</sup>

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 these phrases: "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.

James lists several characteristics of consciousness. I'm going to read them one at a time. In each one, try substituting the phrase "the content of perceptual experience" for the term "consciousness." Then try substituting "the container of perceptual experience." See which one makes more sense.

- 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]

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<sup>1</sup> Zeman, *Consciousness, A User's Guide*, p. 18.

- 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?]

So when you hear the word "consciousness," figure out whether the meaning is content or container.

Yet another meaning of the term "consciousness" is mind or the subjective, interior aspect of the human being. In this sense one is conscious of anything that passes through one's mind, and the term "conscious" means "knowing". Consciousness in this sense is related to intentions and purposes, as in "a conscious attempt to influence the proceedings."<sup>2</sup>

### *Self-Consciousness*

Now let's look at being self-conscious. 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 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. We can detect things that are happening to us or are caused by us, as opposed to happening to or caused by someone else. As children grow older they acquire self-consciousness in this sense. Babies don't know the difference between what they cause and what other people cause, but as they grow older they learn.

An elaboration of this sense of 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 emotions such as envy, pride, guilt and shame. These second-order evaluative emotions require a sense 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 pays attention to the subjectivity of experience in addition to the objects of experience. When done with a specific type of rigor and precision, this kind of being conscious of one's own experience is the philosophical discipline called Phenomenology.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

## Phenomenology

In the early twentieth century the German philosopher Edmund Husserl set out to examine consciousness itself (in the sense of ordinary experience) rather than the objects of consciousness known to sciences and to logic and mathematics. Seeking to ground knowledge in certainty, he sought to find out how we experience those various objects. He was asking about the essential structures of consciousness itself. When we are conscious, what exactly is going on? How is being conscious of physical objects different from being conscious of logical objects? How is direct perception different from memory, anticipation or imagination? In all of this, he was investigating human nature from a first-person point of view.

### *First-Person Point of View*

The uniqueness of the first-person point of view is that each of us has our own, and nobody else has it. For example, when I see a certain object from my own perspective and you see it from your perspective, we can agree that we are seeing the same object, but I do not see it as it appears to you, and you do not see it as it appears to me. We each have our own experience of it, not anybody else's. The experience each one of us has is private, not public.

Why is the first-person point of view important? After all, the triumphs of the scientific method are triumphs of objectivity, the result of observations that have been publicly replicated, justified by evidence that any competent observer can verify. If a chemical process requires something to be heated to a certain temperature, one gets better results using a thermometer, which anyone can see, rather than relying on one's subjective sense of how hot it is. There is no question that the third-person point of view has given us valuable knowledge of what it is to be human; but the first-person point of view provides an additional source of information, which turns out to be equally valuable.

The importance of the first-person point of view is this: in a very real sense, it is the only point of view we have! The only contact each of us has with anything, subjective or objective, is through our experience. The point of all knowledge, whether rigorous science or practical know-how, is to make sense of what we experience. When several researchers independently verify the reading on an instrument or the results of an experiment, each of them sees the reading or the results and communicates that observation to the others. Seeing is a modality of experience. If there were no experience, there would be no possibility of any sort of knowledge.

One way to examine one's experience is to pay attention to purely private objects of consciousness, such as dreams, reveries, hypnagogia, and so forth. This gives valuable knowledge about an individual person, oneself. The discipline of phenomenology attempts to discover the essential characteristics of consciousness that are common to all human beings or indeed to any conscious being whatsoever.

## *Method*

The method of phenomenology is unusual. It is *critical examination of experience, free from bias as much as possible*. The goal is to take nothing for granted, to describe one's experience exactly as it is experienced, without importing concepts or beliefs from other disciplines or from the uncritical natural attitude that we all occupy in our everyday life. To free himself from bias, Husserl used a technique called *epoché*, a Greek word meaning suspension or cessation of judgment. The particular judgment to be suspended is the belief that the object of one's experience actually exists independently of one's experience of it. One does not assert that it does exist, nor that it does not. One merely notes that the belief is there and operative in the experience being examined. Consider a hallucination. Before we realize that nobody else is seeing it, we see something and believe that it exists independently. That experience is no different from seeing something that actually does exist. The fact of independent existence is irrelevant to the experience itself. By systematically putting aside the belief in actual existence of the objects of one's experience, we are more easily able to notice the structures of experience itself.

This is an unusual thing to do. It entails taking an objective stance toward something that is inherently subjective, trying to see it for what it is without preconception or bias, just as we would try to take an objective stance toward some emotion-laden state of affairs – an argument, say, or an interpersonal drama of some sort – without letting our personal feelings interfere. It is certainly not something that people normally do, but if we do, we find out some interesting things.

## *Some Findings*

The first thing we find is the fundamental fact of all experience: "intentionality," or aboutness, meaning that when we are conscious, we are always conscious of something. The term "intentional" here is used in a special sense. It is derived from a Latin phrase meaning to aim at, and does not mean one's determination to do something. Instead it means that in every act or instance of being conscious, there is something one is conscious of.

By the way, this does not always entail vivid perception. Much of our experience consists of vague and indistinct presentations and feelings, and subliminally or subconsciously presented objects. 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 attending to it, but it was present in your experience nevertheless. It was not in the center of the spotlight of attention, but on the periphery, as something unclear and indefinite. But both in vivid perception and in indistinct awareness, there is always an object, always something one is conscious of.

The second thing we find is that there is a great deal of mental activity through which or by means of which we encounter what we are conscious of. When we perceive something we do not merely receive it passively. Instead, mental mechanisms constitute it. "Constitute" does not mean to create. Husserl is not saying that we create reality by perceiving it. He is saying that in the perception there is an activity of mind that puts together various elements, such as sensation of color, apprehension of shape, belief that the object has an unseen side that we could see if we walked around it,

anticipation that the object will stay put (if it is not a living thing), knowledge of what we can do with it or what it is good for, retention of our prior perception of it a moment ago, etc. This putting together, or constituting, yields the object as we perceive it. Normally we pay attention only to the object, but with practice we can become directly conscious of the activities and elements that make up the object as perceived.

That experience is formed of mental activity would not be a surprising concept to cognitive scientists. Studies of the brain reveal complex neural processing in even the simplest acts of perception. What is special about phenomenology is that we can, with practice, pay attention to such processing from the inside, so to speak, within our own experience. Reports of phenomenological investigation are meant to be analogous to scientific reports from the third-person point of view. It is as if each of us has a view of a landscape and we are making maps and comparing them. In the case of science, we all see the same landscape. In the case of phenomenology, we each see a different landscape, but by comparing our maps we can determine the common characteristics. Thus, phenomenology is not entirely objective, like the natural sciences, but is not merely subjective either. It occupies a position in between.

There is a great difference between seeing squiggles on an electroencephalogram representing neural processing and directly perceiving the elements and activities that constitute the intentional object of which one is conscious. There is something authoritative about direct experience. Having observed my own experience, I myself have no doubt, for instance, that in my mental life nothing is devoid of emotion. Cognitive psychology gives me that information as well, but only inferentially, only as an assertion backed by authority (good authority, to be sure). The appeal of phenomenology is that it gives one a solid basis for knowledge, in particular knowledge of oneself.

There are a great many findings of phenomenology – Husserl wrote several volumes and his students and followers wrote many more – but I want to focus on just two of them. One is illustrated by the method itself: that one of the unique things about human beings is our capacity for second-order mentation, our ability to direct our attention at ourselves. The other is related to the fundamental structure of experience. Intentionality, or aboutness, means that we are always related to our world and do not exist in isolation.

## Second-Order Mentation

Human beings have far greater intelligence than other animals. We are the species that makes plans, that imagines states of affairs not immediately present and targets our behavior to reach envisaged goals. When this intelligence is directed at affairs in the world, I call it *first-order mentation*. This can range from the very simple, such as jotting down a grocery list, to the very complex, such as planning a multi-year project encompassing thousands of interrelated tasks. Not only do we make plans, we execute them and accomplish our goals, making corrections along the way to overcome obstacles and take into account changing circumstances. When this kind of observation, planning and execution is directed at oneself, I call it *second-order*

mentation. Others have called it self-knowledge or self-reflection (as one examines one's reflected image in a mirror).

By "mentation" I mean mental (private, subjective) acts of all kinds: thought, imagination, desire, aversion, volition, direct perception and so forth. All of these activities, when directed at oneself, enable *self-transcendence*. By this I mean that in "seeing" oneself as an object, one takes a position, as it were, outside of oneself, and that enables one to alter the self that is "seen."<sup>3</sup> Of course the self that is "seen" is not different from the self that "sees," in that both are the interior of the same physical body. But in another sense, the self that "sees" is different. It has a larger vantage point and is not caught up, or at least not entirely caught up, in the life of the self that is "seen." By taking a position outside oneself, one can alter oneself.

Our primate cousins, chimpanzees and bonobos, share in a rudimentary form some human capacities. They can foresee, dimly, something that might happen in the future. They can feel empathy for one another and understand each other's point of view, at least to the degree of knowing that another individual knows or does not know where some food is. But no other animal has the capacity to be conscious of itself, as humans do. *Second-order mentation is the peculiarly human virtue*, what we do that other beings don't. We are all capable of it, and when we do it well we function optimally and are most fulfilled. It enables us to achieve our goals. Second-order mentation gives us mastery, because it enables us to tune the instrument, so to speak, by means of which we exert first-order influence on the world.

Second-order mentation gives us the peculiar sense of self that is expressed in the poem *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul."<sup>4</sup> The *I* to which the poet refers is the coherence of interiority of second-order mentation, the ongoing inner life of how it feels to be operating at that second-order level. We each (unless we are damaged) have a first-order sense of ourselves as continuous and ongoing entities, as being the same person through time, which comes from familiarity with a point of view, from being within that point of view and seeing the world from it. Within our interior landscape, so to speak, there are certain familiar features – habitual thoughts, feelings, emotions, attitudes and ways of behaving – that are present all or most of the time. These comprise a sense of how it feels to be oneself. Much of the self-sense probably comes from the experience of being in one's body, a particular body that has a particular vantage point on the world. The body changes over time, but gradually enough that one has a sense of continuity. The sense of self is the unity over time of interior background feeling tone; and the sense of self arising from second-order mentation is the same, except it seems more vivid, somehow more real or efficacious. That is because it is more efficacious: one exerts control not only over one's world but over oneself as well.

Like any human activity, second-order mentation can be done poorly or skillfully. When we are unable to see the whole picture, when we have false ideas about ourselves, distorted by ignorance or painful emotion, we do it poorly. When we are able to observe ourselves carefully over time, identifying and removing

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<sup>3</sup> "See" and its variants are in quotes because the experience is not entirely or not merely visual. One experiences oneself in many modalities.

<sup>4</sup> Henley, "Invictus."

preconceptions, we do it better. When our will is weak, when we have true ideas about ourselves but are unable to act on them we do it poorly. When we are able to use what we find out about ourselves to change for the better how we behave and hence what kind of person we become, we do it excellently. So it behooves us to find out how to do it well, so we can enjoy the benefits of living a fulfilling life.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes we take this capacity for granted, but it is really quite extraordinary. We can change who we are. We can activate latent capacities, overcome bad habits, cultivate virtues of character. Within limits we can reinvent ourselves, become new persons. This is the germ of truth in the existentialist claim that existence precedes essence, that human beings have no fixed nature but instead create themselves through their actions and choices.<sup>6</sup> In fact there is quite a lot that is fixed about human nature, but within that fixity we have the freedom to reinvent ourselves. By virtue of second-order mentation, we are not fully constrained by the past.

## Being-In-The-World

Phenomenology reveals that we never have experience without it being experience of something, we are never conscious without being conscious of some object or set of objects. In any moment of experience one finds both mental activity and objects as experienced. If one takes a phenomenological stance toward a different level of one's experience, toward one's life as lived rather than specific acts or instances of being conscious, then one finds oneself always in the world, always engaged with the world. Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student, calls this state of affairs *Being-in-the-world*, hyphenated into one word, indicating that categorical distinctions such as subject and object, consciousness and world, are interpretations that are secondary, not foundational. The original experience, which we can understand only by stepping back from it in a sort of *epoché*, is a unitary phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

That we are always in the world is not a surprising, new discovery. What is important is the attitude that one can take toward it, an attitude of examining one's subjective experience of it with detachment akin to phenomenological disengagement. In doing so, one can evaluate it.

Being-in-the-world is a structural characteristic of human beings. We cannot fail to be in the world. But we can do so well or badly, in the sense of doing it in a way that fulfills us or not. We can look for strategies for being in the world successfully, in a fulfilling way. There are numerous strategies for particular situations – whether to be circumspect or forceful with a given person, for instance, or whether to take the main highway or side roads to get where one is going, depending on the traffic and time of day – but those are not of universal interest. What I am talking about is overarching strategies, strategies that will work in any situation and that will fruitfully guide the adoption of particular strategies for particular situations.

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<sup>5</sup> Please see my paper titled "The First-Person Point of View" for some ideas about how to enhance second-order mentation.

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, "Existence precedes essence."

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 78. See also Wikipedia, "Heideggerian terminology."



The first is to improve one's capacity for second-order mentation. By achieving excellence at that virtue, the uniquely human virtue, one attains mastery, the ability to achieve any goals one sets for oneself. And what goals should we set for ourselves? That we are not separate from our world gives us a clue to a second over-arching strategy, useful in all situations: to do what is good for our world as well as for us, because our world is what nurtures us.

Phenomenologically, each of us is a locus of consciousness and activity at which energy from the world is incorporated into experience, transformed, and then emitted to affect one's surroundings. We are each a crucible of transformation, taking in energy, transforming it, and sending it out; and we have a choice, at every moment, of whether to affect our surroundings in a way that enhances health and vitality for all concerned or not. We can think of the self as a dynamic pattern of relationships with others, with the non-human world and with oneself. One way of describing human flourishing is as a harmony of those relationships as experienced, as a beautiful coherence of interiority. In order to create such beauty, one must create beauty in the world, because the world is the content of one's experience. The focus on creating benefit both for oneself and for one's world I call the Goodness Ethic.

The Goodness Ethic may be stated in a number of ways. The simplest is this:

- *Work for the good in all things.*

By "the good" I mean what is helpful, nourishing, beneficial or effective. The goal is for *both* oneself and one's environment to survive and thrive. If you focus on your own benefit alone (selfishness), you will not thrive as much as you would focusing on both, because you will likely neglect to feed things that give you nourishment. If you focus on your environment alone (altruism), you will not thrive as much because you will likely become stressed and exhausted. One term for such a focus on both self and environment is enlightened self-interest.

If you adopt this principle, to work for the good in all things, then things work out well. You find yourself in an environment that benefits all elements, including yourself. And you get to be thankful to have had a good effect.

## Summary

Viewing human nature from the first-person point of view leads to recognition that the essentially human characteristic is the capacity for second-order mentation, the ability to direct the highly-developed human aptitude for rational observation, planning and execution at oneself. Doing so well enables one to become more proficient at achieving all the other goals conducive to functioning well that arise from an analysis of human nature from an objective, third-person point of view.<sup>8</sup>

I have discussed two strategies for being in the world in a fulfilling way: to cultivate excellence in second-order mentation and to work for the good in all things. Both

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<sup>8</sup> See my paper titled "Facets of Human Nature" for an elaboration of the third-person point of view.

require us to exercise consciousness and self-consciousness, to observe ourselves and our environment carefully and as much as possible without bias, taking a detached point of view akin to the phenomenological *epoché*. Being conscious of the existing state of affairs is the first step toward any effort at improvement, first-order or second-order. In doing so we exercise and achieve excellence at being human.

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## Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Change
1	6 June 2010	Bill Meacham	First Draft
1.1	9 June 2010	Bill Meacham	Minor corrections.
1.2	16 June 2010	Bill Meacham	Add more about indistinct awareness.