

How to Talk About Subjectivity (Don't Say "Consciousness")

Bill Meacham, Ph.D.

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Abstract

When we discuss consciousness we discuss subjectivity, the private aspect of our experience. But language about consciousness is ambiguous, not least because it uses nouns to refer to what is essentially activity or process. This paper examines the many uses of the term "consciousness" and suggests alternative ways of speaking that are more precise. A terminology is proposed for speaking of subjectivity. An operational definition is given of the term "subjectivity," and usages of the terms "experience," "conscious" and "aware" are proposed. The approach is both from a first-person point of view, as that is the essence of subjectivity, and from a third person point of view, as the use of language is inherently public, involving both speakers and hearers. After proposing definitions of salient terms, suggestions are given for reframing confusing language. In particular, the paper advises avoiding the term "consciousness" altogether in favor of the phrase "being conscious."

Introduction

There is no such thing as consciousness.

That may seem a surprising assertion given that we are all conscious a good bit of the time. We certainly have the capacity to be conscious; in that sense we are conscious beings. So why say that there is no such thing as consciousness? I say so because being conscious is not a thing. The word "consciousness," a noun, implies something fixed and substantial, but our experience is ever changing. We do not *have consciousness* as we have a shirt or a blouse or a coffee cup. Instead, we *are conscious* of the shirt or blouse or coffee cup or any of the other innumerable things in our world. The word "consciousness" is misleading, so I suggest that we not use it.

But what shall we say instead? Whenever you want to say "consciousness," try saying "being conscious" or some variant of that phrase. And instead of "awareness" try saying "being aware." If we need a noun, we can say that consciousness is a state of being conscious or the capacity for being conscious.

Substituting "being conscious" for "consciousness" might not always work, but when it doesn't it will provoke us to be more specific about what we want to say. A good part of this paper will be about how to be more specific.

That it is misleading is not the only reason to avoid the term “consciousness.” It is also dreadfully ambiguous. The word “consciousness” has been used at various times to mean each of the following:

- Being awake, not asleep or sedated
- An occasion or episode of being conscious of something
- Being conscious of things over a span of time
- The general capacity to be conscious of things
- Metaphorically, a sort of container in which various objects and happenings occur
- Metaphorically, the set of objects and happenings in the container
- The fact that there are conscious beings in the world, that the world contains subjective features as well as objective ones
- A conscious self
- The sense of being a conscious self
- The ground of all being

That’s quite a list. It is not surprising that misunderstanding abounds despite the appearance of comprehension. People use terms such as "mind," "consciousness," "awareness," "experience," and so forth as if everyone knows what they mean. But they can mean very different things to different people; too often we end up with ambiguity, equivocation, and misunderstanding. Trying to make progress in understanding without a common agreement on the meaning of such terms is hopeless.

In this paper I am going to suggest ways to discuss what these terms refer to without ambiguity. But first we need to address what we are talking about. What do we mean by “being conscious”? In a pre-theoretical way we all know what it is to be conscious, because, as I said, we are all conscious a good bit of the time. We have "knowledge by acquaintance" (James, 1890, p. 221) of being conscious. But what I want here is something more precise.

Definitions

Herein I propose some precise definitions of salient terms. I do not claim that these are the only correct definitions. I merely claim that if we all agree to use words the same way we'll have a productive conversation rather than talking past each other.

Subjectivity

The starting point for all of this is subjectivity. By *subjective* I mean directly detectable or observable in principle by only one person, the person detecting or observing his or her

world; and by its opposite, *objective*, I mean detectable or observable by more than one person.

Here is what I mean. Imagine that two people—let's call them Alice and Bob—each thinks of a word or a color or an object without saying it out loud. Each knows only his or her own thought, not the other's. Alice does not and cannot know directly what Bob is thinking; and Bob, unless he is quite an unusual person with telepathic powers, cannot know what Alice is thinking. But they can both look at a physical object such as a coffee cup, talk about it and agree on its color and shape. Their thoughts are subjective, and the color and shape of what they both see are objective.

The important point is that some things of which each of us is conscious are not directly observable by anybody else: such things as our thoughts and feelings, the particular shades of colors we see, and the particular qualities of sounds that we hear. These things are subjective. Others, like the color and shape of the agreed-upon object, are objective. What is subjective is private, and what is objective is public. That some things are private and some are public seems to be a fundamental characteristic of the world we live in.

Now we can go on to consider the other terms commonly in use such as "experience," "being conscious," "being aware" and other such terms. They all have to do with the subjective aspect of our life. Each has different connotations, however.

Experience

I propose that we use *experience* as the most inclusive concept. It shall mean the subjective aspect of a person's taking into account his or her world. Experience is that aspect of a person's taking into account his or her world which is detectable or observable in principle by that person alone.

I acknowledge that there is a bit of circularity here. Detecting and observing are, if not synonyms for experience, perhaps types of experience. The circularity is unavoidable. Our language is oriented to the objective world, and it is difficult to use it to describe subjectivity. That's one reason for the ambiguity. We use language suited for the public world to describe the private, and it does not quite fit.

At any rate, I use "experience" as the broadest category, including everything on a spectrum from being awake, focused and alertly paying attention to something to hazily and dimly having a feeling in the background of experience, 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" (Dewart, 1989, p.41).

"Experience" in this sense includes both the process of experiencing and the objects experienced. The nature of the process is a matter for empirical investigation, not definition, so in what follows I focus on the objects.

Being Conscious and Being Aware

The English language has two terms that mean roughly the same thing, “conscious” and “aware.” The former is from a Latin root, and the latter is from Old Saxon (Dictionary.com, 2016). Many other languages have only one: “bewusst” in German and “consciente” in Spanish, for instance. Others have two, but the two do not translate directly to the two in English. We find “consciente” and “ciente” in Portuguese and “conscient” and “au courant” in French. For ease of translation I use the two English terms interchangeably. (This is a change from recommendations in my previous writings.)

The terms “conscious” and “aware” most often refer to a person—or animal, perhaps—who is conscious or aware of something. But sometimes they refer to what the person is conscious or aware of, particularly when it is subjective. We say “a conscious thought” or “a conscious belief” meaning that the person entertaining the thought or belief is conscious of it. In what follows I hope that the context makes the usage clear.

The Spectrum of Experience

Please refer to Figure 1 below. We can think of what we experience as being on a continuum from vividly intense and in focus to dim and in a sort of periphery or penumbra, and in fact all the way to being not present at all. I use the term “experience” for the entire spectrum of things that are present to us. The focal end I call “focally conscious.” The dim end I call “peripherally conscious.” I use “unconscious” to mean those things that are not present but potentially could be, and, when they are, we recognize as subjective.

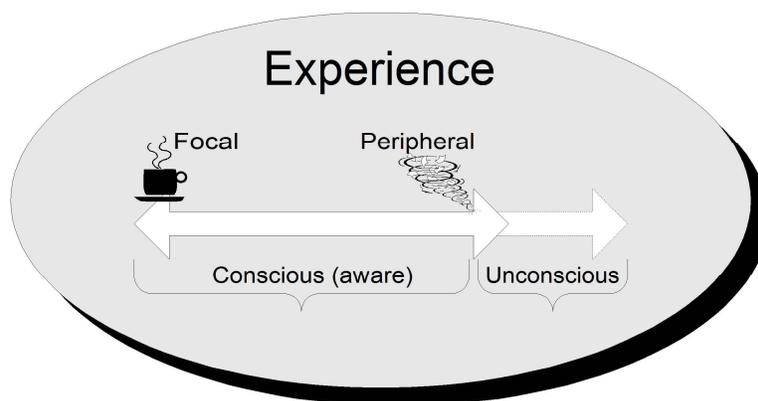


Figure 1 - The Spectrum of Experience

Focal

I use the phrases *being focally conscious* and *being focally aware* to refer to the subset of experience in which objects are presented vividly and are in focus.

Being focally conscious involves at least the following:

- Things are presented to one with vividness or intensity; in other words, one notices or pays attention to some aspect of the world. One focuses one's attention on an aspect of the world. ("World" here means both subjective and objective things and events.)

Additionally, it may make sense to say that being focally conscious also involves two other characteristics:

- At the same time that one notices or pays attention to something, at some level one thinks about what one is noticing.
- All this happens with sufficient intensity to leave a memory for one.

There is room for debate about whether and to what extent being focally conscious always involves simultaneously thinking about what one is conscious of and whether it always leaves memories. Rather than enter such debates here, I just want to note that when we are conscious of something, that thing is present to us with some vividness or intensity, enough to make us notice it and often to remember it.

Peripheral

The phrases *being peripherally conscious* and *being peripherally aware* refer to our experience of the less vivid and acute end of the spectrum. We can also say "being dimly aware." Things in the periphery or background of experience are not in focus and are not vivid. Some examples of such things are physical feelings that one is not attending to, such as the feeling of the shoes on one's feet; the experience of highway hypnosis in which one pays little or no attention to the surroundings but nevertheless navigates the road successfully; and spacing out, when one's mind wanders from the task at hand, and later one remembers neither one's thoughts nor the task.

There is much more present in any moment of experience than what is focally attended to; with William 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" (James, 1963, p. 157). Clear and distinct perception 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 we can only with the greatest of difficulty become explicitly conscious.

Directedness (intentionality)

When we are conscious or aware we are always conscious or aware *of* something. We are conscious of whatever appears to us, which might be objective or subjective. What appears might be objects that we take to exist in the real world, or it might be thoughts or emotions that we take to be private to us and not directly perceivable by anybody else. There are a great many categories of things (using the term “thing” loosely) that we can be conscious of.

This “ofness” is called “intentionality” in the philosophical literature. It would better be called “directedness” or “ofness” because the philosophical meaning of “intention” is different from its meaning in ordinary usage. “Intention” ordinarily means one’s plan to make something happen, including some degree of determination to make it happen and thus some amount of thinking about how to accomplish it. The technical term, however, means that capacity of the mind by which mental states refer to, or are about, or are of objects and states of affairs other than themselves (Searle, 2004, p. 28). It comes from a Latin phrase meaning to aim a bow and arrow at something (Dennett, 1991, p. 333). Mental states are directed toward their objects as a bow directs an arrow toward a target.

Container and contents

Directedness has two poles: that which is aimed (the arrow), and that which is aimed at (the target). Unfortunately, the term “consciousness” has been used for both. Metaphorically, the former is like a container, and the latter is like its contents.

James alludes to the former when he says “Within each personal consciousness, thought is sensibly continuous” (James, 1963, p. 151). By “personal consciousness” he means what I call “experience” or “mind,” which has things such as thought within it, so it is like a container. He alludes to the latter when he says “Consciousness is in constant change” (James, 1963, p.148). He means that the things of which we are conscious, the contents, are always changing. That which is conscious is the container. What we are conscious of is the contents.

I bring this up because it is one of the most prevalent ways in which language about subjectivity can be confusing. I’ll suggest ways to alleviate the confusion shortly.

That which experiences

We also need a name for that which aims. What shall we call that which experiences, that which is aware (of whatever it is aware of)? We often take it to be ourselves; that is, each one of us, when asked “who experiences?” answers “I do.” But the nature of the

self that experiences is not something that can be determined by definition. We might call it the “experiencing subject,” or, following Kant, the “transcendental unity of apperception,” (Brook, 2016) or, following Husserl, the “pure Ego,” “the phenomenological Ego which finds things presented to it ...” (Husserl, 1967, p. 156). In any case, my recommendation is that we not use the ambiguous term “consciousness” to mean that which experiences.

Reframing confusing language

With these definitions in mind, we can now examine many common usages of “conscious,” “aware,” and so forth, with a view to reframing those that may engender confusion.

Being conscious

We can clarify a number of confusing usages of the term “consciousness” simply by avoiding that term and saying something more precise instead. To do so, we need to understand the different meanings of the terms “conscious” and “consciousness.” A good list is provided by neurologist Adam Zeman (2002).

Being awake

Zeman’s first sense of the term “conscious” is simply *being awake* (Zeman, 2002, p. 16). The doctor asks the nurse whether the patient is conscious, meaning whether he or she is able to make an integrated response to the environment. This meaning need not confuse anyone, so long as the context is clear, but for precision we can use other words:

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ awake▪ not sedated

Being aware

Zeman’s second sense of “conscious” is *being aware* (Zeman, 2002, p. 17). To be conscious is to be aware of something. In this sense, “consciousness” is ordinary experience. Since “conscious” and “aware” have roughly the same meaning in ordinary

usage, this definition is not particularly helpful. I suggest using the term “experience” instead of “consciousness.”

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
consciousness	experience

Content and container

As noted previously, one of the most prevalent ambiguities is that of consciousness as a kind of content versus as a kind of container. Zeman quotes William James, in *Principles of Psychology*, as saying that consciousness is “the current content of perceptual experience” (Zeman, 2002, p. 18). However—and here is where the definition of the term gets slippery—sometimes the term “consciousness” means not the content but 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.

The following table, largely taken from Zeman (2002, pp. 18-19) citing James, lists several characteristics of what is commonly called consciousness. Alongside each one, I suggest a better way of saying it.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
Consciousness is stable for short periods of time, up to a few seconds.	What one is conscious of is stable for short periods of time
Consciousness is changeful over time.	What one is conscious of changes over time.
Consciousness is selective, with a foreground and a background, and a limited capacity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Our ability to be conscious is selective and has a limited capacity. ▪ What we are conscious of includes a foreground and a background.
Attention can be directed, one can shift the focus of consciousness.	Attention can be directed, one can shift what one focuses on.
Consciousness ranges over innumerable contents.	One can be conscious of innumerable contents.
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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Our sense of self is continuous over time ▪ Our experience is continuous over time

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
Consciousness is "intentional," in that it is of something, or directed at something.	Being conscious is "intentional," in that when one is conscious one is always conscious of something.
Consciousness is aspectual, with a limited point of view, conditioned by the perspective of one's viewpoint.	We experience only aspects of things. Each of us has a limited point of view
Consciousness is personal, involving a subject.	We each have a sense that our experience is ours alone, not someone else's.
It was not in my consciousness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I was not conscious of it. ▪ I did not think of it. ▪ I did not notice it.
My consciousness was expanded.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Things appeared more intensely to me. ▪ I had a greater understanding of things.

Mind

Yet another meaning of the term "consciousness" according to Zeman is *mind* or the subjective, interior aspect of the human being. He says "... 'conscious' in this third sense can be used to report our acquaintance with any state of affairs whatsoever ...", whether public or private (Zeman, 2002, p. 20). This includes objects that are vivid and in focus as well as those that are dim, vague or not in focus. In this sense, one is aware of anything that passes through one's mind, and the term "conscious" means "knowing". This kind of knowledge is *knowledge by acquaintance* (James, 1890, p. 221), not theoretical knowledge.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ mind ▪ subjectivity

Purpose

Being conscious can be related to intentions and purposes, as in "a conscious attempt to influence the proceedings" (Zeman, 2002, p. 21). Being conscious in this sense bridges perception and action. One does something deliberately when one knows that one is doing it and plans and intends to do it. Such knowledge is *knowledge about*, not knowledge by acquaintance only. We can rephrase such talk as follows:

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
a conscious attempt to influence the proceedings	a deliberate attempt to influence the proceedings

Political understanding

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. Instead of talking about class consciousness, it would be better to speak of how the social world appears to one who is bourgeois or proletarian.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
proletarian consciousness	proletarian view of the world

Capability

"Conscious" can mean capable of being conscious as I have defined it above; that is, capable of paying attention to the world. In this sense, we can say that people are conscious beings even when they are deeply asleep.

Personhood

"Consciousness" 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 discussions of mind would use the term, however.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
a consciousness	a person; a living being

Mystical ground of being

Finally, some mystical thinkers use “consciousness” to mean the ground of all being, that which underlies everything or from which everything emerges. For instance, Deepak Chopra, a prominent New Age author and speaker, says

consciousness creates reality (Chopra, 2009, Preface)

and

Consciousness ... is not just a human attribute. Existing outside space and time, it was “there” “before” those two words had any meaning. In essence, space and time are conceptual artifacts that sprang from primordial consciousness (Roff, 2016).

Without addressing the metaphysical claim, it should be clear at least that the term “consciousness” in this context is misleading. Its meaning is certainly far from just being able to detect one’s surroundings well enough to navigate around. As this primordial consciousness is alleged to precede any distinction between being conscious and what one is conscious of, it would be less confusing to call it something else, perhaps “primordial being” or “primordial reality.”

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
primordial consciousness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ primordial being▪ primordial reality

Being self-conscious

The meanings of “self-consciousness” and “self-conscious” are nearly as varied as the meanings of “consciousness” and “conscious.”

Awkward

Zeman helpfully lists several common meanings of the term “self-conscious” (Zeman, 2002, pp. 21-29). 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, which is knowledge about, although the feeling of embarrassment itself is known by acquaintance. This usage need not be confusing, so long as the context is

clear and we say “being self-conscious” instead of “self-consciousness.” When extreme clarity is needed, we can use other phrases, as follows:

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
self-conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ overly sensitive to others ▪ prone to embarrassment

Self-detecting

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. We ascribe this knowledge in greater and greater degree to children as they grow out of infancy. The infant seems to have little ability to detect what happens as a result of its own activity as opposed to someone else's. As children grow older they acquire the ability to be self-conscious in this sense.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
self-conscious	self-detecting
having self-consciousness	being able to discern one’s activity as one’s own

Self-recognizing

An elaboration of being able to detect one’s own activity 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 such self-representation.) We can avoid ambiguity as follows:

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
self-conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ having ideas about oneself ▪ thinking about oneself ▪ being able to think about oneself

Paying direct attention to oneself

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 what we are conscious of, but to the fact of being conscious as well (which then becomes one of the things we are conscious of). 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 a subject of experience, not just as a person being observed by others. One pays attention to the subjective contents of experience in addition to its other objects. This kind of being conscious of oneself happens in real time, so to speak, as experience is taking place.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
being self-conscious	being directly or immediately conscious of oneself

Having self-knowledge

Finally, we can speak of being self-conscious in a broader sense as having *self-knowledge*, knowledge of the entire psychological and social context in which one comes to know oneself. If this is what we mean, let's say that one has self-knowledge or that one knows oneself. Because "self-conscious" often connotes social awkwardness, I prefer to use "self-aware" to mean the general ability to know oneself and to be directly conscious of oneself.

Ambiguous language	Rephrased language
being self-conscious	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ having self-knowledge▪ knowing oneself▪ being self-aware

Conclusion

This concludes my recommendations for using unambiguous language about subjectivity. Whenever you are tempted to say "consciousness" or "awareness" try "being conscious" or "being aware" instead. If those words do not convey what you intend, use another of the phrases suggested instead.

Misuse of the term "consciousness" is not the only way words are used in unclear ways (see Meacham, 2016 and 2006), but it is the primary one. If we mutually agree on

using words in a standard way we can make headway on the substantive issues in philosophy of mind, cognitive science, neurophysiology, and so forth. And we can come to a better understanding of ourselves, which, as both Socrates and the Oracle at Delphi advised, is a prerequisite to living a good life.

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Author Biography

Bill Meacham, Ph.D., is an independent scholar in philosophy and the author of the books *How To Be An Excellent Human* and *How to Exert Free Will*, both available on his website, <http://bmeacham.com>. After earning a Ph.D. in Philosophy he spent many years in computers, data processing and project management. He brings the precision required for good software development to the analysis of philosophical concepts and to the deep questions posed by philosophy: What's real? How do we know what's real? And what shall we do about what's real?