



Cognitive psychology

What is consciousness?

Male:

Consciousness is an incredibly difficult word. It has multiple overlapping meanings. For example, we talk about being conscious when we're awake, and unconscious when we're asleep. Yet when we're asleep, we have dreams of which we seem to be conscious. So we seem to be both unconscious and conscious at the same time. We also talk about self consciousness. And we talk about consciousness raising. Both of which seems to have rather different meanings. Or being conscious of some kind of sensory experience.

For the purposes of the discussion today, I am going to take consciousness to mean those things of which I am currently thinking, feeling or perceiving. And that's the meaning of consciousness, I am going to try and stay with, as we go through the discussion. But I wonder if anybody else has anything to say about what the meaning of consciousness is?

Male 2:

I think that's pretty all embracing. But I get the feeling too, that as you read through the course, it seems to shift subtly from time to time, from chapter to chapter. Exactly what that particular author is meaning by the term.

Male 3:

I think also in the literature on consciousness, people talk about all sorts of different kinds of consciousness, as you've outlined. But the ones I'm fascinated by, is called 'phenomenal consciousness'. Which is the one as you say attached to the current sensory experience that someone's experiencing.

Male 1:

Okay. Well clearly there are problems in being quite sure that we're talking about the same thing, when we talk to other people about consciousness. But assuming some degree of co-understanding, let's have a brief look at the history of consciousness in relation to psychology.

Consciousness became a very popular topic in the second half of the 19th century, and in the early part of the 20th century. No doubt there are complex socio historical reasons for this. But at least one of them seems to have been the increasing contact between European cultures, and what were perceived as exotic cultures from far parts of the world. People in these cultures often seemed to have a consciousness that differed from that of Europeans. And this led Europeans to take a great interest in the topic of consciousness.

Let me give you some examples. In painting, impressionists revolutionised painting by challenging what it was that should be depicted. They were interested in the actual content of conscious visual perception. And they started to paint in a way very different to their predecessors. Cubism also represented an interest in consciousness. And how conceptual knowledge influenced out consciousness. And this was in part influenced by contact with African cultures. And then surrealism, in the 1920's and 30's and 40's, was very influenced by Freudian notions about consciousness and unconsciousness. And by differences between waking consciousness and consciousness in dreams. So painting has had a long history of interest in consciousness.

Literature similarly, the writings of Gertrude Stein, who was coincidentally a Psychologist at Harvard, before she moved to Paris to take up writing. She was very interested in the processes of creative writing. And whether it was possible to write unconsciously. James Joyce was similarly interested in the analysis of conscious experience. As was Virginia Wolfe. So we can see that consciousness throughout that period was a topic of interest. And

I wonder Peter, if you can tell us something about how this was reflected in the work of early psychologists?

Peter:

Well the early ones. They were working in fields which perhaps not today is central to cognitive psychology. But they were certainly interested in discovering what sort of stimulus becomes conscious. For example, starting with a very dim light and making it brighter and seeing at what point a person would consciously say 'Yes, I can see the light'. I think one of the interesting things is that there was not a sharp threshold as they originally assumed there must be. That there will be a grey area, where sometimes people say 'yes, I've seen it' and another time they say 'No, I can't see anything.' And this does lead us into the idea that there is no clear boundary. There's something a little odd about consciousness. And of course that's carried over right to today in research in the field such as attention. Where there is obviously unconscious processing going on.

Male 1:

Right. You were referring here to the work of the early psycho-physicists who were interested in the link between the physical stimulus and our conscious experience of it. And hence the term 'psycho-physics'. They use the term 'Threshold of consciousness.' Which in Latin is 'Lemen'. And stimulus could be supraliminal, above threshold. Or subliminal, below threshold. And that in turn led to interest in whether subliminal stimuli which were not consciously experience could actually influence behaviour. And there are various points in different chapters in the book where that issue arises.

The early psycho-physicists, were followed by the schools of introspectionism, founded by Functon, Culpee in particular. And they also were concerned with analysing conscious experience. So like their contemporaries in literature and art, early psychologists took consciousness to be the object of study for psychology. However, psychologists unlike painters and artists, began to lose interest in consciousness, at about 1920. They came under the sway of a particular philosophy of science that was popular of the time. Which said that scientists should not investigate entities that were not observable. And those psychologists who wish to align themselves with the scientific model, therefore felt that they could no longer in all conscience study consciousness. And therefore consciousness rather dropped out of the field of psychology, as behaviourist school of thought became dominant.

However, all this has changed in recent years. The cognitive revolution that has replaced behaviourism to some extent. Their building on behaviourism has eventually led us to the point where consciousness is once again a topic of considerable interest.