



Cognitive psychology

Consciousness: a first person experience

Male:

The notion that there's something intrinsically first person about consciousness. I wonder if I know I'm conscious in the same way I know I am talking prose. Because somebody told me. Consciousness is something we attribute to ourselves. And we attribute to other people, on the basis of their outward behaviour. We might attribute it to animals, as well, if they're behaviour is complex enough. I think one of the things that makes students particularly interesting in the topic of consciousness, is when they hear about neuro-psychological cases. Where people with certain types of brain damage exhibit different behaviour to quotes normal people. And we infer that they have different sorts of consciousness. But we attribute consciousness to them. And I wonder if we don't attribute consciousness to ourselves in rather the same way that we attribute it to other people. It's a concept we have, and make use of.

Male 1:

Well it's possible. And I guess no-one would deny that it's possible. The question really is I suppose, if in the absence of attributions, some entity or organism is actually still conscious. Would we still be conscious even if no-one attributed consciousness to us? Thinking about machine consciousness. That's probably a really good way of addressing this question. We ordinarily don't attribute consciousness to machines. Other than the kind of fairly colloquial jokey sense. We don't do say scientifically. But suppose we develop that PC. We add a processing capacity to it, and memory and so on. And we programmed it in very sophisticated ways. And gave it effectors and some motoric system. So that it could move about the world. At some point let's imagine, it became behaviourably indistinguishable, from a normal human being. Now we haven't attributed consciousness to it. But wouldn't it also be conscious?

Male 2:

It's hard to deny isn't it. if it's doing everything. The thing which leaves one questioning, is simply that well it hasn't evolved like an animal, or a human animal. It doesn't have neurons in or anything like that.

Male:

Again, we could come back to this question of whether we need to attribute full consciousness to it. Maybe a robot cat would have some degree of consciousness. We don't have to wait until something as complicated as a robot human. Assuming we are more complicated than cats. We're built. Do you see any sense in the evolutionary argument that consciousness is a matter of degree?

Male 2:

Well I wonder if there isn't something in that. Perhaps not for all types of consciousness. Something like the consciousness we have when we sort of monitor our own mental states. Or we sort of seem to get access from our perceptual states. Maybe those kinds of consciousness. One can imagine programming into some kind of computer. I personally find phenomenal consciousness very hard to imagine how one could programme into a computer. The idea that perhaps in tasting a cup of coffee, I not only get all sorts of information about what I'm doing. And the object that I'm drinking. But I also get this feel, this taste, this sensation, this quality to my experience. It's very hard to imagine how you might programme that into a computer. And get the computer to feel that it has some quality of experience. Other than just extracting information from it's environment. And maybe that is tied up with an evolutionary past.