



Cognitive psychology

Consciousness and experience

Male:

One way of formulating the problem of consciousness is if one can have a single problem consciousness. Is why when certain neurons in the auditory cortex fire, you hear a violin. And when a group of very similar looking neurons in the visual cortex or the temporal cortex fire, you get the experience of seeing a red balloon. Why does sight and sound seem so different. And one answer is that's just the way you process the information.

Angus:

I think that kind of observation demonstrates that we mustn't be too mystical about consciousness. There are some very clear physical and neural basis to consciousness. The difficulty for me, is trying to map what we understand about the possible neural basis. With what we think we understand about the quality of the phenomenal experience. And I think trying to tie those very closely together, is and remains difficult.

Male:

Yes. If I can pick that up, and the idea of the phenomenal experience. If I can paraphrase you slightly there Angus. You almost seem to be saying that consciousness is something a labour we've learned to apply. And really all that was going on, is we're analysing stimuli. Some things we can be shown to have analysed stimuli. But we don't know we have. It's unconscious. But we can prove that we did. Because it influences behaviour. Whereas in another circumstance those same stimuli, we know we've done it, we're conscious of them. So intuitively, you can have consciousness or not. Yet by analysing stimuli.

Male 2:

Consciousness then you're saying is associated with a certain levels of representation. That the lower levels of representation are unconscious. But that higher levels of representation, such as the representation of a red balloon are conscious. Whereas the representation of redness and balloonness might be unconscious.

Male:

I think that's an important point. It looks as if an awful lot of what conscious has to do with, is giving us whatever giving us means. A big picture of our world. Where everything seems to be present. And yet of course all the evidences that the analysis is a rather piecemeal affair. And strictly speaking, we only have access to one rather small area of information at a time. And you can show that changes slightly away from the centre of the focus of attention, go completely unnoticed. That your consciousness is telling you that it's just the same as it's always been. But in fact of course it's altered.

Male:

So consciousness can be fooled, and it's a construction on the basis of rather small amount of information. I would also want to add that I think language is a huge amplifier of consciousness. And if we're looking for consciousness in animals. We might find less of it, not just because they've got often less brain than us. But also because they don't have language. And language does seem to allow one to represent things that are in the distant past. Or that have never happened, and so on. And this must greatly increase the range of ones consciousness.

Male2:

It takes you back to your attribution argument in a sense. That obviously attribution can only take place in linguistic cultures I suppose. And it seems to me that there is something absolutely right about the link between consciousness and language. Our conscious

experience is shaped by language. The language gives us the concepts in which we interpret our conscious experience.

Male:

And often in the kind of cases Peter's referring to, we say that somebody is conscious of a thing, because they can tell us about it.

Yes. Yes.

Male:

It's harder to distinguish between what's consciously, they're consciously aware of and things they've processed unconsciously, then they do a button push.

Yes.

Yes. Indeed.

Male 2:

And Peter's example reminded me a little bit, of a more realistic example of the Zombie thought experiment, in a sense. I think you were asking really what consciousness is for. If you can do all this analytic work, around your perceptions and so on, without having to have consciousness. Then what does it do for us. We think it has an evolutionary advantage. But what is it? What does it do?