



Cognitive psychology

What is consciousness for?

Male:

We can ask for example what is a feather. And we can ask what is a feather for. And we can also ask what is consciousness. And we can ask what is consciousness for. We seem to have some difficulty saying what consciousness is. Do we fair any better when we ask what consciousness is for?

Male 2:

I think we can. It's probably for a number of things. I am going to take you if I may, down a slight side road, and talk about altered states of consciousness briefly, if you're happy with that. As well as what it's for. I pick up the feather point first. We know that feathers are exceedingly costly, for birds to have. They have to spend ages preening them. They are very difficult things to keep in good shape. But they're only effective when they are. So for them to be there, proves just good and essential they are to the bird. And I think we can say the same about consciousness.

You made the point at the beginning, that it's costly in energy terms. So it has to be there for something. And I think one of the things that it lets us do, is use the sensory apparatus that we have. In an imaginative kind of way. One can imagine one of our ancestors perhaps sitting on a rock picturing how about this time last year, this season. He took a route up along the river. And the stepping stones he had to cross. And where he went from there. And there was this lovely source of food. Some fruit had just ripened. And he's thinking about taking that same route again.

A very useful thing to be able to do. So you're using your sensory apparatus. Although it's not being stimulated from without. And an important thing that goes with that, is to be able to tell the difference between it really happening, and you just imaging it. Otherwise he'd have continued sitting there thinking he'd had a good square meal. And we know there is a brain that seems to do this. It's right at the front between where the two sides of the brain, the two hemisphere's fold together. So it's out of sight, but it is actually on the surface. It's called the 'singular girus.' And it's know that brain injury there, would lead to a person who finds it very hard to know the difference between things they've only just thought about, and things that are actually real. We all do it sometimes. Did I lock the door. Did I just think I had.

But the altered states of consciousness thing. That leads me to hypnosis. Because if you brain scan people who are hypnotised, who are probably visualising something very vividly. And it can seen enormously real to them. For people who are really susceptible to hypnosis. It feels just like the real thing. And when you brain scan them, the areas that are affected by this, are all the ones you'd expect from those senses. If a thing were real. If they're hallucinating sounds. Or the auditory quartet it active. But crucially, odd things are happening in the singular girus. So it's as if to be hypnotised. To have an altered state of consciousness. You've turned off this crucial little bit, that knows the difference between imagination and reality. And I think a lot of consciousness has to do with that process.

Male:

Okay. So we seem to be concluding that the consciousness arises as the linkage between stimuli and responses, becomes more remote. If you're a very simply organism that has a stereotype response to stimuli in the world. You don't really need consciousness. But as the stages between stimuli and response. As they're more and more steps in between them, and you have some choice about how you respond to the stimulus. Then perhaps we need consciousness in order to make the choices. And to exercise choice.

Male 2:

I think that's exactly it. For planning, choosing, and so on.

Male 3:

And I think also to sort of tell us when our perceptual systems might be in error. If I drink too much tonight, the room will spin. But I will know that whatever quality of experience I am having there, isn't the one that normally goes along with my perceptions. And I think part of what consciousness does for us, is tell us when our perceptions aren't delivering a faithful representation of reality.

Male:

Well like most of our listeners. I of course have no experience of the phenomena to which you are referring there, connected to alcohol. But it does occur to me that if you know the experience you're having when the room whirls, is not veridical. This is a rather different kind of consciousness. Consciousness one, if you like is the experience of the room spinning. Consciousness two, is probably a language based form of consciousness, that sits above consciousness one. And says it's not veridical. And you could have a consciousness three. That is sitting out there saying 'I'm thinking about the fact that my sensory experience is not veridical on this occasion.' So there may be many orders of consciousness there.