

Propaedeutics to a Philosophical Approach to Consciousness

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Abstract

The phenomenal consciousness, or the subjective experience of our inner world is a very surprising topic, «the last surviving mystery» able to ignite a long line of philosophical and also scientific controversy. Despite all of the comprehensive efforts, the ideal of clarity remains far beyond our expectations. Should we abandon the studies of consciousness as being too futile or counterproductive? Or should we continue to struggle for dismantling the articulations of «the hard problem of consciousness», and setting more sophisticated questions even if there are no guarantees for adequate answers. The following enterprise is just an attempt to persuade the reader about how the problem of conscious experience remains an important issue not only for the philosophy of mind, but also for the commonsense thought too. This special topic deserves our whole attention, because it is able to generate a shift in our perspectives about us and our place into the external world.

Keywords: *philosophy of mind, consciousness, matter, subjectivity, experience.*

When you are engaged in the study of such a complex subject as the one of consciousness, what surprises you the most is the overwhelming multitude of theoretical constructions, detailed analyses, fruitful debates, extensive explanations and perspectives, schools of philosophical or psychological thought, and empirical programs.¹ You discover that there is not only a canonical explanatory scenario, on the contrary, there is an abundance of narrative constructions that strive to clarify one of the most familiar and also mysterious phenomenon of the human nature. Regarding this complex subjective experience, the philosophical research field is constrained to exist between the unsettling hermetism of subjectivity (*first-person*

¹ Consciousness is the object of an extensive multidisciplinary research program called “consciousness studies”, an academic field that includes, besides philosophy, important contributions from disciplines as linguistics, neuroscience, psychology, artificial intelligence.

perspective) and the supposed and most required ideal of scientific objectivity (*third-person perspective*). When it comes to epistemological efforts, *thought that thinks itself* – as an established Aristotelian formula defines the self-reflective mind – risks to shuttle indecisively between the land of incurable optimism and that of demoralizing pessimism or, worst, risks to be trapped into superstition and magic. “The phenomenon of consciousness does not have clear-cut boundaries, and its complex structure does not admit any easy formulations.”² Treating different phenomena as an unique reality, describing them with the same concept, or using different concepts for the same referent could make a hermeneutic enterprise quite problematic.

The academic community focused on the features of consciousness has already produced a fascinating and overwhelming bibliographic universe,³ where all kinds of “-isms” come together: the traditional Cartesian dualism,⁴ interactionism, physicalism, materialism, naturalism, functionalism, internalism and externalism, behaviorism, epiphenomenalism, reductionism, monism, eliminativism, mysterianism, and so on. Trying to investigate consciousness, the student faces a lot of problems, also he risks to become the voluntary prisoner of a provocative and unresolved set of interrogations: *what is consciousness?*, *what does “conscious” mean?*, *what does consciousness do?*, *what is the role of consciousness or, in other words, what functions does it perform?*, *where is the locus of consciousness?*, *is there a nature of consciousness, or a reality of consciousness?*, *is conscious experience entirely determined by the states of the brain?*, *can a computer be endowed with the remarkable privilege of*

² Ned Block, Owen Flanagan and Guven Guzeldere, *The Nature of Consciousness. Philosophical Debates* (MIT Press, 1997), 1.

³ A wide range of publications could shed light on the problematic topic of consciousness: William James’s monumental paper, “Does Consciousness Exist?” (first published in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 1), Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (1991), Collin McGinn, *The Problem of Consciousness* (1991), John R. Searle, *Consciousness and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), John R. Searle, *The Mystery of Consciousness* (A New York Review Book, 1997), David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind. In Search of a Theory of Conscious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 1997), Ned Block, *Consciousness, Function and Representation* (The MIT Press, 2007), Owen Flanagan, *The Conscious Mind. In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford University Press, 1996), Block, Flanagan and Guzeldere, *The Nature of Consciousness*, etc.

⁴ Through his fundamental work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) launched in the philosophical circuit his dualist view, based on the sharp distinction (also interaction) between two substances: “res extensa”, or *the body (matter)*, and “res cogitans” or *mind (spirit)*.

consciousness? and many other valuable challenges.⁵ You get into the distinguished company of people with an indescribable brilliant intelligence: William James, John R. Searle, David J. Chalmers, Thomas Nagel, Ned Block, Michael Tye, Igor Aleksander, Andy Clark, Antonio Damasio, Tim Crane, Daniel C. Dennett, Robert Kirk, Collin McGinn, Michael S. Gazzaniga, Jaegwon Kim, Robert Pepperell, to name just a few of them. Studies and research on consciousness unfold themselves in front of you like an endless stream of pages, and you find yourself full of anxieties and hopes just like Captain Ahab in search of his pray Moby Dick. The published texts embrace decades, far beyond any unclear boundaries of philosophy, sending our cognitive efforts into endless spaces of inter and multidisciplinary approaches. Beyond *the common-sense notion of consciousness*, the glossary of mental states contains an extremely generous terminology: *self-consciousness*, *phenomenal consciousness*, *perceptual consciousness*, *intentional consciousness*, *affective consciousness*, *access consciousness*, *background consciousness*, *actual consciousness*, and so on. This is the reason why a critical understanding of this luxuriant conceptual architecture is not always easily done. On the contrary, you often find that the comprehensive tools and techniques you possess encounter significant obstacles and difficulties.

The commonsense view on consciousness

What is it like to be a conscious human being?⁶ At first glance, finding an answer to this question seems to be an easy, familiar and perfectly comprehensible task, even a remarkable and revealing enterprise, since there is a convenient “self-understanding” of the concept, or a widespread underlying insight into its deepest significance. Nevertheless, the issue becomes obviously problematic if we assume that all of us are experiencing the same categories of mental states, and we have access to someone else’s mind. “Each of us is self-conscious. What is the nature of that curious access you have to the contents of your own mind, but to no other?”

⁵ In the introductory pages to *The Nature of Consciousness. Philosophical Debates* (The MIT Press, 1997), Guven Guzeldere synthesizes questions about consciousness to “the four W-questions”: *What* are the media and mechanisms of consciousness? *Where* is, if anywhere, the locus of consciousness? *Who* can be said to be a conscious being? and *Why* is there consciousness at all?. To this, the author also adds the “how-to-question”: How does consciousness arise in, or emerge from its underlying substance, structure, and mechanism, in the way it does? (“Introduction. The Many Faces of Consciousness, A Field Guide,” 31).

⁶ In his paper “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, Thomas Nagel gives to the consciousness *the subjective character of experience*, saying that “an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism – something it is like *for* the organism.” Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Reading*, ed. David J. Chalmers (Oxford University Press, 2002), 219-220.

How is it you are able to tell, without looking at your behavior, what you feel, think, and desire? We take it for granted, this capacity for *introspection*, but it is a most extraordinary and enigmatic talent to have.”⁷ Speaking in general terms, to be conscious means to be aware, to experience a mental state of alertness or attentiveness, an amount of different and relevant sensations, feelings, amazing passions, and surprising moods, much different from the “inexistence” or unconsciousness of sleeping, coma, or drug-induced states. To be conscious means to be able to have access and to investigate your mental phenomena, to have the feeling of your own identity, to understand your place, and eventually your purpose into the wide picture of the external world. We can call this *phenomenal consciousness*, and, as Ned Block admit it, “phenomenal consciousness is experience.”⁸ Let me illustrate this with an example. When I am writing these lines, I am experiencing the elements of the environment in a purely subjective manner, and simultaneously I integrate the aspects of the surroundings into an intelligible pattern: I am aware that I am at my writing table, sitting in front of my computer screen, touching the black keys with controllable movements, while the loudspeakers offer me a pleasant soundtrack. From time to time I sip the dark liquid out of the coffee cup, feeling the strong taste of a bitter-sweet essence. From outside, the noise of the urban bustle comes to my ears: the tumultuousness of the street, the horns and engines of the vehicles, the intermingling voices, the laughter of unknown children, the tweets of birds. I am aware of this absorbing fabric of sensory impressions conveyed through rods and cones, hair cells, bulbs, fibers and transmitted to my brain via nerve channels. I experience physical stimuli and I integrate them almost instantly in well-known patterns. I am aware of the present, and of the succession of inexorable moments, a complex fabric of the events I live in. If I let my thoughts go away, I could experience the vivid echoes of the past, over which even I can no longer have control and moreover, I can alter it with “false memories”. Finally, I am aware of my plans and my expectations about the future. All of these features are descriptions of our subjective experiences, of our conscious mental states, which could be labelled *phenomenal consciousness*. I am phenomenally conscious when I have a great amount of personal experiences that makes me who I am: perceiving things in a particular way, feeling pleasure and pain different from anyone else, being able to feel a rich kaleidoscope of emotions, further, having the opportunity to switch off the attention from the outside world,

⁷ Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness. A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (third edition) (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press, 2013), 7.

⁸ Ned Block, “Concepts of Consciousness,” in *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Reading*, ed. David J. Chalmers (Oxford University Press, New York, 2002), 206.

and plunge into a personal collection of thoughts, memories or imagination scenarios. As John Searls put it, “by *consciousness*, I simply mean those subjective states of sentience or awareness that begin when one awakes in the morning from a dreamless sleep and continue throughout the day until one goes to sleep at night, or falls into a coma, or dies, or otherwise becomes, as one would say, unconscious.”⁹ But all of these ingredients of conscious experience seem to deliver the comprehensive effort to a problematic and hermetical subjectivity. Being absolutely subjective, this kind of consciousness is extremely difficult to explain in a rigorous scientific language.

If we keep our discourse into a linguistic account, also tributary to the common sense, we find that there are many expressions that imply the controversial phenomenon of consciousness: “I am aware that I should study thoroughly and avoid delays”, “I am aware of the discomfort or pain experienced by a food abuse episode”, “I am aware of the disappointment that I may feel if I do not fulfill my needs as I wish”. We also talk about “unconscious” people, about the characters of the public space that suffer from a chronic lack of moral awareness. Neither medical language is lacking in expressions that evoke more or less directly the phenomenon of consciousness: “X has lost consciousness (he became unconscious)”, “Y regained consciousness at the end of a traumatic event, painful (he became conscious)”, “Z suffers from a lack of attention (attention is an intrinsic part of the consciousness)”, etc. All this leads us to believe that we are dealing with a phenomenon extremely difficult to describe, if we miss a unifying principle. Even if I could explain to someone else the contents of my mental states, “what it is like to be me”, my own subjective world still remains sealed, private, and intrinsic, out of any objective description's attempt made by an outside observer.

Consciousness – a problematic subject of philosophical and scientific investigations

Regarding all these meanings of consciousness given by the commonsense thought, philosophy is not pleased at all with its noncritical assumptions and conjectures. On the contrary, philosophical reflection aims to be more compelling, it intends to dig under the surface of commonplaces, far beyond the twisted paths of the ordinary knowledge. But no theoretical or empirical construction is immune to the real danger of ambiguity. It is true that the philosophical enterprises about consciousness exploit new and prolific aspects as the availability of our own

⁹ John R. Searle, *Consciousness and Language* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 7.

internal contents, the condition of possibility for an accurate description of these mental states. But it is also true that the real issues remain unexploited. In their attempt to perform a serious exploration of the issues of consciousness, philosophers join their efforts with cognitive psychologists, neurobiologists, computer scientists who aim to reveal the mechanisms, processes, and functions that take place in our brains when we are subjects of a conscious experience. In other words, due to their research in neuroscience, scientists try to identify and describe neural mechanisms and processes, or “the neural correlate of consciousness”.¹⁰ From a neurobiological perspective, with the help of extensive laboratory research,¹¹ consciousness tends to turn into a consequence or a by-product of the brain processes, a fundamental property of networked entities. Can we really explain this connection, or the link between neurophysiological processes and our subjective experience, finally reaching the ability to resolve the hard problem of consciousness? Should we abandon the phenomenon of conscious experience? These are not at all trivial questions. On contrary, they are fundamental and ambitious philosophical questions that claim different strategies for resolving the issue, if there are any satisfactory strategies available.

We need to analyze the consequences of this neurobiological reductive explanation, if we accept that “above all, consciousness is a biological phenomenon. We should think of consciousness as part of our ordinary biological history, along with digestion, growth, mitosis and meiosis.”¹² It is a fact that a vast network of neurons performs a polyphonic overture, exchanging rapid and spectacular electrical pulses, transferring chemical substances or neurotransmitters. It is also a fact that all of these processes taking place into our brains build the physiological basis of consciousness. But what about the experiences that accompany the entire cognitive and behavioral functions of the brain? The way in which matter generates the spirit, or the way brain operations and processes convert themselves into subjective experiences could be, for philosophy of mind, the ultimate challenge. Further, describing or reporting the experience we have when we perceive and think is a difficult challenge that David J. Chalmers has placed it under the generic title of *the hard problem of consciousness*:

¹⁰ Christof Koch, in “The Movie in Your Head,” an article published in *Scientific American MIND* 16, no. 3 (2005), 58-63, evokes *the neural correlates of consciousness (NCCs)* as being the neural basis of our subjective experience, or “the set of firings among neurons that correlates with each bit of awareness that experience.”

¹¹ Through brain-scanning techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography (EEG), microelectrodes recordings etc., we can actually watch the brain doing its marvellous work.

¹² Searle, *Consciousness and Language*, 7.

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*when we see, for example, we experience visual sensations: the felt quality of redness, the experience of dark and light, the quality of depth in a visual field. Other experiences go along with perception in different modalities: the sound of a clarinet, the smell of mothballs. Then there are bodily sensations, from pains to orgasms; mental images that are conjured up internally; the felt quality of emotion, and the experience of a stream of conscious thoughts. What unites all of these states is that there is something it's like to be in them. All of them are states of experience.*¹³

Even if we admit the ineffable character of consciousness, its mystery, or its absolute subjectivity, this is a clear trademark for the fact that consciousness exists. It is difficult and adventurous to deny that scanning the vast brain territory, with the help of specific technologies and tools, allows a significant advancement in the understanding of conscious phenomena. As it is just as difficult and adventurous to reduce conscious states *only* to the processes that take place in the brain. Beyond all unanswered questions, subtle distinctions and undesirable confusions, remains our philosophical interest towards a problem that generates new and prolific investigations.

*Human consciousness is just about the last surviving mystery. A mystery is a phenomenon that people don't know how to think about — yet. (...) With consciousness, however, we are still in a terrible muddle. Consciousness stands alone today as a topic that often leaves even the most sophisticated thinkers tongue-tied and confused. And, as with all the earlier mysteries, there are many who insist — and hope — that there will never be a demystification of consciousness.*¹⁴

There are many attempts to demystify the consciousness, and by doing that one could open Pandora's box.¹⁵ There are also a lot of confusion in this effort of demystification. Some researchers prefer to take not the conscious experience for granted, claiming that trying to explain the subjective experience is nothing more than a counterproductive endeavor, automatically condemned to failure, obscurity, or equivocation. Other more radical views deny the phenomenon of conscious experience, for the reason that it is not externally observable and verifiable.

Experience is the most central and manifest aspect of our mental lives, and indeed is perhaps the key explanandum in the science of the mind. Because of this status as an explanandum, experience cannot be discarded like the vital spirit when a new theory comes along. Rather, it is the central fact that any theory of consciousness must

¹³ David J. Chalmers's, "The Hard Problem of Consciousness," in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, eds. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 226.

¹⁴ Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York, Boston London: Back Bay Books, Little, Brown and Company, 1992), 21-22.

¹⁵ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 21.

*explain. A theory that denies the phenomenon solves the problem by ducking the question.*¹⁶

Building an explanatory bridge between our visible material substance (*the body*) and the “hidden dark side” of the *mind* still sounds like a chimerical ideal. Even if there are many notorious philosophical and scientific attempts to testify the existence of conscious states, the challenge still remains in front of us. I am convinced that the purpose of explaining consciousness is an honorable and provocative one, but “the explanatory gap” seems at this moment impossible to overcome. Further, no matter how bold are the explanatory scenarios to understand the puzzling relationship between conscious experience and physical processes of the brain, the hard problem of consciousness cannot be avoided.¹⁷ That is why, the consciousness appears to stand at the crossroads of all problematic thoughts, in a territory that does not belong exclusively to either absolute subjectivity or to that of radical objectivity. It seems to us that consciousness is a forever trapped between a difficult-to-explain subjectivity of our inner worlds (*the mind*) and the steady terrain of objectivity. Is our inner world, that of our thoughts, less real than the outside world? Or, maybe are we just dealing here with conceptual subtlety? If being conscious is just a sort of private experience, how can a person guarantee the existence of his own consciousness? How can we legitimate what we feel, what we experience only through a mediated description or through the report of our language? If everything happens exclusively within us when we say that we are conscious, then we have to deal with the inexplicable rupture between these private experiences and the public sphere, between what we experience and what others could know about the contents of our inner world.

In everyday life, we have the privilege of experiencing conscious states, even if we are not preoccupied with asking relevant questions about how these experiences emerge. Beyond the conveniences of ordinary life, philosophers try to understand and describe the qualities of this mysterious mental phenomena in an intelligible and persuasive way. It is quite comfortable to assume that we have conscious experiences when we perceive things from the world around us, when we scan the environment with the complicity of the mechanisms of a complex sensory device, or, as neuroscience invite us to accept, when we decode stimuli

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 231.

¹⁷ See, for example, the attempt to explain conscious or subjective experiences through the mathematical based language of the quantum mechanics. Despite the classical physical theory, there is enough place for the conscious events in quantum mechanics, which is bringing a “nonlocal, nonreductionistic, nondeterministic, conception of nature.” (Springer Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg, 2009), 40.

and interpret them with specialized brain areas. We are in a conscious state when we perceive, think, feel, suffer, imagine, design aspirations, assume projects and expectations about our destiny and our peers' future. But it is not at all an easy quest to articulate all of these features into a convincing, consistent, and coherent view. A torrent of ambitious and stimulating ideas and facts, not any of them very accessible, where you could easily drown without a guideline.

*Despite much progress consciousness remains as elusive as ever. Some difficulties have been resolved, but new ones have emerged. (...) Science gradually dispelled the need for vital essences to explain life, but consciousness remained unexplained.*¹⁸

Philosophy of mind undoubtedly contains an immense and outstanding repertoire of ideas, where wonderful thinkers are concerned with building up compelling edifices about complex problems, they are struggling to explain sometimes the unexplainable, to solve riddles and to unfold trickery. The problem of consciousness is one of these riddles. To get acquainted with this overwhelming tapestry of fascinating ideas requires courage, analytical ambition, and a great power of synthesis. You meet supporters, but also skeptics, detractors of the conscious mind, strong academic voices that deny the existence of the mental states. They disdain or minimize concerns in the sphere of interiority, for the sake of the argument, or because they consider it just a frivolous topic. Such extreme, and skeptical positioning requires a serious effort of argumentation, also a witty effort of deconstruction or contra-argumentation. But there are also voices that, on the contrary, pay the proper tribute to the consciousness, considering that things must be nuanced lucidly, it must be distinguished between the commonsense concepts and the profound meanings.

Conclusion

One conclusion we can draw from a brief analysis of these investigations, studies, and empirical researches on the controversial topic of consciousness is that there is a chronic lack of consensus. It seems like philosophers persist to discuss their topics within the limits of their own discourse, giving different meanings to consciousness, and hence they generate both anxiety and inspiration in the observer's mind. Although we encounter ambiguity, fuzziness, all of these views are not necessarily shortcomings, weak theoretical enterprises, but rather a challenge that keeps our intellectual interest alive. The conceptual ambiguity may

¹⁸ Chris Frith and Geraint Rees, "A Brief History of the Scientific Approach to the Study of Consciousness," in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, eds. Max Velmans and Susan Schneider (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 17.

eventually damp our necessity to find new and surprising explanations, or it may amplify our comprehensive endeavor, inviting us to travel beyond explored territories. Uncertainty, doubt, and the relativism of ideas – these are the ultimate elements you are dealing with when you intend to map a fascinating territory. Questioning the puzzle of consciousness, you are like Oedipus confronting the Sphinx: you anticipate with perplexity and vivid curiosity the unending stream of interrogations.

Perhaps sometimes we forget to give appropriate attention to the complex mechanisms by which we surmise the phenomenal qualities of the surrounding world. Perhaps we are not wondering in the philosophical way every time we grasp intentional objects and integrate them into a pre-existing cognitive pattern. As the ancient philosopher Protagoras once admitted, the painting of the outer world seems to be inevitably measured with the standard of humanity that we embody as we contemplate this world. Whatever, we are designing our inner world in the outer world. Even if we project at the level of the objects around us the phenomenal features or particularities that are *de facto* intrinsic to us and thus commit what the philosophers call *categorical error*, yet such an illicit assignment is what makes the external world a miraculous space. Although consciousness is identified by some authors with indispensable introspection, by others with the utmost speculative futility, I am convinced that each of us is capable of a prolific self-reflective enterprise. At the end of this propaedeutic exercise, I dare to think that only education and a serious research allows us to enjoy the benefits of self-reflexivity, to look at us with lucidity, to analyze ourselves *ira et studio*, and to give a fresh and coherent view on the conscious experience. And when we transform ourselves into the subject of many perplexities and interrogations, then we are able to experience the pure state of consciousness. Otherwise, the remarkable privilege of this human quality risks to remain nothing more than a foreign, and alienated cognitive project. Perhaps, after all, there is no single meaning of the consciousness, but a lot of questionable meanings of this term. Perhaps everything is unusual and transient in this *terra incognita* of what we call subjective experience of our quotidian saga. One fact is unquestionable, that is our deepest nature and our refinement to feel, to perceive, to judge, to think, to design and anticipate our future, and most of all, to dream.

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