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Editor's Introduction

Defining Consciousness

A frequently ignored elephant in the room of Consciousness Studies is the looming question of what we actually mean by 'consciousness'. A plethora of meanings attaches to the term, some of which are only subtly different from one another, others mutually incompatible. Take any two people at random, get them to discuss the topic, and they will almost certainly have dissimilar concepts in mind; hardly an ideal recipe for agreement! Approaches to many problems of consciousness would surely be eased if the population of meanings could be tamed, maybe culled, and generally rendered user-friendly.

People are sometimes hesitant to attempt definition, thinking it 'premature' to do so. Better to let a thousand flowers bloom, they say. The main risk of definition, of course, is that a meaning judged too wild for inclusion could eventually turn out to be the most worthwhile, thus delaying progress for as long as it was excluded from the fold. On the other hand, appreciation of its value might be harder to achieve if other meanings had not first been domesticated. This JCS 'special issue' represents an attempt to set the scene for domestication: to bring trunk, ears, feet and the rest of the elephant out into the light of day, and to ask whether it will ever be possible meaningfully to discuss the creature as something other than a sum of its parts. Because so many meanings of the term are theory laden, and theories are likely to prove ephemeral given the present stage of development of our field, contributors were asked especially to give their views on whether theory free definitions are available, or indeed achievable.

The introductory paper by **Ram Vimal** describes and lists 40 distinguishable meanings attributed to 'consciousness' that he discovered in the literature and elsewhere — and the list is not exhaustive, he tells us! Meanings can broadly be divided into those that mainly refer to

'function' and those that are primarily about 'experience'. As almost all are theory laden, he regards the prospects for agreeing a significant reduction in their number as dim, but urges authors always to specify which meaning(s) they have in mind, finally giving an example of how this can be achieved.

Next, **Alfredo Pereira** and **Hans Ricke** tell us about the views they have formed on the basis of discussions held in websites that they set up, which are devoted to consciousness definition. They point out that definitions are inherently contextual and suggest that, in a scientific context, the best option may be to regard consciousness as a partially reportable process, involving complex feedback between sensation and action. The term 'qualé', they suggest, is as problematic as 'consciousness' but may most usefully be applied to the entire content of the Jamesian 'specious present'.

Anders Søgaard and **Stine Østerskov Søgaard** comment that defining consciousness does appear to be necessary, but that only 'stipulative', as opposed to 'descriptive', definitions are practicable. They discuss six possible definitions of this type, noting that their three preferred options would each lead to 'very different scientific enquiries'. Having and using a range of suitable definitions would thus seem to be a good idea.

Then **Bill Faw**, apparently agreeing with Marvin Minsky that consciousness is a 'suitcase word' of some type, gives a spirited plea for always considering it in relation to specified functional or behavioural states. He describes an extensive range of particular states that may be specially worth considering when it comes to 'carving consciousness at the joints', as he puts it.

Penelope Rowlatt, on the other hand, takes a more unitary view. She makes a case for regarding the Nagelian, 'what it is likeness' of consciousness as a function of some types of memory, going on to explore in some detail which particular types are likely to be relevant. The 'reportability' of consciousness, necessary for any scientific study of it, comes for free on this proposal.

David Skrbina also takes a relatively unitary view. He makes an impressive case for what might be termed 'pan-mentalism', suggesting that the 'mental' always has two aspects; namely the experiential and the representational or intentional. 'Consciousness', he tells us, '...is the luminous upper layer of the mind ... which is exposed to the light of the world, and which casts its light upon the world'. One might infer from this that any division between his 'upper layer' and the rest of the mind would be somewhat arbitrary or fuzzy. It might

become a matter of (empirically informed) convention rather like the separation of 'hypertension' from 'normal' blood pressure.

Mike Beaton focuses on qualia (i.e. the phenomenal aspect of consciousness), offering a distinctly heavyweight argument that centres on puzzles associated with 'inverted spectra'. If one accepts the common intuition that these could exist, then one must also accept Chalmers' position or some closely related one, he says. On the other hand, our view of qualia depends upon introspection and we can't say anything too definite about them until we have an (independently motivated) theory of introspection. Given a plausible theory of this type, qualia can be defined as subjective, introspectible properties of mentality.

Steve Torrance, in a thought-provoking and constructively iconoclastic (if that's not an oxymoron!) paper, questions the commonly held assumptions that consciousness is essentially 'inner', 'hidden' or necessarily 'single'. Given the doubts that he so elegantly describes, it would seem premature to attempt finally to define consciousness; rather, we should encourage competition between different concepts, while appealing to empirical investigation.

Sophie Allen takes a look at the epistemology of definitions in general, and goes on to discuss the special problems surrounding 'consciousness'. She concludes that the best we can do at the moment is probably to come up with either some relatively trivial general definition that is acceptable to the majority, or with theory-laden, and probably very temporary, usages that relate only to specific contexts.

Finally, **Max Velmans** offers a lucid, insightful analysis of what is required of any adequate definition of consciousness, showing that many of those in current use are either too broad or too narrow. A satisfactory definition has to be grounded in phenomenology, he avers, agreeing with Sophie Allen that such definition is likely to develop along with our increasing knowledge, just as physicists' concepts of energy or time have grown. I guess we can all say 'amen' to that!

Are any overall messages implicit in this collection? There does seem to be fairly general agreement that we should all try harder to both specify what we mean when referring to 'consciousness' and pay more attention to the contexts within which that meaning applies. And we should embrace the resultant diversity, say several authors, for that way lies progress. I believe, too, that there is the outline of another useful and rather more specific agreement; namely that it might be a good idea, chiefly for pragmatic reasons, if the default meaning of 'consciousness' were to become something like

'reportable mental content'. Sogaard and Osterkov do express hesitations about the validity of such a move in their paper, but these can, I suspect, be put down to not having considered links between memory and introspection.

Achieving agreement of this latter sort would reduce questions about the conscious/unconscious distinction to ones about the role(s) of memory and the boundaries and scope of introspection, upon which 'reports' are necessarily based. Many other questions of consciousness would of course be displaced to the field of 'mentality' in general, which could be no bad thing especially in view of the growing interest in 'extended mind'. And the hard problem? Well, that would still be with us, but maybe in slightly less formidable and monolithic guise than is presently the case.

But that's just my personal impression. Please read, enjoy and draw your own conclusions.