



# Consciousness

## *Consciousness: A Perspective of Reality*

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## Introduction

Psychologists and philosophers explain the term 'consciousness' differently. Rocco Gennaro describes consciousness well when he says that trying to explain "the nature of consciousness is one of the most important and perplexing areas of philosophy, but the concept is notoriously ambiguous" (2012, p. 1). He states further that consciousness is arguably the most central issue in current philosophy of mind (Gennaro, 2012). As a matter of fact, it is also central in psychology. Philosophy and psychology differ to some extent in their views of the definition and utility of consciousness. Perhaps consciousness involves each of the professions in different ways, especially in the applicability of the term. I hope to draw out and focus on the primary differences. Philosophy is the discovery of finite points of research, the available selectivity and continuous, never-ending search for more information concerning a subject and object relationship. In many ways, psychology appears to be a derivative of philosophy, but it has the more practical focus of dealing with and explaining human behavior.

## Early Theories

Early psychologists equated consciousness with mind and defined psychology as the study of mind and consciousness (Atkyson, et al., 1987). The early theories of mind were dualism and materialism (or physicalism). Dualism represents a conscious mind or a conscious mental state that is non-physical, whereas materialism (or physicalism), views the mind as the brain, or that which is caused by neural activity (Gennaro, 2012). The former may lean toward a primarily philosophical view and the latter primarily toward the psychological view. Psychologists tend to accept the mind/brain view, which can be utilized by practioners to reinforce and modify client behavior. Philosophers view consciousness in a more finite way that involves



the process of relationship between a subject and his or her environmental object of focus. It is interesting that these two theories can overlap. However, they are also differentiated in the two fields of practice. There is a cross-over between the two fields of philosophy and psychology in the unique studies of consciousness in neurophysiological or physical terms, and also cognitive theories of consciousness whereby conscious mental states are reduced to some type of representational relation between mental states and the world.

There are many familiar objections to both materialism and dualism (Gennaro, 2012). One is that materialism cannot truly explain just how or why some brain states are conscious, and the distinction between mind and matter is not explained. On the other hand, dualism faces the problem of explaining how

a non-physical substance or mental state can causally interact with the physical body (Gennaro, 2012). Most contemporary theories of consciousness try to explain state consciousness or what makes a mental state or a conscious mental state (Gennaro, 2012). Philosophers sometimes refer to conscious states as phenomenal or qualitative states. Philosophers often view such states as having qualitative properties called qualia (pronounced kwa' lee uh). Although this view is debated, they are perhaps most frequently understood as the felt properties or qualities of conscious states (Gennaro, 2012).

Gennaro continues by making a distinction between phenomenal consciousness (phenomenality) and access consciousness by borrowing the insight of Block (2012). Block defines access consciousness as a mental state's relationship with other mental states; for example, a mental state's availability for use in reasoning and rationality that guides speech and action (Gennaro, 2012). Therefore, visual perception is access conscious because it carries visual information that is generally available for a person to use, whether or not it has any qualitative properties. Access

consciousness is more a functional idea that is concerned with what mental states do (Gennaro, 2012).



## A Historical Perspective on Consciousness

Western  
philosophy involves important writings on human

nature and the soul and mind which date back to the work  
of Plato's most famous student, Aristotle (Gennaro, 2012).

Descartes (1596-1650), a medieval philosopher, and his successors in the early modern period  
of philosophy, focused on consciousness and  
the relationship between the mind and body (Gennaro, 2012).

Descartes argued that the mind is a non-  
physical substance that is distinct from the body.  
He viewed consciousness as essential to thought. John Locke (1689-

1775) also believed in the connection between mentality  
and consciousness (Gennaro, 2012).

Historically, scientists studied the human brain and  
behavior objectively. This ignored consciousness, since a person's conscious  
experience cannot be directly observed (Farthing, 1992). More recently, research  
on consciousness has

taken off in many important directions (Gennaro, 2012.)  
In psychology, with the notable exception of the virtual banishment of  
consciousness by behaviorist psychologists

(e.g. Skinner, 1953),  
there were also those deeply interested in consciousness and various  
introspective (first-person) methods



of investigating the mind. To name a few: Wilhelm Wundt (1897), William James (1890), Alfred Titchener (1901) and Franz Brentano (1874/1973) all had a profound effect on some contemporary theories of consciousness. Gennaro offered that phenomenological philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger used introspectionist approaches, but none of them had much scientific knowledge of how the brain works (Gennaro, 2012).

The relatively recent development of neurophysiology is partially responsible for the unprecedented interdisciplinary research interest in consciousness, particularly since the 1980's (Gennaro, 2012). Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the ultimate nature of reality (Gennaro, 2012). There are two broad traditional and competing metaphysical views concerning the nature of the mind and conscious mental states: dualism and materialism (Gennaro, 2012). Dualists believe that in some sense the conscious mind or a conscious mental state is non-physical. On the other hand, materialists hold that the mind is the brain, or, more accurately, that conscious mental activity is neural activity (Gennaro, 2012).

Materialists view the brain, a material thing, as the most likely physical entity to identify with the mind. Dualists tend to believe that conscious mental states or minds are radically different from anything in the physical world (Gennaro, 2012). Gennaro points out that historically there has been a clear link between dualism and a belief in immortality. Therefore, among dualists there tends to be a more theistic perspective than among materialists (2012). Belief in dualism often has an explicit theological motivation (Gennaro, 2012).

## **Philosophy**

Some of the most important questions concerning the mind, the brain, and consciousness originated in philosophy (Farthing, 1992). Philosophers were concerned with determining what things really existed and the essential nature of those things. Consciousness is one of the most difficult of all scientific problems because it is an active process that requires theorizing about diverse and individualized experience (Farthing, 1992).



Although defining consciousness is difficult, if not impossible, there are some features of consciousness that describe it. Consciousness is always directed toward something and its characteristics are true of all types of consciousness: voluntarily directed when a person is awake, drug-induced, or biologically triggered during sleep (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). It is a continuous process of transformation between internal and external spaces (Fischer in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). Conscious is ever-changing. James referred to it as a “stream of consciousness (Symonds, 1949). Neural processes are relevant to consciousness (Siegal, 2007). Consciousness of something lies beneath the reflective act of self-knowledge and nothing can be known or spoken about unless it comes through consciousness (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). Knowledge and consciousness are correlated (Giorgi, 2009). Consciousness is described by sensory perception or mental images and through experience (Siegal, 2007). Finally, it involves a living organism capable of intentional, goal-directed movement, since willed motor activity is a necessary condition of consciousness (Fischer in Wolman & Ullman, 1976).

### Phenomenology

is concerned with the difference between how things appear and those things as they actually are (Boileau, 2006). Some phenomenologists, including Husserl, originally investigated subjective experience as a way to discover how consciousness observes pure reality (Boileau, 2006). There is an objective reality that is independent of conscious awareness, but is available through the senses. A person’s experience in the world is a product of an interaction between the world and the person’s mind (Boileau, 2006). Each person’s interpretation of the world is unique and a person’s perceptions vary over time.

Phenomenologists, including Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre contributed a great deal to the study of mental imagery. Mental images are not pictures (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). They are not framed, they occupy the field of vision, and they are usually dynamic rather than static. Primary images have four main characteristics: image-consciousness; perceiving and imagining; the image as nothingness; and spontaneity (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman 1986). The function of a mental image is representation. When a person sees an object, it is a special kind of image-consciousness, either imagined or conscious. It is a synthetic organization, a special relationship between the object and the consciousness (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). When a mental



image of something observed is created, the object is perceived in profiles. The object may be the total of the profiles, but a mental image can never reveal more than the consciousness the person has of the object (Tolaas in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). Altered states of consciousness, such as dreaming, are primarily mental images.

## Psychology

Although the psychology of consciousness and the philosophy of mind have important connections, consciousness is not

the same as the mind (Farthing, 1992). The mind is a broader concept that includes mental processes that are both conscious and unconscious. It can be divided into three levels: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious (Symonds, 1949.) The mind originates from brain function and a relationship between a stimulus and a response of the nervous system (Fischer in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). The brain is the only organ that is programmed to continue to develop through embryogenesis (Fischer in Wolman & Ullman, 1986). According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory, memories, impulses and desires are part of the unconscious, and are not available to consciousness (Atkysen, et al., 1987). Thoughts and impulses that have been repressed to the unconscious can only reach consciousness indirectly. Freud believed unconscious desires and impulses cause most mental illnesses. The goal of psychoanalysis is to bring the repressed material to consciousness. According to Symonds repression excludes thoughts, feelings, and wishes, and may be the most important defense against unacceptable impulses (1949). Janet's theory of dissociation states that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to bring repressed memories to consciousness. However, dissociated memories and thoughts can reach the conscious level (Atkysen, et al., 1987). They are more like memories of the preconscious or subconscious.

The materialistic view of consciousness is that the mind is the functioning of the brain to process information and control action in a flexible and adaptive manner. According to this view, the mind cannot exist



apart from the living brain (Farthing, 1992). The mind produces information and controls activity. Its neural processes are relevant to consciousness (Siegal, 2007). Products of the mind include perception, memory, and thinking (Farthing, 1992). Only brain activity is accompanied by states of consciousness, but consciousness is not the same thing as neural activity (Kosslyn & Koenig, 1992).

The mind is flexible, not just reflective. It contains separate systems of thought, emotion and ideas, which transfer from one situation to another (Ornstein, 1991). The different centers of the mind appear to act independently of consciousness. It is as if something inside a person decides how and when to move before the consciousness is aware of it (Ornstein, 1991). An unconscious decision center may initiate an action, after which the conscious self can choose to stop it. Instead of a single unconscious, there may be a system of many unconscious minds, each with its own program (Ornstein, 1991). Consciousness, the center of the mind/brain system, may be able to intervene to stop proposals of the separate minds (Ornstein, 1991). For example, when something happens, a person's sense organs perceive it and there is a spike in neuronal activity. Half a second later, if the stimulus was big enough or important enough, the neurons are still active and the conscious mind becomes aware of the stimulus. Even when a person becomes aware of a sensory stimulus, it takes half a second to respond which may leave the unconscious mind to initiate any rapid reaction (Ornstein, 1991). Therefore, people may react to things that are unconscious. Another explanation for this delay is that neural structures evolved for one purpose can perform an entirely different function, but may operate relatively slowly in a new context (Kosslyn & Koenig, 1992).

Emotions create a state of readiness for action and are primarily a mental process that is unconscious (Siegel, 1999). Siegel proposes there is a coordinating center within the brain that relates perceptions with memory and behavior (1999). Both external stimuli and internal stimuli (memory and imagination) create perceptual representations. These are functionally connected in the lateral prefrontal cortex (Siegel, 1999). Siegel proposes





there are left hemisphere and right hemisphere forms of consciousness that are distinct from each other, since the representational process of one hemisphere is unique from the other (Siegel, 1999).

In psychology,  
when a person makes a sensory distinction and validates it through  
willed movement, the response is the sensible world of everyday reality (Fischer in Wolman  
& Ullman, 1986). However, it  
is only the perceptions that make sense to the person (programmed-appropriate  
behavior) that generate behavioral responses. Perceptions without corresponding  
appropriate behavior (learned behavior) will not be actualized. The person will  
deny, misperceive, repress,  
condense, distort, and /or sublimate them according to the person's defense  
style (Fischer in Wolman &  
Ullman, 1986).

## Conclusion

The definitions of consciousness are many, but there is  
agreement that it is a human process. A digital machine can never acquire  
consciousness (Nagal, 2000). Both philosophers and psychologists study  
consciousness, they approach it differently and come to different conclusions.  
Philosophy creates theory, while psychology applies theory and puts it into

practice. Both approaches are valuable and can complement  
each other as in neuroscience. "Analyzing the  
physiological and molecular process of the brain will not lead to an  
understanding of consciousness, since consciousness is an emergent phenomenon"  
(Farthing, 1992, p. 75). An emergent phenomenon, such as consciousness, appears  
as result of a unique relationship among the parts of an organized system, and  
cannot be predicted from knowledge of the parts alone. Ornstein suggests that  
our biological evolution has ended and we need to make conscious changes in the  
ways we think, relate to others, and  
identify with the rest of humanity (1991).

Our brain gives us the ability to  
become aware of ourselves. If we can  
let go of the mind's work of judgment, awareness may become non-judgmental





(Siegel, 2007).

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