# Has Nelkin Discovered Anything about Consciousness?

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The most important fact about persons is that they are conscious, but contemporary philosophers, who ignore Wittgenstein's work in this area, present incredibly distorted views of consciousness. The central principle of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that meaning is use. The word "consciousness", like "awareness", is used ordinarily more-or-less synonymously with "experiencing" and with "knowing", but in a much narrower range of situations (e.g. when someone is coming out of a faint). "Consciousness" does not denote anything ontologically real; instead, it has uses. Philosophers extend the sense of the word to include all experience or our entire mental life. Even then, there is no mystery about consciousness. There are neural preconditions for consciousness, but these are to be investigated by the scientist, not the philosopher. It is absurd to identify consciousness with the neural preconditions; the concept is not used like that. When one sees a flower, one can be said in the extended philosophical sense of conscious, to be conscious of it. But while one can be conscious of a flower, there is no such thing as being conscious of the seeing, in the sense of experiencing the seeing. If one tries to be conscious of *seeing* the flower, one does not find anything while the attention one gives to the flower diminishes markedly. Seeing, like being conscious and being aware and experiencing, is always *of* something; the word does not denote anything in its own right; it is relational, like "consciousness". Moreover, the flower one sees is the real flower, not a representation of it in the mind. How does one *see* a *representation in the mind* of a flower? Consciousness can also mean knowing and when one sees a flower, one can be said to know one is seeing it, but here again, the use is relational; one cannot say anything about knowing, about being conscious in this sense, in their own right. Moreover, this use of "know" or "conscious" is innovative; these words are normally used when it makes sense to doubt, to talk of not knowing etc., but here it makes no sense to do this.

It already shows confusion to ask what consciousness is; if one knows how to use the word, there is nothing more to discover. When philosophers try to discover what consciousness is, they get nowhere. As an example, let us take the work of Norton Nelkin (Nelkin 1996).

Nelkin believes that there are three disparate states, each of which he calls consciousness- CS states, or sensation consciousness, C1 states, or proposition-like consciousness and C2 states, or apperceptive consciousness, which is consciousness of some CS or C1 states. Nelkin calls CS and C1 states states of consciousness because one is aware in these states although not apperceptively aware. In CS states, one can feel tingles, experiences colours and hears sounds without knowing that one is doing so. To know that one is feeling tingles, an act of apperceptive consciousness is necessary; one would have to be C2 aware of the CS state; one would have to be aware of the feeling. In C1 states, one can work on a philosophical problem or drive a car safely through traffic obstacles without knowing that one is doing so; for that, there has to be C2 awareness of the C1 states; one has to be aware of the thinking or the driving. Apperceptive consciousness is not necessary for thinking or driving. If we are usually aware of our experiences, it is because we are usually C2 conscious. To give another example: if a man runs approaches us with a knife, a baby and an adult would experience the same sensation (a CS state) but the adult would also have an experience of meaning; he would see a man approaching with a knife (a C1 state). But to know that he is seeing a man approaching with a knife, a C2 state would be needed.

These extravagant claims about human nature are actually incoherent. There can be no such thing as feeling a tingle and not knowing that one is doing so. In fact, it does not even make sense in such situations to doubt, whereas we use "know" in situations where it makes sense to doubt. "I feel a tingle but I do not know it" does not make sense. If someone is not aware of feeling tingles, we cannot say that he is feeling tingles and similarly for experiencing colours, hearing sounds, seeing a man approaching with a knife and so on. Nelkin separates experiencing colours, for example, from being aware of experiencing colours, and maintains that the first can exist without the second, but there is no second state, only a tautological possibility of talking about being aware of or knowing that one is experiencing colours when one is experiencing colours, and the "being aware" or "knowing" is being used innovatively, because here doubt makes no sense. Apperceptive consciousness is an illusion, born of an idle and innovative tautology. Actually, this is the old view of consciousness as an extra something bestowing luminosity upon mental states. But consciousness is not an extra something; to be conscious of a flower is just to see the flower, with the word being used in special circumstances.

Nelkin tries to support his case with empirical arguments. Regarding CS states, he suggests the following experiment. If one concentrates on the soles of one's feet, one experiences certain phenomena. When one shifts one's attention to the pit of one's stomach, one experiences certain other phenomena. When one returns one's attention to the soles of one's feet, the original phenomena are once again experienced. This is an instance of one's discovering phenomena that were experienced all along, of one's discovering that the feelings continued, although they were not apperceived. It seems as if one discovered phenomena that were being experienced all along, although they were not apperceived; the phenomena seem to be *still* there. Or if one is asked if one still has a headache, one may move one's head about and seem to discover the feeling there and say that one *still* has it. Or, at a cocktail party, when one does not apperceptively hear anything until a key word or topic of interest occurs, it seems as if one is tapping into a phenomenal flow that was already there. Or one might, when concentrating upon something else, find oneself scratching one's arm. This is surely done to rid oneself of a phenomenal feeling, an itch. Nelkin argues that the feeling of discovery is natural and justified if phenomenal states can exist dissociated from apperception.

Feelings, experiences and phenomena (as Nelkin uses this word) are processes that are manifested to us, or explicit processes. If feelings were there all along, one cannot discover them because one can only discover what one is not aware of, what is not already explicit. If one

discovers that a process existed, then it must have been something that one was not aware of till then, and therefore not a feeling or an experience or a phenomenon. It could be the pressure of the ground on one's feet, the headache, the conversational flow, or the itch. Regarding the headache, although one would say that one still has the headache, one would not say that one felt it all along. One cannot "tap into" the phenomenal flow, although one can tap into a conversational flow to which one was not attending till then. One can only "tap into" what is hidden from oneself, not into what is already manifested to oneself. The itch Nelkin mentions is a very common occurrence but it is a case of the body reacting without one's being conscious of it; again there is no feeling. All these are states that one is not conscious of but could become conscious of if one wanted. Perhaps Nelkin is unconsciously making a linguistic recommendation; he wants to call these unconscious states feelings, experiences and phenomena. Nelkin thinks that future empirical research will decide the issue one way or the other but the demand made upon empirical research would be self-contradictory; how can empirical research prove that what is manifested to oneself is not manifested to oneself? If something is already manifested to oneself, it will always make sense to say that one knows it. Is someone feels a tingle, it will always make sense to say he is aware of it.

Nelkin makes similar claims about C1 states. He thinks, for example, that it is possible to think without being "apperceptively conscious", that is, unconsciously. He gives the example of working on a problem, getting stuck and leaving it for a while, to find a well-formed solution coming to oneself. This suggests that a reasoning process took place without one's knowing it. Another example is that of driving while thinking deeply about a problem. One reaches one's destination safely but is unable to remember the traffic obstacles one must have negotiated successfully. This suggests that one saw them, although one did not know it. But there is no such thing as an argument appearing unsatisfactory to us, rejecting it and putting a better one in its place and not knowing that we are doing so. There is no such as seeing a red traffic light and stopping without knowing that there is a red traffic light and that one is stopping or swerving to avoid a car and not knowing that one is swerving to avoid a car. Since these are explicit processes, it does not make sense to say that one does not know that they are there. The well-formed solution can be explained in terms of the previous grappling with the problem and the inability to remember the traffic obstacles is just an inability to remember.

Nelkin makes use of experiments involving pathological cases (blindsight, commissurotomy cases etc.) to support his suggestion that C1 states can exist without C2 states. He cites, for example, the case of blindsight patients who, when presented with shapes like an X or an O in their blind areas, consistently denied seeing anything. But when asked to guess what the shape of the object is, they nearly always succeeded in guessing correctly. This shows, according to Nelkin, that they were in a C1 state (had an experience of meaning or intentionality, saw objects under an aspect) without being aware (or apperceptively aware, in his phraseology) of it. Since the conception of a C1 state is incoherent, there can be no confirming evidence for it, any more than for a round square. The patients' denials show that there was no experience, and their behaviour that there was experience; there is no such thing as proving that unconscious experience exists. These are cases of reports and behaviour not matching. The patients, who suffered from abnormalities, may have misused language, or the experiments may have lacked proper controls. Nelkin suggests that although the patients experienced no visual phenomena, a purely physical process, starting at the retina and continuing into the brain, and involving processing there, caused the patients to give the correct answers. This means that the process was unconscious. There was no visual experience, no seeing. And if the patients were caused to give the correct answers, they were not conscious then; they were automata. If they were conscious, they would act for reasons, not mechanically.

The above argument is a part of Nelkin's thoroughgoing physicalist internalism where consciousness is concerned. Take the case of one's seeing the clock on Parliament Tower. Nelkin would say that there is first a sensory "scanning" of the clock. This results in an unaspectualized (i.e. lacking in intentionality or meaning) internal representation, a CS state, a neural pattern, which is further "scanned" and "weighed", resulting in an aspectualized representation, a C1 state, another neural pattern, which we call a perception. By now, there is intentionality or meaning but one does not know it; if asked if one is seeing the clock, one would deny it, like Nelkin's patients. This aspectualized representational state causes an apperceptive representation having the content "I am seeing the clock" to emerge. This information is "broadcast" to other modules, causing the person, for example, to utter an appropriate English sentence. Since Nelkin does not give us the actual mechanisms (e.g. how exactly the apperceptive state is produced) his suggestions are empty. Since he does not say what a disconfirming instance would be, his theory is metaphysical and not scientific. "Scanning", "weighing" and "broadcasting" involve rational processing which is possible, as a matter of grammar, only for conscious creatures (the homuncular fallacy) or, in a different sense of rational processing, for machines designed by conscious creatures. Elsewhere Nelkin uses expressions like "computing data", "inferring", "encoding" and "recoding" in connection with processes in the brain and the same objection holds. Nelkin even maintains that apperception has a language. The inference is unavoidable because there can be no rational processing without language, but again this implies the presence of a language-user. If sections of the brain were capable of rational processing, could act for reasons, could use language, we would have to say that they were conscious creatures or machines designed by conscious creatures. Nelkin thinks that advances in computer technology will help us to understand how parts of the brain could function in this way, but very sophisticated human beings will design those computers. Nature is driven by causes, not reasons; Nelkin has overlooked the Wittgensteinian distinction between the two. Actually, Nelkin's theory implies that persons are *not* conscious, for consciousness in the everyday sense is of external things, not of brain states. Again, if persons are caused to do things by modules, they are automatons, and not conscious. On the other hand, homunculi inside their heads *are* conscious!

Clearly, Nelkin has misunderstood consciousness. Philosophers like Paul Churchland, David Rosenthal and Fred Dretske are equally vulnerable to a critique from a Wittgensteinian perspective when they discuss consciousness, as also Robert M. Gordon, when he takes up the related subject of emotions. Philosophers should return to the principles of Wittgenstein's philosophical psychology.

## References

Nelkin, N. 1996 *Consciousness and the Origins of Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.