What is Consciousness

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Descartes

• By the word ‘thought’ (‘pensée’) I understand all that of which we are conscious as operating in us. *Principles of Philosophy* (1640),
Consciousness as a form of awareness

• The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. But it is also the case that the ‘I’ who imagines is the same ‘I.’ For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same ‘I’ who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking (CSM II Second Meditation: 19; Descartes AT VII, 29, also cited by Hintikka (1967): 138).

• When Descartes says, “it seems to me” that I am walking, dreaming or that I am being warmed, he is claiming that even if all the appearances (walking, dreaming, the sensation of heat) may be false, what cannot be questioned is “the immediacy of videor, ‘it seems to me.’” I cannot doubt my awareness although I can doubt the content of my awareness.
Consciousness versus Self-Consciousness

• Leibniz – we need to distinguish between consciousness (perception) and self-consciousness (reflexive consciousness – what he call apperception (Monadology 1720)
What is Consciousness?

Leibniz claimed consciousness cannot arise from real matter and is not reducible to it. Imagine someone walking through an expanded brain as one would walk through a mill and observing all its mechanical operations, (this for Leibniz defined physical nature). Nowhere, he asserts, would such an observer see any conscious thoughts.
Hard Problem of Consciousness

• Why should all our complicated brain process *feel* like anything from the inside?

• Why are we not just perfect robots, capable of retaining information, of responding to noises and smells ... but dark inside, lacking inner life? How could indeed the lump of moist, pinkish beige tissue inside our skull give rise to something as mysterious as the experience of *being* that brain and the body to which it is attached?

• The question is ‘what is it like’ (Nagel) to have experience
What is Consciousness

• It is not a thing
• It is something mental (return to a dualist picture)
• Something accessible only from our first person perspective?
• Something subjective?
Fear

• If we affirm the existence of consciousness –
• We grant existence for something that cannot be known in the same way s objects can be known – Mystical?
• We return to a dualism?
What is consciousness?

• Descartes:
• YES
• I think therefore I am (Descartes)
• I can doubt the material world, but not the fact that I am thinking.
• Consciousness defined as a thinking thing *res cogita*
• Something purely mental (it is not not extended)
Intentionality is the Mark of the Mental

• Every mental phenomenon includes something as object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation, something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desires and so on.

What is the intentional Object?

• The intentional object refers to ‘what the scholastics of the Middle Ages referred to as the intentional (mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call, though not wholly unambiguous, reference to a content, direction towards an object (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing) or immanent objectivity (ibid)
Existence is not determinant for what it means to be an intentional object!

• The phenomena of light, sound, heat, spatial location and locomotion which the natural scientist studies are not things which really truly exist. They are signs of something real, which, through its causal activity, produces presentations of them. They are not, however, an adequate representation of this reality, and they give us knowledge of it only in a very incomplete sense. We can say that there exists something which, under certain conditions, causes this or that sensation. We can probably also prove that there must be relations among these realities similar to those which are manifested by spatial phenomena of shapes and sizes. But this is as far as we can go. We have no experience of that which truly exists, in and of itself, and that which we do experience is not true. The truth of physical phenomena, is as they say, only relative truth (Brentano (1995): 19)
How to study Consciousness

- Introspection
- Psychology
Edmund Husserl extrudes the intentional object from the mental

- It is a serious error to draw a real (*reell*) distinction between ‘merely immanent’ or ‘intentional’ objects, on the one hand, and ‘transcendent’, ‘actual’ objects, which may correspond to them on the other. It is an error whether one makes the distinction between a sign or image really (*reell*) present in consciousness and the thing it stands for or images, or whether one substitutes for the ‘immanent object’ some other real (*reelles*) datum of consciousness, a content, e.g., as a sense-giving factor. … It need only be said to be acknowledged that the intentional object of a presentation is the same as its actual object, and on occasion as its external object, and that it is absurd to distinguish between them. The transcendent object would not be the object of this presentation if it was not its intentional object” (LU II/1 V, §21: 425; LI/2: 127). Cf. Husserl (1908): *Ergänzende Texte*: 314 and Ideas I §43.

- I perceive the physical thing, the Object belonging to Nature, the tree there in the garden; that and nothing else is the actual Object of the perceptual “intention”. A second immanent tree, or even an “internal image” of the actual tree standing out there before me, is in no way given, and to suppose that hypothetically leads to an absurdity’ (Ideas I, §90: 219 [186]).
Problem of Non-Existence

• A. Thinking presupposes a dyadic structure – we are referring to a direct relation between the act of thinking and the object of thought.

• B. The relation presupposes the existence of both relata. If S thinks P then P exists. (Intentional objects are ordinary objects)

• C. The existence of mental states is not contingent on the existence of its intentional object. Intentional states can be about objects that do not exist (Brentano)
Husserl Claims

• We can think both about objects that exist and objects that do not exist but in each case we are thinking about something that lies outside of the mind

• I have an idea of the god Jupiter: this means that I have a certain presentative experience, the presentation-of-the-god-Jupiter is realized in my consciousness. This intentional experience may be dismembered as one chooses in descriptive analysis, but the god Jupiter naturally will not be found in it. The ‘immanent’, ‘mental object’ is not therefore part of the descriptive or real make-up (deskriptiven reellen Bestand) of the experience, it is in truth not really immanent or mental. But it also does not exist extramentally, it does not exist at all’ (LUII/1, V §11a: 373; LI/2: 99)
Macbeth

• Isn’t the fictitious and absurd, whenever we speak of it, something we think of? (LU 352)

• Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:--
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw..... (Macbeth)
Example from Illusion

- Wandering about in the Panopticum Waxworks we meet on the stairs a charming lady whom we do not know and who seems to know us, and who is in fact the well-known joke of the place: we have for a moment been tricked by a waxwork figure. As long as we are tricked, we experience a perfectly good percept: we see a lady and not a waxwork figure. When the illusion vanishes, we see exactly the opposite, a waxwork figure that only represents a lady. Such talk of ‘representing’ does not of course mean that the waxwork figure is modelled on a lady as in the same waxworks there are figures-models of Napoleon, of Bismarck etc. The percept of the wax-figure as a thing does not therefore underlie our awareness of the same figure as representing the lady. The lady, rather, makes her appearance together with the wax-figure and in union with it. Two perceptual interpretations, or two appearances of a thing, interpenetrate, coinciding as it were in part in their perceptual content. And they interpenetrate in conflicting fashion, so that our observation wanders from one to another of the apparent objects each barring the other from existence. (LU II/1 V §27: 442-3; LI/2: 137f.)
Intentionality

• **Simple examples:**
  • We do not experience noise, sensations but the thing itself.
  • **Husserl**
    • ‘I see a thing, this box I do not see my sensations’ (LU 360/382)
    • ‘I do not see colour-sensations but coloured things, I do not hear tone-sensations but the singer’s song’ (LU V, Sec 11 and 14)
  
  • **Heidegger:**
    • We never ... originally and really perceive a throng of sensations, e.g.; tones and noises, in the appearance of things...; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-engine aeroplane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction to the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than any sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door slam in the house, and never hear acoustic sensations of mere sounds (Heidegger 1935: 156).
What is consciousness

WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND REFERRING NON-MENTALISTICALLY

• We should not to confuse the term ‘consciousness’ with the real being of the empirical ego, i.e., the psychic experiences in the stream of consciousness (cf. LU, V, §4, 363; LI, 541), or with an inner awareness of one’s psychic perception (cf. LU, V, §5). Rather we should understand consciousness in the ‘pregnant sense’ as intentional experience (Husserl calls it a mental act) which incorporates the distinction between psychic (the individual act) and ideal being (meaning). Consciousness expresses ‘a [‘direct’, L.A.] relation [... to some ‘transcendent’ matter’ (LU V, appendix to §11 & §20, 437; LI, 595).

• ‘The objects of which we are conscious are not simply in a box, so that they can merely be found in ..... they are first constituted as being, what they are for us (LU 385)
Abbreviations


Bibliography


