

## The Hard Terminological Problem of Consciousness

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### *Abstract:*

This article demonstrates that certain issues of philosophy of mind can only be explained via strict observance of the logical law of identity, that is, use of the term “consciousness” in only one meaning. Based on the understanding of consciousness as space in which objects distinguished by the subject are represented, this article considers problems such as the fixation of the consciousness level, correlation between consciousness and thought, between the internal and the external, and between consciousness and the body. It demonstrates the insufficiency of the reactive conception of action for the resolution of the hard problem of consciousness and the necessity of a transition to an active paradigm in which many issues in philosophy of mind would be formulated differently.

*Keywords:* consciousness, the hard problem of consciousness, thought, active paradigm.

Discussing the topic of consciousness, we inevitably encounter a difficult terminological problem. Exaggerating somewhat, we can say that there are as many understandings of the term “consciousness” as there are authors. Some scholars of consciousness, such as Chalmers [3], attempt to handle the terminological problem by introducing a number of special terms: consciousness, awareness, qualia, conscious experience. In contrast to this approach, Searle sees no need to multiply the number of understandings and considers that when discussing issues of consciousness, it can be sufficiently defined as what “begins when we wake in the morning from a dreamless sleep and continues until we fall asleep again, die, go into a coma” [5]. However, the largest problem in philosophy of mind texts is not discrepancy in various authors’ positions, but rather lax adherence to declared terminology within a single text – the use of the word “consciousness” with various meanings. The following section will attempt to examine some central issues in philosophy of mind with strict adherence to the selected terminology.

### **1. Consciousness in its Narrow and Broad Meanings**

Most frequently, the term “consciousness” is used in one of two meanings – the so-called broad and narrow. In its broad meaning, the word “consciousness” is used to refer to the sphere of reason, thought, reflection – that is, that which has traditionally been considered to relate to higher mental

activity and creative cognitive activity. Such an association of consciousness with comprehension, reason, and reflection was characteristic of the philosophy of Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, and many contemporary philosophers still adhere to it.

Consciousness in its narrow meaning is associated with the space in which objects are represented; with the “picture” that appears when we wake from sleep, with the “movie” that plays out before us, uninterrupted, in periods of wakefulness, and then disappears when we fall asleep or faint. Such usage of the word corresponds with everyday language and is fixed in expressions like “lose consciousness,” “do something unconsciously,” “die without regaining consciousness” and others.

Thus, let us take the narrow meaning of consciousness – the space of objects’ givenness – from which position Chalmers formulated the hard problem of “why doesn’t all this information-processing go on ‘in the dark?’” [3], and attempt to provide an answer for this and other questions in philosophy of mind.

## **2. What is the Ontological Status of Consciousness?**

The primary division of the world into the ontological elements “subject” and “object” – into *to whom* the world is given and *what* is given – makes it clear that consciousness is not an object. But it is also not a subject. A correct solution to this problem can be the following claim: consciousness is a totality, an entirety of objects given to the subject. Objects are given to the subject in consciousness. Consciousness can also be represented as a space in which the subject occupies the central place, is the starting point for the reference system, and all objects are given to the subject in that space; they exist in it. Thus, there are only two certitudes with regard to consciousness: (1) it is tied to the subject, it is always the consciousness of some subject, and (2) the existence of consciousness is fixed only by the givenness of objects within it; it is characterized by a multitude of objects that exist within it.

Thus, it can be stated that consciousness holds a particular ontological status, which is secondary relative to the subject and to objects, but inextricably tied to them like a form or means of givenness of objects to the subject. And a rigorous answer to the question of the ontological status of consciousness should be as such: consciousness is a form of the relation between the subject and objects.

Such an understanding of the ontological status of consciousness automatically leads us to the following conclusion: consciousness as a non-object cannot possess properties, attributes, or states; it also cannot be a property or state of any object.

## **3. The Internal and the External**

Developing our understanding of consciousness as a space for the distinction of objects, it is correct – both terminologically and substantively – to say that space (three-dimensional) is a subdomain of our consciousness, in which extended things can be perceived by us. Indeed, the fact of the distinction of any given thing in space brings us to the unambiguous conclusion that that thing has been given to us in consciousness. And, conversely, the claim that any extended object is given to us in consciousness should be understood exclusively and only as an indication of that object’s distinction in space. Naturally, to construct a full “picture” of consciousness, besides its spatial subdomain, we should add a temporal one. Essentially, in doing so, we assert that objects that are given to us in consciousness but not revealed in (three-dimensional) space are distinguished by us in time; they are given earlier or later in relation to others. Such objects include feelings, emotions, and thoughts – we perceive them as being extended in time, that is, they are distinguished in consciousness not simultaneously, like spatial things, but purely sequentially.

And, perhaps, only when discussing the indicated difference in the givenness of objects – as being arranged in space or as being distinguished in time – can we speak of the structure of consciousness. This structure amounts to the distinction of the spatial and temporal subdomains of

consciousness. In common parlance, such a division of consciousness is referred to as a division into the “internal” and “external.” We call objects revealed in three-dimensional space external, and everything that is distinguished/perceived in time – feelings, emotions, thoughts – we call internal.

#### **4. Consciousness and Thought**

It follows from the aforesaid that thoughts and ideas (elements of thought) should be regarded as objects, given in consciousness, to the same extent as other spaceless objects distinguished in time (emotions, feelings). On the most general philosophical level, when we regard consciousness as a form of the givenness of objects, the type of these objects is not important: both rocks and emotions or conceptions should all be interpreted as elements of the “picture” of consciousness. From this standpoint, thought itself should be interpreted as *activity*: the sequencing of operations that use specific elements of consciousness – thoughts and feelings. However, in contrast to actions with things, cognitive activity (thought) organizes and structures its objects in time, rather than in space.

#### **5. “Level” of Consciousness**

As we have already noted, consciousness as a space for the givenness of objects does not possess attributes, characteristics, or any other certitudes. The only thing that can somehow characterize consciousness is its “level,” which is fixed by the multitude of objects given in consciousness, or, more precisely, by the complexity of these objects. We place the word “level” in quotation marks in order to emphasize that different consciousnesses cannot be compared – the consciousnesses of various subjects do not differ in and of themselves, but only with regard to the level of the objects perceived in them. One person, in his consciousness, uses conceptions from quantum physics, another simply uses conceptions from daily life; one person may distinguish the subtleties of poetry and music while such ideas simply do not enter the consciousness of another. That is, we can reformulate the well-known expression: you are what you distinguish. That is, the objects (things, conceptions, emotions) which you use in your consciousness tell us its level. However, once again, we must note that consciousness itself – understood simply as space and as a form of givenness – has no level; we can only speak of the level of consciousness conditionally, bearing in mind the complexity of objects distinguished in consciousness.

#### **6. The Mind–Body Problem**

In order to structure an analysis of the so-called mind–body problem, we will make use of the seven questions formulated by Vadim Vasilyev in his *Consciousness and Things* [8]: “1) Is consciousness physical? 2) Does the brain generate consciousness, and if the brain really generates it, then 3) in what way? 4) Does consciousness supervene the brain? 5) Can consciousness causally affect itself? 6) Does consciousness affect behavior? 7) Why does the functioning of the brain involve consciousness?”

Further, we will provide short and purely formal answers – without detailed explanations – which necessarily come from rigorous adherence to the “narrow” solution to the hard terminological problem of consciousness, that is, from an understanding of consciousness as a space for the givenness of objects.

- *Is consciousness physical?* Consciousness is neither physical, nor chemical, nor physiological, nor psychological, nor cognitive, nor spiritual – we cannot say that it “is” at all. That is, it is not a phenomenon and does not exist at all. Everything that exists, from the physical to the spiritual, exists in consciousness. That means that whatever object we select, whatever property we examine, whatever event we record – it will be neither consciousness itself, nor a property of it. We only run across physical, chemical, physiological, cognitive, and spiritual phenomena, properties, and events. And where is consciousness? Consciousness is where we are given those objects, properties, and

events. Such is the ontological status of consciousness – it is a form of the relation between the subject and objects.

- *Does consciousness affect behavior?* The conception of “influence” implies the presence of two objects and reflects the fact that the state of one object depends on changes in the state of the other. However, insofar as consciousness is not an object, insofar as it has no properties, qualities, structure, or functionality, it is fundamentally unable to exert influence on anything. All influences are fixed by us in consciousness, and a situation where consciousness exerts influence on any object is ontologically impossible. Moreover, it is clear that if we begin to list all possible forms of the influence on a person’s behavior – on his physical location in space, on his psychological reactions (emotions and feelings) – we will, in every case, be dealing with the influence of some specific object, which possesses one type of ontological status, from physical to spiritual. And consciousness cannot exist among these influence-bearing objects. So we can simply imagine: we are looking right now at a certain multitude of objects, given to us in consciousness, including emotions, feelings, and thoughts. In what way can the “space” in which we are given these objects – that is, the form or means of their givenness – exert influence on anything?

Here, we are essentially dealing with an incorrectly formulated question. Most likely, the problem of the influence of objects of different ontological statuses/levels has been raised. Can the psyche influence physiological processes? Does thought influence psychological behavior or, as mentioned above, physiology? Does will possess causal activity? It is clear, after all, that everything listed above – physiology, the psyche, the cognitive system, will – do not relate to consciousness itself; all of these systems are given in consciousness and, undoubtedly, exert influence on each other and have a causal relationship. But that is a separate problem.

The answer to the last question automatically clarifies the next one as well: “Can consciousness casually affect itself?” Of course not. All causal connections are realized only and exclusively between objects that are given in consciousness. Consciousness, in its ontological status as a non-object, cannot exert influence on anything.

- *Does the brain generate consciousness?* Once again, based on the accepted definition of consciousness, the answer is obvious: an object can generate only another object; conversely, consciousness, as a non-object, cannot be the product of an object. That is, consciousness, like subject and object, is something ontologically fundamental. As a form of the basic relation between subject and object, it cannot be generated by a system of objects, which is what the brain is. Yes, the brain can generate objects in consciousness – which is, essentially, what it does – but not consciousness itself. And here, again, we automatically receive an answer (although a preliminary one) to the next question: “does consciousness supervene the brain?”. Consciousness as such, of course, does not. Yet, undoubtedly, objects in consciousness correlate with neuronal processes.

- *Why does the functioning of the brain involve consciousness?* It turns out that of all the seven questions, only this one relates directly to the problem of consciousness. Essentially, it expresses the hard problem of consciousness as formulated by Chalmers: why don’t we live in the dark? Of course, we can obtain a formal answer to this question as well: simply because the subject is a subject only in its own world of objects, and the givenness of these objects implies the presence of a space/forms/means for their givenness – consciousness. But, while formal answers to the preceding questions simply referred us to other questions and to other problems, like the analysis of causal relationships between objects of different ontological levels, in this case, the formal answer only accentuates the problem, returns us to the foundations of ontology, and forces us to think over the basic nature of the subject-object relationship. But that is a separate problem.

Ultimately, we have found that the mind–body problem, when analyzed from the standpoint of the narrow meaning of the term “consciousness,” amounts, only and exclusively, to the hard problem of consciousness as formulated by Chalmers. Vasilyev’s remaining questions are either meaningless within the framework of the basic definition of consciousness, or refer us to issues of relationships between objects (systems of objects) of different ontological levels.

## 7. Conscious and Unconscious Actions

Now we will expand our subject area and examine psychological behavior and human activity from the standpoint of the narrow interpretation.

Some manifestations of the human psyche indicate that it can make appropriate actions in an unconscious state, without their representation in the “picture” of consciousness. Such is the behavior of a sleepwalker or a person severely intoxicated by alcohol, who, come morning, does not remember his actions, although these examples can be seen, of course, as simply an erasure of memory rather than a lack of the “picture” of consciousness in these situations. However, there is also conclusive evidence for behavior that is purposeful, but not reflected in consciousness. We mean the actions of people who have been convinced, under hypnosis, that they should not see – not distinguish – a certain thing. Despite the fact that the “forbidden” thing disappears from the consciousness of the hypnotized person and is not present among the objects surrounding him, he behaves as if it is there – not running into it or trying to walk through it. That is, the person behaves in a fully appropriate way, although the thing which he is reacting to is not at all reflected in his current consciousness or in his memories. We can assume that the sleepwalker and drunk person act the same way in an unconsciousness state. This is also evidenced by the fact that they frequently perform actions which they would be unable to carry out consciously (for example, walking on a narrow ledge).

Analyzing these examples of unconscious behavior, it is possible to conclude that consciousness is needed not so much to carry out specific actions here and now as it is to hold memories that allow the psyche to function successfully in the future. The fact that certain things are not present in the consciousness of a sleepwalker, drunk person or hypnotized person does not make his present behavior incorrect but may exert influence on the future. Most likely, all three will have difficulties building appropriate relationships with surrounding people and physical things the next day.

## 8. The Role of Consciousness in Activity

The formulation of the hard problem of consciousness proposed by Chalmers, notwithstanding his declared philosophical and ideological foundations (panpsychism, etc.), sounds physicalistic or even epiphenomenalistic. The question “why are informational processes not carried out in the dark?” itself presupposes an *a priori* belief in the fact that they (these processes) can proceed in a way causally independent from consciousness and from the givenness of objects. This question is posed from a standpoint which presupposes that human behavior is predetermined by causal-linear processes for handling external data. In order to avoid such original tendentiousness, we should rephrase the question – perhaps, as such: *what predetermines human behavior – data that comes from outside (light, sound, tactile, and other data), or elements of the “picture” of consciousness?*

On the one hand, we can envisage the work of the psyche (the nervous system) as a direct reaction to the full flow of all external forces, which are fixed objectively by “input sensors.” Such a view, which already originated with Descartes, is traditionally termed reactive. And, indeed, in the reactive paradigm, the element of consciousness should be considered an epiphenomenon. The “stimulus-reaction” mechanism does not imply any necessity for its work to be additionally reflected in consciousness. But on the other hand, experience shows that our behavior results from reactions precisely to objects given in consciousness, regardless of whether any signals have been received from outside by our receptors or not. We react in exactly the same way to a rock flying at our head, regardless of whether that rock is tangible or a hallucination. We decide to act in one way or another on the basis of that which we distinguish in our current consciousness – what is drawn on the “picture,” rather than on the basis of any kind of analysis of the flow of external signals.

Here we must also keep in mind that not only things distinguished spatially – those which we perceive as “external” objects – are given in consciousness, but also “internal” ones: current thoughts, emotions, memories. And it is clear that the latter affects behavior to a greater extent than

the flow of external stimuli. That is, we can conclude an utterly trivial thing: we exist and act in the field of our consciousness, make behavioral choices on the basis of our current “picture” of consciousness, in which spatially distinguished things, including our body and a multitude of psychological objects (emotions, thoughts, memories), are coherently inscribed. And, most importantly, in consciousness, before any action and outside of it, we have an idea of its assumed result. In consciousness, elements of action combine in a single field, in a current “here and now”: they include the object at which action is oriented, our body, and our idea of the result. And it is clear that, in order for the system of actions (functional system) to be formed and realized in the event-result, all of its listed elements should have a single ontological status – that of objects given in consciousness. It is also obvious that our idea of the action's result is impossible to derive from the external flow of data. Such an understanding of the role of consciousness in actions provides the basis for the active paradigm of activity of the higher nervous system [1], [2].

## **9. The Psychological Underpinning for the Active Paradigm**

It is clear that the filling of consciousness with objects undergoes change due to the influence of the flow of external data, but not always and not unequivocally. We simply ignore a large part of the data that is not essential for current activity. This is amply demonstrated in research of the phenomena of inattention blindness, change blindness, and choice blindness (Daniel Simons, Daniel Levin, Christopher Chabris, and others) [6], [7]. In experiments that study these psychological phenomena, the majority of subjects do not notice, for example, a gorilla passing through a group of people playing with a ball, changes in the details of a room's decor or even the change of actors in a video; they do not react to the substitution of answers they have just given to a sociological poll with opposite answers. These and many other psychological experiments, which demonstrate human ability to perceive something which does not exist, or, conversely, not perceive the obvious, and also the susceptibility to visual and other illusions, confirm the thesis that a large share of data received externally does not participate in the formation of the “picture” of consciousness. To carry out activity, we use the internally coherent “picture” of consciousness built by our psyche. And it is built, even in usual, everyday life, on the basis of some principles which are not very understandable to us ourselves.

As already discussed, we also observe opposite phenomena, when a person whose consciousness is “disconnected” acts only and exclusively on the basis of external data. The phenomena of sleepwalkers and experiments that demonstrate the appropriateness of people's behavior with items which had been excluded from their consciousness under the influence of hypnosis both demonstrate that our psyche can also function “in the dark,” without the “picture” of consciousness – in “stimulus-reaction” mode. But what is the level of that functioning? Essentially, a sleepwalker is analogous to the philosophical zombie of thought experiments [4]. Physically, the zombie sometimes acts far more precisely than the person in consciousness. Yet his actions are, on the one hand, primitive, and, on the other hand – and this is what is most important – cannot be used for the execution of the next action: not an individual and certainly not a collective one. The sleepwalker zombie and the person with a disconnected consciousness are biological machines that react appropriately to the current flow of data. For this, consciousness is not required. It is obvious that such a machine is incapable of purposeful, systematic activity over a long period of time. Such activity presupposes the availability of mechanisms of memory and anticipation, as well as the formation in consciousness of an idea of the necessary result. Essentially, the unity of consciousness is the unity, totality and continuity of a self-consistent “picture,” which is based on external data and elements of memory and makes purposeful human activity possible. If we take away consciousness, we get a zombie sleepwalker.

## 10. Consciousness and Collective Action

Critically, the psyche's orientation towards the "picture" constructed in consciousness, rather than towards the flow of external data, is important not only for the individual (to ensure the coherence of one's consciousness in time and space), but also socially. Simply put, individuals without consciousness are sleepwalkers, philosophical zombies, etc. – incapable of collective activity. And the reason for this lies not so much in the obvious problems of communication, but precisely in the incoherence of spaces for carrying out actions. It would seem that it should be the other way around: precisely the uniformity of the flow of external data should ensure unity of perception, and, consequently, the coherence of actions, but the inaccessibility of another's consciousness is an insurmountable obstacle to mutual understanding. But here we must note that what is important for collective activity is not *how* something is perceived by one subject or another, but, rather, *out of what* his "picture" is built – what objects are distinguished in it. What is important for collective activity is not the comprehensiveness of data, but the presence of things related to that activity in consciousness. This uniformity of objects in "pictures" of consciousness is formed in the process of upbringing and education.

The orientation of consciousness towards the provision of social coherence is confirmed by psychological research demonstrating that socially conditioned illusions can drown out "objective" data. Thus, exposure to "social cues" (Kuhn and Land) can force people to see something that does not exist, or, conversely, to form images in consciousness of non-existent things only under the influence of another's gaze. Magicians take advantage of this fact as they follow an imaginary ball with their gaze as it is supposedly thrown up and disappears before hitting the ceiling. The majority of viewers in this situation are sure that they have seen a flying object. Without social illusions, that is, without the uniform structuring of elements of consciousness among a large number of people, social units cannot function.

Thus, we can conclude that consciousness in its narrow meaning, consciousness as a picture of the "here and now" that is displayed before a person, as a space for the givenness of objects, does not itself exist as an object and does not possess attributes or functions, but, at the same time, is a prerequisite for coherent individual and collective activity.

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