

Problem of Phenomenal Consciousness:Some Reflection

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Abstract: Consciousness is one of the most interesting, perhaps the most mysterious concept in philosophical discussion. When we say about something, we also think that we say it consciously about something. Conscious experience is the most familiar thing to any subject of such experience. We know our consciousness more intimately than anything else. Philosophers have struggled to understand the phenomenon of consciousness. When we think, perceive and act, a sort of information process takes place with an internal aspect. This internal aspect is characterized as the subjective quality of experience. In this paper, an attempt will be made to highlight the subjective quality or phenomenal character of experience which is also called phenomenal consciousness. Next we shall try to give some arguments against the concept of phenomenal consciousness. Finally, we shall try to provide an analysis of this concept.

Keywords: Access Consciousness, Phenomenal Consciousness, Qualia, Hard Problem, Subjectivity, Explanatory gap.

Consciousness is one of the most interesting, perhaps the most mysterious concept in philosophical discussion. When we say about something, we also think that we say it consciously about something. Conscious experience is the most familiar thing to any subject of such experience. We know our consciousness more intimately than anything else. Philosophers have struggled to understand the phenomenon of consciousness. To be conscious it is only necessary to be aware of the outside world. When we think, perceive and act then a sort of information processing takes place with an internal aspect. This internal aspect is characterized as the subjective quality of experience. In this paper I shall try to highlight about the subjective quality or phenomenal character of experience which is also called phenomenal consciousness. Next I shall try to give some argument against the concept of phenomenal consciousness. At last I shall try to give some possible argument to evaluate this concept.

II

Consciousness has always figured in philosophical discussion of the mind. About six centuries back, when asked what is time, St. Augustine says, “if no one asks me what it is, I know what it is. If I wish to explain to him who asks, I do not know”.¹The seventeenth century French

philosopher Rene Descartes was a dualist. His theory is a form of substance dualism where things can be described using mental terms or physical terms, but one description cannot be reduced to the other. In his words, “when I consider the mind, that is to say, myself inasmuch as I am only a thinking thing. I cannot distinguish in myself any parts, but apprehend myself to be clearly one and entire.”² In the theory of consciousness, Franz Brentano (1838-1917) says that every subjective experience is an act of reference. Conscious experience is about objects or events, while physical objects are not about anything. This “aboutness” he called ‘intentionality’.³ German Phenomenologist Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) believed in systematic inquiry method by “bracketing” any scientific and logical inference about the world. His theory is called the phenomenological reduction or *epoche*.⁴ By this he is able to study experience directly, without tracing them back to what they refer to in the world.

The meaning of consciousness, according to dictionary is “the having of perception, thoughts, and feeling, awareness”.⁵ But this definition is unable to explain all the aspects of consciousness. Rather a big part remains untouched. To have the proper concept and meaning of consciousness, we have to inculcate the ideas presented by some thinkers regarding this matter.

To explain consciousness, famous Australian philosopher David Chalmers distinguishes between two concepts of mind —phenomenal and psychological. The phenomenal concept of mind is that which is associated with a consciously experienced mental state. On the other hand, the psychological concept of mind is that which forms the causal or explanatory basis for behavior. In Chalmers words, on the phenomenal concept, mind is characterized by the way it feels; on the psychological concept mind is characterized by what it does”.⁶ Ned Block mentions four types of consciousness.⁷ These are monitoring consciousness, self-consciousness, access consciousness and phenomenal consciousness. Monitoring consciousness takes many forms. One is some sort of inner perceptions. This is form of phenomenal consciousness or phenomenal consciousness of one’s own states or of the self. Second is ‘internal scanning’, and third is metacognitive notion or ‘higher-order-thought’. To identify phenomenal consciousness with internal scanning is just to grease the slide to eliminativism about phenomenal consciousness. For example, our computers are capable of various types of self-scanning, but no one would think of these computers as ‘conscious’. According to G. Rey, internal scanning is essential to consciousness. Another form of monitoring consciousness is that of accompaniment by a higher-order thought (HOT). According to this theory, a conscious state is accompanied by a thought to the effect that one is in that state. It is noted that phenomenal consciousness without HOT and HOT without phenomenal consciousness are both conceptually possible.

Self-consciousness is the possession of the concepts of the self and the ability to use this

concept in thinking about oneself. There is reason to think that animals or babies can have phenomenally conscious states without employing any concept of the self. It may be that phenomenally conscious states have a non-conceptual content that could be described as 'experienced' as mine. An important and related philosophical view is that self-consciousness requires consciousness of a self. In other words, "for a creature to be self-conscious it is not sufficient that the creature in question is able to self-ascribe experiences on an individual basis without recognizing the identity of that to which the experiences are ascribed."⁸ Another non-phenomenal notion of consciousness is access consciousness. A representation is Access conscious if it is broadcast for free use in reasoning and for direct "rational" control of action. Suppose, an Access-state is one that consists in having an Access representation. Access consciousness does not make the intellectual demands of self-consciousness or higher-order-thought consciousness. We can say that a conscious state is access conscious if, in virtue of one's having the state, a representation of its content is (a) inferentially promiscuous, (b) poised for rational control of action and (c) poised for rational control of speech. That is to say, the representations of an access state can be freely used in reasoning, can be used for control of actions and can also be appropriate in the rational control of speech.

Phenomenal consciousness: What makes a state phenomenally conscious is that there is something 'it is like' to be in that state. Phenomenal consciousness is experience. Phenomenal conscious properties are experiential properties. The totality of the experiential properties of a state are "what it is like" to have it. Our all experiences of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and pains – are all p-conscious state. All experiential properties like sensations, feeling, and perceptions are p-conscious properties. Whatever way the philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists want to define consciousness, the essence of consciousness remains 'feeling a certain way; which is a qualitative subjective experience. In general, subjectivity is a part of the explanandum that needs closer investigation for study of consciousness. According to Shoemaker, -" it is essential for a philosophical understanding of the mental that we appreciate that there is a first person perspective on it, a distinctive way mental states present themselves to the subjects whose states they are, and that an essential part of the philosophical task is to give an account of mind which makes intelligible the perspective mental subjects have on their own mental lives."⁹ The famous American philosopher Thomas Nagel raised the question, "what is it like to be a bat?"¹⁰ mentioning the 'bats' example, he wants to demonstrate that our subjective and objective experiences are quite different. The objective experiences are related to the processing of information in the brain, but the subjective experiences are entirely our own feeling. It cannot be 'shared' with others. The qualitative character of our experience is purely

subjective. It is appearing us in a certain way like judged, seen, feared etc. It is one kind of sense of ownership. When I experience Tajmahal, white stones, orange, tower all these experiences share a certain feature: they are all felt as mine. All these experiences have a common feature. They all involve in first person perspective. W.G. Lycan, in his book “Consciousness and Experience”¹¹, explains that subjectivity involves a presentation from a point of view. We can account for this ‘point-of-view’ aspect of representation by the possibility that such aspect can be represented by someone else in a third-person, scientific way. David Chalmers calls such feeling or subjective experiences as ‘qualia’ which also constitute the so-called “hard problem” of consciousness.

All humans have some mental states. Some of them are conscious. Conscious states such as pain states, visual experience and so on are such that it is ‘like’ something for the subject of the state to be in them. In other words, when there is something it is like to be in a mental state, that mental state has a phenomenal aspect or phenomenal character. For example, pain has a distinctive phenomenal aspect or character – it is painful. We can say phenomenal consciousness is a kind of experience. Phenomenal conscious properties are experiential properties. The totality of the experiential properties of a state are ‘what it is like’ to have it. All experiences of seeing, hearing, and smelling and pains are phenomenally conscious states.

The different intentional contents are the basic feature of phenomenal consciousness. However, it may be noted that famous neuro-physiological theorists like Francis Crick and Christof Koch¹² offers a definition: a synchronized 35-75 hertz neural oscillation in the sensory areas of the cortex is at the heart of phenomenal consciousness. Our physical or functional nature does not help us to understand how our subjective experience can be explained. The question is how does our neural activity give rise to a state of consciousness? This is known as explanatory gap.¹³ Consciousness, considered in this sense, is phenomenal consciousness. Using synonyms, it can be described as ‘subjective experience’ and also as ‘what it is like to be us’. In order to explain phenomenal consciousness, we may refer to the properties or qualities of consciousness. We can refer to the ways things seen to us or immediate phenomenological qualities. As examples of phenomenal consciousness, we can point to the experiential properties of sensations, feelings and perceptual experiences, the ways things look or sound and the way pain feels and so on. However thoughts, desires and emotions are associated conscious aspects and changes in their representational contents make phenomenal differences. Ned Block opines that phenomenal consciousness is something “that we find so hard to understand how it could be a brain state, on how it could be supervened or determined by a brain state. Phenomenal consciousness is a thing such that we don’t understand why it’s determined by one brain state

rather than another.”¹⁴

Phenomenal consciousness naturally differs from Access consciousness. Access consciousness is a non-phenomenal notion of consciousness. A representation is access conscious if it is broadcast for free use in reasoning and for direct ‘rational’ control of action. An A-state is one that consists in having an A-representation. Access consciousness does not make the intellectual demands of self-consciousness or higher-order thought consciousness. So we can say that A-state is access conscious if, in virtue of one’s having the state, a representation of its content is (a) inferentially promiscuous, (b) poised for rational control of action and (c) poised for rational control. Phenomenal consciousness is in virtue of its phenomenal content that a state is phenomenally conscious. On the other hand, access consciousness is in virtue of its representational content of the representational aspect that a state is access conscious. Again access consciousness is a functional notion, but phenomenal consciousness is not. If you are a functionalist about phenomenal consciousness, it would be very natural to identify it with access consciousness. Lastly access consciousness applies to state tokens, or rather tokens at times, but phenomenal consciousness is best thought of as a feature of state types.

The concept of access consciousness state is distinct from the concept of phenomenal consciousness state. We can conceive phenomenal conscious state without the concept of access conscious state. However, it is still an open question whether the phenomenal conscious state is actually possible without access conscious state.

III

In our above discussion we have seen that phenomenal consciousness is also identified as experience. Curiously there are a significant number of philosophers and neuro-scientist who deny the existence of phenomenal consciousness.

According to Eliminative Materialism phenomenal consciousness does not exist. D.C. Dennett (1978) applies eliminativism to phenomenal consciousness. He says, “Everything real has properties, and since, I don’t deny the reality of conscious experience, I grant that conscious experience has properties. I grant moreover that each person’s states of consciousness have properties in virtue of which those states have the experiential content that they do.”¹⁵ However, Dennett denies the reality of the special, ineffable, private, subjective, ‘raw feels’ or ‘the way seems seen to us’, which is known as qualia.

Like Dennett many philosophers and neuroscientists believe that the problem of phenomenal consciousness does not exist. They seem that what we call ‘conscious’ can only be a property of the functions performed by the brain and body. According to these philosophers only access

consciousness exists. But it is a mystery how access consciousness might be experienced if phenomenal consciousness does not exist. David Chalmers (1996) stated the philosophical problem of phenomenal consciousness as hard problem. The hard problem can be consciously defined as “how to explain a state of consciousness in terms of its neurological basis”.¹⁶ But the hard problem cannot be solved because whatever the phenomenal consciousness is it cannot be explained by neural correlates.

Further, some eliminativists like P.S.Churchland, D.Dennett and G.Rey opine that phenomenal consciousness does not exist. On the other hand, functionalist and physicalist draw a reductionist conclusion in respect to phenomenal consciousness. According to them, there are no mysterious ambiances so far as the physical basis of consciousness concerned. Though they admit such a thing as consciousness they do not admit any singular explanatory gap. To them, whatever explanatory gap remains is unremarkable. According to C. McGinn, consciousness is a natural phenomenon but we are bound to be deterred by the problem in understanding the physical basis of consciousness. He tries to show that though the physical properties of our brain do explain consciousness yet it is available only to other type of being and closed off to us.

Again, O.Flanagan and J.Searle¹⁷ admit that there may be significant differences between the naturalistic explanation of consciousness and that of other phenomena. But they point out that this does not warrant us to conclude that consciousness is something non-natural or that it cannot be explained in naturalistic terms. Reductionists, in general, do not distinguish phenomenal consciousness from the cognitive, intentional or functional concept of consciousness. They try to show that phenomenal consciousness requires the concept of self and, so, is a form of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, we have seen, is the possession of the concept of the self as well as the ability to use this concept about one-self. In response to such attempts Ned Block says that such a claim imposes an “implausible intellectual condition on phenomenal consciousness”. It is possible that phenomenally conscious states involve a non-conceptual content that could be identified as “experienced as mine”. However, Block points out that this representational aspect does not exhaust the phenomenal properties of that state.

Similar attempts have been made by identifying monitoring consciousness with the phenomenal consciousness. Monitoring consciousness comes in many forms. One of its forms is ‘internal scanning’. It is an obvious mistake to conflate internal scanning with phenomenal consciousness. G.Rey¹⁸ points that it will be silly to consider our laptop computers as conscious because it is capable of internal scanning. He also suggests that internal scanning is sufficient

for consciousness, if there is any such thing. From these observations he goes on to conclude that the concept of consciousness is incoherent because it both admits and denies consciousness of laptop computers. In response to such claim Ned Block points out that internal scanning is not sufficient for phenomenal consciousness. This is enough to show that the concept of consciousness is a coherent concept.

Again, phenomenal consciousness is sometimes identified with higher-order –thought consciousness, which is another form of monitoring consciousness.¹⁹ Block objects to such identification by observing that phenomenal consciousness does not involve the intellectual component that is necessary for the higher order thought. Cats and babies may have phenomenally conscious pains without any accompaniment by a higher-order –thought to the effect that they have those pains.

Lastly, I want to mention that there has been an attempt, made by the reductionists, to identify phenomenal consciousness with access consciousness. Here, I want to state Block's two reasons why phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness are conceptually different from each-other. In the first place, it is due to its phenomenal contents, or the phenomenal aspect of the content, a state is phenomenally conscious. But it is in virtue of its representational aspect of its content that a state is access - conscious. Secondly, we have seen that access consciousness is a functional notion, but phenomenal consciousness is not a functional notion. However those who are functionalist about phenomenal consciousness will away try to identify it with access consciousness.

IV

From our above discussion we have seen that phenomenal consciousness has still remained a puzzle for many philosophers. We can say that phenomenal consciousness is conceptually different from other types of consciousness. Some conscious states are phenomenal because of their phenomenal contents or the phenomenal aspects of the contents. Also we can say that phenomenal consciousness is not a functional notion. If a robot with a computer brain has been conceived which is behaviorally and computationally identical with us then the following fundamental question arises. How can we make difference between what it is like to be us and what it is like to be that robot? We can also ask whether there is anything at all that it is like to be the referred robot. If there is nothing it is like to be that robot then this robot is called a 'Zombie'. Thus zombies are, at least, conceptually possible.

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