

In defense of a distinction

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Keywords: phenomenal consciousness, access consciousness, conscious awareness, theories of consciousness

Thirty years ago, Ned Block proposed a hugely influential distinction between phenomenal (P) and access (A) consciousness [1,2]. A state is P-conscious if there is something it is like to be in it, and A-conscious if its content is available for reasoning, rational action guidance and report. Block's distinction is principally conceptual. But Block has since offered introspective, behavioral and neuroscientific grounds for thinking that A-consciousness and P-consciousness actually dissociate. For instance, he has argued that iconic and fragile short-term memories are often P-conscious but not A-conscious; that 'exclusion' paradigms evidence contents which are P-conscious but not A-conscious; and that local recurrent processing in posterior regions realizes P-consciousness without the anterior activity required for A-consciousness [3–6]. The fundamental question whether P-consciousness can occur apart from A-consciousness has generated much fruitful controversy [7,8]. In a recent opinion paper, Mudrik et al. [9] make the striking claim that Block's distinction is "conceptually confused" and needs radical reengineering. Here, I defend Block's distinction.

Mudrik et al. charge Block with confusing types of consciousness with necessary but individually insufficient (though presumably, jointly sufficient) conditions on consciousness. However, Block's distinction can trivially be reframed in terms of conditions: the condition for P-consciousness being that there be something it is like to be in a state; the condition for A-

consciousness being that a state's content be cognitively available. Block's contention is then that it is conceptually and empirically possible for a state to meet one condition but not the other. Since Mudrik et al. agree that the relevant "concepts are not identical," where lies the conceptual confusion? Perhaps they think it is conceptually confused to think that a state could (in any sense) be conscious without meeting both conditions. But no grounds for this claim are given. Nor is it motivated by arguing, as Mudrik et al. – and elsewhere Cohen and Dennett [7] – do, that a state "cut-off from having any possible influence on behavior ... remains unconscious." The idea that P-consciousness might occur absent any possible behavioral influence is much stronger than Block's dissociation claim.

Mudrik et al. propose to refashion Block's distinction as follows: A-consciousness should be taken to refer to a general access condition – explaining why there is any experience at all; P-consciousness should be taken to refer to a potential phenomenality condition – explaining why each experience feels the specific way it does (if anything); and consciousness (simpliciter) should be redefined conjunctively as P + A. This proposal is advertised as helping resolve various controversies that beset consciousness science, not least the seemingly intractable dispute between sensory and cognitive theories [2–8]. Sensory theories can see themselves as theorizing sameness and difference among experiences; cognitive theories as accounting for why such experiences are conscious at all. Unfortunately, Mudrik et al.'s proposal only foments confusion.

First, Mudrik et al.'s refashioning reinvents a distinction already well-known amongst theorists of consciousness. Kriegel [10] distinguishes between a state's "qualitative character," viz. "what makes it the phenomenally conscious state it is," and a state's "subjective character," viz. "what makes it a phenomenally conscious state at all." Mudrik et al.'s refashioned P/A distinction is just Kriegel's distinction, with subjective character specified as cognitive access. Block himself highlights a corresponding distinction at the level of neural correlates of

consciousness [NCCs]: “The total NCC of a conscious state is – all by itself – sufficient for the state. The core NCC is the part of the total NCC that distinguishes one conscious state from another – the rest of the total NCC being ... the enabling conditions for that conscious experience.” [4, citing 11,12] The core NCC is the correlate of Mudrik et al.’s refashioned P-consciousness; the remainder – i.e. the enabling conditions, specified cognitively – is the correlate of their refashioned A-consciousness. Crucially, these important distinctions should not be conflated with Block’s original P/A distinction. If we were to follow Mudrik et al. and co-opt the terms ‘P-’ and ‘A-consciousness’ to refer to the qualitative/subjective distinction, the rationale for introducing Block’s original distinction would no more be affected than if we decided to use those terms to distinguish running from jumping.

Second, though advertised as a rapprochement, Mudrik et al.’s conceptual engineering is a partisan coup not a negotiated peace. Non-cognitive theorists will reject its terms. Block’s long-standing contention is that P-consciousness can occur without A-consciousness. This may be empirically false. But it cannot be disproven by imposing a necessary access condition on consciousness by conceptual fiat, nor by parenthetically downgrading P-consciousness to refer to states which are only “(potentially) phenomenally experienced”. Again, if we were to follow Mudrik et al. and use the terminology ‘P-without-A’ to refer to merely potentially phenomenal states without access, we would need to reintroduce ways of talking about actually phenomenal states without access—even if these only represent a conceptual possibility.

If the field accepted Mudrik et al.’s proposal that all conscious states must meet both access and potential phenomenality conditions, many controversies would indeed lapse. But this is only to say that if everyone could just agree, there would be no disagreement. The empirical and theoretical difficulties of studying consciousness run too deep for such easy resolutions.

Declaration of Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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