

My current understanding of the two meanings of the word “consciousness”

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First and foremost, I am referring below to the explanation of each of the two meanings of the word “consciousness”, as provided by Dr. Christian de Quincey in *Radical Knowing*, i.e.:

1. *Philosophical / ontological meaning: consciousness (basic capacity for sentience, feeling, experience, subjectivity, self-agency, intention or knowing) in opposition to non-consciousness (total absence of any experience, subjectivity, sentience, feeling or mentality) = the **fact** of awareness*
2. *Psychological / psychoanalytic / psychospiritual meaning: consciousness (e.g., awake), in opposition to being unconscious (e.g., asleep) = the **form or state** of awareness*

Question 1: Using the light-switch analogy, explain how the two meanings of “consciousness” are different and how they refer to different issues.

The light-switch analogy is a very well thought-through, simple and figurative way to exemplify the difference between the two meanings of consciousness.

Thus, according to the philosophical meaning, consciousness is either there, or it is not at all there, either it is an “ontological reality,” or it is not. When the light-switch is on, it means that consciousness is present, accounting for a state, mode, or quality of being that means the subject is endowed with consciousness and can experience the world, as well as its own existence, through sentience, and other related attributes (knowledge, meaning, self-agency).

By contrast, when the light-switch is off, there are no conditions present that would allow for any experience. This mode of being is defined as “non-consciousness,” i.e., the complete absence of any capacity of perceiving anything.

Consequently, the psychological meaning of “consciousness” is dependent on the presence of consciousness, according to the philosophical meaning. Once the light-switch is on, it is only then that we can start talking about the psychological meaning of “consciousness,” which can be compared with the increase/decrease of the intensity of light, as controlled by the switch.

Ranging from the dim light of the unconscious (e.g., asleep, in a coma), through various states of being alert, to the bright light of higher states of consciousness (spiritually awoken), the psychological meaning treats consciousness as evolutionary, by contrast to the philosophical meaning, according to which consciousness is not an emergent phenomenon.

Using the same light-switch metaphor, I would say that the two meanings refer to two different aspects. The philosophical meaning refers to the raw *fact* that sentient beings (consciousness) exist (light switch is “on”), while the psychological meaning (dimmer switch) refers to different *forms* of sentience or consciousness (once the “switch” is “on”). The philosophical meaning refers to the *fact* of experiencing, while the psychological meaning refers to different *forms* or states of awareness.

Question 2: Explain the difference between being “unconscious” and being “non-conscious.” And why this difference is important.

A dog who is sleeping is “unconscious,” while the pillow he is sleeping on, is a “non-conscious” thing. The dog is a being endowed with consciousness (the philosophical meaning of consciousness – the *ability* to feel, to know, to be aware), while whatever dreams or experiences occur to the sleeping dog are examples of the psychological meaning of consciousness (different *forms* below the threshold of awareness).

The pillow, on the other hand, does not possess consciousness, as none of the characteristics of consciousness are present in a pillow (e.g., sentience, knowledge, meaning, purpose, etc.). Because a pillow is “non-conscious,” i.e., the *opposite* of the philosophical meaning, it could not possibly be “unconscious” (a dim state of awareness), given the fact that the light-switch of consciousness is off, to begin with.

Question 3: Briefly explain why using “consciousness” in the psychological sense (different forms of consciousness) tells us nothing about the ontological fact that consciousness exists (philosophical sense).

The philosophical meaning of the word “consciousness” on one hand, and the psychological meaning of the word “consciousness,” on the other, pertain to two different semantic perspectives. The philosophical use of the word “consciousness,” referring to the *fact* of awareness, relies on ontology (i.e., the branch of philosophy that deals with the study of being and existence), while the psychological use of the word “consciousness,” referring to the *state* of awareness, relies on psychology (i.e., focused on the human mind and behaviour).

The way that consciousness is experienced (i.e., in a limited, subjective, and individual manner) does not hold relevance in relation to explaining consciousness in the “primordial, primitive and cosmic sense” (Thomas Nagel quoted by Christian de Quincey in *Radical Nature*). Consciousness, in the psychological sense, is the consequence of the existence of consciousness in the philosophical sense, so by describing various states of consciousness (i.e., as experienced by the human psyche, for example), one cannot explain the foundational phenomenon of consciousness.

One cannot derive arguments about the *fact* of consciousness’ existence, from the way consciousness is experienced in a certain *form or state*. Such an attempt would imply that one disregards the very essence of the difference between the two meanings of “consciousness,” which consists in the distinction between being “unconscious” (which still possesses consciousness in the *philosophical* sense—e.g., a sleeping dog) and “non-conscious” (which is the complete absence of any form or state of consciousness (e.g., a pillow).

Consequently, psychological evidence (different forms of consciousness in contrast to “unconscious”) cannot substantiate the case for the ontological status of consciousness (fact of consciousness, in contrast to being “non-conscious.”)

Question 4: How is this difference addressed in *Radical Nature* (Chapter 8)? What was the source of the confusion when two philosophers were “talking past each other”?

On one hand, Griffin talks from the perspective of the psychological meaning of “consciousness,” given the fact that in his view experience precedes consciousness, thus the latter being perceived as *evolutionary*. By contrasting “consciousness” with “experience,” Griffin exposes his limited use of “consciousness”—he’s using it in contrast to being “unconscious” (psychological use).

As Griffin differentiates the concepts of consciousness and experience, he argues that consciousness is a derivative characteristic of a more primary experience and *emerges* at a certain threshold of neuronal complexity. Thus, Griffin fails to address the simple *raw fact* that consciousness exists (which is the same as the *raw fact* that experience exists). McGinn was, rightly, focusing on the *philosophical* meaning (the *fact* vs. its absence), but Griffin kept hearing the word “consciousness” in a psychological sense. Hence, the two philosophers consistently “talked past each other.”

Relying on *panpsychism*, which holds that all individual instances of reality are intrinsically experiential (i.e., anywhere an individual unit of matter exists there is also at least some trace of experience or mind), Griffin argues that the mind-body problem is amenable to rational analysis, to a process solution, and indicates that for him consciousness is localized at the level of the “head.” Nevertheless, at the same time, Griffin builds a case from an essentially *extrarational metaphysic*, talking from an *experientialist-rationalist* perspective.

McGinn, on the other hand, is talking from a *rationalist-rationalist perspective*, arguing (i.e., from the point of view of the limited rationality itself) that the “*problem of consciousness*” is *closed to human understanding*. He explains that we know the world of matter empirically through our senses, while we know consciousness only through introspection (i.e., a domain of non-spatial phenomena). McGinn emphasizes that we do not have the cognitive capacity for understanding the nature of this interaction (i.e., invoking the same limitations of reason), even if he accepts the fact that consciousness and matter interact in our own human lives.

McGinn talks about the philosophical meaning of consciousness, its wider ontological meaning, the “ground or context of being,” and while doing so, his conceptual framework implies *spatiality and reasoning* / spatial-conceptual arguments, which, in turn, he maintains, render the topic to be closed to human understanding (via reason).

Thus, Griffin and McGinn “talk past each other” from different *metaphysical perspectives*, as (well as by implying different *epistemologies*.)