# Distinction between Phenomenal and Access Consciousness

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March, 2024

The concept of consciousness encompasses a broad array of phenomena, ranging from the raw experience of sensation to the cognitive processes that underpin rational thought. In an effort to disentangle this complex terrain, philosopher Ned Block introduced a seminal framework in 1995, delineating between two distinct aspects of consciousness: the phenomenal and the functional (Block, 1995). The former is previously labeled as phenomenal consciousness, denoted by P-consciousness in Block's terminology, and described by *what it is like to* experience a conscious state or 'qualia' (Nagel, 1980). The latter is referred to as access consciousness, A-consciousness in Block's terminology, which constitutes the content of consciousness available to use in verbal report, reasoning and rational control of behavior.

This essay explores and critically evaluates Block's dissociative view of consciousness, delving into the theories surrounding the phenomenal and functional dimensions of consciousness. To achieve this aim, we will embark on a comprehensive examination, beginning with an overview of the phenomenal perspective and Block's delineation of access consciousness. Subsequently, we will scrutinize the purely functional view of consciousness, which refutes the phenomenal notion and P and A distinction. Finally, we will delve into the nuanced interplay between phenomenal and access consciousness, the possibility of P without A and A without P, the dependency and interaction between P and A through illustrative examples and theoretical analyses.

P-consciousness can be characterized as the continuous stream of subjective experience accompanying one's mental activities, or in David Chalmers' words, a multi-track movie playing in one's head, including 3D vision, sounds,

smells, touches, pains and emotions[1](Chalmers, 1995). On the other hand, A-consciousness, as delineated by Block, is the functional notion of consciousness, distinct from the realm of phenomenal notion. A-consciousness facilitates ordinary conscious discourse, enabling the inner narrative description of stream-of-consciousness and the manipulation of mental content, which does not encapsulate the entirety of phenomenal subjective experience. Block's framework aims to mitigate the risk of misconstruing the nature of consciousness, conflating A and P, and to acknowledge potential non-overlapping instances: the existence of A without P or P without A.

In contrast to the phenomenal view of consciousness, the purely functional view, notably held by philosopher Daniel Dennett, construes consciousness primarily in access terms (Dennett, 1988). Dennett posits that subjective experience is only possible with the subject's own judgemental quality of the experience. Therefore, he describes a feeling by the beliefs that one felt a feeling[2], identifying subjective experience with a sort of propositional narrative—P=A in Block's notation. Noting that such judgemental qualities or "propositional attitude" states are access states, Dennett's framework rejects the notion of unaccessed conscious states, rejecting P without A in Block's notation. Instead, he asserts that consciousness is inherently tied to access states.

Although Dennett's framework defines consciousness primarily in access and functional terms, he does acknowledge the existence of inaccessible cognitive processes. One illustrative example is provided by the Sperling experiment, wherein subjects are briefly exposed to an array of letters and are subsequently able to report only a subset of them. Interestingly, when a specific row is cued, subjects can recall nearly as many letters from that row as they could from the entire array, despite reporting having seen all the letters when displayed. Dennett attributes this case to the unconscious representation of letters stored prior to the cue, which is the product of inaccessible cognitive processes. Upon cueing, subjects are able to access these unconscious representations before they decay, enabling them to retrieve the desired information (Cohen & Dennett, 2011). The unconscious representations in this case are analogous to the unaccessed yet experienced letters—P

[1]See Chalmers' 2014 TED Talk at https://www.ted.com/talks/david_chalmers_how_do_you_explain_consciousness?referrer=playlist-what_is_consciousness

[2]From the talk of Dennett at the Evolution and Function of Consciousness conference ("Turing Consciousness 2012"). Record is available at: https://youtu.be/AaCedh4Dfs4?si=S6ucEf5zmrouOr1X&t=2412

without A—in Block's terminology.

A pivotal question arises concerning the contribution of these unconscious representations to the phenomenal feel of the subject prior to their accessibility. According to Dennett, such unconscious representations must not contribute to the subjective experience until they are accessed, aligning with his rejection of conscious states devoid of access and his proposition: a feeling always consists of an identified feeling. However, this raises an intriguing inquiry: Can we have a feeling with no clue of our feelings?

To illustrate the case of P without A, I will draw upon an example provided by Block, slightly modifying it to better relate it to the phenomenal feel and point to a peculiar yet common human experience. Imagine you are engaged in conversation with a colleague amid the background noise of nearby construction work. The intensity of the noise does not distract you from the conversation as you do not have a particular thought or judgment about the noise, and you did not even notice its existence. At noon, the construction work is paused, and only then do you realize the extent of the noise's disturbance, experiencing a sudden sense of relief and appreciation for its absence. You can retrospectively report you were feeling disturbance due to the noise and you did not know that you were disturbed. While the noise was present, you were not A-conscious of the noise yet it contributed to your phenomenal feel—P without A. The peculiarity is that you were A-conscious of the noise only when the noise was gone. Subsequently, your subjective experience continued with another phenomenal feel—P with A. In this case, the functionalist explanation is not quite convincing: there was no contribution of the unconscious representation of the noise to your subjective experience at the time the noise was present as you had no judgment about the noise.

In addressing the case of A without P, Block recalls examples such as phenomenal zombies or a functionally identical robot to a person, underscoring its conceptual possibility, a point with which I agree. However, I diverge from Block's interpretation of the blindsighter example, where he posits poor access without P-consciousness. In this case, the blindsight patients are shown an object in their blind visual field. When some options are cued, the subjects can identify the object among the options at better-than-chance levels even though they report that they did not see anything. Block explains this as a state of no access or phenomenal consciousness of the object before the cue, and only after the cue gaining poor access of the object—poorness due to the provided cue.

My disagreement with Block's characterization stems from several points. Firstly, the statement of "P-consciousness of something" sounds misleading, as it contradicts the definition of P-consciousness. This statement follows Block's proposition that P-consciousness is almost-always representational, which strikes me as reductionist and violating the wholeness of P-consciousness, as I view P-consciousness as an indivisible totality of the subjective experience. Secondly, one might reinterpret this statement as referring to the contribution of something to P-consciousness, such as the unconscious perception of the object to the phenomenal feel. Even then, it remains uncertain whether the unseen object truly fails to contribute to the blindsighter's P-consciousness. For example, in a 1990 case study of blindsight, patient D.B. reported that he had a "feeling" of a stimulus approaching in his blind field despite asserting that he saw nothing (Weiskrantz, 1990). This suggests a potential contribution of the unseen object to P-consciousness akin to the aforementioned example where unnoticed noise contributed to the subjective experience.

Thirdly, claiming that blindsighter has lack of P-consciousness implies that blindsighter was momentarily a phenomenal zombie. Yet, we know that blindsighter maintain a subjective experience even when object is within his blind field. Lastly, the subjective experience accompanying the action of choosing post-cue may include an uncanny sense of familiarity towards the correct option, potentially stemming from the unconscious perception of the object contributing to the phenomenal feel.

Nevertheless, Block contends that the blindsight example does not fully demonstrate the case of A without P due to the poor access. He concludes that while A without P may be conceptually possible, it does not manifest as an actual occurrence. Based on the fact that there is an always accompanying P-consciousness in the background, against which A-consciousness can come and go, Block posits that A-consciousness is parasitic on the P-consciousness. Additionally, he acknowledges that he conceptualizes A-consciousness as an information-processing image of P-consciousness. This statement has to endure the objections claiming that A-consciousness is not a type of consciousness given that A does not exist without P.

I oppose considering non-existence of A without P as a parasitic dependency of A-consciousness on the P-consciousness. Access does not necessarily hinge on subjective experience. For instance, the actions and reports grounded in the semantic knowledge may be counted in those A-conscious states, such as using common-sense knowledge for reasoning or solving a

math problem. In more peculiar examples, the access does not rely on the previous states of subjective experience at all yet it is fabricated. For example, we can consider the verbal reports that are made up by split-brain patients to rationalize their decisions to mitigate the inaccessibility of the actual reasoning by the left-side of the brain [3].

In conclusion, my analysis challenges the portrayal of A-consciousness merely as a reductionist mirror of P-consciousness and contests the notion of P-consciousness as representational. However, I align with Block's emphasis on the interaction between A and P consciousness. It is evident that accessed information can influence the phenomenal state, just as the phenomenal state may guide the process of accessing information or initiating action. All in all, Block's dissociative framing of consciousness may offer a thought-provoking alternative to the prevalent functionalist perspective, particularly in elucidating complex human conscious experiences such as the Sperling phenomenon, blindsight, and split-brain cases.

[3]In split-brain patients, when an object is shown in the left-field of vision, this information is confined in the right-hemisphere and does not pass to the left-hemisphere since the bridge was cut by a surgery. As the information does not reach to the speaking center of the brain in the left-hemisphere, this information stays at the unconscious level (inaccessible), the patient cannot report it verbally, however, the patient can point when the picture of the unaccessed object is shown among other options. Upon interrogation of their decisions, they are able to make up an answer explaining why they point to the expected image among the other options (Gazzaniga, 1998).

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