

ARTICLES: PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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CONSCIOUSNESS AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

David Chalmers, the author of “The Conscious Mind” (1996), in a talk, addressing the audience, claimed: “Right now you have a movie playing inside your head. It’s an amazing multi-track movie. It has 3D vision and surround sound for what you’re seeing and hearing right now, but that’s just the start of it. Your movie has smell and taste and touch. It has a sense of your body, pain, hunger, orgasms. It has emotions, anger and happiness. It has memories, like scenes from your childhood playing before you. And it has this constant voiceover narrative in your stream of conscious thinking. At the heart of this movie is you experiencing all this directly. This movie is your stream of consciousness, the subject of experience of the mind and the world”¹.

The purpose of this essay on consciousness and the experience of self is to highlight some aspects of the conscious life that transform the trivial perception we hold, about ourselves and the world around us. In sum, the particular nature of consciousness has deep implications in the characterization of the reality around us. How can we define consciousness? Once again, Chalmers tells us: “Consciousness is one of the fundamental facts of human existence. Each of us is conscious. We all have our own inner movie, you and you and you. There’s nothing we know about more directly. At least, I know about my consciousness directly. I can’t be certain that

¹ Chalmers, D. (2014). How do you explain consciousness. *TED*, March, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.ted.com/talks/david_chalmers_how_do_you_explain_consciousness.

you guys are conscious. Consciousness also is what makes life worth living. If we weren't conscious, nothing in our lives would have meaning or value. But at the same time, it's the most mysterious phenomenon in the universe. Why are we conscious? Why do we have these inner movies? Why aren't we just robots who process all this input, produce all that output, without experiencing the inner movie at all? Right now, nobody knows the answers to those questions"².

Let's specify the concept of consciousness. The word "consciousness", as the majority of natural language terms, has different meanings; some of them are irrelevant to the present analysis. Many times we use the word *conscience* with a moral connotation. We say that someone has high moral conscience or high consciousness. The later, about a very responsible and careful person, and the first, about the judgment about a person's actions. If someone doesn't feel well about his or her actions, we can say that person is very conscious about them. On this present moment, this moral aspect is irrelevant to us. It is important to distinguish consciousness from the state we usually designate as vigil or "being awake". After all, we can be asleep and yet, the movie in our head is still in progress during our dreams. In turn, it is possible to observe some psychological states in which one is vigil and, yet, one is not conscious. As example, here is a description of an episode experienced by one of Damasio's patients: "Suddenly the man stopped, in mid sentence, and his face lost animation; his mouth froze, still open, and his eyes became vacuously fixed on some point on the wall behind me. (...) I spoke his name but there was no reply. (...) I asked him what was going on, and he did not reply, his face has no expression. He did not look at me. (...) Now he turned around and walked slowly to the door. I got up and called him again. He stopped, he looked at me, and some expression returned to his face (...) For a brief period, which seemed like ages, this man suffered from an impairment of consciousness. (...) The man had not collapsed on the floor, comatose, and had not gone to sleep, either. He was both there and not there, certainly awake, attentive in part, bodily present but personally unaccounted for, absent without leave [Damasio, 2000: p. 6]"

Opposite to the described situation happens regularly when we are dreaming. We are conscious but not vigil. To designate this kind of consciousness present in the dreamlike experience, it is common to find terms such as "consciousness of the paradoxical sleep" (that is, dreams) or even "paradoxical consciousness". In turn, consciousness, as object of our reflection, little has to do with certain terms such as when, for example, we say we are "well aware of the problem". Of course that in this context consciousness (or awareness) is synonym of attention and care. Finally, consciousness little has to do with the particular meaning of "self-consciousness" when we claim that a complex situation made us become aware of what we are. As an example, someone very ill will say he became self-conscious of his mortality.

Consciousness is a particular mental state capturing what is learned about oneself and the surrounding circumstance. This can refer to internal states (such as

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