

The elusive nature of consciousness

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In defining what a person is in his famous *Essay*, Locke states that such a being is endowed with reason, reflection and consciousness [1]. The concept of “consciousness” is thus relatively new, and philosophers try to specify its meaning by making distinctions. For example, some years earlier, in his *Traité de l'esprit de l'homme*, Louis de la Forge distinguishes two senses: (1) a feeling that immediately informs the mind of everything that takes place in itself and (2) an act of reflection on what has taken place in the mind (a kind of memory). La Forge adds that animals possess (1), but that only human beings possess (2) [2]. The clarification of the concept continues today. Nowadays, psychologists and many philosophers follow Ned Block, who distinguishes four meanings: (1) phenomenal consciousness, (2) access consciousness, (3) monitoring consciousness and (4) self-consciousness [3]. Phenomenal consciousness consists in subjective experience of what we do and what happens to us; access consciousness includes the various representations we have, like thoughts and desires; self-consciousness is characterized by the concept we have of ourselves; and monitoring consciousness is mobilized when we reflect on our mental activities.

As we already see with La Forge and Locke, consciousness – especially reflective consciousness – is tied to the moral status of a person. Consequently, knowing if a being is endowed with this faculty or capacity is crucial in order to know how we should treat him. Consider this claim of Mary Ann Warren: “To have moral status is to be morally considerable, or to have moral standing. It is to be an entity towards which moral agents have, or can have, moral obligations. If an entity has moral status, then we may not treat it in just any way we please.” [4] To be a person is a moral status, grounded in the possession of reason and reflection. However, we do not have to restrict moral standing to rational beings: suffering, too, can ground moral duties. Syd Johnson reminds us of this fact at the beginning of her paper, quoting Bentham, and she highlights the importance of the quality of life for unconscious patients – quality of life is another elusive concept that is difficult to assess, as she acknowledges. But suffering does not demand self-consciousness: phenomenal consciousness suffices for it. As the diverse states or types of consciousness can be separated not only conceptually but also in reality, it is important to know which consciousness a being is capable of, when we try to define her moral status.

When we are in front of an unconscious person (a person in coma, in vegetative state or in minimally conscious state), it is a notably difficult task to pin down which consciousness she has lost. Thank to neuroimaging, we have been able to make progress in the last ten years. In particular, the studies of Adrian Owen and his colleagues have allowed us to better characterize the state where the patient is minimally conscious, i.e. the state where he retains some form of consciousness and whose prognosis is better than that of other patients in a vegetative state [5]. The paper of Katja Kuehlmeier and her colleagues examining several cases of late recovery of brain-injured patients reported in the literature is a step further in this endeavour for a better understanding and prognosis of the various states of unconsciousness, and for better treatment decisions. However, the argument I have just put forward, relating the question of consciousness and moral status to the outcomes of neuroimaging rests on a mistake – or at least it is too straightforward. As Eric Racine has correctly noticed, neurologists do not use the term “consciousness” in the senses philosophers and psychologists have set: “Clinical approaches to consciousness typically consider it a two-fold concept defined by wakefulness [or arousal] and awareness.” [6] By awareness, neurologists understand a wide spectrum of mental states, including emotions, thoughts and sensory experience. And Racine continues by stating that in this sense, consciousness depends on the good functioning of definite part of the brain that has been identified and can be observed.

The upshot of this situation is a little perplexing. In our ethical tradition, consciousness plays an important role in determining our moral duties. Some human beings are unconscious; therefore we ought to determine their clinical and moral status in order to know how to treat them. We hoped that neuroimaging could help us in this task, and in a sense, this is exactly what happened. But at the same time, we acknowledge that it could have misled us, since we are not sure that we speak of the same phenomena. In my mind, this upshot need not be discouraging; it only demands further research, conceptual as well as clinical, and more collaboration between philosophers, psychologists, clinicians and neuroscientists. Consciousness remains an elusive concept, but we don't have to be in serious trouble as a result.

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