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Continuing Commentary

Commentary on **Ned Block (1995). On a confusion about a function of consciousness. BBS 18(2): 227–287.**

Abstract of the original article: Consciousness is a mongrel concept: there are a number of very different "consciousnesses." Phenomenal consciousness is experience; the phenomenally conscious aspect of a state is what it is like to be in that state. The mark of access-consciousness, by contrast, is availability for use in reasoning and rationally guiding speech and action. These concepts are often partly or totally conflated, with bad results. This target article uses as an example a form of reasoning about a function of "consciousness" based on the phenomenon of blindsight. Some information about stimuli in the blind field is represented in the brains of blindsight patients, as shown by their correct "guesses." They cannot harness this information in the service of action, however, and this is said to show that a function of phenomenal consciousness is somehow to enable information represented in the brain to guide action. But stimuli in the blind field are *both* access-unconscious and phenomenally unconscious. The fallacy is: an obvious function of the machinery of access-consciousness is illicitly transferred to phenomenal consciousness.

Sidestepping the semantics of "consciousness"

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Abstract: Block explains the conflation of phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness by appeal to the ambiguity of the term "consciousness." However, the nature of ambiguity is not at all clear, and the thesis that "consciousness" is ambiguous between phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness is far from obvious. Moreover, the conflation can be explained without supposing that the term is ambiguous. Block's argument can thus be strengthened by avoiding controversial issues in the semantics of "consciousness."

There is a widespread tendency among researchers of consciousness to address the semantics of the term "consciousness" (and its cognates) when investigating the mental phenomenon, consciousness. Such terminological discussions, in my view, are typically poorly motivated, add little to the inquiry, and confuse matters more than anything else. Ned Block, in his important and influential target article (Block 1995t), also touches on the meaning of "consciousness." He proposes that the term is ambiguous (sect. 4.2.2, para. 5), with senses corresponding to phenomenal consciousness (P) and access consciousness (A), among other senses less central to his aims. In contrast with many other researchers, Block motivates his semantic discussion of "consciousness." His purpose is to expose a fallacy which he claims arises when researchers reason about consciousness (sect. 1). According to his diagnosis, the fallacy results from the conflation of P and A, and he explains the conflation by appeal to the ambiguity of "consciousness": "An ambiguous word often corresponds to an ambiguous mental representation, one that functions in thought as a unitary entity and thereby misleads" (sect. 4.2.2, para. 8).

While Block takes it upon himself to motivate his semantic discussion, I believe the reasons he provides are not quite satisfactory. For, as I shall argue, conflations between P and A can be explained without supposing that "consciousness" is ambiguous, indeed without entering into the semantics of "consciousness" at all. By avoiding controversial semantic claims regarding ambiguity, Block can strengthen his argument.

If one explores the literature on ambiguity within lexical semantics, one discovers that things are in a bit of a shambles, but one also encounters serious attempts to theoretically accommodate a wide range of interesting phenomena related to ambiguity.[1] For example, a distinction is often drawn between two kinds of ambiguity: homonymy and polysemy. Homonymous words are said to have unrelated senses (like a dog's *bark* and a tree's *bark*) and correspond to distinct entries in the lexicon; whereas polysemous words have more interrelated senses (like *opening* a window and *opening* with a joke) which are listed together within lexical entries. There also appear to be phenomena that involve subtle variations of meaning but no ambiguity. Cruse (1986), for instance, speaks of *modulations of sense,* where "a single sense can be modified in an unlimited number of ways by different contexts, each context emphasizing certain semantic traits, and obscuring or suppressing others" (p. 52). One of Cruse's examples is "car" in "the car needs servicing" and "the car needs washing," where different parts of the car get emphasized or highlighted (the engine and exterior, respectively) but there is no ambiguity (p. 53). A related example drawn from Pustejovsky (1996, p. 32) concerns the word "good": it seems to express different properties in "a good car," "a good meal," and "a good knife," but it would be rash to infer from this that "good" is ambiguous, since the list of such expressions containing "good" can be extended indefinitely.

I think a reasonable case can be made for the claim that something like modulation occurs with "consciousness" – that there is a single, complex phenomenon, different features of which get highlighted by uses of "consciousness" across different linguistic contexts (sometimes phenomenal aspects, sometimes functional or cognitive aspects, etc.), but that the term "consciousness" itself is not ambiguous between P and A. In any event, it should be clear that anyone who wishes to convincingly argue that "consciousness" is ambiguous between P and A must enter into these rather messy semantic issues and exclude interpretations that treat "consciousness" as univocal. Block does not do that sufficiently, to my mind; nor do others who discuss the semantics of "consciousness." Instead, it seems, new senses of "consciousness" are forever being offered, without constraint. But surely semantics is not that easy! (Notice, by the way, that so-called "stipulative definitions" do not in themselves issue in new meanings for natural language expressions. If a theorist stipulates that "consciousness" means *milkshake,* the English word "consciousness" does not thereby acquire

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a new sense, not even a new "technical" sense. At a minimum, a new public practice or use is required.)

Block suggests that there are several equally legitimate ways to characterize ambiguity, and he favors doing so "in terms of conflation: if there can be conflation, we have ambiguity" (sect. 4.2.2, para. 7). However, if one takes semantics seriously as a scientific enterprise, then meaning presumably will have some nature and one will not be free to characterize ambiguity however one chooses. And even if there is some indeterminacy, some leeway for alternative characterizations, it is hard to avoid seeing Block's construal of ambiguity in terms of conflation as ad hoc, given that it is conflation (of P and A) that he wishes to explain by appeal to ambiguity.

Block, however, can avoid these tangled semantic issues, for conflation does not require ambiguity. He is of course right that ambiguous words often involve ambiguous mental representations (or, perhaps more accurately, distinct mental representations), and that such representations can give rise to conflation. However, all he really needs are the representations – distinct representations or distinct "elements" of complex representations – such that it becomes possible to unknowingly slide from one representation (or representational element) to another. While ambiguity suffices for that, it is unnecessary since mental representations or concepts are cut more finely than are word meanings. Consider commonsense and scientific concepts of water. Because they are different concepts, conflation is in principle possible; but "water" is univocal.[2]

Conflation is also possible where there is modulation (Cruse 1986). Consider how the sense of "full" is subtly modified across contexts in spite of being univocal:

(1) a full bookshelf [no room across the shelf]
(2) a full auditorium [all seats occupied]
(3) a full balloon [stretched near capacity by a gas or liquid inside it]
(4) a full swimming pool [nearly all its volume occupied by water]
(5) a full swimming pool [contains a maximum number of people, as determined by safety regulations, comfort, etc.]

Examples (4) and (5) furnish us with a means of demonstrating how modulation can result in conflation. Imagine a swimming pool that is scheduled to open on June 1, but by that date contains no water (and hence no people). And suppose an employee at the pool overhears the manager complaining on June 1 about the pool not being full. Finally, imagine the employee telling a friend how the manager is upset because the pool was not filled with swimmers on opening day, whereas all the manager really cared about is that it be filled with water (since the manager's salary is independent of how many people are in the pool). In this example, both "kinds of fullness" are missing from the pool and, conflating the two, the employee fallaciously infers that the manager is upset because the pool was not filled with people. This closely parallels the fallacious reasoning about consciousness that concerns Block. However, the example shows that such reasoning, as well as the conflation on which it is based, can occur in the absence of ambiguity, since "full" is univocal. Perhaps something similar is happening with the word "consciousness" and the distinct elements of our complex mental representation of consciousness that represent phenomenal features and cognitive/functional ones.

I believe Block would do best to explain the conflation between P and A in terms of something like "carelessly sliding over representational distinctions," without committing himself to whether such distinctions are across distinct representations or elements within a single representation. And he ought not tie himself to the claim that the English word "consciousness" is ambiguous between P and A. Even if he believes it is, his argument does not depend on it being so. Block's argument would thus be strengthened if such controversial semantic issues were avoided.[3]

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Lyons (1977), Cruse (1986), and Pustejovsky (1996).

2. Lest one think that something like Chalmers's (1996, Ch. 2) distinction between primary and secondary intensions suffices to show that "water" is ambiguous, notice that that could not be a kind of ambiguity relevant to the discussion in this commentary, since that would make all words (or at least all natural kind words) ambiguous, thus robbing the question whether conflation requires ambiguity, of any interest.

3. For more extended treatment of the issues discussed in this commentary, see Antony (2001; 2002).

Superblindsight, Inverse Anton, and tweaking A-consciousness further

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Abstract: It is argued that Block's thought experiment on superblindsight and "the Inverse Anton's syndrome" are not cases of A-consciousness without P-consciousness. "Weak dispositional states" should be excluded from the set of A-conscious states, and a subject's being reflectively conscious of a P-conscious state is suggested as a better candidate for A-consciousness. It is further pointed out that dreams, according to Block's own criterion but contrary to what he claims, are A-unconscious and it is argued that Block should not accept the idea that high-information representational content is an empirically sufficient condition of phenomenality in human beings.

In his target article, Block (1995t) advances a conceptual distinction between a state being A- or P-conscious. A state is A-conscious if, by virtue of one's having the state, a representation of its content is poised for use as a premise in reasoning, rational control of action, and rational control of speech. A state is P-conscious if it has the experiential properties expressed by the phrase "there is something it is like to be in that state." Block's target reasoning is the fallacy committed by "jumping from the premise that 'consciousness' is missing – without being clear about what kind of consciousness is missing – to the conclusion that P-consciousness has a certain function" (1995t, p. 242). However, he also claims that there is something importantly right in this reasoning: A and P often make their presence and absence together (1995t, p. 242). In particular, it seems difficult to find clear cases of A without P. "If indeed there can be P without A, but not A without P, this would be a remarkable result that needed explanation," Block says in his response to commentators (1995r, p. 272), inviting readers "to tinker with the definitions of 'P' and 'A' so as to make them coincide better" (1995r, p. 277).

In what follows I will point to some difficulties with Block's two best proposals for "A without P" – superblindsight and the Inverse Anton's syndrome – and argue for a further tweaking of the concept of A-consciousness.

1. Superblindsight. Is superblindsight a case of A-consciousness without P-consciousness? I don't think so. "Superblindsight" is Block's label for the thought experiment in which we imagine a blindsight patient

> prompt[ing] himself at will, guessing what is in the blind field without being told to guess. . . . Visual information from his blind field simply pops into his thoughts in the way that solutions to problems we've been worrying about pop into our thoughts, or in the way some people just know the time or which way is North without having any perceptual experience of it. (1995t, p. 233)

Block's contention is that the perceptual state which gives rise to the particular thought is A-conscious. I contend that these underlying states are neither perceptual nor A-conscious. Concerning the relation between the superblindsighter's perceptual state (S1) and the resulting thought (S2), some commentators have already argued that the superblindsighter's underlying perceptual state S1

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