

Nehemias Jimenez  
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Prof. Morgan

“Introduction to Consciousness from Cognitive Science”

Consciousness is a main point of interest in the discipline of cognitive science. In an attempt to concretely define and understand it in the aspect of mental states, consciousness can be divided into two concepts. These concepts are phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness. They are distinct yet interconnected in a manner that makes up most of our perceptual faculties.

Since we are talking purely about the aspect of consciousness that has to do with mental states we should clarify its scope and boundaries. The consciousness we are referring to is the self aware type. This is commonly expressed when we say that we “know” what we saw, heard, or felt. If we spoke in technical terms, we are constantly experiencing things. We are always conscious in this sense. But when we say we “know” these things, we are talking about being conscious in another way. We mean to say that we are mentally aware of what we perceive. In cognitive science, this is called being state conscious. If we flip the coin, the boundary of this type of consciousness is then all other perception that is purely subject conscious. Simply stated the consciousness where a person is mindfully disengaged from what they perceive.

Herein lies a further distinction in state consciousness. The first is phenomenal consciousness. This refers to “what it is like” to experience something. We gain this phenomenal consciousness when we are awake and lose them while we are asleep. When we are in phenomenal consciousness, we can explain what it is like to see someone, or to hear something, or to feel something. This is a consciousness that all living animals have with humans. It is also prudent to clarify that although animals have phenomenal consciousness, cognitive scientists do not agree that animals are self-conscious where they can explain that they know what they perceive. This is impossible because of the fundamental distinction

between the brain states of animals and humans. This in turn distinguishes their minds from humans. Where both animals and humans are concerned, phenomenal consciousness is realized in every situation where there is a specific phenomenal distinction in being in that state. A few examples are the phenomenal states in eating an apple and the distinct phenomenal state of drinking a coffee. In both experiences of what it is like to taste the apple or coffee, a human is phenomenally conscious although there is a distinction between them.

The second part of state consciousness is access consciousness. This consciousness is the information the phenomenally conscious state has for the experiencer. In other words, when someone experiences something in a phenomenally conscious state, there is information about what the person experiences and how they experience it available to access. While eating an apple, the experiencer is in a phenomenally conscious state where they are perceiving what it is like to eat an apple. The person is then access conscious when they extract the information of the phenomenal state. Clearly each needs the other for accurate perception. Without phenomenal conscious states, there is no information that the access conscious state can extract. And without the access conscious state, the phenomenal state will remain hidden and unknown. Both the phenomenal and access conscious states then make up an economy for state consciousness to exist. We are self aware because of the information phenomenal consciousness provides and the extractive function of access consciousness.

In conclusion, phenomenal and access consciousness are distinct yet connected. One serves as the experiential mental state and the other serves as the interpreter of these states. While the phenomenal conscious state holds information of mental states, the access conscious states takes this information and decodes it into a conveyable form of speech and other expressive approaches. Together, they create the foundation of how we awarely perceive and understand our experiences in the world, known as state consciousness.