

CONSCIOUSNESS AND COGNITION

Ines Štengl-Grabner Šegota, student of the Faculty of Philosophy of the Society of Jesus, Zagreb

Consciousness

Consciousness is a term multiply ambiguous, but I shall not be dealing with its numerous aspects and meanings relating to its functioning. Some functions of human awareness can be explained by the description of the purely physiological functions. But there is a different approach to consciousness or awareness and it is of a much deeper nature; consciousness cannot be explained with a defined, given theory, although some new theoretical answers have appeared recently. Since consciousness is something that is present in our daily life it is somehow strange it should be a matter of so many ambiguous questions and problems. The origin of all difficulties lies in our approach to consciousness – we can never reach it directly; therefore consciousness can never become the object of our observation in the same sense that are the things and objects from our environment. The reality round us is conceived as something different from us, apart from our self. Pure, essential consciousness cannot be understood if we remove all of its contents. Consciousness is the basic presumption of all our activities and many of its functions can be explained as neurological processes; however, its phenomenon cannot be understood and explained by neuroscience and by physiological theories and neither can the explanations of our experiences be reduced to their descriptions. The explanation of a process which has a physical basis provides an insight into the way our brain functions and into the way our conscious experience is developed, but this still does not provide an answer to the question: what is the nature of our individual experience, why are we aware of the consciousness itself when it is only the means, the instrument of self-awareness which makes it possible to understand how *we* feel in a particular situation, but also *what it is like* to be a human. It is obvious that it is hard to define the idea about our consciousness when we try to observe it from an objective point of view or when we try to reduce it to purely physical processes. There is always something that remains unexplained and out of reach. This is the “me” position from which we perceive and understand the world but from which we also perceive and understand our inner self and try to see it as an external object of perception and cognition, as a different state of individual awareness. All brain functioning, all neurological processes will be known and explained eventually, but the problem

of subjective consciousness will remain as the most complex and mysterious problem that is constantly being reduced to purely material facts and events.

In the first place we should ask ourselves the following question: how do we become aware of our self, how do we become conscious that we are what we are, how do we know that we are aware? Cognition is inseparable from consciousness, consciousness is the first presumption for cognition; but cognition is also an inseparable part of the nature of consciousness. Our conscious activities make us aware of our consciousness as a state of mind in which we perceive our self and the world outside us where we exist as individual objects of cognition.

Even before we become aware of our consciousness we can be aware of our own actions and deeds, we take a point of view from *our* individual, subjective position as an individual, and human. At this point I will allow myself a digression I consider important; I do not want to make judgments about some philosophical issues such as: only a human is capable of self-possession, only a human can be reflected in himself. I believe it is out of place to speak about subjective individual experience of other species only on the basis of unfounded presumptions that different perceptions of reality and of the self in this reality can justly lead to a conclusion that these different species do not possess what we call the subjective moment of consciousness. Of course, this does not mean that there is no difference between human and animal consciousness (differences also exist between various animal species).

The challenging and interesting aspect of consciousness can be found in its deeply unidentifiable, unexplainable characteristic that lies beyond all empirical, sensory experience. If consciousness is merely one of the physiological functions of human organism, how do we become aware of our consciousness? This awareness is not an imperative for survival in a purely biological sense. The specific characteristic of human consciousness is that it is *transitive*, i.e. it involves mentioning the thing, the object a person is conscious *of*. In this way we come to the topic of anthropological discourse about the mental and spiritual activities of mankind which may be intriguing and challenging, but do not present a crucial need of our existence. The needs of our everyday life requirements do not include awareness about consciousness. Life could be lived without this specific aspect of our consciousness. What is the practical part of this consciousness issue? What

exactly is this self reflecting function of our brain? When we reflect our consciousness in our inner self and when we are aware of the 'I' we never say: that is exactly that! There is always something in the background, 'the one that is observing'. What is this physical, never fully comprehensive function, and therefore useless, but at the same time pointing at all integrated aspects of our cognitive thinking while remaining apart, out of everything in the background? The point is not in rejecting solutions based on scientific physiological and neurological research, but in converging them into the same coherent whole where philosophical speculations and thinking would be possible. The question is can the problem of consciousness be solved at the level of phenomenology or should the method dealing with this issue be further developed and improved? I do not want to claim that only traditional theories have the answer to the question, but would dare suggest that there must be something that will point at the right place where to look for the origin and source of our consciousness. In case of brain damage we would probably lose some of its functions, although this does not mean that the origin of consciousness and self awareness can be found only in physical processes. I am more inclined to assume that a higher level of consciousness, i.e. of cognitive self awareness originate in the spiritual sphere, although, in line with our human nature, it appears in materialistic form as a physical phenomenon.

The most difficult issue of this question is that consciousness cannot be a direct object of our mental speculations; thanks to our perceptions and senses we know that cognition and volition are an integral part of our consciousness. It should not be taken for granted that the nature of consciousness could be understood only on the basis of the tradition or by claiming that everything can be explained through brain functioning. Closer cooperation of these two streams will probably help to reach a more comprehensive idea about the true nature of consciousness.

I will now try to give a short insight into some of the traditional opinions which do not pretend to be scientifically valid or even accepted for fear of being already outdated. It would be unacceptable to take them for granted, as it would be equally unacceptable to rely only upon reductive solutions. In order to be clear and more precise I would like to emphasize that science should not be hermetic, but rather prudently open to conclusions that may seem irrational at first glance.

I would also like to devote more attention to the particular mental state which defines people's interpretation of the world. This mental state presumes reflective cognition which is the result of the self-awareness process. This result can be interpreted as "final", as "knowledge", or as a systematically explained set of truths. In this case we can talk about consciousness as a phenomenal property of mental processes that occur on the basis of external stimuli which are 'processed' during mental activities and to which the brain responds and reacts. Most of these processes occur automatically, although self-awareness is not excluded from the process; it provides an insight into the state of affairs, and helps to conceptualise the *situation* and its self in this situation.

Cognition and volition are closely connected activities and reflect the nature of human consciousness. As I mentioned earlier, the analysis of our voluntary actions shows they cannot be reduced to a few functions that would include the states in which an organism is capable of receiving information from its environment, incorporate them into its central nervous system and respond accordingly to the received stimuli. In this way we can also claim that this organism is aware and conscious of the stimuli it receives. Here consciousness does not include only a data structure allowing the organism to derive information about counterfactual conditions (receive – respond functions), not even when we carry out our routine activities. We are aware that these activities belong to us, that something is happening to us, and we respond to the given situation. This is one of the most surprising phenomena of consciousness and is not restricted only to humans. Consciousness is a fully integrated and centred reality which is capable of reflecting its own self, its own centre which is, traditionally speaking, the origin and the source of all our cognitive and voluntary activities. This consciousness also has another function – to unify and structure our perceptions and to sort out and store them into a mental database that will serve as a source of information, of new contents, and will subsequently open new mental and spiritual horizons in our mind. Self awareness refers to our own self, to the "I" which is the central unifying point of all activities and the main protagonist of our spiritual activities. Suppose we took an x (which would correspond to the soul, although, for religious reasons it would be better to call it a different name) as the centre of activities that could not be defined as merely utilitarian or related to some events in the environment, but that could give us the possibility of establishing a personal point of view and attitude to the world as a whole, then it would be obvious that these

mental activities which transcend the boundaries of space and time are not exclusively materialistic, and neither are they completely separated from the human or are they suspended somewhere in the air round him. Of course, the activities of the x can be realized only through a medium. Yet, I do not see *how* the phenomenon of consciousness could be explained only as a materialistic fact, when at the same time we constantly complain that experience cannot be fully grasped as an 'object' and cannot be dissected. On the other hand it would be also absurd to claim (provided we agree that consciousness has a spiritual origin) that something exists only under condition it can be separated into components and than happily conclude that a brain which has been taken out from a patient's head and cut in two parts will certainly deprive the patient of its consciousness.

Cognition

We all have the experience of our inner self and are aware of our cognition. It could be useful to consider in more details the process of taking cognizance of something and the *experience* of the subject who is cognizing, since the origin named x cannot be identified by pointing our finger to it.

As I have already mentioned, consciousness connects the perceptions and stimuli it receives and transfers them into mental contents by simplifying them at the same time. This simplification speaks about the nature of human cognition and is the first condition for developing our knowledge on the basis of general notions. Consciousness is our *companion* during activities we perceive as our own, and it makes possible different relations between the individual and his environment. We are the ones who attribute the meaning to the world round us, to other people and to different events from our environment and this meaning is relevant only to *us*. Our consciousness about different contents and their evaluation based on the given situation, the preceding knowledge and our position in the situation in which we find ourselves will shape the system within which we form our opinions and judgements. Our understanding of the world round us does not happen only on a concrete, limited background but extends further beyond the given horizon which is the framework for the understanding of the reality in which we live; this understanding is not restricted only to the given reality but refers broader to the reality where our

senses and perceptions have no access but which we try to cognize and understand indirectly. The method applied when we try to cognize that what eludes our senses is used when we become self aware, and conscious about the 'I'. Of course, there is a difference due to the fact that our awareness about the objects round us can always receive material evidence from the environment, which is not the case with our self awareness. There is no direct evidence for it in the outside world. And since the contents of our consciousness, despite their differences, are connected into one entity, they must have a common foundation (the highest function of the aforementioned x).

Food for thought, instead of conclusion

Positive knowledge is, undoubtedly, the condition for establishing a system of truths that would be valid for the total reality beyond all time limits (these are primordial principles set by unconditional requirements of truthfulness) and for creating a system of knowledge that would not necessarily have a practical purpose. Humans will tend to cognize and become aware of the reality apart the materialistic requirements of everyday existence, but with the purpose to meet deeper spiritual needs and explain that what will help in better self awareness and understanding of the self. This aspiration for better understanding of the self and of the meaning of life reveals a close connection between consciousness and its orientation to itself. This aspiration is always accompanied by knowledge and a desire for new levels of cognition. Here it is important to point to another important thing – although the certainty which is the basis of our knowledge lies within our self, we are not a hermetic reality closed within our own borders. Self awareness will not occur as a result of a hermetic, inward speculation about our self. Self awareness is inevitably the result of our sensitive perceptions of the world outside us, of the environment we perceive as being different from us. Intellectual cognition is possible only under condition we “completely return to our self” (*reditio in se ipsum*). The cognizing subject leaves his own inner self and steps out into the material world, but returns to the inner self due to his non-material origin. (3). The subject is guided to self awareness by *Reditio in se ipsum* and not only by knowledge about external objects and facts. Our cognition is partly oriented to the essence as well as to ontological truth which is the source of comprehensibility. Our cognition does not terminate with knowledge

about the world, but returns to its self and reaches this moment that always eludes us, just when we think we have finally got hold of it.

Insights into reality, abstract cognition, the ability to connect different contexts and find systematic rules and laws in multiple phenomena is the condition of the world we know, as it is *for us* and that we translate into our systems of knowledge. The question that still remains unanswered is the following: is our relation to ourselves which is also shown in our relation to the world a mere reflection of brain impulses or there is something much deeper to it? If it is true that everything what think we are is only a product of neurological processes, should not we, then, formulate differently the notions about a human? If not, maybe it would be useful to observe reality on a much broader horizon.

Bibliography

Thomas Nagel; Readings in Philosophy of Psychology, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Gerd Haeffner; Filozofska antropologija, Dario Škarica (prev.), Zagreb, 2003.

Ivan Macan; Filzofija spoznaje, Zagreb, 1997.