

The Nature Of Conscious Awareness

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Ancient philosophers and psychologists spent thousands of years exploring the nature of consciousness through careful observation of the human way of life and their own experiences. Modern-day scientists and philosophers still ask the question, what is consciousness? Is it a vital human trait or an essential characteristic of the universe? Scholars have come up with different definitions of consciousness, and no particular interpretation has been accepted entirely in the field of psychology across the globe. However, most scholars define consciousness as the awareness of external events, internal sensations, the self, and thoughts about experiences. The different qualities of self-awareness and information processing are attributed to the various states of consciousness of every individual (Underhill, 2015).

The conscious state of awareness occurs when the mind knows exactly what it is thinking. The conscious state is the most productive state compared to all the other states of consciousness since the thinking is serial and the mind follows a precise sequence of processing information and ideas. The conscious states allow us to operate at the high and low levels of awareness. A high level of awareness occurs when an individual is most alert and selective, controlling information processing and allowing us to focus. Contrary to the high level of awareness, a low level of awareness occurs with the automatic or semi-automatic processing of information. Thinking is simultaneous, and this results in the division of attention between the activities we are undertaking (Davidson, 2012). For example, a low level of awareness in a conscious state occurs when you daydream while listening to class instructions.

There is a significant difference between the conscious state and the other states of consciousness, such as the subconscious state, the unconscious state and the altered state of awareness. All the other states of consciousness portray unique traits that psychologists use to differentiate them from the conscious state. For instance, the subconscious state occurs when we sleep, and we are aware of the external stimuli only to some degree. In the unconscious state, we have no voluntary awareness of our thinking. In contrast, the altered state of consciousness is achieved through the influence of particular secondary stimuli such as drugs and fatigue (Underhill, 2015).

Memories And Conscious Connection

In the human body, the brain is the most complex system known to man, and some of its operations are still mysterious. Some essential functions of the brain include comparing, thinking, planning, dreaming and reflecting. Humans also help us remember past events, be conscious of the world around us, and be aware of ourselves. Memory in the brain is triggered each time we “remember” something. According to scientists, the brain retrieves memories by provoking numerous neural

pathways. There are various types of brain memory, such as long-term memory, short-term memory/working memory, semantic memory and episodic memory. Despite the fact that many of us are not concerned with the interaction of consciousness and memory, research shows that consciousness plays a vital role in our memory qualities (Davidson, 2012).

Process dissociation is one of the widely used techniques to identify the different results of memory retrieval during the conscious state and the unconscious state. This technique aims to determine the degree of unconscious knowledge compared to conscious awareness by determining the probabilities of exclusion and inclusion conditions (Underhill, 2015). Using this methodology, conscious vs. unconscious aspects of memory can be differentiated. Another technique used is implicit learning. This set of paradigms makes use of the conscious mind to estimate the effectiveness of consciousness in remembering past events. Evidently, in recall and recognition, individuals are conscious of retrieved memories in the recall, but not necessarily in recognition tasks.

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the concept of having a clear understanding of your personality, character, beliefs, motivations, and emotions. It primarily involves developing a clear perspective of your strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, and feelings. Self-awareness enables us to understand our impact on other people's lives and how they perceive our attitude towards them. Most of us are not concerned with the concept of self-awareness, with the assumption that we develop self-awareness naturally (Davidson, 2012). Centrally to these assumptions, we can learn to create a high sense of self-awareness and change our interpretation of our thoughts, emotions, and conversations.

Self-awareness is one of the crucial steps taken when we master our lives. When individuals focus on their way of life, their emotions, reactions, personalities, and behaviours change drastically for the better. Self-awareness allows us to have control over our characteristics, making changes in the shape and direction of our lives. Self-knowledge entirely involves understanding one's personal needs, desires, failings, habits and everything else that adds value to our lives.

Self-awareness is an essential part of both therapy and philosophy. An individual can improve his or her self-awareness through a few exercises, as elaborated below (Underhill, 2015). To start with, individuals can learn to look at themselves objectively. This approach should help them study and criticize their ideas and decisions in life. Another technique is writing down our manifesto. Stating your goals helps determine the efforts you will put to achieve them. Thirdly, we should perform self-review. By doing this, we realize other people's perspectives on our ways of life. It is essential to remember that self-awareness is introspection, but it plays a significant role in determining the level of success in our lives.

Is Conscious Awareness A Uniquely Human Attribute?

Psychology indicates that human beings are the only species who think about their thinking. This means that the human brain has a unique feature that can criticize its functions and modify its abilities to suit the required situation. The conscious awareness of human beings is, therefore, a single trait that can be used to differentiate between the consciousness of the human species and other animals. However, research shows conscious awareness extends to some animals to some degree. Despite the fact that some animal species, such as primates, portray some aspects of conscious awareness, current studies show that only human beings possess all the states of consciousness (Davidson, 2012).

The ability of humans to think, remember, plan, predict, and analyze situations during conscious awareness is not evident among any other animal. The only main difference between the conscious awareness of human beings and that of other species is that the levels of capability of the human brain are very high, while those of other species are very low. It could, therefore, be inappropriate to conclude that conscious awareness is a uniquely human attribute that is entirely possessed by human beings alone.

Research On Animal Conscious Awareness

Let us consider the closest species to man, the primates, for example, the chimpanzees and monkeys. These animals have a brain structure that closely resembles the human brain, but they differ in some crucial ways. According to research conducted at Georgia State University, chimpanzees have metacognition, a condition that allows them to recognize and appreciate what he or she knows. An experiment conducted at Georgia State University entails the chimpanzees being trained to use a language-like system of symbols to name things. This experiment has given the researchers a unique and effective way to determine the status of knowing or not knowing among the primates. The researchers tested the primates using an assessment that required the chimpanzees to use symbols to name and identify what food was hidden in different locations. The chimpanzees were provided with either complete or incomplete information about the identity of the food. They were shown the identity of the food items and their location. At the end of the experiment, the chimpanzees could immediately name the food items based on the information that was provided to them but could not name the things they did not already know (Underhill, 2015).

The research team reported that the primates demonstrated patterns in behaviour that reflected a controlled way of thinking and information-seeking capacity. They concluded that the above intelligence traits shown by the chimpanzees suggest that these animals have conscious awareness related to that of human beings.

Can Computers Have Consciousness?

Since the invention of computers during the mid-20th century, many people have been fascinated by the “mind-like” properties of the computer. Similar to a human brain, the computer can process information. Advanced knowledge of creating computer programs has led to the development of intelligent machines such as facial recognition security systems and robots (Davidson, 2012). The advancement in artificial intelligence has resulted in many asking the question of whether computers will one day have consciousness.

For anything to acquire consciousness, it must have a brain so that it can possess its beliefs, desires, and motivations. According to scientists, the only type of artificial intelligence that can support these features is “Strong Artificial Intelligence.” Strong AI should possess all the traits of human cognitive abilities, such as consciousness, self-awareness, and sentience. However, scholars say that humans can only develop and create “Weak Artificial Intelligence.” This means that all machines that have developed and run on digital computer programs can have no conscious states and no self-awareness since they cannot possess a brain that functions exactly like that of human beings (Davidson, 2012).

The fact that some robots are very sophisticated and relatively convincing to be alive means that they do not have an aspect of consciousness. Computer programs and the human brain work similarly, but only the brain understands its operations, and that is not likely to change.

What Distinguishes Humans?

Like most questions in psychology, no definite answer entirely satisfies the uniqueness of human beings. However, philosophers have developed two approaches that will help us find a solution to this mystery. First, we consider whether our cognitive abilities differ entirely from those of other animal species. Secondly, we consider whether we have the same cognitive skills and only that we are the smartest of them all. Charles Darwin supported the second approach, and he argued that we had the same consciousness as the primates, just that we became more intelligent as a result of our exceptional evolution (Underhill, 2015).

However, there are some abilities of the human brain that contribute to our human uniqueness and distinguish us from the rest of the animals. To start with, the human mind shows generative computation. We have the capability to create new expressions and concepts from our memories, a trait that other animals do not possess. Another unique quality is that our brain has a promiscuous combination of ideas. This trait enables us to connect different aspects, such as art, space, sex, and social relationships. The human brain also has the ability to abstract thought. This is the contemplation of things beyond what we can sense. The last aspect is that we use mental symbols as our primary way of encoding sensory experiences. We can then express ourselves through more complex forms, such as language and communication. All the above traits are unique to the human brain, and no other animal possesses them (Davidson, 2012).

Difference Between The Brain And The Mind

It is very common for us to use the brain and mind interchangeably, even though they have different means. The most basic difference is that the brain is physical while the mind is not. The brain is the physical space in which the mind operates. The brain coordinates our body movements and organ activities, while the mind is used for the thinking process. To explain the concept of the mind and brain, let us consider a computer. The hardware parts of the computer are the brain, while the software is the mind. The mind is the self-awareness and consciousness we possess. We think using the mind, and all our thoughts are based on it (Underhill, 2015).

Risks To Research On The Flow Of A Person's Thoughts

The process of monitoring a person's flow of thinking is a very complicated procedure and requires the researchers to consider some things before starting the process. Considering that the research involves the study of the human mind, the results produced may not be very accurate. The method of thinking sometimes occurs very fast (in microseconds), and millions of thoughts can be processed within a short time. The thinking process involves the triggering of very many neurons in the brain, and trying to flow through this process could cause significant brain damage. Another drawback is that the human thinking process varies in the various states of consciousness, and the best results can only be obtained in the conscious state. However, we think serially in this state, and it is almost an impossible task to follow the flow of a person's thoughts during this state due to the many activities of the brain.

References

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