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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Study of Consciousness Is Mired in Complexities and Difficulties: Can They Be Resolved?

Jonathan Nash

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Abstract

This paper explores several etymological, semantic, sociolinguistic, and methodological issues that have, in my opinion, impeded the progress of consciousness research and discourse; and I offer some suggestions that are hopefully worthy of consideration.

I review the historical and extant conflation of terms in the literature, a litany of published definitions and types of consciousness, and call for greater “semantic lucidity”. I critique the rationale underpinning the search for the neural correlates of consciousness, advocate for greater adherence to the requirements of an operational definition in research, and discuss the paradigm of consciousness as a ‘process’ versus the premise of consciousness as a tangible ‘thing’ that can somehow be found in a particular locus within the material substrate of the nervous system.

Jonathan D. Nash**Correspondence: Jonathan D. Nash, Chiangmai, Thailand. Email: jnashdds@gmail.com**Keywords:** Consciousness, NCC, Awareness, Semantics, Sociolinguistics, Etymology, Nomenclature, Terminology, Operational definition.*Note: when the term ‘consciousness’ is used in this paper, it refers exclusively to human consciousness.*

Introduction

Currently, there are over 30 different theories of consciousness (Sattin et al. 2021, Seth and Bayne 2021) and over 20 different ‘types’ of consciousness (see below) cited in the literature, yet a consensual operational definition remains elusive. This paper is not intended as a review and commentary of these various views and theories. Rather, it was written

from the perspective of a dissatisfied consumer who has been frustrated for decades by the lack of clarity emanating from this field of study, and thus focuses on issues of presentation rather than on content. I explore several etymological, semantic, sociolinguistic, and methodological factors that have, in my opinion, impeded the progress of consciousness research and discourse; and offer some suggestions for consideration. I support the theory of consciousness as a ‘process’, as opposed to consciousness as a tangible ‘thing’ that can somehow be found in a particular locus within the material substrate of the nervous system. I also recognize that constraints imposed on scientific endeavors do not necessarily apply to scholars and authors engaged in philosophical discourse, and I leave aside questions that are exclusively the purview of philosophy.

I begin with a confession. On the whole, many of the publications in this field have been in conflict with two of my closely held standards of research and academic authorship, and to be transparent, these biases are central to this project:

- I give credence to the scientific method and have a particular interest in how it is applied by those disciplines engaged in researching the human condition. As such, I abide by the fundamental requirements imposed on any scientific research project: a clearly stated hypothesis, a cogent and measurable operational definition of the target of investigation, and methods and findings that are replicable.
- I believe in the value of shared meaning and mutual understanding; that authors of scholarly publications should strive to convey their ideas with clarity and unambiguous use of terminology and diction; and not assume that, in the absence of a clear definition, everyone innately understands what it is you are writing about, i.e., the meaning of consciousness. I call this criterion “semantic lucidity” (Nash and Newberg 2023).

It is common knowledge that hundreds of years of thought and discourse among Western scholars and scientists have failed to produce a functional consensual definition of exactly what is (and what is not) this ineffable notion we call ‘consciousness’ (Burkeman, 2015). This quandary is reminiscent of the ongoing struggle to promulgate a cogent definition and taxonomy of ‘meditation’ – another challenging enigma that Dr. Newberg and I have attempted to unravel (Nash and Newberg 2013, 2023). I apply some of the ideas/theses that we advanced in those papers to the task at hand in this paper.

With regard to the notion of ‘consciousness’, many scientists and philosophers have expressed skepticism about our ability to reach a consensual definition. Here are three representative examples:

Bodovitz (2008) lamented that:

localizing the neural correlate of consciousness is difficult because of the lack of a functional definition of consciousness. We are not sure what we are looking for

A frustrated Sutherland (1989) declared that:

The term is impossible to define except in terms that are unintelligible without a grasp of what consciousness

means. Many fall into the trap of equating consciousness with self-consciousness—to be conscious it is only necessary to be aware of the external world. Consciousness is a fascinating but elusive phenomenon: it is impossible to specify what it is, what it does, or why it has evolved. Nothing worth reading has been written on it.

And Hacker (2010) proclaimed:

If we attend carefully, we may well hear the ancients in the Elysian fields laughing at us moderns, wondering how we can possibly hope to make sense of human nature and of the nature of the human mind with the knotted tangle of misconceptions that we have woven into reflections on consciousness.

Based on comments such as these, one might conclude that the task of defining consciousness is a hopeless cause, condemned to be the subject of endless acrimonious debate. This paper attempts to explore the root cause(s) of this impasse, and offers some suggestions that are hopefully useful and worthy of consideration.

Etymology, definition and related semantic issues

Conscious and Consciousness

The English words 'conscious' and 'consciousness' are recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary as first occurring at the beginning of the seventeenth century. These words come from the Latin term *conscientia* which means "knowledge shared with others", or being a witness to something. and stems from the combination of two words: *scio* (I know) and *cum* (with).

In its early usage, 'conscious' occurred in phrases such as 'being conscious to another' and 'being conscious to something'. But this sharing of knowledge evolved into being privy to unshared knowledge, either about others or about oneself. 'To be conscious to' became a cousin to the much older expression - 'to be aware of'. Some common modern synonyms of 'conscious' are: alive, awake, aware, cognizant, and sensible (i.e. awareness in the waking state). While all these terms mean having knowledge of something, 'conscious' implies that one is focusing one's attention on something or is preoccupied by it. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that 'consciousness' came to be used to signify wakefulness (as opposed to being unconscious), which enabled discussion of losing or regaining consciousness. (Bennett and Hacker 2003).

According to Hacker:

The term 'consciousness' is a latecomer upon the stage of Western philosophy. The ancients had no such term, although they did raise questions about the nature of our knowledge of our own perceptions and thought, and introduced the idea of an inner sense. Aristotelians conceived of the mind as the array of powers that distinguish humanity from the rest of animate nature - the powers of the intellect, of reason, and of rational will. Medieval

scholars and philosophers followed suit and likewise lacked any term for consciousness.

(Hacker 2010).

Consciousness in a philosophical sense was not popularized in Western society until the 1600s. The oft-repeated, and generally accepted, historical account credits René Descartes with first mentioning this notion of consciousness in his 1641 treatise “Meditations”. This was notably followed by John Locke in the late 17th century, who defined the word in his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding” in 1690: consciousness is “the perception of what passes in a man's own mind”. It is commonly accepted that this essay strongly influenced 18th-century British philosophy, and in 1756 Locke's definition appeared in Samuel Johnson's famous A Dictionary of the English Language.

It is unfortunate, as I demonstrate below, that the shared etymology and similarity of these two words eventually penetrated the scientific and philosophical domains, resulting in a commonly seen conflation of these terms within the field of consciousness research and discourse.

As a good example of this conflation, I offer the following quote by John Searle from his very public and contentious debate with Daniel Dennett in The New York Review of Books (1995) (bold highlights inserted by me):

*About consciousness, I must say that if someone persistently denies the existence of **consciousness** itself, traditional arguments, with premises and conclusions, may never convince him. All I can do is remind the readers of the facts of their own experiences. Here is the paradox of this exchange: I am a **conscious** reviewer **consciously** answering the objections of an author who gives every indication of being **consciously** and puzzlingly angry. I do this for a readership that I assume is **conscious**. How then can I take seriously his claim that **consciousness** does not really exist?*

Here Searle is clearly proclaiming that if he is conscious (awake), then this is conclusive evidence that he has consciousness.

Other examples of conflation and diversity of terms in the consciousness literature are listed below.

Without a clear means of differentiation, logically awkward and semantically challenging statements will persist, such as “consciousness during a state of unconsciousness”. Therefore, I am proposing a simple means of distinction between the medical/physiological and the mental/psychological notions of consciousness and will use them throughout the remainder of this paper:

- When the word ‘consciousness’ is used in a medical/physiological context to signify the conscious vs. the unconscious state (i.e., gain or loss of consciousness), it will be depicted in its normative lower case as ‘consciousness’.
- When the word ‘consciousness’ is used in a mental/psychological context, it will henceforth be depicted by capitalizing the word Consciousness, abbreviated as ‘C’ (except if it appears in the lower case within a quotation by another author).

There is a strong precedence for this technique of denotation within the scientific, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religions literature, e.g., comparing the mundane “self” vs. the supramundane/supreme "Self" (Bond 1983, Chadra 2022, Fingelkurts et al. 2023b, Watson 2006). Capitalization also permits a simple and useful way to differentiate Consciousness from other mundane usages of the term, e.g., ‘collective consciousness’, ‘group consciousness’, and the legal notion of ‘consciousness of guilt’.

A Multitude of Definitions for Consciousness

(Bold highlights inserted by the author)

Dictionaries/Online resources

Please note that within the following standard English language definitions, the term ‘awareness’ is freely used as a synonym for ‘C’, but this cannot be done as freely in many other languages (see sociolinguistics below).

- Webster's College Dictionary

1. *the state of being **conscious**; **awareness**.*
2. *the thoughts and feelings, collectively, of an individual or of an aggregate of people.*
3. *full activity of the mind and senses, as **inwaking life**: to regain consciousness.*
4. ***awareness** of something for what it is; internal knowledge: consciousness of wrongdoing.*
5. *concern, interest, or **awareness**: class consciousness.*
6. *the mental activity of which a person is **aware**, contrasted with unconscious thought.*

- Wikipedia

*Consciousness is the state or quality of **awareness**, or of being aware of an external object or something within oneself. It has been defined variously in terms of sentience, **awareness**, qualia, **subjectivity**, the ability to **experience** or to feel, **wakefulness**, having a **sense of selfhood** or soul, the fact that there is something "that it is like" to "have" or "be" it, and the executive control system of the mind.*

- Collins Online Dictionary

1. *the state of being **conscious**; **awareness** of one's own feelings, existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings; what is happening around one, etc.*

2. the totality of one's thoughts, feelings, and impressions;**conscious** mind

- APA Dictionary of Psychology

1. the state of being **conscious**.
2. an organism's **awareness** of something either internal or external to itself.
3. **the waking state** (see *wakefulness*).
4. in medicine and brain science, the distinctive electrical activity of the waking brain, as recorded via scalp electroencephalogram, that is commonly used to identify **conscious** states and their pathologies.

- Chatbot AI

1. the state or quality of **awareness**, or of being aware of an external object or something within oneself.
2. the ability to experience **thoughts, feelings, and sensations**, and to be **aware** of one's existence and surroundings.
3. the state of being awake and **aware** of one's surroundings, thoughts, and emotions.
4. the **subjective experience** of being aware of oneself and one's environment, including thoughts, sensations, perceptions, and emotions.

Within the Consciousness Literature

The following quotes about Consciousness demonstrate that even some well-respected pundits use words such as 'conscious', 'awareness', 'consciousness', 'thought/thinking', 'subjective experience', etc. as if they were synonymous: (bold highlights inserted)

Alan Watts (1960, 1989):

*Because what **consciousness** is, is a rather specialized form of **awareness**. When you look around the room, you are **conscious** of as much as you can notice, and you see an enormous number of things which you do not notice.*

Antonio Damasio (1999):

*Consciousness is defined as "an organisms' **awareness** of its own self and surroundings*

Bernard Baars (1997):

*You are **conscious** and so am I. This much we can tell pretty easily, since when we are **notconscious**, our bodies wilt, our eyes roll up in their orbits, our brain waves become large, slow, and regular, and we cannot read a sentence like this one. While the outer signs of **consciousness** are pretty clear, it is our inner life that counts for most of us.*

Giulio Tononi (2016):

*Consciousness is **subjective experience**, the “what it is like” to perceive a scene, recognize a face, hear a sound, or reflect on the experience itself.*

William James (1902):

*In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of **thought**, of consciousness, or of **subjective** life.*

Within the Peer Review Community

To further exemplify this diversity of terminology and definition in the ‘C’ literature, below is a summary of an informal content meta-analysis that I conducted in March 2024. Earlier this year, I was one of 30 peer reviewers for an article on animal consciousness by Dr. Louis Irwin (2024) on the Qeios online platform. At that time, I volunteered to analyze and construct a compendium of the full range of definitions, terms, synonyms, and properties of ‘C’ gleaned from the entire online commentary from all 30 reviewers. Here are my findings of the total number of mentions of six different categories of various terms/notions that the reviewers equated or associated with ‘C’, in descending order of frequency:

1. ‘subjective experience’, ‘phenomenology’, ‘qualia’: 65 times in 19 reviews
2. ‘awareness’ and ‘conscious’: 56 times in 19 reviews
3. various types, stages, and levels of ‘C’: 34 times in 14 reviews
4. ‘cognition’ in general, and various cognitive processes: 33 times in 12 reviews
5. ‘witness’, ‘agent’, ‘monitoring mechanism’: 21 times in 11 reviews
6. ‘self’, ‘unified self’, ‘sense of self’: 17 times in 11 reviews

Given this obvious diversity of opinion, it is difficult to see a clear path toward a consensual definition. Christof Koch’s attempt to simplify the definition of ‘C’ is somewhat instructive here in that it aligns with the first two categories above. He says:

Consciousness is experience. That’s it. Consciousness is any experience, from the most mundane to the most exalted. Some add subjective or phenomenal to the definition. For my purposes, these adjectives are redundant. Some distinguish awareness from consciousness. For reasons I’ve given elsewhere, I don’t find this distinction helpful, and so I use these two words interchangeably

(Koch 2019).

At this point, I want to interject my concern with the use of ‘conscious awareness’ as a definition of ‘C’. I assert that if we limit our definition, as many have done, to strictly mental functions in the waking state, then we have not addressed ‘C’ during various states of physiological unconsciousness, e.g., general anesthesia, coma and other disorders of consciousness, lucid dreaming, dream Yoga, etc. Certainly, there needs to be an account for circumstances such as “connected consciousness” during general anesthesia, where some patients can recall details of their surgery and conversations between doctors and staff while they were intubated during surgery and supposedly unconscious (Lennertz et al. 2023); and the experiences of trained practitioners in the discipline of dream Yoga who can cultivate awareness during the dream state and during dreamless sleep, and learn to meditate in that state (Dalai Lama 2002). If we cling to the assumption that ‘C’ is limited to the waking state of conscious awareness in the face of evidence to the contrary (Fingelkurts and Fingelkurts 2023a, Gosseries et al. 2013), we are stuck with the uncomfortable corollary that ‘C’ ceases during unconscious states! It stands to reason that any attempt to proffer a consensual definition of ‘C’ needs to account for both the conscious and the unconscious (Tassi and Muzet 2001).

Sociolinguistic factors regarding the English language

As exemplified above, English-speaking pundits typically use a few favored words when attempting to describe or define their conception of ‘C’. Koch’s assertion that ‘consciousness’ and ‘awareness’ are essentially the same evokes a not oft-mentioned consideration - the role that sociolinguistics plays in enabling or restricting the terminology we employ to discuss this topic, or to even think about it. If you are a native speaker of English, and monolingual like me, you might be surprised to learn that several of these favored words do not translate distinctly in many other languages. For example, here is how one would say “consciousness is conscious awareness” (as declared by many authors) when translated into six other languages which do not permit the same differentiation of terms (per Google Translate):

- French: “la conscience est une conscience consciente”
- Chinese: “yìshí shì yǒu yìshí de yìshí”
- Latin: “conscientia, conscientia, conscientia”
- Swedish: “medvetenhet är medveten medvetenhet”
- Hawaiian: “O ka ‘ike ka ‘ike ‘ike”
- Vietnamese: “Ý thức là nhận thức có ý thức”

It seems plausible, therefore, to ponder whether the English language presents a greater semantic challenge when compared to other languages. Throop and Laughlin (2007) point out, regarding the Western notion of ‘C’, that:

few peoples on the planet would explicitly recognize the concept as it has been developed in the context of Western philosophy and science, and their languages would have no words that neatly gloss with the English

term.

This evokes the provocative topic of the relationship of language and thought, such as the notion of “linguistic determinism” and the ‘softer’ version known as “linguistic relativity” (Whorf 1956). Others have promoted the idea that “language and thought can be considered to be identical from an epistemological point of view” (Dreyfus and Thompson, 2007), and “the way people learn to speak about things influences how they are conditioned to think about things” (Throop and Laughlin 2007).

These considerations strengthen the argument that certain peculiarities of the English language may have contributed to a “Tower of Babel” effect that has impeded the path toward a consensual definition of Consciousness.

Nomenclature and related issues of semantics

Within the body of ‘C’ literature, there is a plethora of attempts to elucidate and define this ineffable notion by modifying the noun with prefixes, suffixes, and/or alluring adjectives. These various types, stages, or states purport to convey the essence of ‘C’. Here are some notable examples:

- Rational consciousness (James 1902)
- Consciousness-as-such (Metzinger 2020)
- Consciousness-itself (Josipovic 2019)
- Pure consciousness (Travis and Pearson 2000)
- Phenomenal consciousness (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008)
- Phenomenal consciousness vs access consciousness (Block 1995)
- Creature consciousness and background consciousness (Chalmers 2000)
- Cosmic consciousness (Bucke 1901, Watts 1960/1989)
- Intransitive, transitive, perceptual, somatic, kinaesthetic, affective, reflective, and self-consciousness (Bennett and Hacker 2003)
- State consciousness vs transitive consciousness (Rosenthal 1993)
- Basic consciousness and store consciousness (Dreyfus 2011, Dreyfus and Thompson 2007)
- Luminous consciousness (Thompson 2014)
- Witness-consciousness (classical Advaita Vedanta philosophy)
- And other popularized terms such as altered states of consciousness and higher states of consciousness

What are we to do with this potpourri of terms – each with its own ‘claim of veracity’? How does this exercise of clever wordsmithing bring us any closer to a cogent explanandum that inspires consensus, or does this simply muddy the waters by creating an excess of terminology?

Conceptual, semantic, and methodological issues in research

The search for the Neural Correlates of Consciousness (NCC)

The current fascination with the neural correlates of consciousness project was made possible by technological advancements in brain mapping such as the use of EEG technology to study meditation in the early 1950s.

EEG was the primary technology for brain function investigation for almost 40 years, with over 100 published studies, until the introduction of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology offered an attractive alternative. Beginning with the first brain mapping/scanning study of meditators by Herzog et al. in 1990 (using PET technology), neural imaging would soon become the dominant research modality for the nascent field of contemplative neuroscience. The invention of BOLD (blood-oxygen-level dependent) contrast technology by Ogawa et al. in 1990 and the functional MRI (fMRI) permitted researchers to avoid the intravenous injection of contrasting dyes and the exposure to ionizing radiation required by the PET and SPECT procedures.

(Travis, Nash, et al. 2020). The parallel interest in the neuroscience of Consciousness heralded the birth of the NCC project, a term first attributed to Crick and Koch (1990), which has since become a major research initiative.

The fundamental difficulty with this NCC enterprise is the lack of a consensual operational/functional definition of 'C'. Researchers are pursuing diverse theories in the absence of this essential component of the scientific method. This is an important methodological problem. As stated by Bodovitz earlier in this paper:

Localizing the neural correlate of consciousness is difficult because of the lack of a functional definition of consciousness. We are not sure what we are looking for.

This critical impediment is exacerbated by uncertainty and debate about what is meant by "neural" and what is meant by a "correlate" (Chalmers 2000, Crick and Koch 1990, de Graff 2012, Hardcastle and Raja 2018, Overgaard and Sandberg 2008).

There is also the issue of whether 'C' should be considered a 'thing' or a 'process'. I would argue that NCC researchers' pursuit to define 'C' as a specific tangible thing/faculty that can somehow be reduced to activity from a specific neural complex/pathway or locus has not been fruitful because the 'thing' has not been (and perhaps cannot be) specified in operational terms. By contrast, theses based on the notion of 'C' as 'process' avoid this conundrum and thus offer a greater opportunity for success. As stated by Chalmers almost 25 years ago – "it is most likely that there is not a 'one-and-only' NCC responsible for the manifestation of consciousness as a singular phenomenon", but rather "there may be multiple NCCs in multiple modalities", what he calls NCCC (neural correlates of the contents of consciousness) (Chalmers 2000).

According to this approach, 'C' is viewed as a dynamic, multifaceted functional process arising from the material substrate of the nervous system (Delacour 1995, Irwin 2024, Koch 2019, Pepperell 2018, Place 1956, Smit and Hacker 2020), which

enables human beings to interact with their internal and external environment. This notion is inclusive, but not limited to, the interaction and interdependence of various mental functions which can be considered as properties/functions or 'contents' of the 'C' phenomenon (Chalmers 2000). For example, here is a laundry list of various elements of mentation that have been associated with, or equivocated to, the notion of 'C': intention, volition, attention, sensory perception, processing subjective experience and phenomenal content, cognition and affect, awareness, memory, imagination, dreaming, hallucinations, reasoning and decision-making, self-monitoring (witnessing, metacognition), perception of time and space, etc. (Throop and Laughlin 2007). Others have highlighted an overarching sense of self/selfhood based on our innate capacity for reflection, introspection, internal dialogue, etc. (Berkovich-Ohana and Glicksohn 2014, Fingelkurts et al. 2023); to which I would add - rendered highly personal and unique by experience, memory, and bias regardless of whether this notion is considered a delusional fabrication (Dreyfus 2011), or not. I would argue that within the constraints of the scientific method, each of these aforementioned elements offers a more tangible, specific, and definable target for neuroscientific research than the nebulous premise of 'C' as a thing.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to shine a light on several contributing factors that arguably have impeded the progress of Consciousness research and discourse - all of which is fixable.

I suggest that meaningful communication between researchers and authors about this strongly felt, and sometimes contentious, subject is achievable if we can agree to the following 'rules of engagement', suggestions, and guiding principles:

1. I think I have made a strong case that, for discussions such as these, it would be beneficial if there were consensus on a simple, non-controversial way to differentiate between the medical/physiological context of consciousness (i.e., conscious and unconscious states) on the one hand, and the mental/psychological context of consciousness on the other. I have proposed that we continue to use the lower-case 'consciousness' for the former, and we agree to capitalize Consciousness for the latter. As previously mentioned, there is a strong precedence for this type of denotation in other related discussions, e.g., 'self' vs 'Self'. Why can't we do this here?
2. Any attempt to formulate an operational definition of 'C' needs to account for both conscious and unconscious states.
3. In research and discourse, pundits would do well to avoid conflating the terms 'conscious' and 'consciousness'.
4. Most of us who are writing in this field can probably relate to the age-old adage that "a philosopher or a researcher would rather use your toothbrush than your terminology". This is more than just a joke - it's a problem. The Consciousness literature is replete with a potpourri of various terms, many of which have been fabricated in the quest for the most insightful and meaningful definition of 'C'. I have taken the position that embellishing the noun with adjectives, hyphenating the noun, attaching prefixes and suffixes, or devising new terminology will just perpetuate the bickering and endless debate. Creative wordsmithing (as tempting as it may be) is not an adequate substitute for a clear definition of the noun itself. This is a plea to curtail the proliferation of new terminology and to maintain semantic lucidity "by using clear and unambiguous terminology; and by avoiding ineffable/vague designations and neologisms

which are prone to conflation and debate, and are difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to operationalize, measure, and validate” (Nash and Newberg 2021).

5. I have argued that NCC researchers who pursue the thesis that ‘C’ is a ‘thing’, that can somehow be found in a single locus of the brain, are engaged in a fruitless enterprise. Given the lack of a consensual operational definition of ‘C’, NCC researchers should consider abandoning this quest in favor of a multifactorial approach to ‘C’ as ‘process’. Chalmers’ proposal to investigate specific and definable neurophysiological aspects of the “contents of Consciousness” (NCCC) seems to be the most reasonable path forward (Chalmers 2000).
6. Finally, for all of us using English to formulate and communicate our ideas about ‘C’, I have suggested that our language of choice may pose some limitations in our thinking and favored terminology that is not evident in several other languages. At the very least, we should consider the possibility that it is not without problems when English is used as a vehicle of discourse for this particular subject.

To conclude, I would like to digress to share some personal thoughts. To me, it seems reasonable to presume that mostly everyone reading this paper possesses an innate sense of their own Consciousness that they find difficult or near impossible to adequately describe.

Is it this sense of a “lived reality... the feeling of life itself” (Koch 2019), or is it the familiar inner voice we hear inside our heads during quiet moments of self-reflection? I have often speculated, what if there were no such thing as a birth certificate or a calendar - we would have difficulty in determining how old we were. We could see that our bodies are changing (maturing/getting older), but something inside seems unchanged – that same ageless inner voice that has been with us for as long as we can remember.

It is most curious that this ineffable phenomenon that we all share is difficult, if not impossible, to define in simple terms that others can readily accept as true – a quandary that has eluded the most brilliant minds in Western culture for hundreds of years. We can only speculate why this has been the case. Perhaps it is due to an unbridled hubris in believing that the intellect is capable of comprehending and solving all the great mysteries in nature and the universe? Perhaps we should humbly accede to the possibility that, for the vast majority of us, certain metaphysical aspects of human existence are beyond the grasp of language, thought, and comprehension at this stage of our evolution as human beings. As stated by Chalmers:

There may be an ultimate explanation for consciousness, but we might not have the intellectual tools to find it.

(Chalmers 1996).

Ancient Eastern philosophy and religion may provide some additional insight here. The famous Hindu foundational texts, the Upanishads (circa 800-300 BCE) (Prabhavananda and Manchester 1948), are widely credited with the first written mentions of ‘C’ (Dreyfus, personal communication 2024). In her treatise on the subject of *cit* Consciousness as found within the texts of the Upanishads, Gupta notes that the Rishi Masters of that period proclaimed that *cit* “lies beyond the plurality of names and forms”; “is not accessible through empirical modes of knowing”; “is the ultimate subject that can

never become an object of knowledge”; and “no description of it is possible except the denial of all empirical attributes” (Gupta 2003). In other words, Consciousness is just a word that humans assigned to an aspect of human mentation that is imponderable. In this context, the terms “consciousness-itself” and “consciousness-as-such” are redundant. Consciousness is quite simply ...Consciousness.

If the Rishis were right about this, it stands to reason that the Western penchant for attempting to define and classify the notion by assigning adjectives, prefixes, and suffixes has been, and will continue to be an exercise in futility. Perhaps complete insight into this ineffable phenomenon is only available to the enlightened minds of a select few, and the best the rest of us can do is to nibble away at the fringes of this age-old mystery. In the meantime, I think we can do a better job of ‘nibbling’ if we recognize and address existing obstacles in a constructive and collaborative manner.

About the Author

Dr. Jonathan Nash is a retired expat living in Thailand who has interests in meditation and contemplative neuroscience.

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