Philosophy of Consciousness

Direct Knowledge of Consciousness

Lecture Reading Material for Topic Two
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Chapter 1

Gaining Access

Ordinary knowledge (common knowledge), at a first approximation, and in a sense that will be clarified as we continue, is only an indirect knowledge of consciousness. This includes all knowledge gained from introspectively reflecting on consciousness. Here the indirectness arises from the reflective intention to make an object of an experience. Such a procedure divides experience: there is the introspecting attentive process and that which it thematises in its introspection. The total experience is one of introspecting on an aspect of experience. I find I cannot reflect on the total introspective experience because introspection itself is turned away from itself. It can only thematise another concurrent experiential process, from which it has separated itself. That is not to imply that reflective introspection is somehow invalid. What we are asking is whether it is possible to have a direct knowledge of consciousness as a totality or unity – in a way that does not make consciousness an object of reflective introspection.

So what is it to be conscious? This is not a theoretical question. I mean to bypass the professional philosophical conceptualisations, the kind that would want to know, for instance, what kind of consciousness I am talking about, and would then expect me to clarify the concept I have in mind. I do not yet have a precise concept in mind. I am asking about this very consciousness now, and now, and now. And I am suggesting that we already implicitly know what it is to be conscious, on the basis of being conscious. It is not that knowledge of consciousness is somehow at a great distance and the discovery of this knowledge is going to require stringent efforts in terms of studying something unfamiliar. On the contrary, the difficulty is that my being conscious is too familiar – it is not something I can separate from myself – wherever I am, as a reflecting, perceiving intelligence, consciousness is, as well.

So the issue is not how to encounter being conscious – my being conscious already takes
care of that. The issue is how to transform my implicit knowledge of consciousness into explicit knowledge, or rather, how to realise this knowledge in such a way that it can be a self-evident truth rather than something I believe (or disbelieve) or hold to be probable. Again, we must recall that this is not a matter of reflecting on my implicit knowledge. Our task is to encounter being conscious, directly, that is, consciously, but without reflection — because in reflection we turn away from the actual experience, now. It is this turning away that is of interest.

1.1 Two Moments of Consciousness

To begin, I shall simply state that my being conscious is always occurring ‘now.’ If I consider being conscious in the past then I am thinking about an experience that was once conscious but is not conscious ‘now.’ Thinking about the past is an act of remembering, of being ‘conscious of’ a past experience, where the act itself is (implicitly) conscious ‘now.’ Even that of which I am conscious — my particular memory — is actually present to me ‘now.’ It is only the meaning-reference of the memory that connects with the past, that makes the memory an experience of the past.\(^1\)

Each act of consciousness is ‘conscious of’ something and each act has its own particular kind of ‘something’ of which it is conscious. For example, an act of remembering is conscious of a memory, an act of perceiving is conscious of a perception, and an act of reflection is conscious of a reflected experience. The first moment of conscious experience comprises this being conscious of an experiential ‘something.’\(^2\) However, the act itself (e.g. the perceiving, the remembering) is always occurring ‘now.’ Encompassing this entire structure is an implicit consciousness that does not proceed from any act, but rather unifies and illuminates all my acts and that of which they are conscious. This implicit, synthesising, impersonal, illuminating consciousness is the source of there being any ‘now’ within which I can be conscious of anything. It does not appear in ‘now’ (like a consciousness of . . .), it is ‘now.’

In distinguishing this implicit encompassing impersonal consciousness from our personal act-

\(^1\)At this point, we cannot fully consider what occurs in an act of remembering, because we have yet to introduce the phenomenological concept of intentionality.

\(^2\)I should emphasise that this is a high level and simplified characterisation. In normal experience the ‘something’ of which I am conscious is hardly ever a single memory or perception, but a much more complex phenomenon, with elements of perception, memory, and horizons of expectations all mixed together. We shall examine this in more detail when we encounter Husserl’s account of internal time consciousness (Husserl, 1991).
based consciousness of the world, we now have two moments of consciousness. These moments comprise our everyday experience of being awake and directed towards the objects of the world. In being so directed, I am directed away from the encompassing consciousness ‘now.’ This remains true even for ordinary acts of perception directed towards the immediate ‘now’ of the world. For example, in being conscious of the chair in front of me ‘now,’ I am still only conscious of an object appearing within an encompassing consciousness, while the encompassing consciousness itself remains unattended.

What has been explicitly stated above concerning the two moments of consciousness is already coming from a direct knowledge of consciousness. It is only on the basis of having (somehow) directly encountered an encompassing consciousness ‘now’ that the two moments of consciousness can be discerned. The idea is that such explicit statements, insofar as they are true, will cause the corresponding implicit knowledge to respond or awaken. Whether such an awakening actually occurs depends (in part) on whether the explicit knowledge contradicts some currently held belief. If so, then that belief first has to be consciously examined. The intention is not that statements of explicit knowledge are taken up as beliefs. The idea is to gain access to a direct knowledge of consciousness. Such direct knowledge, in its very self-evidence, makes belief redundant.

The distinction we are making is between two moments of consciousness that combine to form the inter-related unity of everyday consciousness. This inter-relationship is such that one moment (my explicit consciousness of . . .) obscures the other (the encompassing consciousness now). What is needed, in order to directly encounter the encompassing consciousness, is a withdrawal from the normal stream of conscious experience that remains turned away from this encompassing consciousness (i.e. because it is directed towards the world). Such a withdrawal cannot be achieved by a simple redirection of my attention so that I am directed towards consciousness now – that is the path of reflective introspection, which, as we have already shown, cannot reach to a direct knowledge because it remains divided from the object on which it reflects. What is needed is a withdrawal from the very activity of being directed towards anything. But how is such a withdrawal to be achieved? Am I to somehow direct myself to not direct myself towards anything?


1.2 Stopping Thought

The solution to this paradox requires that we find a way that goes beyond our normal everyday state of consciousness. How this can be achieved is a problem usually taken to lie outside the domain of philosophy. Nevertheless, one of the central claims in this course is that no (true) philosophy is going to be possible from within the confines of a normal everyday state of consciousness, because such a consciousness remains excluded from the very domain it seeks to investigate. Furthermore, I am taking it that philosophical contemplation – true philosophising – is always, and has always been a matter of first escaping from the confines of the prevailing everyday state of consciousness. The difference here is that we are facing this task head-on, so to speak, rather than indirectly reading about the discoveries and insights of someone else.

To restate the situation, I am attempting to bring the implicit consciousness that accompanies my explicit consciousness of the world to a direct realisation. It appears I cannot do this (directly) by an act of will. So I must take another route. The way I am proposing is to consciously observe myself while I am engaging in an act of reflection, i.e. while I am thinking. To think, as far as this experiment is concerned, is to be directed towards an object of thought, where an object of thought is understood in contradistinction to an object of perception. The crucial feature of an object of perception is that it is experienced as being actually (bodily) present ‘now’ i.e. in the ‘now’ of my encompassing consciousness. Hence we say that when we perceive something, we are immediately or directly conscious of it. In contrast, when I think of something, I am directed towards an object of thought which either refers me away from ‘now’ (e.g. towards something I remember or imagine) or towards an object of perception (i.e. something I perceive in front of me now). In both cases, thought is only indirectly related to ‘now,’ via the medium of past, present or future possible perceptions.

However, it certainly appears to the one who is thinking that I can think about now. For example, I can direct my thinking intention towards an object in front of me and I can think of the object, as it is, in front of me, ‘now.’ In that case the object of my thought, the meaning-intention, or reference of the thought, is the very object in front of me ‘now.’ However, when I actually direct myself in this way, I find I am no longer thinking of the object, I am perceiving the object. Any thought I may have of the object directs my attention away from the immediate perception onto a thought-token (a concept) that merely represents the perceived object. Of course, I can at any moment ‘cash in’ the representation in a direct perception of the object, but then I am no
So, if I attempt to entertain an object of thought that refers directly towards ‘now’ I will no longer be thinking, I will be perceiving. Similarly, if I attempt to reflect on an object I am perceiving ‘now,’ I will no longer be perceiving, I will be thinking. This is not an artificial distinction. To think and to perceive are recognisably different acts whose difference can be demonstrated in immediate experience. The test is to attempt to perceive oneself thinking, i.e. to consciously observe one’s own act of thinking about something (anything) in the moment ‘now’ that one is actually thinking (just as one perceives a worldly process occurring ‘now,’ such as my raising my finger ‘now’). To be clear, the task is not to observe what one was thinking ‘just now.’ That is an observation of something that has already occurred, and so is an act of thought directed away from ‘now.’ You have to catch (perceive, become conscious of) yourself thinking ‘now.’

This task is analogous to that of a Zen koan, i.e. something inherently paradoxical and inaccessible for an ordinary state of consciousness, and yet something, once entered into with seriousness and sincerity, capable of moving one beyond that very state. If it works, the attempt to consciously observe yourself thinking will cause you to stop thinking. It is like two mirrors facing each other. So long as the mirror is reflecting on ‘something’ then it is conscious of that something, but if it attempts to reflect on itself reflecting, it will only find an empty mirror. There will be nothing, at least no thought, and in there being no thought there will be no one there to reflect on the fact that there is no thought. There will be a gap. In that gap, if the experiment succeeds, there will be consciousness without thought, without reflection.

Immediately after any gap you will probably think ‘I wasn’t thinking just then.’ In having such a thought you return to a consciousness of the previous moment and leave the immediate consciousness ‘now.’ You may even think you imagined you were conscious without thought, because it is by means of thought that we make things memorable to ourselves. In order to verify that you were not thinking it is not enough to visit once and then remember the visit. Every memory is an indirect consciousness of . . . The task is to realise that no thinking is occurring, that there is a pure thought-free, non-reflective state of consciousness, in the actual moment of such a state of consciousness. Such a realisation (clearly) cannot be a matter of thought, because, in thinking, one has left the thought-free state. Rather, one must look.
1.3 ‘Looking’ and ‘Seeing’

In order to investigate a thought-free state, I first require the ability to voluntarily shift my centre of consciousness away from the normal reflective (thoughtful) state of world understanding to a state of pure (thought-free) experience. To disengage in this way requires a willingness to disengage. If one is simply curious, seeking to obtain information to ‘turn over’ in one’s mind, then no such disengagement is going to take place. Stopping thinking involves the gathering together of one’s entire resource of consciousness so that it becomes immersed in what is present ‘now.’

To begin, what is present ‘now’ is what I (passively) perceive ‘now.’ For example, there are the objects and movements appearing in my visual field, the sensations occurring in my body, the sound of the traffic, the birds, the wind in the trees, and so on. These events are markers of the present, of ‘now,’ and can be used to pull the consciousness back each time it gets caught up in a train of thinking. For if I remain absolutely present with what is occurring ‘now,’ I cannot think. It is only in being distracted from ‘now’ that thinking can get underway.

With practice, it becomes possible to voluntarily ‘turn off’ thinking by one-pointedly attending to whatever is happening ‘now.’ However, our aim is not just to enter into a thought-free state; we are seeking a direct knowledge of this state, i.e. a knowledge that is not the product of reflecting on a past ‘now’ but one that ‘looks’ directly into ‘now,’ now. In order to achieve this, I must still remain absolutely present to the immediacy of the world of my senses. It is this world that we now wish to investigate, to ‘look into.’ To get started, I shall simply state what I ‘see’ when I ‘look’ into this world, and leave the question of how such looking and seeing is achieved until we have a grasp on the domain that is being seen.

The situation ‘now’ is that I have suspended all thinking and I am simply present in the world of my senses. In not thinking, I straightforwardly accept this sensory world to be exactly what it presents itself to be. I leave behind all my abstract interpretations, such as thinking that what I ‘really’ experience is something constructed in my brain. I become naïve. The sun rises. The chair stands before me and it is blue. I have no notion of photons impinging on my retina, or of my experience being composed of sensations. I do not frame what I experience as being immanent or subjective. I have not yet split my world into subjective and objective components. I do not even frame my experience as being an ‘experience.’ I am simply ‘here’ in this room and the things in the room are ‘here’ in front of me. What I see are the things themselves, just as they appear. I implicitly understand myself as being here, present in and to the world, already and directly
immersed in a shared reality. To think of this understanding as something subjective is to have already separated from the immediacy of ‘now’ and to have started to reflect. Such reflection overlays my implicit and immediate thought-free state. For instance, before I reflect, I ‘know’ that the chair, the actual chair, is present before me, that what I see is the chair - my ‘knowing’ this is already embedded in my unreflected consciousness of the chair. As soon as I reflect, my entire frame of reference shifts. Now I can think of my seeing the chair as something subjective. I cannot ignore what science has discovered concerning the functioning of my brain. I understand that my unreflected ‘seeing’ is naïve. It cannot be that I simply look out of my eyes and see the chair. It is a demonstrated fact that my seeing of the chair depends on processes occurring in my brain of which I have no immediate awareness.

And yet, we should pause and question what is happening here. In one moment I am speaking of being in a thought-free state, and in the next I am saying that such a state is inaccessible to ordinary reflection. If, as I claim, my knowledge of being in a thought-free state is not founded on acts of reflection, then how is it founded? For, if I truly remain in a thought-free state, then I do not think, I do not comment on what is occurring, I do not characterise it, my being present in the world simply is what it is. There is (inner) silence.

The answer here is best understood with reference to an ordinary act of perception. For example, I hear a noise in the garden and think: is that a cat? I go to the kitchen window and I look to see if there is a cat and then I see a cat. Although thought and reflection were involved in my first framing the idea that there could be a cat in the garden, neither my act of looking nor my act of seeing were acts of thought or reflection. I can look and see without thinking because I already have the garden immediately before me, i.e. it is not something I have thought up or imagined.

In the same way, if I stop thinking, then my pure unreflected sensory experience is already present. And yet this purity is precarious, for, unlike my perception of the garden, it depends on my not thinking. As soon as I begin to think, I overlay the pure sensory experience with my reflected knowledge and I lose the very domain I am attempting to discover.

Here we should pause again. Simply to follow a description of a thought-free state does not mean that one has entered such a state. It is easy to mistake the thought that refers to the state for the state itself. This is our normal way of proceeding. After all we cannot be expected to actually find a garden and a cat in order to follow the example of looking and seeing. And yet, when it comes to a state of not thinking, the situation is different. I cannot meaningfully think about not
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thinking. Everything that is claimed about such a state has to be tested ‘now’ or one is simply failing to follow what is being said.

Accordingly, what it means to ‘look’ into a thought-free state can only be discovered from within that state ‘now.’ So let us enact an experiment. I have already claimed that in a state of thought-free experience I have no notion that I am having an ‘experience.’ To test this I must enter the very state I am, at first, only thinking of. In entering that state I find I can still hold a question in mind: I can look to see if there is any notion of my having an experience present in the experience. There is no movement of thought involved. I immediately ‘see’ that there is no such notion.

It is important to examine this carefully, to dwell on how it is that I can have knowledge of a thought-free state without thinking about it. To begin, in order to question this state I must frame a question as a proposition, in language, and this surely involves me in thinking about that question. However, that does not mean that the act of questioning is itself an act of thinking. The issue centres on whether I can understand meanings without thinking. The test is to stop thinking and listen to someone else talking. Within this state, I look to see whether I immediately understand what is being said without any movement of thought or reflection. As far as I am concerned, I find I do understand what is being said, immediately and directly. I cannot say how I understand, I simply do understand, just as, if I were to listen to someone speaking in an unfamiliar language, I would not understand. Because I can understand language without thinking, I can question pure experience by holding the question-meaning in mind (without thinking about it) and ‘look’ to see how things stand between my experience and the question-meaning. This looking is an openness to the experience that holds my existing thoughts and opinions at bay.

Such ‘looking’ and its relation to language and reflection is fundamental to our whole enquiry. Unless we have some means of questioning experience, we shall have nothing concrete to reflect on, for pure (thought-free) experience, of itself, does not reflect. The action of directly looking into a thought-free state provides us with an immediate (i.e. unmediated by reflection or inference) knowledge of that state. It is on the basis of this knowledge that we can begin to understand experience explicitly.

We are, therefore, from the beginning, making the validity of our enquiry absolutely dependent on the validity of our ‘seeing’ directly into a thought-free state. Such seeing is foundational because we are taking it to be capable of revealing the truth concerning that state. That does not mean I cannot be mistaken in any assertion I may make concerning what I am seeing. There is
always room for error in terms of the language I use, or I can imagine that I have entered into a thought-free state, or I can presuppose the answer to my question and fail to properly test the correspondence. But, as with all genuine enquiry, I can stand corrected by another whose ‘seeing’ has been more acute than my own.

The basic event of ‘seeing’ into experience is the correspondence of a pure intended meaning (the question I have in mind) and a pure experience. I register this correspondence in the same way as I register the correspondence of my ‘seeing’ that there is a chair in front of me when I am having the visual experience of a chair being in front of me. Both ‘seeings’ carry a warrant of self-certainty within themselves. This warrant is their being grounded in my immediate experience ‘now.’ Experience, in itself, is what it is, and so provides the necessary ground, i.e. my experience of there being a chair in front of me now just is an experience of there being a chair in front of me now, whether or not I am ‘correctly’ perceiving it, or dreaming, or hallucinating.

The difference between immediate perceptual ‘seeing’ and my ‘seeing’ into pure experience, is that, in framing questions of experience, I have abstracted myself into a framework that already understands experience as experience. It is from that place, and in relation to that pre-understanding, that I begin to question my immediate experience, and seek to discover general truths concerning the nature of that experience. In contrast, in my immediate perceptual experience, I implicitly know within the experience that there is a chair in front of me. I do not ‘set up’ a framework, I am already and involuntarily ‘thrown’ into the world.3

The fact that my questioning of experience is informed by a pre-existing framework of understanding is both necessary and problematical. And yet we must start somewhere, and our questions must be intelligible. That is why we are already working within the reflected understandings that we find deposited in the language of our culture. These understandings of experience as subjective, of our being conscious, of our having evolved, of time and space, of neuroscience, and so on, are the necessary background from which our questioning has to emerge. Our task is to test these understandings against the evidence of pure experience.

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1.4 Direct Knowledge of Consciousness

Having now indicated what it means to ‘look’ into the state of pure (thought-free) experience and to ‘see’ its essential character, we are in a position to renew our enquiry into consciousness itself. Our question is whether consciousness is something we can encounter directly, or whether, like the concept of experience, it is a distinction that can only be drawn on the basis of our reflecting on experience.

What we are attempting is to look through experience toward the encompassing consciousness that makes experience conscious in the first place – the unified totality within which each particular ‘consciousness of’ is known. We are looking to see whether there is a knowledge of what it is to be conscious inherent in a state of pure thought-free experience. The answer, if there is such direct knowledge, is the direct knowledge itself. To attempt to express such knowledge in language, to attempt to think such knowledge, is to have misunderstood it. Pure consciousness (if it is not a fiction) exceeds language. It is the space in which language appears. This is knowledge that requires us to have left the domain of thought and language to one side. That is what makes it direct. If I cannot do this, then no proposition in language is going to reach me concerning such knowledge. It will remain a speculation, a possibility. What it means to be conscious is known immediately in the very state of being conscious without thought. One just has to look. Here, the ‘looking’ and the corresponding ‘seeing’ are the demonstration of a direct knowledge of consciousness. This knowledge cannot be expressed in language because it is too immediate – there is no separation between the subject and the object. Consciousness is not an object. It is that by means of which objects are known. I cannot define knowledge of consciousness, and I do not need to define it. I define what is separate from me, what I am not, the entities I am ‘conscious of.’ But I am not ‘conscious of’ consciousness. ‘I’ am this consciousness. This is not difficult until you think about it.
References
