

sector and consultancy. She has a PhD in Theoretical Physics and an MSc in Mathematical Economics, and has published two books and several peer-reviewed papers.

**David Skrbina** is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Michigan at Dearborn. His book, *Panpsychism in the West*, was published by MIT Press in 2005. He has recently edited a collection of essays, *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium* (Benjamins, 2009).

**Anders Søgaard** is Assistant Professor in IT and Cognition at the University of Copenhagen. His research interests include computational linguistics, applied logic and the philosophy of science. His previous work has been published in acclaimed journals such as *Journal of Logic, Language and Information* and *Semiotica*.

**Sine Østerskov Søgaard** is a graduate student at the Dept. of Psychology at the University of Copenhagen. She has a strong interest in cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind.

**Steve Torrance** is Professor Emeritus at Middlesex University, London. He is visiting Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Informatics, University of Sussex, and visiting Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He works on the relation between ethics and consciousness, and on the impact of research in AI and artificial agency to both fields of study.

**Max Velmans** is currently Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Visiting Professor of Consciousness Studies at the University of Plymouth. He has around 100 publications on consciousness, his most recent book being *Understanding Consciousness, 2nd Edition* (Routledge, 2009). He co-founded, and from 2003 to 2006 chaired, the Consciousness and Experimental Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society.

**Ram L.P. Vimal** is Professor (Research) and founder of the Vision Research Institute (USA) and Dristi Anusandhana Sanstha (India). He did BE (Elect. Engineering, India), MS (Computer Science and Physics, USA), PhD (Physics/Biophysics, University of Illinois, USA), and Postdoctoral Fellowship (Colour Vision Psychophysics, University of Chicago, USA). He performed further research in Visual Psychophysics at York University (Canada) and New England College of Optometry (Boston), and neuroscience and fMRI at Harvard Medical Schools (Schepens Eye Research Institute and McLean Hospital). His has keen interest in neuroscience, mind-brain problem, and colour vision.

Ram Lakhan Pandey Vimal

## Meanings Attributed to the Term 'Consciousness'

An Overview

**Keywords:** Classification, consciousness, definitions, meanings, structure, function, experience, materialism, physicalism, dualism, dual-aspect, neural-Darwinism, yogins, pure awareness, *samadhi*.

**Abstract:** I here describe meanings (or aspects) attributed to the term *consciousness*, extracted from the literature and from recent online discussions. Forty such meanings were identified and categorized according to whether they were principally about function or about experience; some overlapped but others were apparently mutually exclusive — and this list is by no means exhaustive. Most can be regarded as expressions of authors' views about the basis of consciousness, or opinions about the significance of aspects of its contents. The prospects for reaching any single, agreed, theory-independent definition of consciousness thus appear remote. However, much confusion could be avoided if authors were always to specify which aspects of consciousness they refer to when using the term. An example is outlined of how this can be done (using a 'PE-SE' framework).

### 1. Introduction

The term consciousness 'means different things to different people' (Rao, 1998). Here, I shall offer outline descriptions and tabulations of

Correspondence:

Email: [rpvimal@yahoo.co.in](mailto:rpvimal@yahoo.co.in); <http://www.geocities.com/rpvimal/>

various meanings and/or definitions, derived from published works and also from recent online discussions. The latter can perhaps be regarded as providing a useful indication of usages current among 'people out there' in the consciousness community.

Although the meanings (or aspects) identified differ, many appear to share common characteristics and can be grouped according to two criteria, namely, *function* and *experience*. In general, materialists [Types A–C; (Chalmers, 2003) — see later discussion] attribute various *functions* ('easy problems', such as detection, discrimination, recognition, cognition, etc.) to consciousness, whereas others (e.g. Chalmers' Types E–F) attribute to it *experiences* (i.e. aspects of the 'hard problem').

Thus, from a reductive/materialistic perspective, consciousness has been defined as (a) a multidimensional physical/neurobiological process that 'emerges from interactions of the brain, the body, and the environment', and (b) 'the result of dynamic interactions among widely distributed groups of neurons' (Edelman, 2003). According to non-reductive views (such as substance dualism, property dualism, panpsychism, and pan-informativism), on the other hand, consciousness is an irreducible fundamental mental entity, even when regarded as being an aspect of, or closely associated with, matter or material processes.

From a dual-aspect perspective, one can envisage a variety of possible relationships between objective aspects of matter, proto-experience (PE) and subjective experience (SE) — see (Vimal, 2008b) and also (Vimal, 2008a; 2009). There are three hypotheses: Matter may be the *carrier* of both PEs and SEs (Vimal, 2008b); or it may carry PEs only, with *emergence* of SEs in the course of neural evolution (Vimal, 200x-a; 200x-b; 200x-d; 200x-e); or the three may be ontologically inseparable (Vimal, 200x-d) though possessing different epistemic aspects. A SE is an *expressed* first person experience that occurs/arises/emerges during interaction between feed-forward signals and feedback signals in a neural-net, which satisfies the *necessary* ingredients of consciousness (Vimal, 200x-e) such as wakefulness, re-entry, attention, working memory, stimulus at above threshold, and neural-net proto-experiences (PEs). In general, PEs are precursors of SEs. In the first hypothesis, PEs are precursors of SEs in the sense that PEs are superposed SEs in unexpressed form in the mental aspect of every entity, from which a specific SE is selected via matching and selection process. In the second and third hypotheses, PEs are precursors of SEs in the sense that SEs *somehow* arise/emerge from PEs, as elaborated in (Vimal, 200x-a, 200x-b, 200x-c, 200x-d). This

framework is a *non-reductive physicalism*, (where *physicalism* = materialism + *experience*) (Vimal, 200x-c).

It thus suggests one way of envisaging overlap between *function* and *experience*. Hence, I am not suggesting that the two categories must be mutually exclusive, but they are nevertheless useful guides. Armed with them, we can set out to explore the jungle of meanings, starting with a description of David Chalmers' views on the topic.

## 2. Selected meanings

### 1. David Chalmers' Categorization

According to (Chalmers, 2003), 'On my view, the most important views on the metaphysics of consciousness can be divided almost exhaustively into six classes, which I will label "Type A" through "type F"'. Three of these (A through C) involve broadly reductive views, seeing consciousness as a physical process that involves no expansion of a physical ontology. The other three (D through F) involve broadly non-reductive views, on which consciousness involves something irreducible in nature, and requires expansion or reconception of a physical ontology. ... The word "consciousness" is used in many different ways. It is sometimes used for the ability to discriminate stimuli, or to report information, or to monitor internal states, or to control behavior. We can think of these phenomena as posing the "easy problems" of consciousness. ... The hard problem of consciousness is the problem of experience. Human beings have subjective experience: there is something it is like to be them. We can say that a being is conscious in this sense — or is phenomenally conscious, as it is sometimes put — when there is something it is like to be that being. A mental state is conscious when there is something it is like to be in that state. Conscious states include states of perceptual experience, bodily sensation, mental imagery, emotional experience, occurrent thought, and more. ...

Type-A materialism (Dennett, 1991; Dretske, 1995; Harman, 1990) sometimes takes the form of eliminativism, holding that consciousness does not exist, and that there are no phenomenal truths. It sometimes takes the form of analytic functionalism or logical behaviorism, holding that consciousness exists, where the concept of "consciousness" is defined in wholly functional or behavioral terms (e.g., where to be conscious might be to have certain sorts of access to information, and/or certain sorts of dispositions to make verbal reports). For our purposes, the difference between these two views can be seen as terminological. Both agree that we are conscious in the sense of having

