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Revisiting Conscious Access

ESPP Annual Conference, 2026

What is conscious access? Who/what is accessing? What is being accessed? The standard answers would say that conscious access happens when information borne by representational vehicles processed by our sub-personal systems becomes conscious by being accessed by a conscious subject. But do we need to accept the standard answers? And, perhaps more pressing, how do we know that the standard answers are those that will lead us towards our best hopes for a scientific theory of consciousness? I aim to explore these questions, and in doing so provide grounds for doubting that the standard answers to our basic questions about conscious access are ones we all ought to accept without question.

First, we need a principled way of distinguishing what kind of explanation we should demand of a scientific theory of consciousness to provide. Once we have an idea of what kind of explanation we are after, we can think of a general methodological framework for how we might go about providing such explanations. Such a methodological framework aims to secure “attachment points” between our ordinary, first-personal reflections on consciousness with sub-personal psychological explanation. With these in place, we can begin an analysis of the motivations for positing conscious access.

Such analysis reveals why the standard answers to our basic questions about conscious access would seem attractive. However, the analysis also reveals that our standard answers do not necessarily follow from the general methodological framework, nor from a principled understanding of the desideratum of a scientific theory of consciousness. In light of this, the standard answers to our basic questions about conscious access are best understood as theoretical ‘ground assumptions’. However, once we recognize this point, it becomes apparent that such ‘ground assumptions’ are but a few of many possible ground assumptions that could have been made instead.

From this perspective, I explore whether there are principled reasons flowing from our desideratum for a scientific theory of consciousness and the general methodological framework which would necessarily preclude a somewhat ‘radical’ alternative to our standard answers. This radical alternative conceives of conscious access in terms of a

subject's direct access to environmental features, rather than access to representational vehicles in the head. Though such a notion has been widely dismissed in sub-personal theorizing as a matter of contingent historical fact, our analysis reveals that neither the desideratum for a scientific theory of consciousness nor our general methodological framework provides grounds for such a dismissal.

Finally, I explore some of the implications that taking on alternative 'ground assumptions' to our standard answers to basic questions about conscious access may have on current theorizing. In conclusion, which set of ground assumptions we ought to accept cannot be decided by the general aims and method of a scientific theory of consciousness. Neither should we leave the decision up to contingent matters of historical fact. What ground assumptions we make should rather be at least in part constrained by the explanatory power of these assumptions in addressing the kinds of questions that we are demanding answers to. Whether the standard answers to our basic questions about conscious access are our only available answers is a matter that cannot be decided until the alternative options have been explored thoroughly.