

I want to raise a question about what we are referring to when we use the word “consciousness” in order to ask questions like, “Does consciousness make a causal difference to what we do?”

If you have in mind consciousness *of* something, or consciousness *that* something is so, when you use the term, then you are likely to think that question of what consciousness adds to our agency, or our causal powers, is no different from the question of what is added by having available a particular piece of information for the purposes of reasoning or inference. Sometimes the information is information about yourself, sometimes about the world outside yourself. If you ask, “Had I been conscious of the stop sign, would I have stopped?” you might just be asking what would have happened if you had been able to use the information that there was a stop sign there in your decision-making process. Or, if you ask, “Had I been conscious of my anger towards my friend, would I still have invited her to drive across the country with me?”, you’re asking whether you would have made a different decision had the information about yourself been available to you.

Notice that if this is all there is to the question of whether consciousness matters, causally, to what we do, then the answer to it is obvious: yes it matters. We frequently would have made different decisions had information been available to use that was not in fact available. You would have stopped if light from the stop sign had hit your retina, and resulted in the information about the stop sign’s presence being available to the processes through which you controlled the car.

What this shows is not that the question we care about is easy. It shows, rather, that the easy question isn’t the right question. The right question does not concern consciousness as an information-delivery mechanism. What we really want to know, it seems to me, is whether consciousness can make a difference to what we do *even when it makes no difference to what information is available to our reasoning and decision-making processes.*

One thing that we’ve learned, I think, from much contemporary neuroscience—including the neuroscience of, for instance, visual processing—is that information can be available to a human being for use in many inferences and decision-making processes even when the representations of that information cannot be plausibly thought conscious. Your brain holds information about the angle made by lines in your peripheral vision; there is a neural representation of that information, but that representation is not conscious. The question is whether pushing into consciousness a piece of information *that was already available to reasoning and decision-making processes* can make a difference to what we do.

But here it seems to me is an empirical challenge that I am not certain can be overcome. How could we measure, or manipulate, the presence or absence of consciousness except by measuring the presence or absence of information? Self-report—"Are you aware of the angle of the lines in your visual field?"—is inadequate because what is reported is information about yourself, not information about the representation of the lines. Are there are other tools that could be useful here?

Discuss.