

Postscript to ‘What is it like to be a bot?’ *

Keith Frankish

Consciousness matters. It’s because we know that other humans are conscious that we care so much about them. If we think that a creature (a worm, say) is not conscious, then we have fewer qualms about harming it.

Yet how can we detect consciousness? You know that you are conscious, but how do you know that other people are? You could observe their behaviour and scan their brains, but you won’t feel their experiences. Indeed, it is conceivable (if very unlikely) that other people do not have conscious experiences at all. Their brains might operate just like yours, producing the normal range of human behaviour (including *claiming* to be conscious), yet without any conscious experience occurring. Philosophers call such imaginary beings *zombies*.

If our brain processes could, in theory, occur without consciousness, then it seems to follow that consciousness is an extra, nonphysical property, over and above our physical ones -- a view known as *property dualism*. One consequence of this view is that it’s unclear what to say about consciousness in creatures very different from ourselves, such as aliens or advanced robots. Would their brains also produce the added nonphysical extra, or would they be zombies, whom we could treat as slaves? How would we tell?

‘What is it like to be a bot?’ turns the tables on us, presenting a race of advanced robots who doubt that we are conscious. Professor Shiningbright and his class assume that Vicky is a zombie, since they think that biological tissue is the wrong sort of stuff to produce consciousness. Shiningbright challenges Vicky to prove otherwise, but she finds it hard, partly because she shares his apparent commitment to property dualism. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that Shiningbright is in fact trying to show the futility of that view, and Vicky finally changes tack, suggesting that it’s wrong to think of consciousness as an “intangible essence” and that it is simply a matter of having certain attitudes, behavioural dispositions, and effects on others. It is implied that Shiningbright regards this as a more humane view, since it does not encourage chauvinism about consciousness.

The story leaves us with many questions. Is there really no way for property dualists to prove they are not zombies? If not, should we agree with Vicky that consciousness is just a matter of having certain beliefs and dispositions? Or would that amount to denying the existence of consciousness in the ordinary sense -- to saying, in effect, that we *are* zombies? Are there intermediate positions, on which consciousness is publicly detectable but still somehow inner? What about moral issues? Are we right to regard consciousness as the crucial determinant of moral status? Maybe the attitudes and dispositions Vicky mentions are what matter morally, even if they are not the whole story? Or is that just dodging the issue?

It may not be long before we have to address these questions in real life, as scientists create robots with advanced artificial intelligence.

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