Conscious versus unconscious processes: Are they qualitatively different?

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Can conscious and unconscious processes be distinguished empirically? No amount of precision in measurement is in itself sufficient. Equal emphasis on methodological rigor and conceptual clarity is necessary for genuine progress. Methodologically, the study of the unconscious involves illusive and fragile phenomena, difficult to replicate findings, and inconsistent and sometimes inadequate measurement criteria (see Eriksen 1960; Holender 1986; Merikle 1982; Reingold & Merikle 1988; 1990). Conceptually, definitional and terminological chaos and implicit assumptions that are rarely acknowledged fuel the often futile controversy between "believers" and "nonbelievers" in the unconscious (see Dunn & Kirnser 1988; 1989; Erdelyi 1985; 1986; Lockhart 1989; Reingold & Merikle 1988; 1990; Richardson-Klavehn & Bjork 1988). Not surprisingly, these difficulties have prompted practical researchers to stay clear of the conscious/unconscious distinction (Searle 1991), while related phenomena have been investigated under a variety of different dichotomies (e.g., attended/unattended, intentional/incidental, explicit/implicit, overt/covert, controlled/automatic, etc.). Yet the terms consciousness and awareness still seem to preserve best the historical link among related ideas, moreover their very ambiguity is an accurate reflection and a constant reminder of the vagueness of the theoretical constructs and their relation to empirical work in this area.

It is precisely in this context that Dennett & Kinsbourne (D & K) make a truly unique contribution. They not only expose brilliantly an important confusion between the temporal properties of the process of representing and the temporal content of the representations themselves, but they also provide powerful metaphors that may help one avoid sliding back into this ingrained confusion.

An inadvertent consequence, however, of D & K’s very compelling case against attempts to time the emergence of consciousness and against the Cartesian notion of a transition between the unconscious and the conscious realms, may be an underestimation of the importance of the conscious/unconscious distinction. Although one can agree with the authors’ portrayal of the graceful interplay between conscious and unconscious processes, and its temporal indeterminacy, this should not prevent us from trying to explore and explain the qualitative differences between these processes. This line of work would complement D & K’s arguments; their very effective critique of nonquestions should be coupled with alternative questions. It is precisely because consciousness cannot be temporally or spatially localized in the brain that identifying qualitative differences between conscious and unconscious processes is crucial for the conscious/unconscious distinction. In