Concepts, Consciousness & Self-Reference

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The Hard Problem
"The really hard problem of consciousness is the problem of experience."

"Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all? It seems objectively unreasonable that it should, and yet it does."

Self-Reference as the Hard Problem
Consciousness studies take empirical study of the external world and turn it around, to focus attention on ourselves: for consciousness is intimately our own consciousness.

Understanding consciousness may be seen as a recursively defined exercise, where what is being specified becomes part of the specification.

Very similar ideas posited by F.A. Hayek (THE SENSORY ORDER, 1952)

Compatible with Chalmers' evolving view?

Shares something of spirit of Nagel's work, but not his pessimism.

Why Self-Reference Matters
First, to the extent that it implies recursive definitions: people have reliably been shown to be very poor at understanding recursive constructions.

Second, to the extent that it raises the threats of vicious self-reference and self-contradiction.

Self-reference need not be vicious self-reference. But any time we have an absolute distinction between two things -- as we traditionally do, per Frege, between concepts and objects -- then any self-reference that exploits that distinction will raise certain paradoxes.

Grelling's Paradox: What does one make of the concept of all non-self-referential concepts? Is it non-self-referential?

Self-Referential Paradox
A proposition (or set of propositions) which imply that both a certain conclusion p and its inverse ¬p must be true.

A paradox expresses an apparent contradiction or contradictions, about which we nonetheless retain an intuition of meaningfulness.

Russell offered one solution w/ his theory of types.

Relating Concepts to Consciousness
Concepts relate to consciousness through the medium of experience: experience gives rise to concepts which in turn structure experience.

Getting theory of consciousness right may depend on getting theory of concepts right.

Proposal: concepts share similar form of self-reference to consciousness.

- Difficult if not impossible to specify what a concept is in general without employing particular concepts in the specification.

- Pace Fodor and per Prinz, the content of concepts must be specified, in part, in terms of other concepts.

- In that case, there will be a recursive structure to the specification of concepts.

Proposal: examination of the one sort of self-reference may give insight into the other.

Escaping Paradox
1. One can deny the intuition of meaningfulness in the paradox and so reduce it to a simple contradiction.

2. One can deny the contradiction: the contradiction is only apparent, because our understanding is incomplete.

3. One can conclude that the contradiction at the heart of the paradox may be essential to the structure of our thought.

Conclusions
Conceptual thought may depend upon critical contradictions.

An examination of self-reference in concepts and consciousness may help us to understand those contradictions.

Holding two contradictory perspectives may be necessary for a more complete overall understanding, or for any proper understanding at all.

http://www.informatics.sussex.ac.uk/users/jep25