

The nature and meaning of emotional consciousness

The main goal of this paper is to better understand the notion of ‘emotional consciousness’. This notion is crucial for the understanding of a variety of clinical syndromes that involve particular emotional processes, as it is the case of autism, schizophrenia or depression.

I noticed that even when it applies to the typical cognitive functions, different researchers understand ‘emotional consciousness’ in different, and sometimes opposite ways. The conceptual clarification of the concept of ‘emotional consciousness’ appears nonetheless necessary to explain the different meanings that have been associated to it and disentangle some conceptual ambiguities. The main issue is that there is very little overlap between the research on emotions and the one on consciousness.

Philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists who work on emotions have tended to ignore the literature on consciousness, mostly because the question of the nature of consciousness has not yet reached a consensus. Studies on consciousness face what has been called the “hard problem” of consciousness, which posits that the subjective components of our conscious experiences are not explainable by any physical knowledge. It thus seems that there is an ‘explanatory gap’ in our understanding of consciousness (Chalmers, 1996; Jackson, 1986; Levine, 1983; Nagel, 1974). While these researchers continue to consider the project of defining consciousness as a dead end, others try to understand and define consciousness as a unified notion (Dehaene, 2014; Dennett, 2013, 2017; Prinz, 2012), and others propose some distinctions of different types or subtypes of it (Block, 2008, 2011; Rosenthal, 2012). These disagreements present a strong barrier to the proper definition of emotional consciousness.

Conversely, researchers who work on consciousness often ignore the literature on emotions, as it seems to face unresolved debates. An ‘emotion’ often refers to a set of dynamic processes (Colombetti, 2017) that occur in an organism for a short duration of time (Deonna, Tappolet, & Teroni, 2015). It is generally understood as an intentional and motivating state (Döring, 2015), underpinned by different cognitive mechanisms, notably personal evaluations (Teroni & Deonna, 2014), basic categorization (Barrett, 2017a), and affective components such as valence and arousal (Barrett, 2017b; Colombetti, 2014; Russell, 2009). When not felt by the organism undergoing living it, the emotion is said to occur ‘unconsciously’ (Prinz, 2005). However, some researchers assert that an emotion is always conscious (Clore, Storbeck, Robinson, & Centerbar, 2005), while others argue for the existence of unconscious emotions (Prinz, 2005).

I intend to show how the two domains can be mutually illuminating. My aim is to contribute to the debate about the existence of unconscious emotions and show how both sides of it are compatible. I do not intend to resolve the hard problem of consciousness but I hope that my results can show that it should not be seen as an obstacle to the study of emotional consciousness. I propose to show that ‘emotional consciousness’ can refer to three different processes, so it can have three different meanings depending on how one understands consciousness. The first meaning of ‘emotional consciousness’ is the experience itself, or the phenomenology of the emotion. According to the second and third senses, emotional consciousness is the conscious access one can have to the emotion itself. One can consciously access her emotion through a subjective / phenomenal access (second sense), or through a cognitive one (third sense). The distinction between these three meanings can clear up some of the ambiguities in the literature about emotion and consciousness.

My presentation will necessitate three main developments: first, the clarification of the phenomenology of emotions; second, distinguishing between the consciousness *through* an emotion and the consciousness *of* an emotion; and third, distinguishing between two types of consciousness *of* an emotion - a subjective access and a cognitive access.

The first development aims to identify and characterize the subjective component of emotions. Most emotion researchers agree on the existence of this component that they often called the 'phenomenology'. In other words, there is always a *something it is like* to be sad, jealous or in love. Phenomenology of emotions can be described as the 'core affect' (Russell, 2009), or the 'primordial affectivity' (Colombetti, 2014), composed by certain degrees of valence and arousal. This is the first sense in which one can speak of 'emotional consciousness'. It can be understood as a consciousness *through* the emotion. When one feels afraid, the combination of the negative valence and strong arousal felt by the organism constitute by itself a consciousness of the world (or some of its relevant components) as frightening. That is to say that emotions bear within them a conscious access to some stimuli of the environment.

The second development consists in distinguishing this first meaning of 'emotional consciousness' from the second one: a consciousness *of* the emotion. If phenomenology is an essential part of the emotional experience, then, in this sense, all emotions are conscious. Indeed, some researchers assert this view (Clore, 1994; Clore, Storbeck, Robinson, & Centerbar, 2005). Nevertheless, this claim might be seen as problematic, as it seems to prevent the existence of unconscious emotions. This point has been the object of a continuous and unresolved debate (Prinz, 2005; Winkielman, Berridge, & Wilbarger, 2005; Zajonc, 2000). I wish to demonstrate that the researchers who argue for the existence of unconscious emotions refer to 'emotional consciousness' as defined by the second meaning: a consciousness *of* the emotion. In this sense, even if all emotions have a phenomenology, it remains possible that an emotional organism is not conscious *of* the emotion. In these cases, all the components of the emotional occurrence remain unperceived and unknown. This is the way in which an emotion can be said to be unconscious. The distinction between these two meanings of emotional consciousness helps to solve the debate concerning the existence of unconscious emotions: an emotion cannot be unconscious in the sense of the consciousness *through* the emotion, but it can be unconscious in the sense of the consciousness *of* the emotion.

The last development will consist in elucidating the second sense of emotional consciousness, which includes two different processes. Both of these processes are unfortunately referred to as 'emotional consciousness' by researchers in affective science. I intend to draw a clear division between them, based on Block's conceptual distinction between a phenomenal consciousness and a cognitive access (Block 2011). An individual can be conscious of her emotion thanks to a subjective/phenomenal access, and/or thanks to a more cognitive access. The first type of access designates consciousness of the phenomenology of the emotion: the negative feeling and the strong arousal of the fear become themselves conscious, whether or not the organism associates concepts or meanings with them. The second type of access to consciousness of the emotional experience designates consciousness of external components to the emotion, and is associated with concepts that the individual possesses: the object of fear is understood as a threat, or the reaction of freezing or running is associated with danger, to give a few examples. The phenomenal access is a subjective access of the emotion to consciousness, whereas the cognitive access is an objective mechanism which depends on the possession of more cognitive abilities. They are both to be distinguished from consciousness *through* the emotion.

Thanks to these distinctions, researchers could explain precisely how individuals with typical and atypical cognitive profiles, and potential other organisms, access their emotions. It is my hope to broaden the scope of this work in the future, to a general understanding of some processes implied in consciousness of all types of experience. In fact, once applied to perception, this view would suggest different ways in which visual or olfactory experiences, for instance, can access consciousness.