

Consciousness in Comatose Clowns: No Funny Business

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Abstract

Consider the tragic case of three circus clowns whose pie-to-the-face gag effectively knocks each one into a cream-pie coma. Although none of our apparently comatose clowns have voluntary motor capacities, each has a unique set of internal and external activity going on. In other words, each of our clowns (Bozo, Wiggles, and Krusty, respectively), now sits in a Vegetative State.

Now, we have a problem. Sometimes comatose patients are conscious, so there's a big philosophical and empirical issue going on here: how can we tell which patients are conscious and which ones aren't? Different neuroscientists and philosophers use the concept 'consciousness' in a variety of ways *and* have proposed different tests based on what they take 'consciousness' to stand for. To solve this problem, we'll need to figure out the best conception of 'consciousness' and the test it corresponds to. This issue matters for a few reasons: First, we don't want to give false hope (to loved ones and researchers alike). Second, we don't want to waste limited resources (money, hospital space, etc.). Third, while we *do* want to avoid the first issue, we don't want to do it by unplugging conscious patients—we want to un-trap them. To figure out if it's possible to free conscious patients from their confounding bodies, I will:

- (1) examine three promising proposals in the scientific and philosophical literature about the conditions under which patients have vegetative consciousness and how to test for it; and
- (2) consider whether the proposed tests are accurate measures of detecting the kind of consciousness they are trying to test for.

Based on (1) and (2) I will argue that IITC provides both the best account of consciousness *and* the most reliable test for detecting consciousness in vegetative state patients.