From Experimental Psychology to Folk Psychology (and Back)

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In order to distinguish conscious from unconscious mental processes, experimental psychologists generally make a comparison between objective and subjective measures. Thus, they state that a certain process is unconscious if experimental subjects show evidence of having this process according to an objective measure (a behavioral performance or a neural activation) but not according to a subjective measure (a verbal report). That is, experimental psychologists design studies with the aim of detecting evidence of dissociation between conscious and unconscious processing.

It is worth noting that many studies using this dissociation method have shown that most of our cognition works at an unconscious level inaccessible to consciousness. All along his work the experimental psychologist David Shanks has challenged this conclusion by showing that the subjective measures used in many studies are not sufficiently sensible to assess if a mental process is conscious or not and that the evidence for the unconscious is not so compelling as it appears. Specifically, Shanks argues that it is more plausible to postulate a single mental system having different degrees of consciousness than different mental systems having conscious or unconscious processes. He points out that consciousness appears to be present at every level of cognition, even in simple phenomena like Pavlovian conditioning or priming effects.

The talk will critically consider Shank's results and considerations and try to assess their epistemological implications. It will argue that, if Shanks is right in assuming that there are no reasons for considering the unconscious as the main determinant of our behavior, one of the pillars of our folk psychological explanations (that consciousness causes behavior) turns out to be highly plausible. This appears to suggest an alternative view of experimental psychology, a view closer to folk psychology than to the so-called mainstream cognitive science.

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