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“The Use and Abuse of Consciousness”

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Abstract: Much recent work on the mind begins with conscious cases of mental states, and takes as primary what our subjective first-person access seems to tell us about those states. This may seem natural. Subjective access is compelling, and we may often have only first-person information about particular instances of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. So it's inviting to extrapolate and hold that consciousness is decisive about the nature of mental states generally.

I challenge this widely accepted approach, and argue that it has significantly distorted our understanding of the mind. Qualitative mentality requires special care because many regard consciousness as simply an aspect of qualitative character. So I begin by arguing that there are distinctively qualitative mental properties that occur independently of being conscious. I then consider a range of specific ways in which relying on consciousness distorts the nature of mental states, arguing this first for qualitative mental states and then for intentional states.

I conclude by urging that we reject a conception of consciousness that casts it as the way we primarily know about mental states. That conception sees the mind through the lens of epistemology, and so imports considerations foreign to mental functioning proper. We should instead think of consciousness as simply one mental property among others, a mental property we must explain but should not see as a tool to explain or to get knowledge about other mental properties.