Blindsight: a doorway to consciousness

Blindsight is a condition in which people with damage to their primary visual cortex report a loss of visual consciousness in the corresponding part of their visual field. Paradoxically, despite claims that they lack visual consciousness, careful testing can reveal that subjects have preserved visually-guided capacities, such as, the ability to reliably guess the identity of simple objects. Since its discovery over four decades ago, blindsight has played a significant role in shaping empirical and philosophical investigations into visual consciousness and perception. Perhaps most significantly, blindsight has contributed to the growing acceptance that unconscious visual perception can guide one’s behaviour. However, blindsight is a highly contentious phenomenon and the empirical literature shows that there is little agreement on many of the most commonly discussed features.

Given the contentious nature of the empirical debate surrounding this highly counter-intuitive phenomenon, it is surprising that most philosophical accounts simply take blindsight at face value. In particular, they assume that blindsight is properly characterised as unconscious visual perception. It is questionable, however, whether the residual visual processing that subserves blindsight qualifies as either perceptual or unconscious. In this dissertation, I argue that blindsight is not a perceptual phenomenon and that the empirical data does not warrant the claim that blindsight subjects lack all visual consciousness. As a result, most philosophical accounts of blindsight misrepresent the phenomenon and, as such, claims made on the basis of the phenomenon are called into question.

In the first chapter, I provide a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on blindsight, highlighting the lack of consensus concerning basic features of the phenomenon – especially subjects’ lack of visual consciousness and the extent and nature of their residual visual capacities. In chapter two, I argue that this lack of consensus has serious consequences for philosophical treatments of blindsight and that the failure to take the details of the phenomenon seriously risks our engaging in thought experiments under the guise of appeal to an empirical phenomenon. In chapters 3 and 4, I provide the first systematic account of blindsight as degraded, abnormal, non-perceptual visual processing. I then argue that this account better accommodates important features of the phenomenon than competing accounts of blindsight. In the final chapter, I return to the question of visual consciousness in blindsight. I highlight the serious methodological and theoretical issues concerning the attribution of consciousness and unconsciousness on the basis of introspective report. I then argue that intentional accounts of consciousness can help us to develop novel behavioural measures of awareness based on the attribution of agency to a subject. I conjecture that this approach can help to resolve the tricky question of whether blindsight subjects lack all visual consciousness in their damaged visual field. I conclude the dissertation by arguing that while appeal to blindsight may not support the kinds of claims that philosophers have traditionally made, it still has much to contribute to empirical and philosophical investigations into visual consciousness and perception.