TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

2021 Lebowitz Award Winners on How We Perceive Our Selves

The Lebowitz Award is presented each year to a pair of outstanding philosophers who hold contrasting views on a topic of current interest in the field. The 2021 winners, New York University's Ned Block and Johns Hopkins University's Ian Phillips, speak with Fred about how they approach philosophy of mind – specifically, our powers of perception and how that affects our consciousness.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at hkelly@pbk.org. Thanks for listening.

Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we've welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys.

Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholar lectures, please visit pbk.org.

Today it's my great pleasure to welcome two eminent philosophers, Dr. Ned Block and Dr. Ian Phillips to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. Ned Block is the Silver Professor of Philosophy, Psychology and Neural Science at New York University, and Ian Phillips is the Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Psychology and Brain Sciences at Johns Hopkins University.

These two scholars are the 2021 recipients of the Lebowitz Prize for Philosophical Achievement and Contribution awarded by the Phi Beta Kappa Society in conjunction

with the American Philosophical Association, the APA, for a recognition of their outstanding achievement in the field of philosophy.

Lawrence: Each year, the Lebowitz award is presented to a pair of highly regarded philosophers who hold contrasting views on an important philosophical question. Our 2021 winners' topic is Perception, Consciousness and the Self, which they presented at the 2022 APA Central Division meeting in Chicago in late February. We're thrilled to be with them here today to talk about their respective viewpoints on their topic. Welcome professors.

Ian Phillips: Thanks Fred. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ned Block: Thanks.

Lawrence: It's great each year to have the Lebowitz Prize winners with me, it's a chance for us to explore some important issues in philosophy. And before that, I'd love to just do a little bit of a walk through your respective journeys. Ned, first tell us a little bit about where you grew up and was there a moment when you thought to yourself, if I can swing it, I want to make a living being a philosopher.

Block: I'm originally from Chicago. I was a first generation college student. My grandparents were immigrants. My father was the first member of his family to be born in the U.S. He grew up speaking Yiddish. He lived above a Yiddish cafe. So I had really pretty much never heard of philosophy. I went to MIT to be an electrical engineer. In my first semester, actually my first day, I took a course from Hubert Dreyfus, who is a famous existentialist phenomenologist philosopher and that got me really interested. In my second year, Hilary Putnam came to MIT.

Lawrence: A celebrated philosopher from Harvard, Hilary Putnam.

Block: Yes. So I took a course from Putnam each semester, and then when I was a graduate student, he was my thesis advisor at Harvard. But a defining moment for me actually was a course I took as a senior in college from Philippa Foot who was an Oxford philosopher who was visiting at MIT, and she taught us a course on John Locke and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and she was a strong Wittgenstein proponent and I realized in that course that I was a Lockeian.

Lawrence: And it was because she was coming at it from the other side that you discovered your Lockeian self.

Block: Yeah, exactly.

Lawrence: Ian, what about you? I presume you didn't grow up in Chicago from your accent. Tell us a little bit about your background and again, was there a moment when you said, I think this is my path.

Phillips: Yeah, no, you're quite right Fred. I didn't grow up in Chicago. I grew up in London, England, as you probably could tell. As a kid, I was really interested in everything, and my parents were wonderfully supportive of every intellectual endeavor that I engaged in. But in the UK, you really have to choose basically one subject to study at university, and I found that incredibly difficult. And I came across this course called Physics and Philosophy, and I thought, brilliant. I can study science. I really liked math and physics, and I could study humanity. I didn't really know what philosophy was at that time. It just seemed an opportunity to carry on with studying literature and things like that. And so it wasn't until university I actually started reading philosophy. In particular in my first year, I remember studying logic and Descartes Meditations and I thought this was amazing. This is just the place that the questions I'm interested in are being asked. And I love the way, the kind of freedom of thought and the combination of rigor and creativity. I suppose, especially in this context, I want to single out one influence on me at that early age, which was Ned because I certainly, by my sophomore year, I was reading papers and philosophy of mind, his kind of classic papers, and they really excited me about issues to do with consciousness and also about how you might engage philosophy with science. So at the time I was studying physics, but it seemed to me it would really be great if I could study these issues and philosophy of mind in a way that connected with the mind brain sciences, and that's something that I've really found a model in Ned's work and have tried to carry on in my own work.

Lawrence: So Ian you transitioned from the interest in physics being the philosophy to brain science neurobiology, I assume. How did that transition take place and how do you see each side of that elucidating the other side in your work?

Phillips: I think it's extremely difficult. There is this clear, common interest in trying to understand what the nature of the mind is, and very, very different perspectives from as you say, neurobiology through cognitive neuroscience and psychology and philosophy, and actually many other things, too: artificial intelligence, linguistics and so on. And so integrating those different perspectives and disciplines into some unified understanding of the mind and consciousness, I think is a huge challenge. It's very much still with us, and philosophy is in ways uniquely placed to do that.

Lawrence: Ned, I want to ask you the same question about interdisciplinarity, but before we turn to hard science, you have a particular interest in science fiction, don't you, and you have looked to science fiction as a source for some of your examples. Do you mind telling us a little bit about where, where that all comes from?

Block: Oh, when I was a kid, I read all the science fiction books in the Chicago public library, downtown branch, and I was a real science fiction addict. I'm still something of a science fiction addict. I just watched the new movie Dune which I loved.

Lawrence: So in terms of your other interdisciplinary interests and how it enforces and reinforces your work on the philosophy side, how would you describe that?

Block: I got very interested in psychology in graduate school. I took a lot of psychology courses. I didn't really get interested in neuroscience until maybe 20 years ago. Really there was an explosion in philosophically interesting results in neuroscience and they were just crying out for somebody to try to figure out what they meant and that got me really hooked. I should say that the kind of thing that Ian and I do, despite our differences in views, were both really taken with the importance of the sciences of the mind for doing philosophy of mind, and that has become extremely popular in the field, and for good reason, there's just terrific collaborations. Actually the department that Ian is in, is perhaps the strongest place that there is for that kind of work.

Lawrence: Let's take us into the 2021 Lebowitz Prize and what brought you here and get into that part of the discussion a little bit. First, let me say a word or two about the prize itself if I might. We at Phi Beta Kappa are enormously grateful to Eve Lewellis Lebowitz Prize for her generous bequest honoring her late husband, Dr. Martin Lebowitz in establishing the prize. I will say for me, the beauty of the Lebowitz Prize is that it's designed to be presented to a pair of philosophers who disagree about something or take contrasting views on an important philosophical question that's of current interest. So in a sense, every year, there are two things that are going on with the Lebowitz Prize. One obviously is the discussion and learning about an important philosophical topic. Part of the whole goal of the prize is to have this be an opportunity to promote the discipline of philosophy to wider audiences, hence this podcast, for example. But in addition to that, there's kind of a meta topic here, isn't there? About how to disagree without delegitimizing. In an interesting way, I think disagreement is community building in a way people don't always expect. So, in that sense, I think that the Lebowitz Prize is the highest aspiration of the community building enterprise of disagreeing. So I'm going to let you both disagree a little bit on the topic of perception, consciousness and the self. Let me see if I can set the table a bit. I do this with some trepidation with two world renowned experts here. So if I have this right, Ned embraces distinctions between conscious and unconscious perceptions, supporting in fact, a trichotomy comprising unconscious, merely phenomenally conscious and access conscious perception, and so you have described that as the fragmented mind or understanding the mind in a fragmented sense, whereas Ian rejects these distinctions rejects fragmentation and defends a monistic, or we could say unified vision of the mind. So if I have that roughly right at a surface level, Ned, why don't you take us through the background of your position, and then Ian, I'm going to let you react to that and articulate your own position, and let's talk a little bit about perception in the mind.

Block: Yeah. So I think you did get that right. So I see a distinction between what I've called phenomenal consciousness and access consciousness. So phenomenal consciousness is

what it's like of perception, what it feels like to have a perception. So that is distinguished from the availability to our thought and reasoning processes of perceptual information. So that's the access set. So I think sometimes when people talk about unconscious perception, they're talking about access to unconscious perception, for example, Freud speaks of repressed memories. Those memories, there may be something that's like to have them, but you lose access to them because they're so damaging and problematic. And the same time, I also think that there are ordinary cases that are pretty plausibly cases of phenomenal consciousness without access consciousness. One intuitive example, well, two intuitive examples. One is one experience that people often have is an experience of when some background sound goes off. You have the experience, not just that you stopped hearing something, but that you were hearing it for some long period of time, which suggests that perhaps at some earlier time, you and we're having the experience of hearing it without accessing the fact that that noise was going on without noticing it, or bringing it to your attention. Both Ian and I agree that that's not enough that you need some actual experimental data to support it, and Ian has made very strong criticisms, many of which I agree with, about some of the experiments that have been done to support it, but I think there are other experiments that evade those criticisms. So I take the basic rationale for that distinction to be an experimental distinction. So then the second point is about unconscious perception. We certainly live in an environment where people think there's a lot of unconscious perception; subliminal perception, there's a lot of misinformation about it. And in Ian's in my original debates, I strongly supported the idea of purely unconscious perception. I was convinced by some of Ian's criticisms that maybe the idea of completely unconscious perception. Well, I still think there is such a thing, I think it isn't as well supported as I once thought. What I now advocate more strongly is that perception always involves conscious and unconscious elements. And I think the support for this is experimental. So one interesting experiment by Mel Goodale at the University of Western Ontario in Canada showed that there is more precision in normal people's grip aperture, and the periphery of the visual field then is in their judgments. Judgments scale up from, if you look straight ahead and then you are picking something up on the side, your precision of your grip is pretty constant across the visual field, including it's 70 degrees off of where the direction you're actually looking in, which as far as conscious vision goes, you can barely see it really. But your judgments are much more imprecise about the peripheral size of things. So the precision comes partly from a partly unconscious system. That's the basic idea.

Lawrence: So the claim is not for purely unconscious perception, but that there is conscious perception and then there is this mix of far more unconscious aspects to perception.

Block: That's right. That's exactly right. So a lot of the earlier work suggested that you could shave off the conscious part of a perception and be left with unconscious perception.

And I think Ian's done a pretty good job of suggesting that that case isn't as strong as one might have thought.

Lawrence: Perhaps a homely example of that 70 degree angle picking up something not completely consciously is the experience most of us have had of putting a phone down someplace, not directly in front of us and still seeing a push of some kind or a text come in, and you're not even fully aware that it came in, but it did.

Block: And another anecdotal case is people report running on the beach and your feet avoid the stones that you're only barely aware of seeing it all.

Lawrence: Ian, how's he got it right and where is he fundamentally wrong?

Phillips: Maybe I could say just a brief thing about the meta question you began with, so about fruitful disagreement. I suppose there are two things. One is most disagreements, if they're fruitful, they take place against the background of a certain amount of agreement. So I think there's kind of a lot of agreement about various things. One is, I think we both think that phenomenal consciousness is that target phenomenon that really exists and that it's importantly connected with what's going on in the brain. But I guess another thing, just a sociological thing, is that I remember the first time I presented material criticizing Ned's views and his response to that was, “great”. I really relish the engagement and that's made the most out of it, which is huge for me when a senior figure in your field who you're really potentially going to be intimidated by, and no doubt could pick holes in lots of your arguments, really decides to engage with you in that way. So, yes. So where do we disagree? So there's this notion that there's a distinction between phenomenal consciousness, an access consciousness that Ned was talking about, and that the notion of phenomenal consciousness you might introduce in terms of they're being something it's like for you from your perspective. So this goes back to a famous discussion by Tom Nagel of what is it like to be a bat. And part of the way that that gets motivated in the case of the bat is to point out that bats can discriminate all sorts of things in their environment, they can detect their prey, they can detect how it's moving and so on. And it gives you this sense that the bat has an environment that it has a subjective perspective on. And I think that's exactly right, but what I resist is the idea that there could be elements of that subjective perspective, which aren't even available to as it were the bats' cognitive systems. So that means the bats' action planning and guidance systems, it's thinking so far as bats going for a lot of thinking, and I think a tricky notion here is this notion of available or accessible. So I think I really want to distinguish between something being to you or accessible to you and actually being exploited by you in some way or other. So some of the examples that Ned now mentioned, the cases, I think, where there is information that's forming part of your subjective perspective, it's in phenomenal consciousness and it's available to you. It's just, you haven't taken, made use of it yet. And so I think there can be elements of our consciousness, which as it were, we're not paying attention to, but are there for us,

but the idea that there could be something that's part of our conscious experience, but that we don't have any access to at all, that really is completely beyond our can, seems to me mistaken. And that in ways I think connect with some of the things I want to say about unconscious perception too. So I think that perceptual states should really be regarded as states of people, of individuals like human beings in our own case or bats in the case of bats. They're not states of our brains, or they're not states of some subpart or at some lower level of explanation. And to take, if you take that idea seriously that a perceptual state is really a state of yours, then there's a question about what conditions have to be in play for that to be the case. When is some information about the size of something or location of something figuring in your mind, even if allegedly unconsciously. And I think the answer to that is like when it's available to guide your actions and to figure in your cognitive life more generally. And taking that seriously, I don't think there are good examples of even aspects of states, which are genuinely perceptions of us, which are unconscious. Those aspects of states of our brains and maybe they have effects on the way that we navigate in the world in certain situations, but they're not available for our use in guiding our actions. Otherwise that would just be a marker of their actually being conscious. And I think that's consistent with that being lots of stuff that's in the fringe of our conscious awareness that we, maybe don't pay attention to, maybe like the locations of the stones on the beach. And they're there, as James would say, maybe in the fringe of our consciousness, we don't pay much attention to them, but they're nonetheless there they're nonetheless available for guiding the movements of our feet.

Lawrence: So I'm going to let Ned weigh in, but I can't resist just asking a follow up on that jogging on the beach example. Is there a meaningful distinction between what I do when I run on the beach and I'll use the word consciously, see something in front of me, and I avoid that, excuse me, as I do dodge past somebody. And the experience of my feet are looking out for me, right? My head is not the one guiding this and I don't know how I missed that stone. I genuinely don't, but apparently I did. Should those experiences be meaningfully distinguished?

Phillips: Good. So I do think there are cases where information comes in and something less than us, a bit of our brain, or maybe as you said, our feet, there's some reflex response and that I think is perfectly fine to think of that as unconscious, that process, and maybe that's one way of thinking about what's going on in this case. It's really an empirical question about exactly how we think about the anecdotal example. So one possibility is that information is coming in through the eyes and triggering various avoidance reflexes, meaning that we move in a slightly different way. But another possibility is that we are in fact consciously picking up that information and using it to guide our movements, and so making good on that distinction between flexibly guided movement and automatic reflex response is really crucial. And so I don't mean to pronounce on an anecdotal case.

I think getting that distinction right does map onto the conscious unconscious in a helpful way.

Block: Yeah. So on the feet avoiding the stones thing, I think it's helpful to go back to the example that I gave to begin with of the precision of your grip in picking up a block in the peripheral periphery of your vision. There's more precision there than is in your conscious vision. So some of that precision is applied by a partially unconscious system. So that's the key from my point of view, that's not a reflex. It's not your feet doing it. It's not your hand doing it. It is your vision doing it, but you have partially unconscious vision that is supplying some of that extra precision. So that's the kind of thing I'm talking about.

Lawrence: So let me just press you on that a little bit. Tell me really from a visual science point of view, what does unconscious vision mean?

Block: Okay. So this is this weird fact. We have two visual systems. Philosophers make up examples and I think this could easily sound like a made up example. We have actually two visual systems. They both start in the back of the head, wires from the eye go to the back of the head, the earliest cortical visual area, view one is in the back of the head, and then they feed into one system that goes down under your ear or by your ears called the ventral stream. And then there's another one that goes to the top of your head called the dorsal stream, and it's that dorsal stream that's partially unconscious. People used to claim it was entirely unconscious, but I don't know that that's really very well supported, and that feeds very heavily into the periphery of your visual field. That's why people think it's responsible for your feet avoiding the stones and it's also much faster than the ventral visual system. So if you're dribbling a basketball down the court, most of your fades back and forth trying to outwit the other person are going to be controlled by that dorsal system which is partially unconscious. So that's why I think that there's so much of the visually guided action that's ours, but is partially unconsciously guided.

Lawrence: One of the things that made your topic such a great fit for the Lebowitz Prize, I think, is that, although obviously it gets pretty rigorous from a philosophical point of view pretty quickly, that the topic itself actually has quite a bit of appeal, even for non-specialists trying to understand how we think, how do we experience the world. What I wanted to ask both of you to do, if you would, before we end our time together in Key Conversations is to make a couple of book recommendations. But ordinarily, I ask for a recommendation of something that the guests are reading right now, or particular interest. But I'd be grateful if each of you could suggest a couple of books, one for somebody with some expertise in the field, but maybe it's something that hasn't quite received the attention that it might. And then the other is for those who are not specialists or any expertise in philosophy, but obviously have enough interest to join us today and would like to do a little more reading, to expand on their knowledge on some of the themes we've been talking about.

Phillips: So the book I'd recommend to a non-specialist who is just interested broadly as a book called Other Minds by Peter Godfrey Smith. Its subtitle is The Octopus, The Sea and The Deep Origins of Consciousness. And he's a very serious diver and has spent a lot of time studying underwater life, but in particular, the octopus, which has a very, very different brain system distributed throughout its body in a way that's very different from ours. And it just raises so many fascinating questions because our earliest common ancestor, almost recent common ancestor, is such a simple, like a worm or something. It's like an alien that exists on our planet. So octopuses are really smart, they seem plausible candidates for being conscious, but his discussion of in what ways they might be conscious and how their consciousness might differ from humans is really cool. A book I loved as a student, I still love. It's really provocative and very accessible. I don't think it's right about everything of course, but I think it's really interesting is Dan Dennett's Consciousness Explained, and I think that's really accessible, but also something that deserves studies still even by people in the field. A book I've read recently, which I really loved and is a bit more technical, but actually it's so interesting that I think I recommend it more broadly, is a book by a philosopher called Elizabeth Schechter. It's called Self-Consciousness and Split Brains. And it's about this fascinating group of subjects who because the problems with severe epilepsy had the bundles of fibers that connect their two cerebral hemispheres severed, and it seems, and she makes a very powerful case for this, that such individuals really become two. They have two minds, two separate streams of consciousness. And I think kind of thinking through the implications of that empirical case, whether or not you agree with that conclusion, but what you say about those cases is really an interesting thing to think about.

Block: So I would also recommend the Schechter book and the Godfrey Smith book. I'm not a fan of Dennett's, so I wouldn't recommend that. One additional book I would recommend both for specialists and for just the ordinary public, it's a book by Stanislas Dehaene on consciousness. I forget the name of the book, but it's like maybe three or four years old. And although I am totally opposed to his point of view on consciousness, I think it's just a fantastic book going through the evidence in a pretty neutral objective way. It's an exciting read. Anybody who's interested in consciousness should really read that book and it's easily available to anybody with, somebody with no background.

Phillips: I think it's called A Conscious Brain if I'm not wrong, but-

Block: That sounds right.

Lawrence: Ned Block, Ian Phillips, congratulations again, on winning the Lebowitz Prize. You add great luster to a great prize, one that we take enormous pride in at Phi Beta Kappa. And thank you both for joining me on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa today.

Block: Oh, thank you.

Phillips: Thanks so much, Fred.

Lawrence: This podcast is produced by LWC. Cedric Wilson is lead producer. Paulina Velasco is managing producer. This episode was mixed by Kojin Tashiro. Jimmy Gutierrez contributed to this episode. Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on our show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa society and our visiting scholar program please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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