



Consciousness system

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Theoretical Study

Abstract

The aim of the current essay is to present the focal points of what Niklas Luhmann describes as human consciousness. Luhmann recognizes consciousness as an entity and reality, which cannot be reduced to other disciplines such as biology or sociology. The whatness and features of consciousness become clear through identifying the internal structures, procedures, elements, and logic of consciousness itself. Luhmann attempted to show all of these through having a systemic view of consciousness. He recognizes consciousness as an autopoietic system whose rule-governedness and specific boundaries separate it from biology and society.

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Introduction

Human being has consciousness (German: Bewusstsein). By making use of their senses, perception, interpretation, process of remembering and forgetting, self/other/future-expectations, attention, awareness, organizing structures, language, thought, and cognition, human beings become aware of what happens inside and outside of themselves. In addition, human beings are aware of their being conscious and can think about the whatness and howness of their consciousness; they attempt to understand and know consciousness, being conscious, and become conscious by the help

of consciousness. These led many to identify human consciousness as the greatest astonishing thing in existence and that which distinguishes human beings from other animals and things. Finding out the whatness and howness of the phenomenon of consciousness is undoubtedly the key to finding the answers to fundamental questions on human life. Nevertheless, comprehensive knowledge about consciousness, clarifying its internal procedure, structures, and elements, separating and showing consciousness boundaries and explaining its relations to nervous system, biological facts, unconsciousness, reflections, and domains of society and culture should be simultaneously acknowledged as the greatest intellectual and scientific challenges. Amongst these attempts, those who have reduced consciousness to neocortical and biochemical processes or to society and culture in order to

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show its whatness and howness have had no achievements. As a whole, consciousness has some qualities and functions that are not found in the above-mentioned disciplines and external processes, and thus, such attempts have reached no inclusive and satisfying results. Hence, we need an approach that acknowledges consciousness as an independent entity, can explain what is specific to or is raised from this totality, and of course, specify its relation to other realities. We can find such an approach in the views of Niklas Luhmann.

In his examinations and theoretical investigations, more than anything else, Luhmann wants to develop a theoretical framework and system for understanding and knowing society and social facts. For this reason, he separated the three realms of society, individual consciousness, and biology. He distinguishes each one of these realms as independent of the other two realms and notes that they have their own specific internal logic, structure, procedures, and elements. Despite their independence, these three realms are interconnected and interrelated. Each realm is an independent system with clear-cut boundaries, organizes and maintains itself based on the autopoiesis principle, and has structural connection with other systems. Therefore, human being and human consciousness belong to a realm outside the realm of society and social affairs in Luhmann's view. However, as a classic sociologist who has first dealt with explaining society based on systems theory, he made use of this theory to explain the individual consciousness system and its relation to the social system. The aim of the current essay is to introduce his general achievements in this respect. Luhmann has developed his theory on consciousness titled "Die Autopoiesis des Bewusstseins" in a systematic and specialized way. His reflections on consciousness, which are dealt with in this essay, are adapted from this manuscript. In a methodological way, he has developed a theory about the consciousness

phenomenon which is not reducible and explains its themes based on its own necessities, but does not ignore the relationship of consciousness with other areas. Therefore, familiarization with his theories can promote the advancement of knowledge regarding consciousness. Luhmann's theory on consciousness is one of the explanatory possibilities among other possibilities; however, it is evident that for a more exact knowledge of complicated, difficult, far-reaching, and enigmatic phenomena such as consciousness, we should make use of other views.

1

Luhmann founded his theory on consciousness on the concept of autopoiesis. This concept was first introduced by Humberto Maturana - the Chilean neuroscientist - for describing biological phenomena. Luhmann redefined and extended it to fields of consciousness and society. He explains that autopoietic systems create and recreate their creating elements through the help of their own creating elements. The components themselves determine and specify anything that these systems use as units, that is, their elements, processes, and structures, and the units themselves. In other words, there is no system input and output (Luhmann, 2008). However, this does not mean that an autopoietic system such as consciousness has no relationship with its periphery, but rather that it is not dependent upon its periphery in the process of creating and recreating itself. In this sense, consciousness is a closed and autopoietic system and is reality independent of other levels of reality such as society and biology. However, it is evident that no consciousness emerges until a live body, brain, and nervous system exist; what Luhmann means simply is that consciousness has a logic and structure that is not gained from other levels of reality. Furthermore, consciousness systems have a direct and non-mediating relationship with other

consciousness systems, but have no non-mediating availability to each other. In contrast, every consciousness system has two possibilities to have a mediating contact with other consciousness systems; these are observation (*Beobachtung*) and intentionality in the process of communication (*Kommunikation*) (Bagheri, 2012).

Each of these two possibilities makes the communication possible in a specific and restricted framework. Observation is constantly conducted from a certain window such as expectations and based on differentiation - for instance, the differentiation between being conscious and unconscious. Meanwhile, awareness of the observer is aware of what has remained unobserved and unclear in observed consciousness. For this reason, the other consciousness system remains constantly as the black box for the observer as the observer can never observe all his/her consciousness background (Luhmann, 2008). The other possibility - intentionality to communication - inevitably leads to social systems emergence. In their own turn, social systems also make possible communication in a selective way. From Luhmann's point of view, this shows that consciousness is a closed system. The many more limitations and lower acceleration and speed of communication compared to consciousness makes consciousness aware of its separation and differentiation from social fact. Consciousness understands through communication that it cannot retell what is happening within it; it also finds out that it is sometimes misunderstood (Luhmann, 2008). After this general definition, an investigation of the constructing elements and autopoiesis process of consciousness system is necessary.

2

In Luhmann's view, the feature of consciousness system is that each present moment is replaced with the present moment that proceeds it. Each present moment which takes place vanishes at the same moment. In

this way, consciousness is a time-bound and fluent phenomenon in time. These events, which replace each other, are basic elements that form consciousness system. As these element are event-like and transient, the sustainability of consciousness system depends on its non-intermittent and continuous element-making. Luhmann calls this situation "dynamic sustenance". Of course, dynamic sustenance and general maintenance of the system are not achieved by reproduction. Rather, each element has to be distinct and recognizable from its former and latter elements. Therefore, no element exists in an isolated and separated manner, but they gain their meaning in a chain of elements and in the framework of autopoietic consciousness system (Luhmann, 2008). Consciousness system and its structures underlie the continuous moment-to-moment emergence of basic events. The interchangeability of each event or element guarantees the maintenance of consciousness system. The capacity of the system for organization is disturbed if each element is fixed in consciousness (Luhmann, 2008).

However, for a more exact knowledge of the way in which consciousness system functions, its constructing units and elements have to be determined and defined more exactly. Hence, Luhmann calls these elements "observer's thought" (*Gedanke*). Nevertheless, by this name he does not mean the capacity of consciousness for thinking and contemplating. He means that which takes place in the mind and constructs the chain of thinking ranges from exact, clear, and mathematical thought to imagination (Luhmann, 2008). Each thought comes and passes, and therefore, is an event. However, all these event-like thoughts are interconnected, take place, and emerge in a selective way.

Every thought, which takes place in the now and present moment, observes its prior thought. This observation (*Beobachtung*) distances itself from that thought and recognizes it as a specific and separated unit detached from itself. This observer's thinking

makes thinking of a specific thing possible. Luhmann named the observed thought image (*Vorstellung*) and the observation imagining an imagination (Luhmann, 2008). The observer's thought sees the observed thought or image as a separated and atomistic part on the one hand, and as an image of one thing on the other.

By separating the observer's thought from image, we can conclude that consciousness goes on looking at the past while backing to the future. "In contrast to time, consciousness looks at the past and always sees itself in the future and where it was. Hence, it is only the past of consciousness, which can find the future beyond itself by seeing its goal and accumulated expectations. Consciousness does not follow a goal in itself, but understands what has happened. Consciousness becomes aware of itself. It is not that consciousness sets the goals in the future, which does not yet exist, to follow them. Rather, it finds what is in the future in memory and..." (Luhmann, 2008). Consciousness does not work retroactively, but proactively; however, by looking at the past, it finds the accumulated expectation of the future" (Luhmann, 2008). Now the important question is "How does a thought observe, determine, and specify an image and at what basis?"

3

The observer's thought observes the thought prior to itself, which is the same as imagination. The observer's thought observes based on the criterion of being self-referent and other-referent. Therefore, the observed thought is the imagination of something; this thought is intentional and returns to something either external, other-referent, or, to the consciousness itself and imagining, self-referential.

On the one hand, consciousness is being aware of a perceived object. On the other hand, the condition for becoming aware of what is imagined and the condition for consciousness in general is being self-referent

or observing the self. If it was not self-referent, other-referents, like beads of a torn chain, would follow each other and pass without becoming conscious (Luhmann, 2008). In Luhmann's view, the basic constructing elements of consciousness system do not have a specific quality and orientation in themselves individually; rather, they gain them through being observed based on self-referentiality and other-referentiality. Evidently, the observer's thought is not observed while observing; hence, consciousness system remains unclear continuously.

Each element of consciousness system orients either to itself or to another thing. It allows the element next to it in order to make itself or another thing the focus of its attention. It is due to this very point that consciousness system is not like a simple machine that creates a specific output from a specific input. However, self-referent always accompanies other-referent in consciousness system. To put it another way, being aware of a certain affair always takes place in the framework of and is embedded in consciousness system. This framework can be very versatile. It can be either lively or awake or tired, either saturated with knowledge or thirsty for knowledge, either experienced or inexperienced. In addition, that which the self has experienced recently influences events and experiences which ensue. Hence, consciousness system is not a simple machine. Even if this system's procedures and events are recognized as deterministic and its inputs are very few, the events and its outcomes cannot be predicted since consciousness system takes various states and situations. Therefore, consciousness system has no way other than knowing its behavior to emerge from its decisions (Luhmann, 2008).

Consciousness systems reach a general image of themselves based on their history and states. They fix this image as their identity. This fixed identity then becomes a framework for determining the position and

relationship between events and case perceptions. This causes the experience of freedom since consciousness system gains the ability to assess and select through knowing itself and its identity. Evidently, the fixed conception of the self can be either flexible or inflexible. However, it is fundamentally relative and one of the many possibilities, and hence, replaceable affairs. One of the possibilities is always identified as necessary and other possibilities are negated. As Luhmann states, it is for this reason that keeping the conception of the whoness of the self requires emotional accompaniment and high support (Luhmann, 2008). Consciousness system contacts external world events through selecting and mediating the neurocerebral system, which has its own specific and different organization. Subsequently, it reconstructs these conceived events based on its conception of itself and its internal structures. Now the important question is "How do the internal structures of consciousness system emerge?"

4

In Luhmann's view, continuous elements of consciousness system are separated from the structures of the system. Structures emerge inside the consciousness system itself and are metamorphosized. The initial point of a structure is an imagination's observation by the observer's thought. Observing an imagination gives it the possibility to find itself and determine its position in the vague instant of the present moment, and makes possible the transition to the next moment. For this transition to happen, some relations transform to expectation due to repetition and being established, and consciousness will take a structure in this way. However, the emergence of a structure takes place in respect to its being either self-referent or other-referent. With the help of this difference, consciousness distinguishes itself from the other and defines a relation with it. The relation that is given to a certain thing is established and transforms to structure

through repetition. These structures provide orientation and framework for the autopoiesis process of consciousness; however, they themselves can change and ruin themselves. In Luhmann's view, consciousness can re-employ what has initially taken place accidentally or in a specific situation, keep it in itself, and make a structure from it. In this way, what has been initially a single case or small thing may transform into a framework (Luhmann, 2008). For instance, an individual is stung by a wasp; he/she then emphasizes on and repeats this case and external experience for himself/herself, and in this way, the structure of fearing a wasp is formed in him/her. Another instance is the experience of someone who can convince others in a certain situation that his/her idea is true. Then, he/she attributes this experience to his/her inherent capability to convince others, and in this way, a specific personality trait and behavioral structure is gradually formed in him/her.

Another name that Luhmann gives to consciousness-specific structures is "expectation". Emerged expectations in consciousness system are confirmed and either satisfied or unsatisfied in each case or specific situation. Consciousness finds satisfaction with expectations as a normal affair and is not excited or occupied by them. Through the confirmation of expectations, the autopoiesis process of consciousness system goes on smoothly based on being aware of itself. Conversely, consciousness recognizes unsatisfied expectations as abnormal. Non-satisfaction has a threatening function for consciousness system and makes consciousness busy with itself. It is in this point that emotions and feelings can be evoked and come to help and accompany the consciousness system to overcome the emerged disorder (Luhmann, 2008).

Luhmann identifies the emergence and complication of the structures of consciousness system as an intra-systemic event. Overall, this emergence is not possible

without the association of consciousness system with its periphery and specific peripheral situation. In Luhmann's view, consciousness system is associated with the neurophysiological system of the body as well as social system; however, its inner logic is independent of the two. Luhmann explains this point more based on the relationship between language and consciousness. Luhmann believes that the view that consciousness finds complicated structure only through language has to be revised. He claims that language is not the constructor of the observer's thought, imagination, and structural procedures of consciousness. In addition, themes of consciousness cannot be reduced to what is expressed through language. Language does not determine internal logic and the themes of consciousness system. Nevertheless, consciousness system makes use of language; it needs language so that the transition from one thought to the other happens more smoothly. Language makes possible the expressing of thoughts and constructing elements of consciousness clearly and differentially without the disturbance of consciousness system. Consciousness continuously becomes more complicated. For this reason, it is at risk of becoming vague and disturbed. Language as a tool prevents this risk (Luhmann, 2008). Another significant question is "How does consciousness system recognize itself from the peripheral world and find itself distinct from it?"

5

By considering itself as an integrated thing and differentiating itself from its periphery, especially from the society, a consciousness system will have a relation and relationship with it. Luhmann seeks the roots of this process more inside the consciousness system and less in social and linguistic relations. In his view, for consciousness to find itself as an individual and differentiated thing, it has to disjoin itself from something and find itself distinct from that thing. Luhmann calls this

thing body. Consciousness finds that the body always exists, and can be observed in separation from transient states such as fatigue or pain. Consciousness reaches integration and individuality through seeing this body, its biological foundation. Consciousness recognizes itself with the help of the body and by distinguishing itself from the body. Nevertheless, this does not mean that consciousness sees the body as the other or in differentiation with itself since this other is not the external world, but its own body. Therefore, in a complicated way, the live body and consciousness are in separation from each other and simultaneously with each other, belong to each other, and none of them is perceived without the other (Luhmann, 2008).

In Luhmann's view, it is through recognizing and differentiating its own body, that consciousness knows where it is. Furthermore, it becomes familiar with the experience of being observed through this. Being aware of being observed is only possible through being aware of the visibility of the body. This makes consciousness accept the responsibility of the body, although it cannot thoroughly observe or survey the body. In this way, consciousness responds to others' expectations, it either accepts them or refrains from them and participates in the social system.

The key point here is that consciousness experiences itself as an integrated whole and has to appear as an integrated whole before others through experiencing others' expectations and being experienced by others. Luhmann, however, sees and finds all of these from the window of consciousness system and identifies them as separated from social system processes; consciousness does not adopt all the norms and behavioral patterns constructed by society through its contact with society. Rather, everything that comes from outside is reconstructed and understood based on internal needs and necessities. Among these necessities, the most important include the continuity of the self-

autopoiesis procedure of the consciousness system and replacing the constructing elements of this system. Consciousness system inevitably goes from one observer's thought to the next observer's thought. For this reason, it uses whatever is accessible and is effective (Luhmann, 2008).

Conclusion

It was attempted in the current essay to briefly introduce Luhmann's view on consciousness phenomena. In the view of this well-known representative of the systemic view to human phenomena, consciousness is an independent and autopoietic system. Imagination and the observer's thought are fundamental constructing elements of this

system. That which determines the content of these elements includes the perceptions and conceptions of consciousness system of itself.

Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

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