In this paper, we critically examine responses to the question: Are there levels of consciousness? The first response, the orthodox approach, holds that there are levels of consciousness (Laureys et al. 2004). This assumption underwrites the received taxonomy of disorders of consciousness. An alternative approach holds that there are not levels of consciousness (Bayne et al. 2016), as a levels framework is conceptually dubious. According to this alternative, aspects of consciousness are scalar, but consciousness is not (Peterson and Bayne, 2018).

We engage these views by outlining an instrumentalist account of consciousness. According to our view, the representation of consciousness—as nonscalar, scalar, or more complicated representations—depends on the purpose of the measurement procedure. If, as we argue, consciousness is clinically relevant, then consciousness can be represented as other health states are for clinical measurement. For example, a nonscalar (unidimensional) representation of a health state enables measures of prevalence in a population. Similarly, nonscalar representations also allow for classification or screening of a condition in an individual patient, by ruling in or ruling out the condition based on observed symptoms. Alternatively, a scalar representation of a health state takes values along a continuum, such as body temperature. Scalar representations are valuable for ongoing monitoring of a patient’s condition. A multidimensional representation of a health state combines two measures from any of these types.

We argue that the representation of consciousness for clinical measurement can be similarly understood. Rather than asking: “Are there levels of consciousness?”, we ask instead: “What clinical purpose is there to representing consciousness as scalar, nonscalar, or multidimensional, and are there benefits or drawbacks to these different approaches?” We situate our discussion in ongoing debates in disorders of consciousness research. We suggest that our instrumentalist reply could provide further clarity to these disagreements.