

Lecture 3: Representational Theories of Consciousness

Introduction

Our experiences often have representational content and they are usually access-conscious:

- Representational content: A mental state has representational content if it carries information about the world.
- Access-consciousness: To say that a mental state is access-conscious is to say that the information it carries is available to other mental faculties, such as reasoning, decision-making and speech.

Access-consciousness is a functional property. According to Chalmers it's one of the 'easy' problems of consciousness. In contrast, conscious experiences are supposed to also have an ineffable phenomenal character. That's supposed to be the 'hard' problem of consciousness.

One important physicalist approach starts from the following suggestions: Phenomenally conscious experiences are simply representational states that are linked in appropriate ways to other mental states and processes.

If so, then the 'hard' problem of consciousness reduces to the 'easy' problem of access consciousness and representation. This is not to say that the 'easy' problem is easy. But it's at least tractable (e.g. significant progress has been made in developing reductive theories of content).

Such theories of consciousness are called Representational Theories. This lecture we will evaluate the prospects for such theories.

Representational Theories

Representational theories come in two kinds:

1. *First-order representational theories (FOR)*: For an experience to have a phenomenal character is simply for it to have a certain sort of representational content, available in the right way to mental processes.
2. *Higher-order representational theories (HOR)*: In order for an experience to have a phenomenal character an experience must itself be represented within the mind; it must be accompanied by a further thought or experience about it.

It helps to look at an example. Consider the experience of seeing a blue circle.

FOR: This experience involves a mental state that represents a blue circle in a certain way and has a certain role in mental processing. Thus, it involves *one* representation.

HOR: The experience involves a mental state that represents a blue circle (first-order representation) *and* a mental state that represents the presence of this experience of a blue circle (higher-order representation).

We will focus on FOR theories in this lecture but we will also touch upon motivations for HOR theories. We'll particularly focus on Michael Tye's version in his 1995 "Ten Problems of Consciousness"

An Argument for First-Order Representationalism

Here's Tye:

Generalizing, introspection of your perceptual experiences seems to reveal only aspects of what you experience, further aspects of the scenes, as represented. Why? The answer, I suggest, is that your perceptual experiences have no introspectible features over and above those implicated in their intentional contents. So the phenomenal character of such experiences – itself something that is introspectibly accessible, assuming the appropriate concepts are possessed and there is no cognitive malfunction – is identical with, or contained within, their intentional content.

The same is true for bodily sensations. Suppose you have a pain in your toe. then your toe is where you feel the painful disturbance to be. Now try to turn attention away from what you are experiencing in your toe to your experience itself apart from that. Again, inevitably what you end up focusing on is simply what is going in your toe, or rather what your experience represents is going on there. The phenomenal character of your experience – certainly something you are introspectively aware of on such an occasion – must itself be representational. (Tye 1995, 136)

What's the Representational Content?

According to Tye phenomenal character is a matter of a special kind of representational content, namely phenomenal content. Clearly not all states with representational content have phenomenal character. So what's special about phenomenal content?

First, we need to know a few things about Tye's account of the nature of sense experience:

- Sense-experiences are the products of specialized, self-contained subsystems or modules, which operate independently of the rest of the mind and provide the input to higher-level cognitive processes (like belief-formation, reasoning).
- Sensory modules operate on computational principles, processing signals from the sense organs in order to build up complex representations of the environment.
- Representations generated by sensory modules are essentially map like. E.g. in the case of vision the output is a map of the visual field on which various features – edges, textures, colors, etc – are marked.
- Mental representations represent features of the external world because they track them; they are causally correlated with them (under ideal conditions).

Let's now look at Tye's account of *phenomenal* content:

Phenomenal content, I maintain, is content that is appropriately poised for use by the cognitive system, content that is abstract and nonconceptual. I call this the PANIC theory of phenomenal character: phenomenal character is one and the same as Poised Abstract Nonconceptual Intentional Content. I hope that this will not be taken as a literal indication of the state of mind to which I have been driven by the problems of consciousness! It follows that representations that differ in their PANICs differ in their phenomenal character, and representation that are alike with respect to their PANICs are alike in their phenomenal character.

Some clarifications: What does it mean that phenomenal content....

...is poised?

It's ready to be used by mechanisms which form beliefs and desires. So, for example, the content of the perception of a blue square ahead is ready to be used by the belief-forming system to generate the belief that there is a blue square ahead.

...is abstract?

Individual objects do not enter into it. Phenomenal content does not represent the presence of particular objects, but only of general features that can be shared by different objects. Thus, perceptions of two identical objects seen under identical conditions will have the same phenomenal content, as will an hallucination of an identical object.

...is non-conceptual?

Features represented in phenomenal content need not be ones for which we have concepts. Sense experience has a richness and detail which far outstrips our ability to conceptualize it. And although we can apply concepts to our sense experiences, the concepts applied do not enter into the character of the experiences themselves.

Questions for Tye:

- Do all experiences with phenomenal character have representational content?
- Can't there be experiences with the same representational content but different phenomenal character?
- Even if phenomenal character and representational content go together, why should we reduce one to the other?

Does the account explain phenomenal consciousness?

One major difficulty with FOR-accounts in general, is that they cannot distinguish between what the world (or the state of the organism's own body) is like for an organism, and what the organism's experience of the world (or of its own body) is like for the organism. This distinction is very frequently overlooked in discussions of consciousness. And Tye, for example, will move (sometimes in the space of a single sentence) from saying that his account explains what colour is like for an

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organism with colour-vision, to saying that it explains what experiences of colour are like for that organism. But the first is a property of the world (or of a world-perceiver pair, perhaps), whereas the latter is a property of the organism's experience of the world (or of an experience-experencer pair). These are plainly distinct.

According to Carruthers, FOR-theories fail to make the distinction between worldly subjectivity (what the world is like for an organism) and mental-state subjectivity (what its own experiences are like):

- To understand what the world is like for an organism, we need to understand its point of view. This can be characterized by reference to the kinds of perceptual information available to the organism and the kind of perceptual discrimination it can make.
- For an organism to exhibit mental-state subjectivity, i.e. for its experiences having phenomenal character, the organism must have a point of view on its own experiences. It must possess information about its experiences and be able to make discriminations among them.
- Worldly subjectivity involves first-order representations. But mental-state subjectivity, according to Carruthers, requires higher-order representations: it requires one to have information and make discriminations among one's own experiences.
- Carruthers argues that the hard problem of consciousness is specifically a problem about mental-state subjectivity, not just worldly-subjectivity.

Thus, according to Carruthers, first-order representations are not sufficient to account for mental-state subjectivity. For this we need higher-order representations.

Tye does not deny that we can form higher-order representations of our experiences: we can introspect them, conceptualize them, form beliefs about them. What he denies is that higher-order representations are *necessary* for phenomenal consciousness. According to Tye, the driver is phenomenally conscious even when she is unaware of her visual sensations. And non-human animals, too, may be phenomenally conscious, even if they cannot form higher-order representations.

Readings

Tye, Michael (1995). *Ten Problems of Consciousness*. MIT Press.

Carruthers, Peter (1998). Natural theories of consciousness. *European Journal of Philosophy*.