

## Lecture 6: Higher-Order Representationalism

According to higher-order representational theories, phenomenal consciousness involves a kind of inner awareness. Experiences are not phenomenally conscious in their own right, but become so only when we are aware of them in a suitable way. In order to be phenomenally conscious, an experience must be the object of another mental state: a higher-order representation.

Different versions disagree on the nature of the inner awareness:

- HOP-theories: inner awareness is perceptual in character, we have an 'inner sense' which generates perceptions of our own experiences.
- HOT-theories: inner awareness is cognitive, it involves having thoughts about our experiences.

### The Basic Strategy

Whatever else we may discover about consciousness, it's clear that, if one is totally unaware of some mental state, that state is not a conscious state. A state may of course be conscious without one's paying conscious attention to it and indeed, even without one's being conscious of every mental aspect of the state. But if one is not at all aware of a state, that state is not a conscious state. [...] being aware of a state is perforce a necessary condition for that state to be a conscious state.

Being aware of a mental state, however, is not also a sufficient condition for the state to be conscious. There are ways we can be aware of our mental states even when those states are not conscious states. So, if we can rule out those ways, we'll be left with the particular way in which we are aware of our mental states when those states are conscious states. And this would give us a condition that's both necessary and sufficient for a mental state to be conscious.

For present purposes, I'll speak interchangeably of being aware of something and being conscious of that thing. So my strategy is to explain a state's being a conscious state in terms of our being conscious of that state in some particular way. No circle is involved here, since we are explaining one phenomenon in terms of another. It is one thing for us to be conscious of something – that we may call transitive consciousness – and another for a state to be a conscious state – what I'm calling state consciousness. And we understand transitive consciousness – our being conscious of things – independently of understanding what it is for mental states to be conscious states. We are transitively conscious of something by virtue of being either in an intentional or a sensory state whose content is directed upon that thing. And a state's having a certain content is a distinct property from that of a state's being conscious. (Rosenthal, 2002)

The basic thought: in order for a mental state to be conscious it is necessary, but not sufficient, for its possessor to be aware of it in some way. So we can look for the particular type of awareness that is sufficient for consciousness and thereby establish necessary and sufficient conditions for it.

What is the difference between *state consciousness* and *transitive consciousness*?

Two kinds of transitive consciousness

- Our awareness of our conscious mental states seems immediate. It does not involve any conscious inference.
- Two ways of being transitively conscious of something: we can see/hear it or we can have a thought about it.

### Rosenthal's HOT-theory

When a mental state is conscious, we are conscious of being in that state; so the content of our HOT must be, roughly, that one is in that very state. And, since merely being disposed to have a thought about something does not make one conscious of that thing, the HOT must be an occurrent thought, rather than just a disposition to think that one is in the target state. Moreover, when we are conscious of something by being in intentional state that's about that thing, the intentional state is normally assertoric. Indeed, it's likely that being in intentional state whose mental attitude is not assertoric does not result in one's being conscious of the thing the intentional state is about. So we should require that the HOT has

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an assertoric mental attitude. Finally, to capture the intuition about immediacy, we have seen that our HOTs must be independent of any inference of which we are aware. Our hypothesis, therefore, is that a mental state is conscious just in case it is accompanied by a noninferential, nondispositional, assertoric thought to the effect that one is in that very state.

### Questions:

Is it a problem that when we are in many conscious states, we are typically unaware of having any such HOTs?

### Motivating the HOT-theory

When a mental state is conscious, one can noninferentially report being in that state, whereas one cannot report one's nonconscious mental states. Every speech act, moreover, expresses an intentional state with the same content as that of the speech act. [] So a noninferential report that one is in a mental state will express a noninferential thought that one is in that state, that is, a HOT about the state. We can best explain this ability noninferentially to report our conscious states by supposing that the relevant HOT is there to be expressed. Correspondingly, the best explanation of our inability to report nonconscious states is that no HOTs accompany them.

### When are experiences conscious?

An experience (a sensory state) is conscious when it is the object of an appropriate HOT. An experience acquires a phenomenal character when we are conscious of sensory qualities – that is, when we have a noninferential HOT about it.

### Why do we tend to think that sensory quality cannot exist non-consciously?

Because, from the first-person point of view, we are never aware of it – it is outside consciousness.

But what exactly *are* these sensory qualities? Rosenthal argues that these are neurological properties, whose existence is not problematic.

**The key claim is that the puzzling thing – phenomenal consciousness – occurs when we have HOTs *about* sensory qualities.**

### Arguing for the HOT-Theory

1. There is a systematic link between HOT's and phenomenal experiences.
  2. HOT theory provides the best explanation for this link.
- So we should believe the HOT theory.

we need not rely solely on first-person considerations; there are other factors that help establish the correlation between having HOTs and there being something it's like for one to be in conscious sensory states. In particular, there is a striking connection between what HOTs we are able to have and what sensory qualities we are able to be aware of. And the best explanation of this connection is that accompanying HOTs do result in there being something it's like for one to be in states with those sensory qualities.

Acquiring new concepts for experiences can alter the phenomenal character of our experiences. Learning to make finer-grained classifications among our experiences can lead to our experiences themselves having a more finely differentiated phenomenal character.

Suppose that there is such a link. Does HOT theory provide us with a good explanation?

Two ways in which such a link could occur:

1. Coming to have new concepts results in our sensory states' coming to have distinguishing properties that they did not previously have.

But this is implausible – why should concepts affect the sensory properties?

2. New concepts enable us to become aware of sensory qualities that were there, non-consciously, all along. This supports HOT theory since it suggests that it is the ability to frame thoughts about sensory qualities

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which renders them conscious – and so makes it like something to have the relevant experiences. If we lacked any appropriate concepts, Rosenthal suggest, we would be conscious of none of the sensory qualities of our experiences and it would not be like anything to have them.

So, HOT theory provides us with an explanation of the systematic link between our phenomenal experiences and our conceptual capacities.

### **Problems for HOT-theories**

Ineffability of conscious experience: on Rosenthal's view sensory qualities become conscious only when we have thoughts about them. So what are experiences are like is closely connected to our ability to conceptualize them. But what about the inexpressible richness of our conscious experience?

Babies and puppies: According to HOT theory, consciousness involves having thoughts about one's mental states. And this requires possession of mental-state concepts, such as that of experience. It's unlikely that babies and puppies meet that condition.

If [infants] are unable to hold higher-order beliefs about lower order thoughts and experiences, are we to conclude, therefore, that none of their thoughts and experience are conscious? They may not, to be sure, be conscious that they have experiences but that isn't the question. The question is not whether a two-year old knows what a six-year old knows (about its own experiences), but whether the experiences of a two-year old and a six-year-old are, as a result of this fact, fundamentally different – the one being conscious, the other not. If that is a consequence of a HOT theory, it strikes me as very close to a reductio...

(Dretske, 1995)

What is the function of consciousness? It is natural to think that whether or not a mental state is conscious makes an important difference to its effects. So, for example, we assume that a conscious pain will provoke reactions that a non-conscious one would not. Yet HOT theories seem committed to denying it.

The causal powers of a rock (as opposed to my causal powers) are not changed or enhanced by my observing the rock or having thoughts about it. Why should the causal powers of a thought or an experience be any different? If the consciousness of mental states and processes comes down to higher-order experiences of them,..., then consciousness is epiphenomenal. Mental states and processes would be no less effective in doing their job – whatever, exactly, we take that job to be – if they were unconscious. (ibid)

### **Readings**

Rosenthal David (2002), Explaining Consciousness.

Dretske, Fred (1993), Conscious Experience.