

Animal Subjectivity

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1. Introduction

The main focus of "Natural theories of consciousness" is the debate between first-order representationalist <1> and higher-order representationalist theories of phenomenal consciousness - theories <2>, that is, of the sort of consciousness which is involved whenever an organism undergoes experiences which have a subjective *feel* to them, or has sensations which it is *like something to have*.<3> Here I present some of the main points from the paper, retargeting them somewhat towards the question of the phenomenal consciousness of animals.<4> I also chart, at the end, some of my own changes of mind on the issues.

For the purposes of this discussion I shall take for granted the falsity of "mysterian" claims about phenomenal consciousness.<5> That is, I assume that there are no good grounds to claim either that phenomenal consciousness is non-physical and/or epiphenomenal or that its physical nature is inherently closed to us. If this assumption is false, then who knows what becomes of the question of animal subjectivity? Perhaps all animals would then lack phenomenal consciousness; or perhaps even plants and rocks might then be phenomenally conscious, unknowably to us. If the relationship between

phenomenal consciousness and matters of biology is inherently mysterious, then presumably the answers to these questions concerning animals will also be closed to us.

I also assume for the purposes of this discussion that the correct form for a naturalistic account of phenomenal consciousness is *cognitive* - dealing in thoughts, mental representations, and/or mental functions - rather than being neurological in nature. It seems obvious to me that to attempt a reductive explanation of phenomenal consciousness in terms of the latter would be to try to jump over too many explanatory levels at once. But I make no claim to have argued for this here.

The case against phenomenal consciousness for most species of animal divides into two parts. The first demonstrates the superiority of higher-order representationalist over first-order representationalist theories of phenomenal consciousness. This first part itself divides into two strands - a negative strand, arguing that there are important distinctions which get lost within first-order theories; and a positive strand, arguing that only higher-order theories can provide a substantive explanation of the puzzling features of phenomenal consciousness. Then, having established the superiority of higher-order theories, the second part of the argument shows how unlikely it is that more than a few species of animal will fulfill its requirements. I shall take these points briefly in turn.

2. Against First-Order Representationalism

One major difficulty with first-order-representationalist accounts in general, is that they cannot distinguish between what the *world* is like for an organism, and what the organism's *experience of the world* is like for the organism. This distinction is very frequently overlooked in discussions of phenomenal consciousness. People will move (sometimes in the space of a single sentence) from saying that an account explains what *colour* is like for an 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.

We therefore need to distinguish between two different sorts of subjectivity - between worldly-subjectivity and mental-state-subjectivity. In fact we need to distinguish between phenomenal properties of the world, on the one hand, and phenomenal properties of the subject's experience of the world, on the other. First-order representationalism may be adequate to account for the former; but not to explain the latter, where some kind of higher-order theory is surely needed. Which of these two deserves to be called "phenomenal consciousness"? There is nothing (or nothing much) in a name; and I am happy whichever reply is given. But it is the subjectivity of experience which seems to be especially problematic - if there is a "hard problem" of consciousness, it surely lies here. And a first-order theory can plainly make no progress with it.

Another - closely related - difficulty for first-order-representationalist theories is to provide an account of the distinction between conscious and non-conscious experience. (As examples of the latter, consider absent-minded driving; sleepwalking; experience during mild epileptic seizure; the experiences which guide fast-reaction activity; and blindsight).[6](#) For in some of these cases, at least, we appear to have first-order representations of the environment which are not only poised for the guidance of behaviour, but which are actually controlling it. So how can first-order theorists explain why our perceptions, in such cases, are not phenomenally conscious? There would seem to be just two ways for them to respond - either they can accept that absent-minded driving experiences are *not* phenomenally conscious, and characterize what additionally is required to render an experience phenomenally conscious in (first-order) functional terms; or they can insist that absent-minded driving experiences *are* phenomenally conscious, but in a way which makes them inaccessible to their subjects. I argue that neither option is acceptable.

3. In Support of Higher-Order Representationalism

The main positive argument in support of a higher-order-representationalist theory is that it can *explain* the features of phenomenal consciousness.[7](#) So there is good reason to think that it is a correct account of what phenomenal consciousness *is*.

If a creature has analogue [8](#) perceptual information available to conceptual thought, then it will be capable of purely recognitional concepts of surface-features of its environment - e.g. simple concepts of *red*, or *bright*. If a creature has that same analogue information present to a "theory of mind" system, containing concepts of experience and thought, then it will be capable of acquiring purely recognitional concepts of *experience* - e.g. *seems red*, *seems bright*.

For such a creature, the hypothesis of *inverted spectra* will be a conceptual possibility - it will be able to think, "*This* experience [e.g. an experience *as of red*] might have had some quite other worldly cause [e.g. green]." A creature with recognitional concepts of experience will be inclined to deny that its experiences are *relationally defined*. It may also be inclined to insist that its experiences are *private*, *ineffable*, and knowable by itself with complete *certainty*. In short, any creature capable of higher-order representations, whose percepts are made available to such representations in analogue form, will be tempted to think just those things which "qualia freaks" are tempted to think about the *what it is likeness* of their experience.[9](#)

4. Against Higher-Order Representations for Animals

Like some higher-order-representation theorists (e.g. Dennett, 1991), but unlike others (Gennaro, 1996; Lycan, 1996), I think that the truth of higher-order representationalism renders it extremely unlikely that any animals (excepting perhaps the great apes) will have phenomenally-conscious experiences. But I do not see this as an objection to higher-order theories, since we lack any real grounds for believing that animals are capable of phenomenal consciousness. Of course, most of us do have a powerful intuitive belief that there is something which it is *like* for a cat or a rat to experience the smell of cheese. But this intuition is easily explained. For when we ascribe an experience to the cat we quite naturally (almost habitually) try to form a first-person representation of its content, trying to imagine what it might be like "from the inside". But when we do this what we do, of course, is imagine a *phenomenally conscious* experience - what we do, in effect, is represent one of our *own* experiences, which will bring its distinctive subjectivity with it. All we really have reason to suppose, in fact, is that the cat *perceives* the smell of the cheese. We have no independent grounds for thinking that its percepts will be phenomenally-conscious ones. And certainly such grounds are not provided by the need to explain the cat's behaviour. For this purpose the concept of perception, *simpliciter*, will do perfectly well.

Why do I think it unlikely that animals are capable of phenomenal consciousness? Firstly, because I think the best form of higher-order representationalism is some or other kind of higher-order *thought* account. (Part of the argument for this is evolutionary - it is unlikely that a capacity for higher-order experience would evolve in the absence of a capacity for higher-order thought; and if a creature has a capacity for higher-order thought then it doesn't *need* higher-order experience).[10](#) And higher-order thoughts require the possession by the creature of a theory of mind, within which its concepts of experience and thought will be embedded. Since there is vigorous debate about whether even the theory of mind of chimpanzees is sufficiently elaborate to contain a concept of experience as a subjective state of the perceiver, [11](#) it seems most unlikely that dogs, cats, or bats are capable of the requisite higher-order thoughts.

Secondly, even if one adopted an "inner sense" or higher-order *experience* account of phenomenal consciousness (as does Lycan, 1996), it seems very unlikely that animals would be capable of higher-order experiences. To think otherwise, would be to underestimate seriously the representational complexity of higher-order experiences, and the cognitive resources which would need to be devoted to their construction; and there is also no serious proposal to be made concerning what higher-order experiences would be *for*, in the absence of a theory of mind.[12](#) (They are surely not for perceptual integration, as Lycan (1996) suggests. I know of no cognitive scientist working on the so-called "binding problem" in perception who thinks that higher-order representations play any part in the process.)

In summary, then: if hardly any animals are capable of higher-order representations; but if higher-order representations are necessary for phenomenal consciousness; then it follows that hardly any animals will enjoy experiences which are phenomenally conscious, or which it is *like* anything to undergo. In which case, although *the world* may

be subjectively presented differently to different species of animal, animal *experiences* will lack the kind of subjectivity necessary for possession of phenomenal consciousness.

5. Shifting Sands

[<13>](#)

How have my views on these matters shifted over the years? There has been a commitment to higher-order-thought theories throughout. But there has been a change in my view of the required form of such a theory; and a change in my view of the immediate moral consequences.

In "Brute experience" (1989) I articulated what I was later to call a "reflexive thinking" theory of consciousness (where the higher-order thoughts which render a given experience conscious must themselves be conscious, being reflexively available to further higher-order thoughts), and drew robust conclusions concerning the moral standing of animals. But unfortunately, the paper conflated the various forms of higher-order-thought theory with which I took reflexive-thinking theory to be contrasted. I developed further arguments in support of a form of higher-order-thought theory, and against first-order representationalism (Carruthers, 1992a), and the moral conclusions were developed and reiterated in *The Animals Issue* (1992b, chap. 8).

By the time of writing *Language, Thought and Consciousness* (1996), I had begun to have doubts about the need for anything as strong as reflexive-thinking theory as an account of consciousness in general. But my focus in that book was mostly on the structure of *human* consciousness, and more particularly on the nature of human conscious *thinking*, since I was proposing to argue that human conscious thinking is essentially language-involving. And it does still seem to me to be the case that human consciousness does, *de facto*, fit the structure of reflexive-thinking theory. But I have now come to believe that when the focus of our attention is, not on human conscious thinking, but rather on phenomenal consciousness, and phenomenal consciousness in general, then reflexive-thinking theory is too strong. Rather, all we need is a form of dispositionalist higher-order-thought theory, of the sort defended in the present target-paper.

Of course, reflexive-thinking theory, in placing such strong constraints on phenomenal consciousness, made it particularly unlikely that any animals should be capable of such consciousness, since it seems unlikely that any animals are capable of thinking about their own acts of thinking on a regular basis. So you might expect that weakening those constraints, in moving to a form of higher-order thought theory in which there is no requirement that the higher-order thoughts should themselves be conscious ones, might make it substantially more likely that animals are capable of phenomenal consciousness. But in fact the situation is more or less unchanged, as I argue in the present paper. What makes it unlikely that animals are phenomenally conscious, is not their inability to

entertain *conscious* thoughts, but rather their lack of a theory of mind, and consequent inability to entertain *higher-order* thoughts.

Finally, my view of the moral implications of these views has undergone a change. I no longer think that their lack of phenomenal consciousness entails that the experiences of animals cannot be appropriate objects of sympathy or moral concern. I now argue that the most basic object of sympathy is, not phenomenal consciousness or anything implicating higher-order thoughts, but the thwarting of first-order desire.<14> And this can certainly be undergone by many species of non-human animal. But it is one thing to say that sympathy for animal suffering is possible or appropriate; and quite another to say that it is morally required of us. On this my views, defended in my (1992b, chaps. 5 & 7), have not changed. It is a distinctively moral question, to be answered in the negative (although a somewhat hedged-about negative), as a result of considerations of moral theory. <15>

Notes

<1> See Dretske (1995); Kirk (1994); Tye (1995).

<2> See Carruthers (1996); Dennett (1991); Gennaro (1996); Lycan (1996); Rosenthal (1993).

<3> The idea of "phenomenal consciousness" is normally introduced by example. Think of hearing the brazen rasp of a trumpet, or of immersing yourself in the vivid orange of a sunset, or of the sensations you undergo when your lover strokes your back. In each case the subjective, felt, quality of the experience - what it is *like* to undergo it - is what philosophers mean by "phenomenal consciousness".

<4> Of course, since humans are animals too, this should really read "the phenomenal consciousness of *non-human animals*." I drop the qualifier throughout, for simplicity.

<5> See Chalmers (1996); Jackson (1982, 1986); McGinn (1991); Nagel (1974, 1986).

<6> For more extended discussion of some of these cases, see my *Language, Thought and Consciousness* (1996, section 5.2).

<7> For full development of this argument, see *Language, Thought and Consciousness* (1996, section 7.6).

<8> Strictly, the information does not need to be analogue. It just needs sufficient "fineness of grain" to slip through the mesh of any conceptual net. It is this which tempts subjects to think that their experiences are ineffable.

<9> Note that both first-order and higher-order representationalist theories are *eliminativist* about *qualia*, at least in the sense that they deny that there are any non-

functionally-characterizable, non-representational, properties of experience. (Some writers use the term "qualia" much more liberally, to mean just the *what it is likeness* of experience, whatever the latter should turn out to be.)

[<10>](#) For development of a version of this argument, see *Language, Thought and Consciousness* (1996, section 5.8).

[<11>](#) See, e.g., Povinelli (1996).

[<12>](#) See also *Language, Thought and Consciousness* (1996, section 5.8).

[<13>](#) This section is included at the request of the guest editor, Colin Allen; originally in the form of an Appendix.

[<14>](#) See my (submitted).

[<15>](#) Thanks to Colin Allen, Kevin Korb and Ann Wolfe for advice and feed-back on early versions of this abstract.

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