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Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory

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Book review

Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory

Uriah Kriegel

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009

333 pages, ISBN: 9780199570355 (hbk); \$48.00

For almost a decade, Uriah Kriegel has been one of the foremost proponents of the self-representational theory of phenomenal consciousness (hereafter simply “consciousness”), which says that a mental state is conscious just in case it suitably represents itself. His work on the theory has culminated in this book, which, though clearly written, is deeply unsatisfying. Kriegel produces several arguments in favor of a reductive self-representational account of consciousness, but fails to heed Thomasson’s warning that “we cannot properly assess [the prospects for a reductive theory of consciousness] until we have a decent analysis of what consciousness is, so that we can assess whether or not various supposed reductions are in fact reducing *consciousness*” (2000, p. 190). Kriegel offers an analysis of what consciousness is, but it isn’t a decent analysis. One upshot is that a large portion of his book isn’t about consciousness at all, but rather about a philosophical pseudo-phenomenon, a non-phenomenon.

In the introduction, Kriegel says: “when I have a conscious experience of the blue sky . . . there is a bluish way it is like for me to have it. This ‘bluish way it is like for me’ constitutes the phenomenal character of my experience” (p. 1). He goes on to say: “the bluish way it is like for me has two distinguishable components: (i) the *bluish* component and (ii) the *for-me* component. I call the former *qualitative character* and the latter *subjective character*” (p. 1). According to Kriegel, what makes a mental state the conscious state *it is*, is its qualitative character (q-character), while what makes it conscious *at all* is its subjective character (s-character). He then argues that the best way to explain s-character is in terms of self-representation: a mental state is subjectively conscious just in case it suitably represents itself; while the best way to explain q-character is in terms of a mental state’s acquiring its q-character by representing a specific response-dependent property, where this is a property whose instantiation conditions consist in its “disposition to elicit certain responses in certain respondents” (p. 87).

I don’t wish to contest the basic idea underlying Kriegel’s theory, namely, that a conscious experience, E, has a structure that is best characterized in terms of the

following two propositions: (1) E necessarily involves self-awareness, and (2) the relation between E and one's awareness of E is non-dyadic; the mental state in virtue of which the subject of E is aware of E is E itself. However, serious difficulties afflict Kriegel's more detailed analysis of consciousness. Consider his musings on q-character. On his view, there is a "bluish way it is like" for the subject of an experience of a blue sky to have it. This bluishness is a property of one's experience: "my visual experience of the blue sky has a bluish character" (p. 45). Conscious experiences have not only "colorish" qualitative properties, Kriegel argues, but also, if one is looking at a rectangular wall and simultaneously eating honey, a sweet-ish quality, a smooth-ish quality, and a rectangular-ish quality (pp. 45–46). But what are these qualitative properties, and what sorts of arguments does Kriegel muster in their favor? None, as it turns out. Envisaging no objections, he simply announces, on phenomenological grounds, that conscious experiences instantiate properties like bluishness, rectangularishness, etc. The following phenomenological observation is, in his words, "pedestrian": "when you look at the blue sky . . . you undergo a visual experience. There is a bluish way it is like for you to have this experience" (p. 167). But if the relevant terms here are understood in their ordinary sense, then this is sheer nonsense. Skies and poorly constructed walls are, respectively, bluish and rectangularish, but experiences certainly aren't.

One of Kriegel's primary motivations for endorsing this view of q-character is the *transparency thesis*: that any introspectible property of an experience is (part of) the representational content of that experience. Kriegel readily accepts this thesis, but doesn't bother defending it, except to say that he finds it phenomenologically attractive. This is troubling, for there are a number of objections to the thesis that its exponents have yet to refute (see, e.g., Kind, 2003; Pace, 2007). Kriegel doesn't so much as mention these objections. In general, his defense of his representationalist account of q-character is strikingly inadequate. He deals, for the most part, with hackneyed objections that other representationalists have long since rebutted (Block, 1990; Peacocke, 1983), and ignores compelling recent objections (Deutsch, 2005; Kind, 2007; Nickel, 2007).

Philosophers sometimes forget that, within reason, it is perfectly acceptable to simply counter-assert an opponent's unsupported assertion. So I'll begin by doing that. The claim that experiences instantiate properties like bluishness, rectangularishness, etc. is grossly at variance with perceptual phenomenology. I, at least, don't find such properties in my experience, which should show up if they are, as Kriegel claims they are, *experienced* aspects of conscious states.

To be sure, Kriegel does not claim that one's visual experience of a blue sky instantiates the same extra-mental property, blueness, that the sky instantiates. On his view, these are distinct properties, and the bluishness my experience instantiates is a property *analogous* to the blueness of the sky. That this is Kriegel's considered position isn't obvious, but it is evidenced by his espousal of a version of indirect realism according to which there is a response-*independent* shade of blue, such that a subject represents that the sky is that shade of blue by representing that the sky appears bluish, say blue₁₇, to her (p. 96). Thus, according to Kriegel, my

visual experience of a blue sky instantiates a mental analogue of blue, so that what it is like for me to see the sky is bluish. Again, however, this position I am inclined to dismiss as unserious, or as immediately confuted by experience.

Apart from its phenomenological absurdity, Kriegel's version of indirect realism is vulnerable to a crippling objection. His view is that perception involves a process in which cognitive abstraction is performed on streams of sensory data. But why suppose anything like this hoary empiricist tale is true? Kriegel has it that perception is *mediated* in the sense that "objective . . . reality is perceived *through*, or *in virtue of*, the perception of something like a realm of appearances" (p. 96). Put differently, we perceive appearances, and, in virtue of perceiving these appearances, we perceive the worldly item corresponding to the appearances. But no sense attaches to the claim that I see *x* by perceiving something else, say an appearance of *x*. If I see Barak Obama on television, then I perceive Barak Obama by perceiving something else—viz., a televised image. However, if I see Barak Obama on the street, I do not see him by perceiving an appearance of him.

Kriegel thinks, wrongly, that it is phenomenologically evident that experiences instantiate properties like bluishness, but he might insist that there are other considerations that force these properties' demand on our acceptance. He's impressed, for example, with the phenomenon of *shifted* spectrum (pp. 84–87), which occurs when different people have color experiences of the same surface that systematically slightly differ. Now suppose, to use one of Kriegel's examples, Norma perceives the blue sky as being blue₁₇, while Norman perceives the sky as being blue₁₆. Since neither Norma nor Norman can be said to be misperceiving the sky, and since it's impossible for a surface to be both blue₁₇ and blue₁₆ all over at the same time, it's reasonable, Kriegel might argue, to posit the existence of experiential properties, bluishness₁₇ and bluishness₁₆, corresponding to the actual objective worldly property, blue, of the sky.

This is, at best, a weak argument for the existence of experiential properties like bluishness. We may dispute the assumption that it's impossible for a thing to be more than one color all over at the same time. Kriegel believes that this assumption isn't seriously contestable, claiming that the notion that the sky might be both blue₁₇ and blue₁₆ all over at the same time is "plainly absurd" (p. 86). But is it? Not to me, and not to a number of other philosophers who are much cleverer than I (Collins, 1999; Harman, 2001; Kalderon, 2007). Of course, it's impossible for one to *see* a blue sky as simultaneously blue₁₇ all over and blue₁₆ all over, but it doesn't follow that the sky isn't simultaneously blue₁₇ all over and blue₁₆ all over. It's impossible for one to see a drawing of the duck-rabbit figure as simultaneously a figure of a duck all over and a rabbit all over, but it *is* a figure of simultaneously a duck all over and a rabbit all over. "Perhaps," as Kalderon has put it, "[blue₁₇ and blue₁₆] do not so much as *exclude* one another as they *occlude* one another" (2007, p. 574). There's nothing awry about the notion that Norma and Norman have perceptions that enable them to acquire only a partial perspective on the objective properties of the sky: Norma, unlike Norman, is able to perceive blue₁₇, while Norman, unlike Norma, is able to perceive blue₁₆. But the sky is simultaneously blue₁₇ and blue₁₆ all over—it's just that

these properties are occluded by one another. Notice that if one adopts this conception of color, then one can say that Norma and Norman aren't misperceiving the sky, and that their respective visual experiences are, in fact, veridical; and one can say this without having to promulgate fictions like visual experiences that have a bluish character.

Unfortunately, Kriegel's theory of s-character fares just as poorly as his theory of q-character. As noted above, he argues that the best way to explain s-character is in terms of self-representation. Kriegel portrays the representationalist paradigm as less controversial than it actually is, and his acceptance of it is largely uncritical: "it is highly plausible that awareness of anything requires representation of it: to be aware of a tree, for example, involves representing the tree" (p. 106). The basic idea is that the brain constructs representations, whatever these are (Kriegel expresses sympathy for Dretske's (e.g., 1995) beleaguered *teleo-informational semantics*, according to which a representation of a fact, F, is a brain state whose function it is to carry information about F), corresponding to what perceive; and we perceive worldly items via these representations. Apparently he's unaware, unimpressed, or simply undaunted by the various objections that have been leveled against this view of perception (e.g., Alston, 2005; Brewer, 2006; Dewey, 1929; Travis, 2004).

Since, for Kriegel, some version of representationalism about consciousness is almost certainly true, he applies the notion of representation to explain s-character: a mental state is subjectively conscious just in case it suitably represents itself. The notion of *self-representation*, however, is opaque: my awareness of my experiences arguably involves no representational mediation. It's appropriate to say that my experiences are *manifested* to me, or that I am *acquainted* with them, but it makes scant sense to say that my experiences are represented to me. Kriegel uses "representation" to mean, roughly, "indicate." But since experiences don't *indicate* anything, they don't indicate themselves. Fresh footprints in the snow might indicate (to me) the presence of a prowler in the vicinity, but my visual experience of the footprints doesn't indicate (to me) the presence of the footprints.

Kriegel's main reason for preferring the representational model over the acquaintance model is that the "notion of representation is familiar and well behaved, whereas that of acquaintance is unfamiliar and somewhat mysterious" (p. 112). In saying that the notion of acquaintance is "unfamiliar," Kriegel means that "acquainted with" is the only *basic* factive mental verb. Other factive mental verbs are *non-basic*, in sense that the relations they denote are always "asymmetrically dependent on other relations denoted by non-factive mental verbs. In the case of 'knows', the denoted relation depends asymmetrically on the relation denoted by 'believes', which is a non-factive verb" (p. 112). Since "acquainted with" is the only basic factive verb, it's "deeply unfamiliar" and therefore ought to be viewed with suspicion. Kriegel even formulates a principle—the "Principle of No Basic Factivity" (NBF)—stipulating that there are no basic factive relations (p. 113). It follows from NBF that there is no such thing as acquaintance.

But this argument is a non-starter. Given the sublimity and *prima facie* mysteriousness of consciousness, it's positively predictable that a description of its

structure would be best expressed by a unique factive verb. That is to say, the deep unfamiliarity of the notion of acquaintance should count in *favor* of the acquaintance model, since consciousness itself is deeply unfamiliar in the sense under consideration.

So where does this leave us? In the final two chapters, entitled respectively “The Science of Consciousness” and “The Reduction of Consciousness,” Kriegel offers his contribution to the well-worn debate over whether consciousness can be explained reductively. Much neurophysiological speculation ensues, but it’s all for naught. Since Kriegel’s theory of consciousness misses the mark, so, *eo ipso*, do his conjectures regarding the neurophysiological underpinnings of consciousness. In these chapters there’s also, as one might expect, much expatiation on familiar topics like supervenience, the explanatory gap, and the dreaded phenomenal zombie. Kriegel’s remarks on these topics did nothing to persuade me that the current debate over whether consciousness can be explained reductively hasn’t reached a dead end.

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