

Introduction: Consciousness and Self-Representation

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Sydney, NSW 2006
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PSYCHE 12 (2), May 2006

The symposium before us examines aspects of the relationship between phenomenal consciousness and self-representation—in particular, the alleged capacity of some mental state to represent themselves. The hypothesis under consideration is that all and only conscious states are self-representational in this way. The symposium contains two papers favoring the hypothesis (Ismael and Brook and Raymont) and two opposing it (Thomasson and Zahavi). Each paper is accompanied by a critical commentary (Thompson, Seager, Caston, and Williford).

In the next three paragraphs, I offer a brief exposition of the self-representational approach to consciousness. In the four subsequent paragraphs, I offer an even briefer exposition of each of the four main papers of the symposium.

To a first and crude approximation, the self-representationalist view of consciousness holds that a mental state M is conscious when, and only when, M represents itself in the right way. Thus, when a person consciously perceives a tree, she is in a perceptual state that represents both the tree and itself. When she consciously thinks of Vienna, her thought represents both Vienna and itself. In both cases, it is *in virtue* of representing itself that the conscious state is conscious. This is the self-representational theory of consciousness, or *self-representationalism* for short.

Self-representationalism provides a genuine alternative to the two major reductive theories of consciousness currently discussed in the literature. These are the Representational Theory of Consciousness and the Higher-Order Monitoring theory. According to the former, a mental state is conscious iff it represents in the right way.

According to the latter, a mental state is conscious iff it is *represented* in the right way. Importantly, for the former it does not matter how, nor whether, the state is represented; and for the latter it makes no difference how, nor whether, the state represents.

Self-representationalism holds that a mental state is conscious if and only if it represents itself in the right way, so on this view, it is true of conscious states both that they are conscious in virtue of representing and that they are conscious in virtue of being represented. In this way self-representationalism charts new logical territory in the theory of consciousness, and may well capitalize on the strengths of both kinds of more familiar theories, without incurring their respective weaknesses.

The first paper in the symposium is Jenann Ismael's. One of the major challenges facing self-representationalism is how to understand the notion of self-representation. Ismael develops a sophisticated model of self-representation and then argues that any cognitive architecture that would employ self-representing representations would have certain important advantages, but would also display the kind of explanatory gaps that has characterized consciousness. These considerations favor the idea that consciousness is indeed characterized by such self-representation.

The second paper is by Amie Thomasson, and its goal is to undermine the motivation for self-representationalism. Thomasson identifies three initial sources of motivation for the view: linguistic, phenomenological, and epistemological. She then argues that whatever force the first two have relies ultimately on the third. The third is the idea that the epistemological peculiarities of our access to our own consciousness are best accounted for by assuming that conscious states are self-representing. To undermine this idea, Thomasson offers an alternative account of our access to our own consciousness, an account based on the notion of "conceptual transformation."

The third paper is co-authored by Andrew Brook and Paul Raymont. It is a bird's-eye view of their theory of consciousness, developed in much more detail in a manuscript in preparation. There are two central ideas in Brook and Raymont's theory. The first is that self-presenting representations form what Brook and Raymont call "the representational base" of consciousness. The second is that consciousness involves both synchronically and diachronically globalized, rather than atomized, representations. The upshot is that every conscious episode involves a single unified global and self-presenting representation.

The last paper is by Dan Zahavi. It offers a critique of self-representationalism from the phenomenological tradition. Perhaps the first clearly articulated self-representational account of consciousness is Brentano's, and it was criticized on a number of grounds by Husserl, Gurwitsch, and other phenomenologists. Two main problems stand out. First, self-representationalism is alleged to generate an unwelcome infinite regress. Second, it is alleged to misconstrue the inner awareness we have of our conscious experiences as an objectifying awareness, when in reality it is a special kind of non-objectifying awareness.

As I said above, each of the papers is accompanied by a penetrating critical piece. Together, these papers exemplify the vibrancy of a hitherto underdiscussed approach to consciousness. As such, this approach promises to reenergize some of the philosophical debate surrounding consciousness. After all, the current state of research on theories of

consciousness is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, there is little progress being made, with most work dedicated to criticisms of representational and higher-order theories. On the other hand, there is no widespread feeling in the community that the debate has necessarily reached an impasse, and certainly not that the problem of consciousness has been solved. So on the one hand no impasse, but on the other no progress. This state of affairs calls for a constructive proposal for understanding consciousness that will be new yet plausible. The self-representational theory has the potential to fulfil these requirements. The symposium before us is meant to take a closer look at that type of theory.

KRIEGEL: INTRODUCTION