

# A Response to Carruthers' *Natural Theories of Consciousness*

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**COMMENTARY ON:** Carruthers, P. (1998) ["Natural theories of consciousness,"](#) *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6(2), 203-222.

**ABSTRACT:** I have very little disagreement with Carruthers' article, for our views are very similar. I think he is terminologically a bit hard on Michael Tye. I think that in invoking Swampman he is in danger of conflating teleological theories of representation with etiological theories of teleology. In response to his criticism of my own higher-order experience (HOE) view, I argue that there is good reason to believe that we human beings sport as great a degree of computational complexity as is needed for HOEs. If other animals do not exhibit a comparable degree, we should deny that they have "phenomenal-consciousness" *in the strong sense of that term*.

Probably I am not the best choice as a commentator on Professor Carruthers' article, because I can do little but applaud it. Indeed, through section 6 of the paper he is singing my song. I defended much the same view in Lycan (1996). As Carruthers says, we part company only at the penultimate branch of his admirable diagram, since I endorse a higher-order experience (HOE) theory rather than a higher-order thought (HOT) theory.

I shall merely remark on a few points.

1. I think Carruthers is terminologically a bit hard on Michael Tye, in his accusation of counterintuitiveness. We may agree that the formulation, "phenomenally-conscious experiences to which the subject is blind -- experiences which it is *like* something to

have, but of which the subject is unaware" (p. 210), is strange. But like any philosophical phrase containing either the word "conscious" or the now horrible "what it is like" locution (much less both), it badly needs disambiguation.

First, "phenomenally-conscious": This can mean either just *phenomenal*, i.e., having a qualitative character, <1> or more strongly, having *conscious* qualitative character in that the subject is aware of that phenomenal property. Tye surely means the former only, though Carruthers tends to mean the latter. Now, "what it is like": That phrase certainly is usually used in Carruthers' rich way, but it has also been used to mean just a bare phenomenal quale, such as the phenomenal property of redness that Dretske, Tye and I explicate representationally and that figures in what Carruthers calls a percept. What Tye means, presumably, is that there are "phenomenally-conscious" states in the weak sense, states having a qualitative character (so that there is "something it is like" to be in them, in the weak sense of that expression), but of which the subject is unaware (and so there is nothing "it is like" for the subject to have them, in the strong sense of that expression). This is not at all anomalous; I believe Carruthers himself agrees with it.

However, Carruthers is right to point out (p. 210) that in order to explain "what it is like" in the strong sense, Tye is committed to "an immensely rich set of HOTs involving phenomenal concepts." (So am I.) This consequence has been attacked on empirical grounds by Diana Raffman (1995). Raffman complains that neither an individual subject nor that person's introspector or internal monitor has enough stored phenomenal concepts to represent the qualitative character of every possible experience. Tye has replied, in a commentary on Raffman's paper, presented at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association (quoted by Raffman, p. 301):

I am so built that I cannot store the concept,  $red_{31}$ . So, I can't learn to reidentify [ $red_{31}$ ]. But the fact that I cannot *re*-cognize  $red_{31}$ , does not mean that I cannot cognize it when I see it... [P]erhaps I even cognize [my perceptual state] under a syntactically structured predicate like ' $red_{31}$ '... Perhaps what happens is that I manufacture this predicate on the spot and then mechanically chop off the subscript before placing what is left in memory... So, I cognize my state as a  $red_{31}$  experience for as long as it lasts, but I don't remember what  $red_{31}$  looks like.

Raffman says she finds this very obscure. I agree it needs considerable spelling out, but I would take much the same line as Tye.

2. A cautionary word about Swampman (p. 207): We must take care to distinguish *teleological theories of representation* from *etiological theories of teleology*. Dretske happens to hold both kinds of theory, but one can easily hold either without the other.

Now, the Swampman type of example was originally wielded by Boorse (1976) against Wright's (1973) etiological theory of teleology. If it succeeds against etiological theories generally, then we should abandon such theories. But a failure of etiological theories of teleology does nothing to impugn teleological theories of representation, which per se are

not committed to any particular account of teleology in turn. (There are forward-looking accounts of teleology, that would award full teleofunctional properties to Swampman, e.g., Bigelow and Pargetter, 1987). Also, notice that Carruthers' Swampman objections to Dretske and Tye would apply equally to belief, desire, or other intentional contents. The problem is in the psychosemantics, not in the approach to phenomenal qualities.

3. Turning to Carruthers' criticism of my own HOE view (p. 213): Of course it is possible that I have underestimated the computational complexity that would be needed to generate lots of HOEs. Nonetheless I think we have good reason to believe that we ourselves (human beings) exhibit that degree of complexity, however great it may be. I offer the following argument from introspection. (I take this argument also to favor HOE theories over HOT theories.) It is a striking but neglected fact that our introspective attention is under voluntary control. I can ask you to concentrate on your visual field as such, then to focus on a particular patch of phenomenal red, then to shift your attention to the upper left quadrant of the field, then to attend to what you feel in your left elbow, then to ask yourself what you are smelling at the moment, etc., and you can do those things at will, with a remarkable degree of facility and precision. All that activity feels unmistakably like scanning and monitoring rather than just thinking. And surely something cognitive, and presumably something neurophysiological, subserves it.

Even if I am right about human beings, of course it does not follow that other animals exhibit a comparable degree of computational complexity. Perhaps some do and some do not; perhaps few if any do. I would continue to maintain that an animal has phenomenal-consciousness in the strong sense if and only if that animal has HOEs. So I would at least provisionally conclude that if many animals (including very young human children) lack the computational complexity needed for HOEs, those same many animals lack phenomenal-consciousness in the strong sense. Carruthers would not disagree with that.

I do, incidentally, join Dennett in denying the richness and complexity of conscious experience (p. 218), assuming that Carruthers here means phenomenal-consciousness in the strong sense rather than mere percepts. I would say that the vast majority of what we think and do on a given day is accomplished on automatic pilot. I do not mean "majority" diachronically, as if we enjoyed conscious experience for only an hour or two per day. Rather, I mean that at any given moment we are consciously aware of only a small sector of our total phenomenal field (and, for that matter, of only a tiny slice each of our cognitive and conative structures). Our overall accomplishments depend heavily on mere percepts.

4. I will not here try to speculate further on the function or adaptive advantage of HOEs. I think Carruthers is clearly right about the "binding problem"; no one supposes that HOEs need be implicated in a solution to that. The "integration" I had in mind is integration of a higher order -- executive integration, if you like, by which we use the deliverances of our various sense organs in making decisions and taking action in complex circumstances, especially on short notice. (Note that this is compatible with my earlier claim that the majority of what we think and do on a given day is accomplished nonconsciously.) Here

too, it may be that not many other animal species have this sort of executive ability, and I would tentatively explain that by supposing that those animals lack HOEs.

5. I ringingly endorse Carruthers' conclusion that prospects for a naturalistic theory of phenomenal-consciousness are (at worst) pretty good. But then, I would.

## Notes

<1> As, e.g., in Block (1995)

## References

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