

# Consciousness Without Awareness

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**ABSTRACT:** I argue that Carruthers' arguments that (non-human) animals are unable to have conscious experience relies on a human-centered view of consciousness. Once we abandon those characteristics of consciousness that are typically human, such as the ability to reason about one's conscious experience, it becomes clear that animals may have conscious experience, although such experience may not be available as the subject of thought. Consideration of evidence from human conscious experience, child development, and evolution supports this suggestion.

My cat woke me this morning by meowing insistently by my head. When I woke and started scratching her head, she lay down next to me and started purring. We might wonder what sort of experience the cat has which causes her to purr. One might naively think that the purr indicates that by scratching the cat's head I am giving her pleasure. However, the attribution of this sort of experience to the cat is notoriously objectionable. For the suggestion that the cat is experiencing pleasure seems to imply that the cat is conscious, and that, for some at least, is a highly dubious assertion. Is it possible that cats and other (non-human) animals [<1>](#) experience pleasure? Does an affirmative answer to this question commit one to the claim that those animals are conscious? I argue here that the answer to the former question is "yes." I do not address the latter question directly,

but I do argue that despite Peter Carruthers' (1998) argument to the contrary, that some animals (including cats) may be conscious.

Rather than challenging Carruthers' argument head on, I show that the arguments he musters for the claim that the correct theory of consciousness is one that postulates consciousness to be a phenomenon of higher-order experience (HOE, in his terms) apply only to human consciousness. In brief: I argue that an organism (a cat, say) might be conscious without being able to reflect upon or represent its conscious states (it might be conscious without being aware of its consciousness). This would limit its ability to reason about its conscious states, but while such reasoning is emblematic of human consciousness, it need not be present for consciousness to be present. The details of this argument will become clear momentarily. As with all discussions of consciousness, it is worth taking care with the terminology used. So it is with terminology that I begin.

Carruthers is careful to distinguish several different properties to which we might be referring when we raise the question of an organism's consciousness. We might say of an organism that it is conscious *simpliciter*, meaning that it is awake as opposed to asleep (or comatose). Or we might say that the organism is conscious of something or other. In such a case, the organism is perceiving that thing of which it is conscious. Of course, it is possible to perceive something without being conscious of the fact that one is perceiving anything. Recall the familiar example of the absent-minded driver who arrives at a destination without remembering the drive there. The driver perceives the road, the other cars, etc., and, indeed, navigates around various obstacles and stops at red lights, but is not conscious of these perceptions. Thus an organism might be conscious of something or other (i.e., perceiving that thing), without being aware of those perceptions.

The majority of organisms, it seems safe to say, are like the absent-minded driver, receiving information about their environments, acting on that information, and yet not conscious of those experiences. For those organisms, there is nothing it is like to have particular experiences, no more so, perhaps, than there is anything it is like for a nail to be hammered into a block of wood, or for a video camera to record a child's birthday party. For some organisms, however, there is (or there certainly seems to be) the possibility of phenomenal consciousness, the experience of being in states which have a particular feel. It is with phenomenal consciousness that Carruthers is concerned. Notice that this suggestion is that consciousness requires more than mere perception; it also requires an awareness of what it feels like to be in a particular state. Phenomenal consciousness apparently requires the ability to be aware of one's perceptual states, to think about one's experiences, as it were. Theorists who think that appearances, in this case, are revealing, think that consciousness is a phenomenon of higher order representation (HOR): thoughts about thoughts. Theorists who think that appearances, in this case, are deceiving, who think that being phenomenally conscious does not require the ability to think about one's experience, offer first order representation (FOR) theories of consciousness. Carruthers opts for the former family of theories, and as a consequence he claims that only certain animals, namely human animals, are able to experience phenomenal consciousness.

Carruthers' argument for this claim comes in two parts. He argues first (1) that the correct theory of phenomenal consciousness is a HOR theory, and then (2) that such representations are at best unlikely to be found in animals (with the possible exception of some primates). For animals, a theory of perception is sufficient. Therefore, (3) animals are not conscious. I do not challenge Carruthers' proposition (2) here. Nor, in fact, do I challenge his first premise as applied to human beings. Instead, I argue that the evidence he musters in support of the first premise is evidence relevant only to a theory of human consciousness. It is perfectly consistent with his arguments that in order to satisfactorily account for all the qualities of human consciousness a HOR theory is required, but that such a theory fails to be the only possible theory of consciousness. This observation leaves room for a FOR theory of animal consciousness. To see this, it is necessary to examine Carruthers' arguments for his proposition (1).

Carruthers points out two problems that a FOR theory faces and which are solved by a HOR theory. (A) One of the marks of human conscious experience is a distinction between an individual's phenomenal experience of the world and her or his phenomenal experience of that experience. The world seems a particular way to me right now, and in seeming so, causes in me a particular sensation. In addition, the world's seeming that way also seems a particular way to me, and causes in me a particular sensation. Thus I might reason about the way a particular pair of sunglasses make the world appear. I can reason about my experience as distinct from the world; I need not judge that my experience reliably presents the world to me. (B) A FOR theory cannot explain, claims Carruthers, the distinction "between conscious and non-conscious experience" (p. 210). (This is the distinction referred to above in the discussion of absent-minded driving.) According to a FOR theory, all of our perceptions should be phenomenally conscious, but as cases of absent-minded driving illustrate, not all of our perceptions are phenomenally conscious. So claims Carruthers.

A HOR theory not only lacks these faults, but, Carruthers argues, there is also positive evidence for a HOR approach to consciousness. Intrinsic to particular phenomenal experiences is that any such experience need not have been caused by whatever might typically cause it. Thus an experience of red need not have been caused by something that is red. We are able to think about our red experiences and wonder if the world is the way our experience represents it as being, if the object we are representing as being red is genuinely red. (This sort of reasoning is what has led to philosophical problems such as the problem of the possibility of an inverted spectrum.) Such reasoning is only possible if one is able to reason about one's thoughts.

In brief, then, the three reasons we should hold a HOR theory of consciousness are: only a HOR theory of consciousness can make sense of (1) the distinction between a conscious agent's experience of the world as being a particular way and one's experience of one's experience as being a particular way; (2) the possibility of non-conscious perceptions; and (3) the ability a conscious agent has to reason about experience and think that it might be different without the world being different.

Although one might quibble about (2), all of these certainly seem to be features of human conscious experience. However, in order for Carruthers' argument against the existence of conscious experience for animals to work, it must be the case that all of these are features of consciousness full stop. That is, it is not enough to establish his position that these features be characteristic of human consciousness alone; Carruthers needs an argument that (i) all conscious experience includes the ability to experience one's own experience as distinct from the way the world actually is (reasons (1) and (3) require this); and (ii) perceptions about which there are no higher-order thoughts do not have a phenomenal feel.

Here is Carruthers' argument for (i):

... we have good reason to think that HOR-theory provides us with a sufficient condition of phenomenal consciousness. But is there any reason to think that it is also necessary -- that is, for believing that HOR-theory gives us the truth about what phenomenal consciousness is? ... [I]t may be claimed that what underpins the possibility of inverted spectra (i.e. phenomenal consciousness itself) is there, latent, in FOR-systems; but that only a creature with the requisite concepts (HORs) can actually entertain that possibility.

This suggestion can be seen to be false, however, in the light of the FOR-theorists' failure to distinguish between worldly-subjectivity and mental-state-subjectivity. In fact a system which is only capable of FORs will only have the raw-materials to underpin a much more limited kind of possibility. ... But there is nothing here which might make possible to entertain thoughts about spectra inversion. Lacking any way of distinguishing between red and the experience of red, the system lacks the raw-materials necessary to underpin such thoughts as, 'Others may experience red as I experience green' -- by which I mean not just that a FOR-system will lack the concepts necessary to frame such a thought (this is obvious), but that there will be nothing in the contents of the system's experiences and other mental states which might warrant it. (p. 213-214)

The problem is that in order for an organism to have the higher-order thoughts about the experience of others that we have (for example, thoughts about the possibility of an inverted spectrum) that organism must be able to experience its own experiences as distinct from the world. A FOR system will be unable to do that. Thus, human consciousness is not simply a FOR system with the potential for higher-order thought superadded to it. Such a system would still be unable to raise the conceptual possibility of an inverted spectrum.

Carruthers' argument, I believe, is correct as far as it goes. However, he misses the force of this challenge. The challenge is not merely that a FOR theory is true of various animals (including humans), and that humans have added abilities because humans have the further ability to entertain higher-order thoughts about their own inner states. The challenge is, instead, that a FOR theory is true of various animals (not including humans)

even though explaining human consciousness may well require a HOR theory. By focussing on the challenge in the way he does, Carruthers keeps his focus on the human ability to engage in certain sorts of introspective analyses of human conscious experience. Thus, he gives an argument that this ability is not derived from an ability to think about one's first-order experiences. Instead, he needs to give an argument that this sort of introspective analysis is characteristic of conscious experience. In short, for all Carruthers says, it may be the case that various animals still experience phenomenal consciousness even though they lack the ability to differentiate the way the world seems to them from the way the world is.

What of Carruthers' argument for (ii)? Here Carruthers argues that FOR theorists have no plausible way of accounting for the possibility of non-conscious perceptual experiences (such as absent-minded driving). The FOR theorists, says Carruthers, have two options:

either they can accept that absent-minded driving experiences are not phenomenally-conscious, and characterise 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 that makes them inaccessible to their subjects. (p. 210)

The first option (as taken by R. Kirk, 1994), Carruthers claims, is a non-starter because, "[i]t is utterly mysterious how an experience with one and the same content could be sometimes phenomenally-conscious and sometimes not, depending just upon the overall role in the organism's cognition of the decision-making processes to which it is present." (p. 210) <2>

Notice that I am trying to claim some logical space for the possibility that animals have conscious experience even though such experience is not available to them as fodder for higher-order thought. Such experience seems akin to our non-conscious perceptual experience. If it is, if the experience that I am suggesting might be conscious is merely perception, then that fact alone provides a prima facie argument against my claim. The second option suggests a way to avoid this prima facie argument. It suggests that it is possible that animals are phenomenally conscious, even though their conscious states are not available to them for higher-order thoughts. Carruthers ridicules this option, however: "But there surely could not be properties of experience which were subjective without being available to the subject, and of which the subject was unaware." (p. 210)

Why not? When Carruthers says that subjective experience must be "available to" the subject, he is merely claiming that in order for experience to be conscious it must be available as the subject matter for higher-order thoughts. Similarly, when he claims that there cannot be subjective experience "of which the subject [is] unaware," he is claiming that in order for experience to be conscious it must be the subject of higher-order thoughts. At worst, he is guilty of begging the question. Perhaps, though, we can put a better spin on his claims. For the concept of subjective experience is meant to capture the "what-it-is-likeness" (p. 210) of conscious experience. How could there be something an

experience is like if one can have an experience without being aware of it? The "what-it-is-likeness" of an experience seems to give us a handle on that experience, how it is different from other experiences, and how to identify that experience when it occurs again. How can we do these things without being aware of the qualitative nature of the experience?

As above, this bit of reasoning looks at consciousness from the perspective of human conscious experience: this is how phenomenal experience is for human beings, thus this is how phenomenal experience is. Clearly, however, this reasoning is misguided. It is not conceptually impossible that there be phenomenal experience that is not the fodder for higher-order thought. It seems unlikely, for example, that infants lack phenomenal experience even though they may lack "the dimension of subjectivity," as Carruthers claims (p. 216). As a child grows it may learn that its experiences are not the same as other people's experiences, but I see no reason that this sort of learning should endow its experiences with a phenomenal feel.

I have argued that Carruthers' argument against animal consciousness is not airtight; there is the possibility that there is something it is like to be an animal (even though the animal may not be able to know that). What evidence is there that this is more than just a logical or conceptual possibility? Here are three different sorts of evidence, all of which suggest that phenomenal consciousness does not require higher-order thought.

First, consider the feeling you have when someone rubs your back. You might sigh involuntarily -- because it feels good -- you might even do so before you recognize that it feels good. (Sometimes the sigh is the evidence one takes for the quality of the feeling.) Presumably, it feels good (i.e., it has a phenomenal quality) before you are able to recognize that feeling; the feeling is present before it is a subject of higher-order thought. Similar evidence is present in reactions to painful stimuli: we are all familiar with the experience of withdrawing a burnt finger before realizing that the finger hurts. Here too the phenomenal experience causes a reaction before it is a subject of higher-order thought. (One might object to this sort of evidence by claiming that these reactions are not caused by the phenomenal qualities of the experience, but by something else. However, this leads one inexorably to the claim that phenomenal consciousness is epiphenomenal, a claim that Carruthers wishes to deny.)

Second, I baldly suggested above that gaining the ability to engage in higher-order thought about one's experiences does not suddenly endow those experiences with a phenomenal feel. Considering the development of this ability in young children should help to put a little bit of meat on the bones of that claim. Young children, as Carruthers points out, do not recognize that their experience is subjective. They are unaware that their experience is not shared with everyone; they do not make the distinction between self and world. The ability to make this distinction, however, does not come about all at once, but in stages. At which stage does the phenomenal feel of experience come in? The phenomenal feel of experience is not something that can be only half present: either one is phenomenally conscious or one is not; to be a little bit phenomenally conscious is to be phenomenally conscious. But it seems unlikely that this aspect of experience is suddenly

present when a child passes a developmental stage. Instead of gaining phenomenal consciousness, as children develop they are likely to be gaining the ability to think about their phenomenal experience.

(This is not to suggest a flaw in Carruthers' argument against the possibility that human consciousness is the result of HOR abilities being built on top of pre-existing FOR abilities. I am suggesting that the addition of the ability to think about one's experience is not enough to give one's experience a phenomenal feel. This can be thought of as complementary to Carruthers' claim; perhaps even before children gain the ability to think about their experiences, even before a HOR theory is true of them, they are not properly described by a FOR theory. The theory that does properly describe them may also describe some animals.)

Finally, an evolutionary consideration. Let us suppose, as many do, that the (evolutionary) function of the pain which accompanies tissue damage is to get the organism to avoid the cause of tissue damage. By denying that animals experience phenomenal consciousness, Carruthers is consequently denying that animals can feel pain. Thus this ability must have been selected for solely in human beings. This not only implies a great evolutionary gulf between humans and other species, but it places it in a strikingly odd location. Because humans are organisms who can think about the causes of tissue damage and easily learn to avoid them, it would seem that the ability to feel pain would be less likely to be selected for in humans, not more likely. This consideration is not limited to experience of pain. Think, for example, of the pleasure which accompanies orgasm, or the nausea that, for some, comes when looking over a cliff.

These bits of evidence do not amount to an argument that there is phenomenal consciousness in creatures that lack the capacity for higher-order thought. They merely suggest that this possibility is more likely than would be suggested simply by the presence of a logical hole in Carruthers' arguments. For all that I've said, however, it doesn't follow that there is something it's like to, say, be a cat, at least not in the way we normally think of that expression. For when we think of what it's like to be a cat, we imagine examining the cat's experience from the inside. Without an ability to engage in higher-order thought, the cat cannot do that. Thus, in that particular sense, there is nothing it's like to be a cat. But, all this denies is the cat's ability to think about its phenomenal experience, not the possibility that the cat has phenomenal experience. In that latter sense, there may well be something it is like to be a cat. It is possible that animals are able to be phenomenally conscious even though they lack the ability to think about their conscious experiences.

Let's return to my cat. Why does she purr? One plausible answer is that she purrs because she feels pleasure and that a consequence of a long history of the interaction of domesticated felines and human beings has resulted in cats that purr because that results in a greater likelihood of their being petted, and thus that they get more pleasure. Certainly, it seems that my rubbing my cat's head has no advantage to it other than the way it might make her feel. She may not recognize this, she may not be able to think

about it, but surely, the purr is evidence that there is some phenomenal experience the cat is having, whether she is aware of it or not.

## Notes

<1> Hereafter I use "animals" for "non-human animals."

<2> I am content to let Carruthers' claim stand unchallenged for the purposes of this essay. Notice, however, that this "mystery" is easily cleared up if we think of the first option differently than Kirk does. All we need do is recognize that similar representational states can be tokened in different parts of the brain. It is an easy step to the completely reasonable hypothesis that in order for a state to be phenomenally conscious, it must take place within a certain area of the brain. Some perceptual states fail to be tokened in the consciousness center and are thus non-conscious perceptions. (This hypothesis does not require any sort of HOR theory to explain non-conscious perceptions.)

## References

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