

Carruthers on the Deficits of Animals

Derek Browne

Department of Philosophy
University of Canterbury
Christchurch
NEW ZEALAND

d.browne@phil.canterbury.ac.nz

Copyright (c) Derek Browne 1999

PSYCHE, 5(23), August 1999

<http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v5/psyche-5-23-browne.html>

KEYWORDS: Higher-Order thought, consciousness, animal consciousness, Carruthers

COMMENTARY ON: Carruthers, P. (1998a). Animal Subjectivity.
<http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v4/psyche-4-03-carruthers.html>.

ABSTRACT: The simple version of the HOT theory of consciousness is easily refuted. Carruthers escapes this refutation because he is actually a closet introspectionist. I agree with Carruthers that the subjective properties of experience are constituted from discriminatory and other cognitive responses, but I disagree that conceptual uptake into a language of thought is the form of uptake that is necessary. Carruthers' neocartesian argument for a divide between 'man and brute' should be rejected.

1. HOT or HOE?

Peter Carruthers argues that the nonhuman animals are not very intelligent and therefore, they are not conscious. Descartes also concluded that animals were unconscious, because they failed several key intelligence tests. But Carruthers' arguments are no more successful than were Descartes'. A substantial part of my paper consists of some necessary clarifications of Carruthers' position. I argue that he is really an introspectionist, a higher-order experience theorist. Thus he avoids the simple refutation I give of higher-order thought theories. But his own theory gives undue weight to the cognitive conditions for mental talk. He does not show that only mental talkers can be conscious.

2. The Target Argument

There are five key steps in Carruthers' argument. The first step introduces a distinction between unconscious mental states and conscious mental states. Carruthers says (1996) that the main datum that a theory of consciousness should explain is "that all types of mental state admit of both conscious and non-conscious varieties" (p. 135). I disagree; but let that pass.

The second step claims that a mental state is conscious just in case it has phenomenal properties: there is always something it is like to be in conscious mental states whereas there is nothing it is like to be in an unconscious mental state. Mental states that are conscious in this sense are phenomenally conscious. Phenomenal consciousness is (roughly speaking) the ground of moral standing. I disagree with this way of setting up the issues; but again, let that pass.

The third step provides a theory of the conditions under which a mental state has phenomenal qualities. Carruthers says he has a higher-order thought theory of phenomenal consciousness. A mental state M is phenomenally conscious just in case the subject has a higher-order thought about M. (I disregard further complications, including Carruthers' dispositionalism, which do not, so far as I can see, affect my arguments.)

The fourth step is 'qualia irrealism' (Carruthers, 1998b): the thesis that qualia are actually constituted out of higher-order mental acts. Mental states do not have phenomenal properties independently of the relations they have to other mental states and processes. Higher-order cognition is not, therefore, a capacity for the discovery of phenomenal properties that exist independently of those higher-order cognitions. For a mental state to have phenomenal properties just is for that state to be the object of a suitable higher-order thought. Mental states that are not thought about have no phenomenal qualities. Phenomenal qualities are virtual properties, projected onto first-order mental states by acts of higher-order thinking.

The fifth step clarifies the conditions that any animal must satisfy if it is to be capable of higher-order thought. Metacognition is conceptually demanding. To think about mental states, one must possess concepts for those states, psychological concepts. There is reason to think that no nonhuman animals have concepts like belief, desire, perception, pain and pleasure. So these animals cannot think about their own first-order mental states. So none of their first-order states are conscious. They lack the intellectual resources that are necessary for conscious experiences.

3. Why Consciousness is Not HOT

David Rosenthal (1997) defends a higher-order thought theory of consciousness. Rosenthal says that a conscious mental state is a state that I am conscious of, and I am

conscious of a mental state in virtue of having higher-order thoughts about it. An essential step in the analysis is to explain mental state consciousness in terms of transitive creature consciousness: mental state *m* of subject *S* is a conscious state just in case *S* is conscious of *m*. This particular instance of the consciousness-of relation is, in turn, explained in terms of the relation thoughts have to their objects.

My basic objection to Rosenthal's version of the theory is that in thinking about mental states, I only know them 'by description'. I only know them propositionally. Speaking sentences in the head about objects, mentally talking about them, does not count as a genuine mode of awareness of those objects. There are easy counterexamples to Rosenthal's theory. (1) Since I have a lot of theoretical knowledge about the functions of the cerebellum, I can have propositional thoughts about events that are currently occurring in my cerebellum, though I am obviously not conscious of those events. (2) Believing what my psychotherapist tells me, I can think about my own unconscious desires, without thereby making them conscious. The consciousness-of relation requires more than mental talk about psychological objects. To be genuinely conscious of any of my own internal states, I must know them 'by acquaintance'. It is not enough that I have propositional thoughts about them, that I talk about them mentally. The purely intentional relation I have to objects of thought is not, as such, an instance of the consciousness-of relation. On the other hand, there is some plausibility to the view that I am conscious-of my own first-order mental states if I am introspectively aware of them.

My objection to Rosenthal takes seriously his proposal to analyse state consciousness in terms of transitive creature consciousness. Carruthers also appears to endorse this strategy. He says (1996, p. 149) that "a conscious mental state is one of which the agent is aware... and so to this extent at least it involves self-consciousness". But I'm not sure that Carruthers wants to base anything of substance on intuitions about what is required if a mental relation to an object is to count as an instance of the consciousness-of relation. However that may be, my view is that Carruthers avoids my objection to Rosenthal's version of the HOT theory only because his own theory is in fact introspectionist, not HOT but HOE. This will take some explanation.

4. Sensation and Perception

Psychologists have distinguished between sensation and perception; philosophers similarly have distinguished between seeing and seeing-as (hearing and hearing-as, etc). The principle of the distinction is that sensation (seeing) is non-conceptual whereas perception (seeing-as) is conceptual. You can see the computer as a computer whereas the cat can not. You can see it as a computer because you recognize it, you bring your sensations of it under concepts. The cat does not have those concepts. She has the sensations but not the perceptions. The crucial point is that perception depends on sensation. You cannot see the computer as a computer unless it is also true that you see the computer ('concepts without intuitions are empty', as Kant almost said). If you do not

have perceptual sensations of the computer, then you might be thinking about the computer, mentally talking about it; but you aren't seeing anything as a computer.

Consider now an introspectionist or higher-order experience (HOE) theory of consciousness. A mental state is conscious just in case I am introspectively aware of it. Introspective awareness is understood to be broadly perceptual. An animal that lacks psychological concepts might in principle have introspective 'sensations' of its own experiences, but it cannot have introspective 'perceptions'. We who have mastery of psychological concepts can 'perceive' our own states of mind; but this concept-using introspective capacity depends on our having 'sensations' as well. The 'sensations' provide the nonconceptual content to which psychological concepts are applied. In some sense, nonconceptual awareness of your own mental states figures in your recognition of them, your consciousness-of them. If you do not have such nonconceptual awareness of your own mental states, then you might be thinking about those mental states, you might be mentally talking about them; but you aren't aware of them.

5. Observing Mental States

Carruthers and Rosenthal both have higher-order representation theories of consciousness. Rosenthal believes that we are conscious of our own mental states just in case we are thinking about them. Carruthers describes his own view as a 'reflexive thinking' theory of consciousness (1996). But it is a very different kind of theory from Rosenthal's. Consider the following passage from the target article:

If a creature has analogue 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. (Carruthers, 1998a).

What is described here is something quite different from simple mental talk about first-order mental events. Conscious perceptual experiences represent (in analogue form) environmental objects and properties. (This is a useful way to cash out the concept of perceptual sensation: see Dretske 1981.) These sensory representations are present-to, are made available-to, a concept-using cognitive system. The higher, concept-using cognitive system takes up information about the environment, thanks to the first-order representational activities of the perceptual system. The higher, concept-using cognitive system can also take up information about the way the environment is being (first-order) represented: visually, say.

What this adds up to is an account of the second-order representation of first-order mental states that is modelled on the seeing-as relation. Sensory representations are actually

present-to the concept-using system. Recall that in order to be conscious-of an object, I must be acquainted with that object. In the passage quoted, the content of the perceptual event (in analogue form) is passed to the higher, cognitive system; and in addition, the mental event that is the event of seeing something red and bright is itself also present-to the higher cognitive system. This higher system detects properties of the representational event, the property of being, say, an episode of seeing rather than one of hearing. So the resulting thought about that sensory event is not just unconnected mental talk ('seeing is now going on in me'), but is instead the kind of conceptualizing activity that goes on in ordinary seeing-as: nonconceptual content is being conceptually appropriated.

We see now how Carruthers can counter my counterexamples to Rosenthal's theory. (1) I am thinking about specific events which are now going on in my cerebellum, but neither those events themselves nor analogue representations of them are actually present-to the concept-deploying system in which this thinking is going on. So those events are not conscious, even though I am mentally talking about them. They fail the crucial condition that they must be objects of my acquaintance. (2) I have an unconscious desire D and (believing what my psychotherapist tells me) I am also now thinking that I have D. Carruthers can say: neither D itself nor an analogue representation of the content of D is available-to, is actually present-to, a suitable concept-using cognitive system. D also fails the crucial condition that it must be an object with which I am acquainted.

6. In Defense of First-Order Representationalism

Suppose I am right in my interpretation of what is in fact a much more complicated theory than I have allowed. Then Carruthers should classify himself as an introspectionist (an HOE theorist), according to whom I am conscious of my own first-order mental states in virtue of 'seeing-them-as' the kinds of mental states they are. This I see as a strengthening of his position, just because it protects him from the easy refutation I gave of Rosenthal's theory.

I am also sympathetic to Carruthers' anti-realism about qualia. But unlike him, I take this as a warrant for a deeper scepticism about the significance of the Nagel property ('what-it-is-likeness'). I do not agree that a Cartesian divide between 'man and brute' can be raised on such a soft foundation. But there are too many issues here for the present discussion. Let me try to articulate the core of my disagreement with Carruthers, given my interpretation of him as a closet introspectionist. I will accept for the sake of the present argument that the fundamental challenge for the theory of consciousness is to explain the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental states.

All higher-order representation theories say that a mental state is conscious if it is the object of a suitable mental act of representation (or simply: if I am conscious of it). My own view is first-order representationalist. Mental events are conscious, or not, depending on the way in which they occur. Very roughly speaking, a perceptual episode that has no downstream effects, that is not taken up and suitably used by the mind, is

unconscious; an episode that has suitable downstream effects, that is suitably connected to executive processes and the like, is conscious. (See Kirk (1992) for a similar view, and Carruthers' criticisms of Kirk in his (1996).)

7. What Pain is Like

Consider one of the hard cases: pain. Carruthers sets out from the premiss that the experience of pain is conscious only if the experience has phenomenal properties ('hurtfulness'). But he is also an irrealist about phenomenal qualities. The painfulness of an experience is not a monadic property of that mental event (the experience). It is constituted from relations that event has to other cognitive events. The phenomenal property is a virtual property, wholly constituted out of the mind's discriminatory responses to the first-order mental episode that is the experience of pain.

I think that this is not far wrong. The hurtfulness of pain is constituted from the way in which the representation of trauma is taken up by cognitive, affective and motivational processes. Where Carruthers and I differ is over the order of intentionality that is necessary for this kind of uptake to occur. For me, there is no need for anything beyond first-order intentionality: there is representation of the trauma, discrimination of it as a trauma and not some other kind of bodily event, there is identification of the location in the body of the trauma, its kind, its intensity, and so on; and the downstream responses include uptake by affective, motivational and other cognitive systems, the organization of behavioural responses to the trauma, and so on. Any animal with a functioning pain system will, near enough, be capable of all of these responses to trauma. None of this activity requires the sort of mastery of psychological concepts that is needed in order to talk about them. But these activities surely do constitute a set of fine-grained discriminations, identifications, evaluations, and so on. I agree that without second-order intentionality, there cannot be mental talk about pain. It does not follow, and in fact it is false, that without second-order intentionality, there cannot be a range of discriminating cognitive, affective and motivational responses to the experience of pain. Consciousness, for me, depends just on those first-order responses.

8. The Transparency of Conscious Experience

Carruthers' primary criticism of first-order representationalism is that it does not explain why any mental events have the Nagel-property: why it is like anything to perceive, like anything to sense states of one's body, and so on (Carruthers, 1996). But there is an obvious response to this, a response powerfully made by Fred Dretske (1995). There are heaps of properties available for this role, namely (to consider just perceptual experiences) all the properties that sight, hearing and so on, present the world as having. These are properties of the world, not of mental states, and they are the properties of

which perceptual experience makes us aware. As Moore famously noted, our sense experiences are diaphanous: the phenomenal properties of sense experience are just properties of the object or content of experience, not of the mental event of experiencing itself.

Carruthers denies that experience is diaphanous. He offers a distinction between two different sorts of subjectivity. These are (and here he is speaking specifically of sense experience) 'worldly-subjectivity' and 'mental-state-subjectivity'. Equivalently, he distinguishes two different kinds of phenomenal properties: "phenomenal properties of the world ... and phenomenal properties of the subject's experience of the world" (1998a). Worldly-subjectivity is constituted by what the world is like for the organism. Mental-state-subjectivity is constituted by what the organism's experience of the world is like for the organism.

I can only make sense of this if I assume that Carruthers is intending to distinguish between properties represented and properties of representations (Dretske, 1995). Properties represented are in the world (call them 'content properties'). Properties of representations are in the head. Moore's point is that only the content properties of perceptual representations are available to experience. Naive phenomenology surely supports Moore on this point. Ask a philosophically naive person to describe the properties of visual experience and they will only describe the visible properties of what they see: the properties represented. Introspection gives us no access to mental properties of sensory representations. So the difference between conscious and unconscious sense experience cannot be explained by reference to introspective awareness of the mental properties of sense experiences.

The strongest objection to first-order representationalism rests on the claim that nonperceptual experiences are not diaphanous. Bodily sensations and feelings have properties that cannot be identified with properties of objects being represented, content properties. Consider pain again. It is evidently true that some very important properties of the total experience of pain are representational: they are properties of the traumatized or stressed part of the body, for instance. But equally, some properties of the experience of the pain seem not to be content properties. Is Carruthers right at least about pain - and about emotion, bodily sensation, and so on? Is it the case that only creatures with a theory of mind can consciously experience the non-content properties of these mental episodes? I think not.

Carruthers' own strategy is to construct phenomenal qualities from discriminatory (and other cognitive) responses. I think this is broadly correct. What is in dispute is whether conceptual uptake is a necessary part of such acts of discrimination. I agree that, for conscious experiences of pain, uptake into a language of thought is necessary in order to engage in talk about pain, whether the talk is mental or public. But it isn't necessary in order that the experience of pain should play a delicate role in the functional life of an organism. (See section 7 above.)

9. Life Without Divides

The only reason I can see for insisting that conceptual uptake into a language of thought is necessary for consciousness, is that only a principle as restrictive as this can justify the Cartesian divide. But that, of course, is just what is at issue. So I find in all of Carruthers' theorizing no sound basis for a Cartesian divide between human and nonhuman animals. The fact that the other animals are metacognitively inept provides no good reason to think that they lead unconscious lives.

References

Carruthers, P. (1996). *Language, thought and consciousness: An essay in philosophical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carruthers, P. (1998a) Animal Subjectivity. *Psyche* 4(3).
<http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v4/psyche-4-03-carruthers.html>

Carruthers, P. (1998b) Natural Theories of Consciousness. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 6(2), 203-222.

Dretske, F. (1981), *Knowledge and the flow of information*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dretske, F. (1995), *Naturalizing the mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kirk, R. (1992), Consciousness and concepts. *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, 66, 23-40.

Rosenthal, D. (1997), A Theory of Consciousness. In N. Block, O. Flanagan, & G. Guzeldere (Eds.) *The nature of consciousness: Philosophical debates* (pp.729-754). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.