

# Saving the Phenomenal

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**ABSTRACT:** Carruthers seeks to explain phenomenal awareness in terms of higher-order representations, i.e. representations of representations. There are serious problems with this view. First, it rests on a dubious distinction between phenomenal properties of the world and phenomenal properties of our experience of the world. Second, it fails to explain why a representation of a representation is necessary or sufficient for the experience of phenomenal properties. Third, it denies conscious awareness to entities who are clearly in possession of it. One can imagine alternative explanations of phenomenal awareness that are no more speculative than Carruthers' and that don't face these problems.

Thalia, my four-year-old daughter, loves to be tickled. "That tickles," she'll say, when I tickle her. "Tickle me some more." Sophia, my two-year-old daughter, also loves to be tickled. Grabbing her from behind I'll place my fingertips on either side of her rib cage and rub up and down so that her skin slides over her ribs like a sausage casing. She can endure only a few seconds of this intense form of rapture. Soon her legs buckle and she melts into a quivering mound of giggling girl. The giggles slowly subside, she lets out a satisfied sigh and, eyes sparkling, says, "Daddy tickle 'gain."

I describe this blissful scene not because I wish to boast of my tickling talents, but because it serves to introduce a remarkable claim to which Carruthers is happily committed. According to Carruthers, Thalia and Sophia enjoy a good tickle for very different reasons. Thalia loves to be tickled because tickling makes her feel a certain way. She is phenomenally aware of a tickling sensation and it is this sensation that she seeks when she implores me to tickle her. Sophia, on the other hand, having not yet developed the concepts necessary to recognize her experience as of being tickled, is not phenomenally aware of being tickled. Her reaction to my vibrating fingertips no more suggests that she is phenomenally conscious of a tickling sensation than does a thermometer's reaction to temperature suggest that it is phenomenally conscious of warmth.

Sophia is in good company. According to Carruthers, it is not only children under three who lack phenomenal awareness, but all animals other than perhaps some great apes (ourselves included) are also phenomenally unaware. Don't scratch your dog behind the ears if your intent is to give it pleasure. It doesn't feel a thing.

On my view, any theory of consciousness that denies that Sophia has a feeling of being tickled is not truly a theory of consciousness. Of course Sophia is conscious of being tickled. Similarly, of course the whimpering dog is aware of its pain. Any theory of consciousness that disputes these facts has simply changed the meaning of 'consciousness' and is offering us an account of something else. It is like a theory of planetary motion that tells us that the planets stand still or a theory of evolution that tells us that species are immutable. One doesn't *explain* conscious phenomena by denying its existence.

But what drives Carruthers to such a view? It is a distinction he draws between worldly-subjectivity and mental-state-subjectivity. Carruthers claims that we need to distinguish between phenomenal properties of the world (or of the organism's own body), on the one hand, and phenomenal properties of one's experience of the world (or of one's experience of one's body) on the other (p. 7). Both Thalia and Sophia can recognize phenomenal properties of the world, but only Thalia can recognize the phenomenal properties of her experiences of the world. The rise in the mercury column shows that the thermometer is sensitive to temperature but does not suggest that the thermometer can actually feel warmth. Likewise, Sophia's giggles reveal that she is sensitive to my fingertips without indicating that she is phenomenally aware of a tickling feeling.

But what are phenomenal properties of the world? I'd be very surprised to learn that the world has any phenomenal properties. Organisms with the right psychological equipment have phenomenal experiences of properties of the world. Likewise, when Carruthers chastens Tye for sliding from claims about what color is like for an organism to claims about what experiences of color are like for an organism (p. 5) I find myself wondering where Tye has gone wrong. Assume color is a property of the world. Surely what color is *like* for an organism is not a property of the world, but a property of the organism. Accordingly, it seems natural to equate, as Tye apparently has, an organism's experience of color with what color is like for the organism.

When I tickle an automobile the automobile feels nothing. It lacks the psychological equipment to feel tickles. However, the movement of my fingertips along the surface of the car is just like the movement of my fingertips along Thalia's belly. This movement is a property in the world. It is not a phenomenal property, because only phenomenally conscious organisms can have phenomenal properties. Moreover, there is nothing it is like for the car to be tickled. Cars have no experiences. In contrast, my fingertips *do* cause a phenomenal property in Thalia. There is something it is like to be tickled for Thalia. Thalia experiences the tickling. If there are distinctions to be drawn here it is between a property in the world and Thalia's phenomenal experience of this property. I don't see any distinction worth drawing between phenomenal properties *in the world* and phenomenal experiences of these properties, nor do I see any distinction worth drawing between what tickling is like for Thalia and Thalia's experience of tickling.

This said, I would agree with Carruthers that there is a distinction between representations of properties in the world and representations of representations of properties in the world. A painting represents properties in the world and a photograph of a painting can thereby be a representation of a representation. When I perceive a photograph of a painting I form a third-order representation. But why should any of this be significant in an account of conscious experience? Carruthers thinks that unless subjects are able to represent representations of the world they are unable to have phenomenal awareness. Phenomenal awareness, for Carruthers, is an awareness not of the world, but of a representation of the world. Until Sophia is able to represent her representation of being tickled, she will be aware only of the world and not of her experience of the world.

This view seems unnecessarily complicated. It's the tickling Thalia feels, not her feeling of being tickled. It's the dog's barking I hear, not my perception of the dog's barking. There's good reason for this. Our sensory organs are directed outward toward the world (or our body) because it is properties in the world (or in our bodies) to which we must respond. It's the flame that burns us, not our representation of the flame, so it had better be the flame of which we are aware.

Carruthers is willing to live with the complications of the higher-order account because he believes it, unlike a mere first-order account of experience, can make sense of episodes like the one Armstrong (1980) describes: we drive from here to there without being phenomenally aware of all that goes on between. Our successful arrival proves that we must have detected the obstacles along the way, but our inability to recount what these obstacles were shows that we were phenomenally unaware of them. The reason for this gap in our phenomenal experience, Carruthers holds, is that in the course of our trip we didn't bother to form representations of our representations of the world. The representations of the world were by themselves sufficient to steer us safely to our destination, but, having failed to form representations of these experiences, we had no phenomenal awareness.

I do not find Carruthers' higher-order explanation of Armstrong's example compelling. It is the stop signs, other cars, pedestrians, etc., of which we are unaware en route, not our

experiences of these things. Accordingly, we should look for another way to explain why we sometimes are unaware of worldly properties to which we are obviously reacting and other times not. Why not think of our perceptual experiences as sometimes entering a channel that makes us phenomenally aware of what they represent and other times bypassing this channel? When I'm driving around town thinking about a lecture I need to prepare, my perceptions of the scenery bypass the phenomenal awareness channel. When, on the other hand, I need to attend more closely to the world, to heighten my awareness of the world, I elect (perhaps unconsciously) to make my perceptions of the world conscious. Accordingly, my perceptions of the world get funneled through the phenomenal awareness channel. Phenomenal awareness, on this picture, requires no higher-order representational capacities.

This account of why we are sometimes phenomenally aware of the world and why we are sometimes not is pure speculation on my part. However, it seems no more speculative than Carruthers' account, and it has the advantage of consistency with the facts: Sophia *is* aware of being tickled and dogs *are* aware of pain.

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## References

Armstrong, D. (1980). *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.