

Consciousness and Theory of Mind: a Common Theory?

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1 Introduction

Many of our mental states are phenomenally conscious. It *feels* a certain way, or to borrow Nagel's expression, *there is something it is like* to be in these states. Examples of phenomenally conscious states are those one undergoes while looking at the ocean or at a red apple, drinking a glass of scotch or a tomato juice, smelling coffee or the perfume of a lover, listening to the radio or a symphonic concert, or feeling pain or hunger.

A theory of consciousness has to explain the distinctive properties that phenomenally conscious states have and other kind of states lack. Higher-Order Representational (HOR) theories¹ attempt to provide such an explanation. According to these theories, phenomenally conscious states are those that are the objects of some kind of higher-order process or representation. There is something higher-order, a meta-state, in the case of phenomenal conscious mental states, which is lacking in the case of other kind of states. According to these theories, consciousness depends on our Theory of Mind.

A Theory of Mind, henceforth ToM, is the ability of humans to identify their own mental states and attribute mental states different from their owns to others. Such an ability can, at least conceptually, be decomposed into another two: mindreading and metacognition.

Human beings are able to entertain representations of other people mental states thanks to the mindreading ability. We attribute beliefs, perceptions, feelings or desires to other people and predict and explain their behaviour accordingly. But we also, frequently, attribute mental states to ourselves. This kind of first-person access to our mental states is usually called 'metacognition'.

My purpose in this paper is to argue against HOR theories of consciousness by showing that the claim that phenomenal consciousness depends on a ToM is not plausible.

¹ See, for instance, Armstrong (1968); Carruthers (2003); Gennaro (1996); Lycan (1996); Rosenthal (1997, 2005)

Most HOR theories maintain that phenomenal consciousness depends on metacognition. Some philosophers, however, have maintained that it depends on our mindreading capacities. In section 2 I will argue that this is not plausible. The tenability of a HOR theory would therefore depend on the relation between mindreading and metacognition. I analyze several views on such a relation in section 3 and argue that none of them is a plausible option for HOR theories.

2 Phenomenal Consciousness does not Depend on Mindreading.

According to HOR theories, beings lacking metacognition lack thereby phenomenal consciousness. Carruthers (2003) further claims that the ability of mindreading is required.

Assuming the truth of a consumer semantics (Millikan (1984, 1989); Papineau (1993); Peacocke (1995)), Carruthers maintains that some of our mental states acquire at the same time a higher-order content in virtue of their availability to another consumer system: a ToM. These states, which have a double content, are the states that are phenomenally conscious.

Our evolutionary ancestors would have had first-order representational concepts for many features of the environment (red, green, etc); then the development of a ToM would have allowed them to build up an *is-seems* distinction: a distinction between how things are and how things seem to us. The concepts produced by the ToM could make use of first-order representations and these higher-order recognitional concepts (seems red, seems green, etc.) could have been generated in response to the very same perceptual data that gave rise to the first-order concepts.

This new content, *seems red*, is a by-product of a mindreading faculty, which builds up the *is/seems* distinction. Besides there being a first order representation of redness, there is also second-order representation of seeming-redness.

Carruthers introduces an interesting proposal defending higher-order representational theories of consciousness.

The explanation of phenomenal consciousness which I am putting forward, then, claims that it is because the content of C is available to two sets of consumers –first order conceptual reasoning systems, as well as a higher-order mind-reading faculty– that those contents actually (categorically) have dual representational status. (ibid., p.246)

A conscious mental state has a double content (*is/seems*) due to its availability to these two systems. The second content, provided by the mindreading ability, plays the role of explaining the differential features of phenomenal consciousness. This proposal, while compelling, faces, I think, a serious objection.

My purpose in this objection is to show the implausibility of a theory of consciousness according to which having a phenomenally conscious experience

depends on our mindreading abilities.² The reason is that phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for the attribution to others of mental states that feel some way or other, which is part of our mindreading ability. This objection may be extended to any HOR theory that makes mindreading prior to metacognition. In other words, either metacognition is prior to, or an independent mechanism from, mindreading, or higher-order theories face serious problems. In the next section, I will, however, argue that these last options are not very plausible assuming the truth of HOR theories.

My opponent would argue that conscious experiences are not necessary for developing a ToM along these lines: creatures can see objects in the environment and the response of other organisms to those objects and their properties. Different properties cause different responses in different creatures. On that basis, organisms (through evolution) can come to theorize that there are internal states inside of other creatures that track particular properties and conditions. Similarly, my opponent would argue, in the case of experiences, when people attribute to others sensory states there is no reason for attributing feeling, we just attribute to them states that track certain properties.

That seems to me to be completely misguided as it is dramatically clear in the case of pains or orgasms. The kind of mental state ascription mentioned above is very different from the kind of attribution we usually do. How can one ascribe others with mental states that *feel* in a certain way if one has never been in a mental state that *feels*? It seems to me that the kind of attribution would be completely different in this case.³ For illustration, consider Sally who has never had an orgasm in her life. Sally knows that she has never had an orgasm. She can nevertheless ascribe orgasms to other people. As a matter of fact, she is really good in that task and she can always recognize when her partners are having an orgasm or just faking given their behavioral response. Surely the kind of mental state Sally attributes to her partners or, for instance, actors when seeing a film, is a phenomenally conscious mental state. My intuition is that clearly, after she has an orgasm for the first time, the kind of experience that she will be attributing to others when having an orgasm is different from the one attributed before she felt an orgasm for that first time. She knows how it feels to have an orgasm and attributes to others a similar sensation when they are having one.

This example suggests that the kind of mental state attributions that someone that lacks phenomenal consciousness can do, in case she can, are different from the ones that I can do. If this is right, then phenomenal consciousness cannot depend on mindreading capacities, for phenomenal consciousness is prior, at least to certain mindreading capacities. We attribute to others phenomenally conscious mental states and this kind of attribution is not possible unless one has undergone the relevant experience, as the example suggests. So, phenomenal consciousness cannot be a by-product of our mindreading capacities, precisely because our mindreading capacities require phenomenally conscious

² Carruthers (2009) seems to take feelings as inputs for a mindreading ability.

³ This is independent of whether my ascription of mental states to myself or others is due to a simulation theory or purely theoretical.

mental states.

One possible alternative theory, not clearly in the spirit of Carruthers' one, would maintain that our theory of mind evolved in two steps. In a first step a proto-theory of mind attributes states with certain functional role. A mental state is phenomenally conscious in virtue of being available to this proto-theory of mind. In a second step a *full-blown* ToM evolves and allows the attributions of phenomenally conscious states to others.

The problem of this reply is that, according to Carruthers, the functional role attributed by the proto-theory of mind exhausts the phenomenal character and the proto-theory of mind already allows the attribution of mental states with this role. So, there is no evolutionary advantage in attributing phenomenally conscious mental states and therefore there is no justification for the evolution of the mechanisms underlying this new *full-blown* ToM.

If my intuition is right, then phenomenal consciousness is prior to our mindreading ability and not a by-product of it. The plausibility of a HOR theory will, therefore, depend on the relation of mindreading and metacognition. Such a relation is controversial.⁴ In the next section, I review different models and argue that the plausibility of a model in which mindreading is not prior to metacognition is not compatible with the truth of HOR theories.

3 The Relation between Metacognition and Mindreading

If one is interested in the relation between metacognition and mindreading there are two possibilities one has to consider: either mindreading and metacognition involve independent mechanisms or they have a common architecture.

A model in which metacognition and mindreading are independent capacities realized by distinct cognitive mechanisms has been proposed by Nichols and Stich (2003). This model, however, is not compatible with HOR views on the nature of phenomenal consciousness.

Defenders of HOR theories can deny that phenomenal consciousness depends on mindreading, conceding the intuition presented in the previous section, while urging that phenomenal consciousness depends on metacognition. This view is, however, incompatible with the view that mindreading and metacognition are independent to each other, as Nichols and Stich's model suggests. The reason is that i) the previous intuition suggests that phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for our mindreading ability and ii) according to higher-order theories, metacognition is a necessary condition for phenomenal consciousness. These two premises entail the conclusion that metacognition is necessary for our mindreading ability and both abilities cannot, therefore, involve independent mechanisms.

Contrary to Nichols and Stich proposal, it is commonly held that there is a unique mechanism for both abilities and that they are directly connected. There is, however, a huge controversy on whether metacognition is prior to mindreading (where metacognition being prior to mindreading means that the ability of

⁴ See Carruthers (2009) for an excellent review.

mindreading depends on the mechanisms that evolved for metacognition) or the other way around.

Goldman (2006) suggests that metacognition is prior to mindreading. The attribution of mental states to others depends upon our introspective access to our own mental states together with processes of inference and simulation of various sorts, where a simulation is “the process of re-enacting or attempt to re-enact, other mental episodes.” This is what is known as simulation theory of mind.

The opponent to the simulation theory is known as theory-theory. Theory-theory holds that when we mindread, we access and utilize a theory of human behavior represented in our brains. It posits a theory of human behavior commonly known as ‘folk psychology.’ Just like other folk theories, such as folk physics, it helps us to master our daily lives successfully. On this view, mindreading is essentially an exercise in theoretical reasoning. When we predict behavior, for example, we utilize folk psychology in order to reason from representations of the target’s past and present circumstances and behavior (including verbal behavior), to representations of the target’s future behavior. For theory-theory, if there is just one mechanism, then metacognition depends on mindreading. Metacognition is merely the result of turning our mindreading capacities upon ourselves. In metacognition we just self-interpret ourselves.⁵

If phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for mindreading then the thesis that mindreading is prior to metacognition is not compatible with HOR theories of consciousness. Theory-theory is not an option for HOR theories, if the intuition presented in the previous section is correct.

The only alternative available to HOR theories is that metacognition is prior to mindreading, endorsing some kind or other of simulation theory. This would, however, require that there had been an evolutionary pressure for metacognition; namely, that metacognition confers an adaptive advantage to an organism. I know of no HOR theory that makes such a claim and it is hard to see what such an advantage would be.⁶

It is crucial, for understanding the difficulty, to distinguish metacognition in the intended sense –as cognition *about (representing)* one’s own cognition–

⁵ For different interpretations of the view that mindreading is prior to metacognition see Gazzaniga (1995, 2000); Gopnik (1993); Wilson (2002). This is the view endorsed by Carruthers himself. More precisely, in Carruthers (2003), where he presents his theory of phenomenal consciousness, he suggests that mindreading and metacognition are a unique mechanism with two different modes of access, one for perception (mindreading) and one for introspection (metacognition). In Carruthers (2006) he gives up this view, in favor of the one presented here.

⁶ For instance, the claim that metacognition lacks biological function seems to be endorsed by David Rosenthal, one of the main proponents of HOR theories (1997; 2005). Rosenthal maintain that phenomenal conscious states lack biological function, because most mental states seem to admit unconscious versions with similar causal powers and a theory like his that predicts that phenomenal consciousness lacks biological function is to be preferred.

Rosenthal (2008) offers an alternative genesis of phenomenal consciousness, in cases such as beliefs and desires, without appealing to any notion of function. Rosenthal appeals, however, in his explanation to the mindreading capacity and his view faces, therefore, my objection: phenomenal consciousness seems to be prior to our mindreading ability.

from other uses in cognitive sciences. The term 'metacognition' is sometimes used to refer to any process *above* regular cognitive processes. In this sense, any process that makes use, or monitors, the output of a cognitive process would count as metacognitive. In the intended sense, however, the relation between the metacognitive process and the cognitive is intentional or representational and not merely causal. I show, following Carruthers (2009), that most evolutionary explanation of metacognition focus on the non intentional sense, leaving the thesis that metacognition is prior to mindreading unsupported.

4 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that phenomenal consciousness is a necessary condition for our mindreading ability. This observation jeopardizes theories that maintain that phenomenal consciousness is a by-product of our mindreading ability such as Carruthers (2003).

My objection might be extended to other HOR theories on the reasonable assumption that metacognition depends on mindreading.

To press on other HOR theories, I have argued that HOR theories cannot endorse the view that metacognition and mindreading are independent cognitive mechanisms.

The tenability of HOR theories depends, therefore, on the plausibility of a functional explanation of the evolution of metacognition. I have offered some reasons to doubt that such an explanation will be provided.

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