

A Simple Point about an Alleged Objection to Higher-Order Theories of Consciousness

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For purposes of this paper, a “conscious state” is a mental state whose subject is directly or at least nonevidentially aware of being in it. (The state does not count as conscious if the subject has only been told about it by a cognitive scientist or psychologist; “introspectively” would be better, but no one should say that a state is conscious only if its subject actively introspects it.). N.b., this usage is only one among several quite different though of course not competing ones; the phrase has been used in at least two other senses, as by, respectively, Dretske (1993, 1995) and Block (1995).¹ My definition is stipulative, but not brutally so; it settles on one thing that is often meant by “conscious state”—cf. “a conscious memory,” “a conscious desire,” “a conscious intention,” “a conscious decision.”

According to “higher-order” (HO) theories of consciousness in this sense of “consciousness,” what makes a mental state a conscious one is that it is represented by another of the subject’s mental states, that in virtue of which s/he is aware of it. Some practitioners follow Locke in taking the higher-order state to be quasi-perceptual (Armstrong, 1968, 1980, Lycan 1991, 1996); others say it may be merely a thought about the original state (Rosenthal, 1986, 1990).²

There is an alleged objection to such theories, that originated with Goldman (1993)³ and has since been voiced and discussed by others (Dretske 1995, Stubenberg 1998, Van Gulick 2000, 2005, Gennaro 2005, Kriegel 2009). I say “alleged,” because,

far from seeing the argument as telling, I cannot see that it is an objection at all. My purpose in this note is to explain why not.

Goldman put the argument in this now oft-quoted way:

A rock does not become conscious when someone has a belief about it.

Why should a first-order psychological state become conscious simply by

[its owner's] having a belief about it? (p. 366)

(Or of course by its owner's quasi-perceiving it.) Following Stubenberg, the matter has come to be known as "the problem of the rock," though it has more appropriately been put in terms of bodily states such as of the stomach, the liver or the skin.

Lycan (1996) pointed out the obvious difference: that states of rocks, stomachs et al. are not mental, in the first place. As Gennaro has put it, "after all, the HOT theory is attempting to explain *what makes a mental state* a conscious mental state" (2005, p. 6). Insofar as this was supposed to respond to the perceived problem, it did not satisfy, for it only puts the alleged problem off: Why are mental states made conscious through higher-order representation, when other bodily states are not? But the real problem with the problem is more fundamental.

It is this: The so-called "problem" of the rock is about the *datum*, not about the (or any) theory designed to explain the datum. Let me back up.

The datum for HO theories is the difference between mental states I am aware of being in and those I am not aware of being in.⁴ Now, according to our earlier stipulative definition of "conscious," the datum is, synonymously, the difference between conscious

mental states and non-conscious mental states. HO theories and their competitors set out to explicate that (same) difference.

So what is supposed to be the *problem*? There is no problem, but at most a very mildly interesting side issue: Why are mental states *called* “conscious” when we are aware of them, but stomach states or skin states are not called “conscious” when we are aware of *them*? That is a superficial linguistic question. Lycan (1996) offered one answer⁵ and there may be better ones. But, again, it is a question about the datum. It arises no matter what explanation you go on to accept—HO, or Volume Control (Dennett 1978, Ch. 11, Hill 1991), or “Intermediate Level” (Jackendoff, 1987, Prinz, 2005, 2007), or any other. A fortiori, it does not fault HO, in particular.⁶

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Notes

¹ Dretske uses “conscious state” to mean a state, by being in which, one is conscious of something *else*. (Of course as he insists, such a state need not be conscious in my sense.) Block uses the phrase to mean a state such that there is something “it is like” for its subject to be in it. Plausibly, if a state is conscious in my sense it is also conscious in Block’s, but Block’s further implies specifically sensory-qualitative character. On the difference, see Lycan (2008).

² Still others adopt a “global state” model, as in Van Gulick (2004). I here ignore the dubious difference between higher-order and “self-representational” theories.

³ It had earlier been put to me by Fred Dretske in correspondence. Van Gulick calls it the “Generality Problem.”

⁴ It would be pleasant to think that “aware of” is a nice, uncontentious theory-neutral term; but it is, to say the least, hard to operationalize (Dretske 2006).

⁵

Maybe it is a transferred epithet: We begin with the adverbial form, as in “consciously thought” or “consciously felt,” and when we make the verb into a noun the adverb automatically becomes an adjective—as in the move from “meditatively sipped” to “took a meditative sip.” (p. 24)

⁶ Thanks to Fred Dretske for pushing me to make this point clearer than previously.