

State consciousness – two defective arguments

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1. Introduction

In Lycan (2001) a simple deductive argument for the higher-order representation theory of state consciousness (HOR) is presented. Lycan takes the argument to be valid for his own and similar ‘inner sense’ accounts of HOR (cf. Armstrong 1981; Lycan 1996, 2004) as well as for Rosenthal’s higher-order thought version (see e.g. Rosenthal 1997, 2004, 2005). From a so called first-order representational perspective on state consciousness (FOR) Lurz (2001) presents an argument against Lycan’s account. I demonstrate that Lurz’ argument gives a misinterpretation of HOR and that his FOR-compatible account does not capture the self-presentational structure of state consciousness, a structure implied by the stipulative definition of state consciousness shared by him and Lycan. Although Lurz’ argumentation fails, Lycan’s argument can be shown to be non-valid for another simple reason. Hence both accounts of state consciousness are defective.

In the next section I briefly clarify what the notion ‘state consciousness’ is taken to mean and present two much discussed features of conscious states: Phenomenal character and the self-presentational structure of such states. In section 3 the general agenda for FOR and HOR – what unites them and what divides them - is spelled out with emphasize on the issue about the self-presentational structure of conscious states. This feature plays an axiomatic role for Lurz’ and Lycan’s arguments and is the touchstone in my critique. Section 4 presents Lycan’s argument. In section 5 I give an exposition of the premisses in Lurz’ argument against Lycan. Section 6 proceeds with a demonstration that Lurz’ critique of Lycan’s argument is defective. Section 7 is a critique of Lurz’ version of FOR. Lycan’s argument is demonstrated non-valid in section 8. Section 9 sums up.

2. State consciousness – the notion and the explanandum

What does the term ‘state consciousness’ denote? In philosophy of mind there is a widespread agreement to the effect that there is a difference between ascribing the property ‘consciousness’ to creatures and to mental states. (cf. e.g. Bayne & Chalmers 2003, Block 1995, Carruthers 2005, Dretske 1995, Gennaro 1995, Jacob 1999, Kriegel 2004, Lurz 2004, Lycan 1996, Manson 2000, Rosenthal 2005, Van Gulick 1995). First, an animal or a human being can be described as being conscious, by which we mean, roughly, that the subject considered as a type or token is awake. Second, some subjects are also routinely characterized as being conscious *of* things and state of affairs: By having a perceptual mental state, a creature can be said to be conscious *of* some parcel of its environment. A creature’s being conscious and a creature’s being conscious *of* something are different characterizations of the subject as such. But third, mental states themselves can also have the property of being conscious.

“When we describe desires, fears, and experiences as being conscious or unconscious we attribute or deny consciousness, not to a being, but to some state, condition, or process in that being. States (processes, etc.), unlike the creatures in which they occur, are not conscious of anything or that anything is so although their occurrence in a creature may make that creature conscious of something or that something is so.” (Dretske 1995: 98).

Put somewhat differently, if mental states are properties of creatures, properties of those states are second-order properties of the creatures harboring such states. Therefore consciousness as a

property of a mental state is different from those properties of a creature we ascribe to it when we say it is conscious (period) or conscious *of* something. So, even if there exists a relation of interdependency between the ascription of, say, a creature's being conscious of something and its being in a conscious state, these properties are distinct. Our matter of concern can now be raised: What is, then, this property of consciousness attributed to mental states (for short: 'state consciousness')? What are the characteristic features of a conscious state, to be more precise about the explanandum?

In recent discussions of the prospects for representational reductionism two features have been in focus. These features are the so called phenomenal character and a certain self-presentational structure both of which have been claimed to characterize conscious states. The phenomenal character of a conscious state is that there is something it is like for the subject to have that experience (pace Nagel 1974). When you are looking at a banana there is something it is like for you to have that particular experience of yellow, the claim goes.¹ The claim about the self-presentational structure of consciousness is that a subject's having a conscious state implies that the subject is aware of being in that state.² This claim is essential for HOR's explanation of state consciousness, but is typically denied by FOR. But before turning to that issue, what is representationalism, generally spoken?

3. *Representationalism – the explanans*

What does a representational reduction of state consciousness amount to? FOR and HOR claim that all the features of a conscious state should and can be exhaustively accounted for in terms of the representational properties of the state itself and/or another state representing that state, added a number of functional constraints. This perspective is different from a straight reduction of consciousness to physical or neurological properties; instead, consciousness is claimed to be reducible to intentional and functional relations:

“[...] in seeking to explain phenomenal consciousness in terms of properties of neural events in the brain we would be trying to leap over too many explanatory levels at once. [...] It is now a familiar idea in the philosophy of science that there are *levels* of phenomena in nature, with each level being realized in the one below it, and with each level having its characteristic properties and processes explicable in terms of the one below it. [...] Seen in this light, then what we should expect is that phenomenal consciousness will be reductively explicable in terms of intentional contents and causal-role psychology, if it is explicable at all.” (Carruthers 2005: 6).

The representationalists then, in a second move, further explain - or consider it possible somehow to explain - these intentional and functional features in informational and/or teleological relations between brain states and physical states of the environment.

In accordance with the FOR version of representationalism, when I look at a banana, what it is like for me to have that experience is basically a matter of the state's having a certain sort of representational content. The phenomenal character of the conscious state is claimed either to be

¹ While phenomenal character is an acclaimed mark of conscious states of a sensory kind, many philosophers deny that pure cognitive conscious states like thoughts and beliefs exhibit this feature.

² In this paper the expressions 'aware of' and 'conscious of' are used synonymously in formulation of the self-presentational structure of conscious states. This is also the case when it comes to HOR's turning this formulation into an explicit explanatory account of state consciousness. A practice licensed by representationalists of both sorts; see e.g. Rosenthal (2004: 41, note 4); Dretske (1995: 98); Lycan (1996: 3).

nothing above the content of that state or to supervene on that content, added some functional constraints. Some FOR proponents have hypothesized that a content of a conscious state must be of a non-conceptual kind and have a non-symbolic, fine-grained, picture-like format (see e.g. Dretske, 1995; Kirk 1994, and Tye 1995, 2000). In addition the content is typically claimed to have the functional role that it is available for further cognitive and conative states in the subject (Kirk 1994; Tye 1995, 2000).

Against FOR however, HOR proponents argue that such kinds of representational relations are not sufficient to explain state consciousness. Another type of representational relation is required to explain what it is for mental states to be conscious, with their characteristic features of phenomenal character and self-presentational structure. And HOR's hypothesis is that necessarily, for a mental state to be conscious, the presence of that state must be represented by another state. A meta-representation is needed, which is the rationale behind the name 'higher-order representation theory'. According to HOR a subject S is in a conscious mental state M_1 iff S by having a mental state M_2 in a suitable way W is aware of being in M_1 , where 'aware of' indicates the representational relation between M_1 and M_2 and 'W' is placeholder for the different specific HOR suggestions concerning the precise nature of this relation. Thus the divide between HOR and FOR can be seen to turn on whether or not the existence of a meta-representation is deemed necessary in order for a mental state to be conscious.

Why should we wish to 'go HOR'? Defenders of HOR point out that their explanatory sketch simply reflects a pre-theoretically acceptable mark of state consciousness – namely what I have called the self-presentational structure of a conscious state. Clearly HOR proponents take this feature as pre-theoretically vindicated. Lycan states that he can't hear a natural sense of the phrase 'conscious state' other than as meaning 'state one is conscious of being in' (Lycan 1996: 25), and similarly Rosenthal declares that:

"whatever else we may discover about consciousness, it's clear that, if one is totally unaware of some mental state, that state is not a conscious state" (Rosenthal 2002: 408).

Now, one thing is whether or not HOR's explanation of state consciousness is correct. Another is whether the structure of self-presentation is correct as an initial characterization of the explanandum. Certainly not all FOR proponents assent to this pretheoretical 'mark of state consciousness'. As Lycan points out, Dretske does not (Lycan 2001: 3, note 1) Neither does Tye (cf. Tye 1995: 5-6) or Kirk (2005: 216).

The question is whether it is possible to defend a FOR account without denying the HOR's axiomatic claim about the self-presentational structure of a conscious state. This is what Lurz (2001) claims and Lycan (2001) denies.

4. *Lycan's argument for HOR*

Lycan presents his argument for HOR in the following way:

(1) A conscious state is a mental state whose subject is aware of being in it. [Stipulative definition]

This premiss lends expression to Lycan's acceptance of the claim about the self-presentational structure of a conscious state.

(2) The 'of' in (1) is the 'of' of intentionality; what one is aware of is an intentional object of the awareness.

(3) Intentionality is representation; a state has a thing as its intentional object only if it represents that thing.

Therefore,

(4) Awareness of a mental state is a representation of that state. [2,3]

And therefore,

(5) A conscious state is a state that is itself represented by another of the subject's mental states. [1,4]

Lycan's challenge to the opponent of HOR is: If he accepts (1), but wishes to reject (5), which one of the premisses (2) and (3) will he abandon?

5. Lurz' argument against Lycan

Lurz (2001) argues against Lycan by pointing out two different readings of (1): A higher-order reading of 'aware of' which makes Lycan's argument valid, and a 'lower-order reading', according to which S's awareness of his mental state M simply is S's awareness of what his mental state M represents, and as such lends no support to HOR. Let me expose what I take Lurz' premisses to be before I state my case against his argument:

Lurz' first three premisses - let me denote them (L1), (L2) and (L3) - are identical with (1), (2) and (3) respectively.

(L4) 'A subject's state of *awareness of X*' (Where X has representational content) can be read as 'A subject's state of *awareness of what X represents*'.

(L5) A subject's state of *awareness of what X represents* is not equivalent to the subject's state of *awareness that X represents such-and-such* or equivalent to a state of *awareness as of X's representing such-and-such*.³

(L6) A subject's state of *awareness of his mental state M* is not necessarily a state of *awareness that M represents such-and-such*. [L4, L5]

Therefore,

(L7) A subject's state of *awareness of his mental state M* is not necessarily a state that is a representation of M. [L2, L3, L6]

Thus, since Lurz' lower-order reading of (1) does not affect the supposed truth of Lycan's premisses (2) or (3) - occurring as (L2) and (L3) - Lycan's sentence (4) does not logically follow

³ Lurz' disjunction between '*awareness that something represents such-and-such*' and '*awareness as of something representing such-and-such*' is borrowed from McGinn (1982) and is introduced to capture the difference between thought- and perceptual versions of HOR respectively (Lurz 2001: 315). The distinction neither plays a role for Lurz' argument against HOR nor for my case against Lurz. It will therefore be ignored in what follows.

from his premisses (1)-(3). According to Lurz a subject's state of *awareness of his mental state M* might be read as a state of *awareness of what his mental state M represents*. And for a subject to be in a state of awareness that represents the *content* of his mental state M, it is not the case that the subject is in a further representational state that represents M as such:

"Hence, the subject is *not* in a higher-order representational state when he is simply aware of *what his mental state M represents* [...] it is *not* a representation of the mental state M as such – no more so than one's awareness of *what a trompe l'oeil painting represents* is a representation of the *trompe l'oeil painting as such*." (Lurz 2001: 316)

From this Lurz' conclusion immediately follows:

(L8) A subject's having a conscious state is not necessarily to have a mental state M that is itself represented by another of the subject's mental states; that is: HOR as expressed in (5) does not logically follow from the premisses (1-4). [L1,L7]

Thus, Lycan's deductive argument for HOR fails.

6. A first reply to Lurz

Lurz' argument against Lycan is invalid since his higher-order reading is a misinterpretation of HOR. Lurz' higher-order reading can be rejected without rejecting HOR as such. This is so because HOR does not claim that *awareness of M* is to be explained in terms of *awareness that M represents such-and-such*. Thus the proponent of HOR might embrace the general distinction stated in (L5) between awareness of *what* something represents and awareness *that* it represents such-and-such, as well as this distinction applied to mental states, that is (L6), without this implying (L7) and (L8). It is not part of Lycan's argument that awareness of M - in terms of having a representation with the intentional object M - is to be understood as awareness that M represents such-and-such.

To read HOR's notion of 'awareness of M' in terms of 'awareness that M represents-such-and-such' is to read HOR as putting forward an explanation of a subject's state consciousness in terms of the subject's having explicit awareness of *M as representing such-and-such*. There is a word for this specific kind of awareness of one's ongoing mental states as representing such-and-such, which is *introspection*. A state of ongoing introspection is a conscious mental state. But not all conscious states are states of ongoing introspection. The claim that a conscious state is identical with an ongoing state of introspection is untenable. If true, all mental states except those where the subject has explicit awareness of the fact that it's having a mental state should be deemed unconscious, which makes state consciousness a rather rarely occurring phenomenon. On the contrary, when we introspect our mental states, they are conscious to begin with. Lurz' reading of HOR's notion 'awareness of M' in terms of 'awareness that M represents such-and-such' (L6) implicitly presents HOR as an explanation of state consciousness by way of the subject's having introspective consciousness. But this reading puts HOR's card before the horse: such an explanation would be circular. HOR is an attempt to explain state consciousness in terms of a second-order representation of the state in question, wherefore state consciousness itself should not be introduced at the second-order representational level as a part of the *explanans* of the first-order state consciousness.

Hence, while Lurz is right in pointing out that 'S's awareness of what M represents' is not equivalent to 'S's awareness that M represents such-and-such' (L6), he is wrong when he takes HOR to explain state consciousness in terms of the latter.

The higher-order thought version of HOR clearly acknowledges a distinction between a conscious state and an introspective state of consciousness, where the latter denotes a state in which a subject

is aware that his mental state is representing such-and-such (cf. Rosenthal 1997: 730, 745-746; Rosenthal 2000; Gennaro 1995: 16-21). But the inner sense version of HOR acknowledges this distinction as well. Unfortunately, however, Lycan and David Armstrong have both used the locution 'introspection' (as well as terms like 'scanning', 'inner perception' and 'monitoring') to describe the activity by which a subject's mental states are rendered conscious for it according to the perceptual version of HOR. This is unfortunate, since it might lead someone to misrepresent HOR as a thesis where introspective consciousness holds a position either as *explanandum* (which is false) or as *explanans* (which is viciously circular). The last option is an implicit part of Lurz' argument against Lycan. In fact, though, Armstrong makes a clarifying distinction between 'reflex' introspective awareness and 'introspection proper', a clearing up which Lycan points out too (Lycan 1996: 162-163, note 2):

"It is a plausible hypothesis that the latter ['introspection proper'] will normally involve not only introspective awareness of mental states and activities but also introspective awareness of that introspective awareness." (Armstrong 1981: 63).

Put in Armstrong's terms: By attributing an 'introspection proper' reading of 'awareness of one's own mental state' to HOR, Lurz' case against HOR is valid: Since a subject's state of *awareness of* his mental state M is not necessarily a state of *awareness that* M represents such-and-such (L6), (L7) and (L8) follow immediately and Lycan's deductive argument for HOR fails.

But if one adopts Armstrong's 'reflex'-introspective reading of 'awareness of one's own mental state' instead, a subject is said to be consciously aware of *what* his mental state M represents by being aware of M - a reading which does not lead to (L7) and (L8). In Armstrong's famous example of the absent-minded driver, who suddenly - after a long time of driving without awareness of what he has been doing - 'comes to' and realizes what he is doing, the lack of awareness of the ongoing perceptual representations is a lack of 'reflex' introspective awareness (see Armstrong 1981: 59-60). The driver is absent-minded in a double sense: He is not consciously aware of the road, although he is still having unconscious representations of it while driving. The road is the object represented by his first-order perceptual states.⁴ Secondly, he is not aware of these first-order states. But, according to HOR, it is only because of one's becoming aware of the latter that one is consciously aware of what they represent - and did unconsciously represent all along - namely the road.

Certainly there is a difference between being aware of what a *trompe l'oeil* painting represents and being aware that a painting represents such-and-such (L5). But this is a false analogy to HOR since a subject needs not be aware *that* he is having a representation of a mental state in order for the mental state to be conscious by having a representation of it.⁵ To put it metaphorically: Lurz' higher-order reading of HOR is simply too high.

7. A second reply to Lurz

Lurz might object that even if his higher-order reading illustrates a misconception of HOR along the lines indicated above, his argument has still teeth against the 'true HOR account'. This is so because he also argues *via positiva* for FOR:

⁴ In Armstrong's terminology, the absent-minded driver has 'perceptual consciousness' of the road. "Above all, how is it possible to drive a car for kilometres along a road if one cannot perceive that road?" (Armstrong 1981: 60).

⁵ Likewise David Rosenthal's higher-order thought version of HOR does not imply that the second-order thoughts necessary for the first-order states to become conscious need themselves be conscious, although these second-order states might sometimes themselves in turn become conscious by the subject's having third-order thoughts about *them* (Rosenthal 1997: 742).

(L9) All cases supporting a higher-order reading of the expression ‘S’s awareness of M’ in (L1) can be interpreted in the lower-order way as well, that is, as instances of ‘*awareness of what M represents*’. And this reading is in accordance with a FOR account of state consciousness.

Therefore

(L10) There is no reason for accepting the higher-order reading of the expression ‘S’s *awareness of M*’ in (L1) over the lower-order reading except by begging the question against the FOR account of state consciousness.

Thus, even if Lurz’ own higher-order reading of HOR is mistaken, it might be true that all cases supporting ‘true readings of HOR’ can be interpreted in the suggested lower-order way, a way which conforms with a FOR account. Lurz takes it as a fact that we use the expressions ‘aware of’ and ‘aware of what’ interchangeably, a fact which lends abductive support for the hypothesis that these locutions really do express the same idea (Lurz 2001: 317). Accordingly there would be no reason except by begging the question against FOR for accepting *any* higher-order reading of ‘state of awareness of his mental state’ (Lurz 2001: 317-318).

Against this I argue that (L9) must be rejected. By adopting Lurz’ lower-order interpretation of (L1) his stipulative definition of state consciousness is rendered incomprehensible as a criterion for distinguishing between conscious and unconscious mental states. Therefore (L10) is false.

Consider what Lurz’ presents as the basis for his claim that ‘aware of’ and ‘aware of what’ are used interchangeably:

“Whenever we find it natural to say of a subject who is distracted, for instance, that she is not aware *of* perceiving some item or fact (which she is in fact perceiving), we find it just as natural to say that she is not aware *of what* she is perceiving when she is perceiving the item or fact. And vice versa.” (Lurz 2001: 316).

Lurz points out that this fact is indeed exemplified by the wording of David Armstrong and Peter Carruthers in their descriptions of the absent-minded driver case (Lurz 2001: 316-317).⁶

But first, this is not to say that ‘aware of’ and ‘aware of what’ are used interchangeably when someone *is* (consciously) perceiving. From the fact that the expression ‘S is not aware of perceiving some x’ is used interchangeably with ‘S is not aware of the x he is perceiving’ it does not follow that the expressions ‘S is aware of perceiving some x’ and ‘S is aware of the x he is perceiving’ are used interchangeably as well.

Second, there is a reason why Lurz *should* acknowledge this distinction. If S is not, some way or another, aware of his perceiving, he is not consciously perceiving x. To substitute ‘S’s awareness of what M represents’ for S’s awareness of M’ leaves us with a reading of (L1) by which we no longer have a criterion for distinguishing between instances of conscious and unconscious mental states. Lycan and Lurz agree upon the stipulative definition of state consciousness: (L1)=(1). Both of them believe that this premiss states a ‘mark of state consciousness’ which gives us a non-question begging first handle on the difference between conscious and unconscious states. Now, by adopting Lurz’ lower-order reading of (L1) it gets the following form:

⁶ See Armstrong *op.cit.* and (Carruthers 1989: 258). See also (Carruthers 2000: 149) for a similar description.

(L1*) A conscious state is a mental state whose subject is aware of what M represents.

But when a subject has an *unconscious* mental state he might also be said to be aware of what the state represents. Certainly the unconscious driver too might be described as being perceptually aware of the road, other cars, curves, etc. Lurz clearly accepts the existence of unconscious mental states. He describes, with HOR, the unconscious driver's visual states in terms of 'perceiving' and seeing' (Lurz 2001: 315, 317). So, by accepting (L1*), what is the difference between conscious and unconscious mental states? It would be truly unhelpful and circular to modify (L1*) to 'a conscious mental state is a mental state whose subject is consciously aware of what M represents', in order to explain the difference. Thus, where (L1) captures such a difference, (L1*) does not.

When Lurz interprets (L1) - a premiss acceptable to both HOR and FOR - in terms of (L1*) he leaves his own stipulatively defined 'mark of state consciousness' behind. A reading of (L1), which implies that S is aware of his mental state M, runs the risk of wiping out the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental states. As exemplified by Lurz' lower-order account. Hence (L9) must be rejected, and, contrary to (L10), Lurz' lower-order reading of (L1) does not pose a threat to a HOR account of state consciousness.

Lurz describes (L1) as reflecting 'our pre-theoretical intuitions about state consciousness' (Lurz 2001: 314). That is, (L1) reflects a non-explanatory criterion by which we distinguish between conscious and unconscious mental states. Since (L1*) no longer reflects this distinction, (L1*) is not, strictly speaking, a reading of (L1) at all. Lurz' lower-order reading is simply too low.

8. A reply to Lycan

Although I take Lurz' argument against HOR to be defective, I am not satisfied with Lycan's argument myself. His argument is not valid.

Consider again Lycan's premisses and the challenge posed: If the opponent of HOR accepts (1), but wishes to reject (5), which one of the premisses (2) and (3) will he abandon?

My answer to Lycan's challenge is that neither of the premisses (2) and (3) has to be rejected in order to show that the conclusion (5) does not follow. From (1)-(4) it might still be the case that when a subject is in a conscious state – that is, a mental state whose subject is aware of being in it (1) – this very state represents *itself* to the subject as one he is aware of being in. According to such an account of state consciousness, no *further* mental state is needed for this representation.⁷ From acceptance of the subject's awareness of the state as an intentional relation (2) and understanding this relation as the subject's having a representation of the state in question (3), it does not follow that the conscious state does not represent *itself* to the subject. Certainly defenders of HOR argue against this possibility for *other* reasons. But (5) cannot be deduced *solely* from (1)-(4). Acceptance of the proposition that awareness of a mental state is a representation of that state (4), does not necessarily imply that the representation in question is carried out by *another* of the subject's mental states, as (5) says. So, yes, Lurz is right: Lycan's argument is defective, but not because (4) does not logically follow from Lycan's premisses (1)-(3), as Lurz suggests. The reason is that (5) does not follow from (4).

A deductive shortcut to HOR has not been brought to light yet.

⁷ Such an account can be found in Brentano (1874). For recent version see Thomasson (2000) and Lehrer (2002). For a discussion of this view in contrast with HOR, see Kriegel (2006). Indeed Kriegel & Williford (2006) is a collection of papers all of which in different ways address this issue..

9. Conclusion

Lurz' case against HOR fails for two reasons: First, his higher-order reading misrepresents HOR as a theory about introspective consciousness. Second, his lower-order reading does not account for the stipulative definition of state consciousness. This reading does not reflect a conception of state consciousness by which we can distinguish a conscious from an unconscious mental state. Thus, on the one hand, Lurz' argument against HOR is defective and his FOR account does not lend expression to the self-presentational structure of a conscious state stipulated in the definition of this term.

On the other hand, though, Lycan's argument is non-valid anyway. A theory of state consciousness in which the presentational structure of consciousness is accounted for by the mental state's representing itself is not an instance of HOR.⁸ In other words, from the fact that S's awareness of a mental state is a representation of that state it does not follow that this representation is carried out by S's having another mental state: HOR does not follow. Hence both of the considered arguments by Lycan and Lurz are defective.

Perhaps other versions of FOR or HOR can lend us the explanation of state consciousness. Whether this is the case remains to be shown.

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I would like to thank Mikkel Gerken, Bill Lycan and David Rosenthal for helpful comments.

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⁸ Lycan (2004: 110, note 1) actually mentions such a theoretical possibility, but dismisses it right away without argument.

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