

Phenomenal Consciousness: Understanding the Relation between Experience and Neural Processes in the Brain, by Dimitris Platchias. Acumen, 2011. Pp. viii + 215. H/b £55.00, P/b £18.99.

Some philosophers maintain that consciousness poses a problem for attempts to articulate a naturalistic account of mental phenomena. These philosophers often maintain that there are two different kinds of consciousness. There is, on the one hand, the kind of consciousness that factors into descriptions and explanations of behavior—what Ned Block has called ‘access consciousness’, and there is, on the other hand, the kind of consciousness that consists of qualitative feels or qualia—what Block has called ‘phenomenal consciousness’. Many philosophers feel confident that access-conscious states can be understood in terms of the functional roles they play in explanations of behavior, and that the mechanisms occupying these roles can be understood in principle in completely naturalistic terms. But, they claim, phenomenal consciousness is different. It cannot be given a functional-role analysis, so it presents an obstacle to a naturalistic theory of mind.

Philosophers like Dimitris Platchias disagree. Consciousness, they say, can be understood in terms of a functional role.

To appreciate their view, we first have to reject the idea that there are two kinds of consciousness. There is only one, say philosophers like Platchias; it’s the kind of phenomenon Thomas Nagel has described: there is something it is like for us to be in conscious mental states. There are nevertheless many mental states that are not conscious. Freud made known examples of unconscious desires and other cognitive states, but there are examples of unconscious perceptual or sensory states as well. A hiker moving quickly through the woods avoids a large tree branch that has fallen across the path. Avoiding the branch requires the hiker to have fairly detailed sensory information about it, but the hiker may not be conscious of all its sensory features. Likewise, patients with neurological conditions like blindsight perceive qualitative features of their

environments and yet are not conscious of doing so; there is nothing it is like for them to have the perceptions. These examples suggest that perceptual or sensory qualia are not essentially conscious. Other examples seem to show that conscious states are not essentially qualitative. There is something it's like for me to understand consciously that $2+3=5$, but it is not essential to my understanding that it be accompanied by qualitative mental properties. The conclusion philosophers like Platchias draw from these examples is that qualia are neither necessary nor sufficient for consciousness. The distinction between qualitative mental states and other mental states is not a distinction between two kinds of consciousness; rather, mental states of both sorts can be conscious or not. This suggests that the task of explaining consciousness can be understood as the task of describing a mechanism that plays a functional role, namely the role of rendering some mental states conscious. According to philosophers like Platchias, that mechanism involves higher-order mental states.

Higher-order mental states are occurrent internal states that have first-order mental states as their objects. The hiker who perceives the tree is in a first-order perceptual state, an internal state that represents the tree. He is not aware that he is in this state, however, because he does not have a corresponding higher-order state; that is, he does not have an internal state that represents his possession of that first-order state. Were he to acquire such a higher-order state, he would be aware of perceiving the tree; his previously unconscious perceptual state would become conscious.

Some higher-order theorists have claimed that higher-order states are themselves like perceptual states, that we perceive our first-order mental states and thereby make them conscious. But philosophers like Platchias take higher-order states to be more like thoughts. They are higher-order thought (HOT) theorists (the best known among them is perhaps David Rosenthal). Within a HOT framework, the task of accounting for consciousness becomes the task of accounting for the function of thinking about other mental states. Platchias does not defend the claim that such a

function can be understood naturalistically, but like most parties to the consciousness debate, including anti-naturalists like David Chalmers, Platchias is optimistic that cognitive functions in general can. He thus sees HOT theory as paving the way for a naturalistic account of consciousness.

To defend his HOT theory, Platchias argues against several competing theories including higher-order perception (HOP) theories, first-order representational theories, mysterianism, panprotopsychism, and emergentism. The arguments he advances are well-rehearsed in the literature for the most part, but he does sometimes bring a fresh angle or example.

One complaint about the book is that the organization of particular sections is sometimes difficult to follow. The writing can also be a bit inefficient at times; Platchias treats some points at greater length than seems necessary. At other times he treats points more briskly than one might hope. I'll mention two examples of the latter.

One of the standard objections to HOT theories is the so-called problem of the rock. HOT theories claim that having a thought about a first-order mental state M is sufficient to make M conscious. But, says the objection, it is unclear how having a thought about an unconscious thing can do this. Consider a rock. You cannot make a rock conscious simply by thinking about it. But if thinking about an unconscious thing doesn't make it conscious, there is no reason to think that thinking about unconscious mental state M can make M conscious. Critics thus challenge HOT theorists to explain how higher-order states manage to convert first-order states into conscious ones. Some HOT theorists have argued that this request for an explanation is illegitimate. The transition of a first-order state from being unconscious to being conscious when it is represented by a higher-order state is, they say, a brute matter of fact about how the mind works on their view. Because of this, critics cannot assume the legitimacy of their request for an explanation of the transition without assuming at the outset that HOT theory is false. The charge of explanatory inadequacy implicitly begs the question against HOT theorists.

Platchias offers what he takes to be a better response. The self-ascription of mental states, he says, is what essentially characterizes them as conscious. Moreover, he says, ‘a HOT does not misrepresent its first-order state... If [it] represents us as being in a certain first-order state, then we are in that state, we are having that experience’ (p. 167). Suppose, then, that higher-order state H represents me as having first-order mental state M . If Platchias is right, then it follows that I must be in M . Moreover, if he is right about the sufficiency of self-ascription for consciousness, then I must be conscious of being in M . Consequently, having H is sufficient for M 's being a conscious state. But how does this solve the problem of the rock? A sufficient condition is not yet an explanation. Knowing that inserting a coin will activate a vending machine does not suffice for knowing how the coin does it. How, then, does the sufficiency of H for M 's being conscious explain how H manages to convert M from being unconscious to conscious? On this point it is not clear that Platchias does any better than HOT theorists who appeal to bruteness.

Second, Platchias does not discuss sensorimotor contingency theory (SC theory) in any detail. This is surprising since SC theory emerges out of the literature in cognitive science and is inspired by many of the same examples that Platchias mentions. SC theory has been championed recently by the philosopher Alva Noë and the cognitive scientist J. Kevin O'Regan. They share with HOT theorists like Platchias a commitment to naturalism, but they challenge a key assumption that HOT theories share with HOP theories and with first-order representational theories, namely the assumption that consciousness consists in the possession of internal representations. Representational theories, they say, paint a picture of experience as a passive process in which an organism internally registers features of the environment in the way a camera passively registers light. But real perception is not like this. It is an exploratory activity in which an organism strives to position and reposition its sensory organs to acquire information about the surrounding world. Each sensory modality is characterized by distinctive patterns of sensorimotor interaction with the

environment. Movements, sensations, and features of the environment change in response to one another in lawlike ways that SC theorists call ‘sensorimotor contingencies’ or ‘sensorimotor expectations’. The taste of espresso, the look of a red wall—these and other conscious experiences consist not in the possession of inner representations, but in the various things organisms do with objects in their environments, the various ways they exploit their tacit knowledge of sensorimotor contingencies to navigate their way through the world. There might be good reasons for rejecting SC theory, and perhaps there are ways that HOT, HOP, and representational theorists can exploit its insights. Either way it would have been nice to have heard more from Platchias on the potential threats and opportunities SC theory presents.

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