

Abusing the notion of what-it's-like-ness: A response to Block

JOSH WEISBERG

Ned Block argues that the higher order (HO) approach to explaining consciousness is ‘defunct’ because a prominent objection (the ‘misrepresentation objection’) exposes the view as ‘incoherent’. What’s more, a response to this objection that I’ve offered elsewhere (Weisberg 2010) fails because it ‘amounts to abusing the notion of what-it’s-like-ness’ (Block 2011: 427).¹ In this response, I wish to plead guilty as charged. Indeed, I will continue herein to abuse Block’s notion of what-it’s-like-ness. After doing so, I will argue that the HO approach accounts for the sense of what-it’s-like-ness that matters in a theory of consciousness. I will also argue that the only incoherence present in the HO theory is that generated by embracing Block’s controversial notion of what-it’s-like-ness, something no theorist of any stripe ought to do.

Block is famous for (among other things) having introduced the notion of ‘phenomenal consciousness’ into contemporary philosophy of mind (Block 1995). This term is widely employed in the philosophical literature and it even appears in the empirical literature. But widespread usage has brought about divergent interpretations of the term. We can distinguish a ‘moderate’ and a ‘zealous’ reading of ‘phenomenal consciousness’. On the moderate reading, ‘phenomenal consciousness’ just means ‘experience’. Many people have embraced this sense of the term and use it to roughly pick out conscious experience involving sensory quality (states like conscious visual experiences or conscious pains, for example).² On the zealous reading, however, phenomenal consciousness is held to be ‘distinct from any cognitive, intentional, or functional property’ (Block 1995: 234). That is, any explanation of phenomenal consciousness in exclusively cognitive, intentional or functional terms will fail to capture, without remainder, what is really distinctive about phenomenal consciousness. Block, of course, is fully clear about embracing the zealous reading; indeed, his initial introduction of the notion is in those terms.

The same ambiguity occurs with the much-used (and abused) idea of ‘what-it’s-like-ness’. The notion has its origins in Nagel’s famous 1974 ‘Bat’ paper where he writes that ‘an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something it’s like to *be* that organism – something it’s like *for* the organism’ (1974: 436, emphasis in original). Here, again, there

¹ Unchaperoned references are to Block 2011.

² See, e.g. Byrne 1997: 106: ‘Everyone believes in phenomenal consciousness, understood as I explained it. Yes, even Daniel Dennett and Paul Churchland.’

are (at least) two interpretations of the notion. On one reading, which we can again term the moderate reading, the 'for' stressed by Nagel is crucial: the notion indicates a subjective awareness of an organism's mental states by the organism itself. Further, this reading is noncommittal about the nature of what-it's-like-ness. It might be a monadic property of mental states. Or it might be a relational property, linking a psychological subject with her conscious states. Or it might be a property of how things *seem* to a conscious subject – the property of seeming to be in this or that mental state. The moderate reading does not take this fine-grained individuation to be given in Nagel's phrase. Rather, it is seen as a rough, common-sense way picking out conscious experience.

The zealous reading of the phrase, in contrast, takes what-it's-like-ness as a monadic property of conscious states. It is something that a state has or lacks independently of its relations to other mental states.³ On this reading, a conscious pain itself has the property of what-it's-like-ness. And this is true even if the subject is wholly unaware of the existence of this pain – that is, even if there's nothing it's like *for* the subject. The zealous readings of 'what-it's-like-ness' and 'phenomenal consciousness' go hand-in-hand. And it is solely what-it's-like-ness zealously construed that causes the alleged troubles for the HO approach.

Block rightly notes that I consider the HO approach and approaches like his neural identity theory of qualia to be 'conflicting approaches to the same thing' (Block 2011: 420). I hold that they are both attempts to explain phenomenal consciousness and what-it's-like-ness in the moderate sense. But I explicitly reject the claim that the HO approach is trying to explain the zealous notion of phenomenal consciousness and of what-it's-like-ness.⁴

Furthermore, I believe the zealous notion is worthy of abuse. Block builds his present argument on the fact that the HO approach is forced to accept that we can misrepresent ourselves as being in conscious states. My response to this worry is to clarify that what it is to be in a conscious state is to be aware of oneself as being in that state. This awareness, in turn, is explained by HO representation. So 'being in a conscious state' is an intentional, representational notion. Conscious states are states we represent ourselves as being in, and so, like all objects of representation, they need not exist. It is the intentional content of the HO representation that matters for consciousness, not the presence of the target first-order state the HO representation is normally about.⁵

³ This is true even if the state's realization in the brain is characterized in relational terms. Hence, the property is intrinsic to the mental state. Cf. Levine 2001: 93ff.

⁴ Cf. Weisberg 2010: §1.

⁵ I take all this to be consistent with what David Rosenthal has said in defence of the HOT theory. See, e.g. Rosenthal 2004, 2005, 2010.

It's here Block claims that things get abusive. My defence entails that the what-it's-like-ness occurring during an episode of HO misrepresentation 'is fake' (Block 2011: 425)! There is no first-order state, and so, on the zealous reading, there is no property of what-it's-like-ness. (The HO state itself cannot have the what-it's-like-ness without collapsing the HO view into the rival 'self-representational' view.) And by this logic, the HO theorists cannot explain why there is an important difference between those really having conscious pains (replete with real what-it's-like-ness) and those merely representing themselves as having conscious pains (possessing only fake what-it's-like-ness). Block concludes that there is no way to explain why pain matters on the HO approach. And that means that the approach is 'about consciousness in a merely technical sense of the term' (Block 2011: 427). This is not meant as a compliment.

But the zealous notion of what-it's-like-ness has it exactly backwards. According to Block's zealous reading, pains matter even if the subject is *in no way aware of them*. Consider a person in such a state. She will not be aware of being in pain. She will deny that anything is wrong. She will lack any conscious desire that the pain should cease. She will consciously go about her business as if nothing is wrong. Indeed, it may be that certain general anaesthetics work in this manner. There is still activity in lower level brain regions associated with pain, but owing to a lack of coherence in higher areas, subjects are completely unaware that they are in pain.⁶ But according to Block, the pains that matter are still present. The subjects might even be in agonizing pain – that is, they might possess states with the what-it's-like-ness property of agonizing pain – even though there's nothing it's like *for* the subjects. I contend that, whatever is going on here, to characterize such episodes as conscious is to use a 'merely technical sense of the term'. There is little to recommend this technical sense beyond the intuitions brought on by philosophical thought experiments,⁷ and so I feel no shame in abusing the zealous notion.

According to the HO approach, when there's something it's like for one, it's due to the subject's being aware of her states by way of HO representation. In the misrepresentation case, she is aware of herself as being in a state that happens to be absent. So what it's like for her is just as she (erroneously) represents things as being. If she seems to herself to be in pain, that's what it's like for her. And that's also what matters to her! If you offer someone a choice between real torture of which she will be wholly unaware or something that consciously *seems* just like real torture but isn't, my guess is she'll pick the former every time.⁸ This moderate reading of what-it's-like-ness ties

⁶ Flohr 2000.

⁷ Block 1995. See also Chalmers 1996: ch. 3.

⁸ With the stipulation that the real torture will cause no bodily damage. The contrast here is between two sorts of *mental* states.

what-it's-like-ness to how things subjectively seem for the subject. Consciousness is a matter of mental appearances, and the moderate HO reading of the what-it's-like phrase captures this idea. The only abuse being offered here is to a zealous extension of the notion.⁹

Still, it might seem that something is badly wrong with the HO approach. I've acknowledged that one can be in a conscious state that does not exist – surely, that's the close cousin of an incoherence, even if one can make some technical sense of it. However, I'll now show that this is not the case, and indeed, that any lingering worry is a residue of the zealous reading.

Consider the following scenario. In the glorious future of neuroscience, researchers are able to precisely identify which brain states occur when a subject is phenomenally conscious in the moderate sense. Imagine that these future neuroscientists discover that lower level brain states, like the states of visual processing, audition, olfaction, etc. sometimes occur without there being anything it's like *for* the subject. Further, when there *is* something it's like *for* the subject, the lower level states are always accompanied by a state in the higher cortical reaches of the brain.¹⁰

Now imagine that the scientists are able to discern what it is that these higher level brain states are doing. They encode, in a compressed form, the representational information carried by the lower level brain states and they integrate this information with the subject's active self-representation. I submit that these scientists have discovered what Block terms the 'aboriginal' HO view (Block 2011: 427). There is something it's like for one to be in lower level states when they are accompanied by higher level states making one aware of oneself as being in those states. Of course, this still might be what Block terms the 'modest' HO view – the consciousness that matters might be instantiated by the lower level states themselves and the HO states might only make the subject aware (in some cognitive, reflexive sense) of states that are already conscious in the zealous phenomenal sense.

But now our future neuroscientists run the following test, being well versed in the important history of early 21st-century proto-neuroscience (back when even philosophers wrote about consciousness!). The scientists trigger the HO state by itself, carefully tickling all the right neurons with their subtle

⁹ None of this is to say that there's *no* difference on the HO theory between the accurate and misrepresentation case. What is missing in the misrepresentation case is a pain, characterized independently of consciousness in broadly functional terms. (See Rosenthal 2005: chs. 5–7; 2010.) So the misrepresenting subject will lack certain functional states and this will matter for her behaviour and the future progression of her mental states. But Block's objection is about *what it's like*, not about missing functional states.

¹⁰ Indeed, we may not have to wait for future neuroscience to make this discovery. See Lau and Passingham 2006: 18765ff: '...a significantly higher level of subjective awareness... was associated with a significant increase in activity in the left mid-dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (mid-DLPFC) (coordinates 46, 48, 14).'

neuro-stimulators. What happens? Here, I contend, is one possibility: it seems to the conscious subject that things are exactly the same as when the HO state accompanied a lower order state in the normal way. Indeed, oscillating between the presence and absence of the lower order state causes no discernible *subjective* difference. Is this just impossible? Incoherent? It does not seem so, and I'll proceed on the assumption that the situation described is in fact a completely coherent possibility.

Now, scratching their heads, our future neuroscientists ask the following question: which state is conscious in the neuro-stimulator-induced misrepresentation case? My feeling is that it's not at all a big deal how they answer this question. They are already in possession of a theory explaining what happens in the brain when there's something it's like *for* subjects: there is something it's like for subjects when they represent themselves as being in lower order mental states.

But in this case, the lower order state does not exist. What is to be said? Perhaps, the thing to say is that the HO state itself is the conscious state. And there's a decent sense of 'conscious state' where that is correct – the HO state is the state *responsible* for there being something it's like for the subject.

But there is another sense of 'conscious state' to address, the sense picking out how things seem to the subject. The subject is wholly unaware of this HO state; indeed, she is quite surprised when she is told of its presence by our neuroscientists. The subject instead says, 'It seems to me that I'm in pain! Please stop stimulating my neurons in that way!' In this sense of the term, it seems reasonable to say that the subject is in the conscious state she seems to herself to be in – that explains the mental appearances and, what's more, it explains what matters *to her*. Even though this state does not exist, it is conscious because the subject represents herself as being in that state. This is, of course, not the only way to understand conscious states, but I do not see it as being at all incoherent.

Still, one may feel that we require a real, existent mental state to pin the property of what-it's-like-ness on. But by now it should be clear that there's no need to accept the existence of this strange property, a free-floating what-it's-like-ness disconnected from any conscious subject. I hope that I've established that the HO approach can explain without incoherence all that needs to be explained, even in the odd case of HO misrepresentation. And I hope I've disabused you of any over-zealous ideas about what-it's-like-ness.

University of Houston
513 Agnes Arnold Hall
Houston, TX 77204-3004, USA
jweisberg@uh.edu

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Response to Rosenthal and Weisberg

NED BLOCK

I described an incoherence in one form of the higher order thought (HOT) theory that derives from its holding both that an appropriate higher order thought is *sufficient* for a conscious state and that being the object of an appropriate higher order thought is *necessary* for a conscious state. A (1) lone and (2) unconscious (i.e. not the object of another HOT) and (3) “empty” (i.e. reference-failing) higher order thought at *t* determines a conscious state at *t*, but – contrary to the necessary condition – there is no thought at *t* about *that conscious state* – unless the lone thought is about itself. But such self-reference would collapse the HOT theory into the rival same-order