

Peter Carruthers. *Consciousness*. Essays from a Higher-Order Perspective. Oxford (Clarendon Press), 2005, 247 pp.

Consciousness collects Carruthers' essays on the topic from the last ten years. Some of the essays haven't been revised, so the book may set out Carruthers' current position on consciousness, presenting his dispositionalist higher order theory of consciousness. Although there is some repetition given that the original essays sometimes follow a similar line of argument the book presents a more or less concise introduction to one of the main theories currently discussed.

The book can be divided into three parts. The first part deals with phenomenal consciousness and the advantages of a dispositionalist theory of (phenomenal) consciousness in distinction to first order or second order actualist theories. The second part takes up Carruthers' work on the relation of language and thought. The third part takes up Carruthers' work on animal consciousness and the ethics of animal treatment.

Carruthers' work is known for some highly controversial theses.

In his earlier book *The Animal Issue* (Cambridge [University Press], 1992) he claimed "that human beings are unique amongst members of the animal kingdom in possessing conscious mental states" (p. 186). Given a common understanding of "conscious" this sounds like the outrageous remark that there is nothing – not even blackness, so to say – going on in even highly developed animals like mammals. Everything depends on the employed definition of (phenomenal) consciousness here. Carruthers himself is partly to blame for such misunderstandings, but in *Consciousness* he gives a more precise statement of this definition or understanding of the terms. Interestingly his definition of consciousness, tying it to the human case interwoven with self-awareness, resembles the understanding of consciousness in the phenomenological tradition. Phenomenal consciousness, according to Carruthers, consists of a dual analog content (the first order perceptual content *red* plus the higher order analog presentation *seeming red* of the occurrence of the first order state itself). Thus there are phenomenal properties of the world "and phenomenal properties of one's experience of the world" (43). The subjective aspect of phenomenal states "is their higher-order analog content" (180). Phenomenal consciousness *thus defined* requires higher order thought (namely possessing the concept of experience), and *thus taken* is restricted to beings capable of higher order thought, presumably those having a language faculty. Animals experience the world (there *is* something going on in them), but do not possess consciousness in the strict sense of the term. "[T]he cat *perceives* the smell of the cheese. We have no independent grounds for thinking that its percepts will be phenomenally conscious ones." (52). We cannot imagine

what a cat perception is like, since we are prone to project our (i.e. phenomenally conscious) perspective into a being which has a different mental life. This does not preclude comparative psychology, since in many human and all animal behaviors “the explanatory burden is carried by the purely first-order, not necessarily phenomenally conscious, character of those states” (203). Some human behavior involves consciousness (or reports thereof) directly.

Carruthers still invites some misunderstanding – as in the earlier book – by linking animal consciousness to phenomena like blindsight (e.g. 72), in which from the conscious perspective of the person involved really *nothing* is going on (with respect to seeing, in this case).

Carruthers, further on, now thinks that it is first order disappointments that are morally relevant, not phenomenal states. This, however, requires attribution of belief to animals:

“What is sufficient for subjective frustration is that a desire and a belief with directly contradictory contents should both be active together in the creature’s practical reasoning system.”(169)

In another of this earlier books *Language, Thought, and Consciousness* (Cambridge [University Press], 1996) Carruthers claimed that “many thought-types are such that their conscious tokening in us are *necessarily* language-involving” (p. 7), taking language to be constitutive of thought. Given some common understanding of “thought” this, again, may seem highly contra-intuitive, since some of our thoughts (e.g. perceptions) are conscious although neither linguistic nor accompanied, it seems, by inner speech. In *Consciousness* Carruthers now qualifies his position in restricting the language dependency thesis to conscious propositional thinking (116). He argues that one either has to be an eliminativist with respect to conscious propositional thinking or accept its being constituted by inner speech. The main argument apart from the role of language in higher order thought is that one hasn’t to interpret one’s inner speech to know what one is thinking right then, as might be the case if language only expressed thoughts already there. And as with phenomenal states “conscious thinkings are self-referential” (142), subject to higher order thought.

One of the main goals of the book is to argue for a naturalistic explanation of consciousness and the dispositionalist higher order theory of consciousness as the most appropriate approach. (First order theories are dismissed by Carruthers, since they fail to account for the dual analog character of phenomenal consciousness, actualist higher order theories are dismissed, since they fail to account for some perception to not become phenomenally conscious and, if such theories propose some inner perceptive faculty, the absence of inner misrepresentation.) Now, one may wonder how a disposition can *explain* anything. A disposition sometimes “fires”, that is some event occurs which causes further events. If the

disposition does not “fire” no such event occurs. Events are involved in causal chains, neither states nor dispositions are. So how can the disposition to be the object of an higher thought make a state conscious? In fact Carruthers has a model in which it is not this disposition itself – so to say – which makes the state conscious, but the state’s entering into a special processing stage (“special-purpose functionally individuated memory store” [8], Cartesian Theatre, or whatever your favorite description of the involved mental module may be). This entering clearly is an event. As an event it is involved in causal chains. The mere entering of a stage, however, may be doubted to be explanatory. Compare: That something can be seen by you is explained by bringing it from the outside into a lit chamber. So far so good, but what is not explained here is why the chamber is lit or who are you. The same goes for Carruthers’ theory: Entering a special processing stage explains the further functional potential of a state, but it does not explain why that stage is lit by consciousness (even leaving the problem of the perceiving agent to the side). The problem seems to be what to expect from an explanation. Fichte famously criticized any higher order theory of consciousness in noting that the mere process of one act taking another act as its objects does not explain the occurrence of consciousness/self-awareness. His riddle was that the reflecting consciousness has already to have the structure of the reflected consciousness to be conscious of *itself*. Some similar problem can be found, as just explained, within Carruthers’ theory; his theory is in the same boat as the operator theories, which account for consciousness by putting some representation into the scope of operators like ‘The experience...’/‘I feel...’, he criticizes (90). Carruthers comes in some of his expositions of the working of consciousness close to the phenomenological (or Neo-Kantian) tradition, but these in contrast insisted on consciousness to be non-explainable, but to be described with inherently complex egological structures (like distinguishing implicit self-knowledge from the occurring subjective perspective from the “agent” of consciousness – etc. [cf. my “Lessons from Sartre for the Analytic Philosophy of Mind”, *Analecta Husserliana*, 2005]).

Consciousness sets forth one of the main contenders in the current theories of consciousness. Topics not dealt with in this review include a functionalist account of merely representational concepts in contrast to so called “qualia”. The book can be studied as an exposition of Carruthers’ theory, but may also be taken as a clarifying supplement to Carruthers’ other work.

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