

The problem of animal consciousness

Peter Carruthers

University of Maryland

Consciousness

- Our topic: *phenomenal* consciousness.
- A property of mental states.
- Not: conscious vs unconscious *organism* – awake vs asleep.
- Not: mere perception – many forms of unconscious perception.
- All can agree: consciousness is first-personal (what it is *like*).
- Theorizing about consciousness must begin from the human case.

Qualia realism

- Some believe in intrinsic properties of experience: qualia.
- Qualia are the *phenomenal* properties of conscious experience.
- Which events do qualia attach to in humans?
- *Can* endorse global broadcasting theory (Baars, Tye, Dehaene).
- Our best empirical theory of conscious/unconscious distinction.
- Other animals undergo states that are *more or less similar* to human forms of global broadcasting.
- A substantive (factual) question which states possess intrinsic qualia.

My assumptions

- Global broadcasting theory + reductive representationalism.
- Hence: no qualia.
- Consciousness = globally broadcast nonconceptual content.
- Note: a distinctive combination of *content-type* and *causal role*.
- But can explain the temptation to believe in qualia.
- “Hard-problem”-type thought-experiments (zombies, Mary, etc.) arise because we can form purely recognitional concepts of experience.
- “There could be a being like me in all physical, functional, and intentional/representational respects who lacks *this-R*.”
- (*this-R* = recognitional concept of experience of red)
- “When Mary leaves her room she will learn that red tomatoes give rise to *this-R*.”

Degrees of broadcasting

- In humans, a sharp step-function for conscious/unconscious.
- No degrees of broadcasting.
- But global broadcasting *architecture* varies by degrees *across species*.
- Verbal report; higher-order awareness; executive function; long-term memory; sustained affective reactions.
- Executive systems are multi-component / multi-functional.
- Selecting actions, rehearsing actions, inhibiting actions, forming intentions for future, implementing intentions, directing attention, searching memory, modulating emotion.
- All systems have degrees of internal complexity.
- & degrees of conceptual sophistication.
- Global broadcasting by degrees. What of consciousness?

Degrees of consciousness?

- Degree of conscious experience in species S = degree of similarity to human global broadcasting?
- Conscious experience all-or-none in humans.
- Maybe *concept* of consciousness is all-or-none.
- But the property picked out (globally broadcast nonconceptual content) *isn't*.
- Can be degrees of that property exemplified across species.
- But similarities are likely to be complex, multifaceted & cross-cutting.
- No single similarity metric awaiting discovery.
- & what specifies the zero-point?

A conscious / unconscious mid-point?

- A (vague) categorical boundary:
- Conscious experience in species *S* = *more similar* to human global broadcast than to human *unconscious* experience?
- Dorsal-visual motor control; habit-guidance; sleepwalking; unattended percepts; swift activation of affect motor-responses; unconscious affective learning.
- c.f. red is any shade more similar to central red than central yellow.
- But: there may be many forms of unconscious experience that aren't similar to either.
- c.f. red is any shade more similar to central red than central blue.
- Presupposes an already-given (discoverable) similarity metric.
- And: unlikely to be a linear similarity-space.

Stipulative, not substantive

- Suppose complete knowledge of systems and functioning in a chicken, a salmon, or a honey bee.
- What is added if conscious (or not), or to degree n or m ?
- Nothing “lights up”; no intrinsic qualia.
- What is added is just categorization *as* conscious (or to degree n).
- Stipulated, not discovered.
- Stop asking whether animals are conscious.
- But not because they aren’t; because no fact of the matter.
- Distracts from the hard (and substantive) question of how different minds are organized and function
- & moral Q of extent to which minds organized like that matter.