

After Brentano: A One-Level Theory of Consciousness

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Much current discussion in philosophy of mind focusses on the prospects for a reductive account of consciousness. But we cannot properly assess those prospects until we have a decent analysis of what consciousness is, so that we can assess whether or not various supposed reductions are in fact reducing *consciousness*. Recent analyses of consciousness are sharply divided between higher-order views of consciousness, according to which an act is made conscious in virtue of a second-order mental act directed towards it; and intrinsic or one-level theories, according to which consciousness is an intrinsic feature of those mental states that have it, not something that must be bestowed on them by some further act.

Modern higher-order views of consciousness are typically traced back to Brentano (Güzeldere 1997: 789; Siewert 1998: 357n1 and 358n3), but I will argue that, far from defending a higher-order view, Brentano saw problems with higher-order accounts and sought to develop a one-level approach to consciousness that could avoid them.¹ This early attempt at a one-level theory was rejected by early higher-order theorists, but I will argue that this was a mistake, because the reasons for the shift in fact provided no real motivation for preferring genuinely higher-order theories. Moreover, higher-order views have recently come under attack (Rey 1983, Block 1997, Dretske 1997 (originally published in 1993) and 1995), and face competition from one-level representational theories of consciousness (Dretske 1995). Thus it seems we have good reason to reconsider one-level views of consciousness. Yet the one-level representational view Dretske suggests as an alternative to higher-order theories faces difficulties of its own, notably in distinguishing conscious from unconscious states.

I will argue that the presence of an early one-level theory in Brentano's work is not merely of historical interest, for it can show the way to develop an alternative one-level view of consciousness. Although certain modifications from his original view are required, I will argue that a phenomenologically sensitive one-level view developed along the lines he suggests can provide a better analysis of what consciousness consists in, and what distinguishes conscious from unconscious states, than either higher-order or current one-level representational views of consciousness.

I. Brentano's One-Level View

Brentano's goal in the oft-cited Chapter 2 of his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* is to define 'consciousness'. Notably, his initial definition of 'consciousness'

is completely independent of any claim to consciousness of our mental states. He begins from the view that the most sensible use of the term 'consciousness' is to treat it as synonymous with 'mental phenomenon'. 'Mental phenomenon', in turn, he defines as involving 'the intentional in-existence of an object', that is, roughly, states exhibiting intentionality (1995: 88–89). He takes this to be equivalent to those states providing consciousness-of something: 'We have seen that no mental phenomenon exists which is not, in the sense indicated above, consciousness of an object . . .' (1995: 102). Thus he begins by identifying consciousness not with consciousness of our mental states themselves, but with an intentionality that makes us (creature-)conscious of other entities.

To defend his use of 'consciousness' as synonymous with 'mental act', Brentano must argue that we have no reason to postulate unconscious mental states, and in fact after laying out the above definition in the first section, the remaining twelve sections of the chapter are dedicated to presenting, criticising, and demonstrating ways to avoid common arguments that there are unconscious mental states. It is in this context that he begins to speak of conscious acts as those of which we are conscious, writing:

... another question arises, namely, whether there are any mental phenomena which are not objects of consciousness. All mental phenomena are states of consciousness; but are all mental phenomena conscious, or might there also be unconscious mental acts? (1995: 102)

In the following chapter he reports his negative result as: 'Every mental act is conscious; it includes within it a consciousness of itself' (1995: 153). Passages such as these are largely responsible for the common view that Brentano defended a higher-order conception of consciousness; but these are not statements of a higher-order view of consciousness. They merely provide a different way of asserting the claim that there are no unconscious states (a fact naturally, if incautiously, reported as there being no mental states 'of which we are not aware'). In fact, Brentano explicitly criticises any views that require the consciousness of one mental state to be bestowed on it by another, and attempts to formulate an intrinsic view of consciousness.

His criticisms of higher-order theories of consciousness appear in his discussion of the fourth argument he considers for postulating unconscious mental states: that, on the assumption that conscious mental states are those we are conscious of, it is incoherent to suppose that all mental states are conscious. If all mental states were conscious, for one mental state to be conscious would require an infinite regress of mental states, each requiring one at a higher level to make it conscious. Yet surely the mind lacks the power to grasp an infinite number of presentations at the same time (1995: 121–22). Thus, the argument goes, to avoid this regress we must postulate unconscious mental states at some level. An unconscious mental state could make a lower-level state conscious without itself requiring any further mental state to make it conscious, and thus could provide an end to the regress.

Brentano argues that this is a very good reason for avoiding higher-order conceptions of consciousness, but not for postulating unconscious mental states. To postulate unconscious mental states on this basis would be ill-motivated, for there is another way to develop an understanding of consciousness that is not subject to this regress problem. The key to avoiding the regress problem lies in two changes Brentano suggests from traditional higher-order theories.

The first change is to reduce the claim that we must directly observe each conscious act to the idea that we merely have a 'secondary', 'incidental' awareness of our conscious mental states. Since our attention can have only a single focus at a time, 'it is obvious that we are not able to observe our present mental phenomena' (1995: 128). Instead, he claims, the focus of attention in each mental act is its 'primary object', that is the thing we are thinking of, desiring, perceiving etc. (e.g. the sound of a trumpet). The awareness of our own mental acts takes the form only of a reduced awareness of itself (e.g. of the act of hearing) as a 'secondary object' apprehended 'incidentally and as something additional', not of a form of observation of the act as an object (1995: 128).

If the awareness that characterises conscious mental states is only a secondary awareness, he claims, there is no need for a separate mental state to observe the first. Thus the second and more important change Brentano suggests (1995: 155 and below) is that the (secondary) awareness should be considered as an aspect of the original mental act itself:

The presentation of the sound and the presentation of the presentation of the sound form a single mental phenomenon; it is only by considering it in its relation to two different objects, one of which is a physical phenomenon and the other a mental phenomenon, that we divide it conceptually into two presentations. In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. (1995: 127)

Since the features that make an act conscious are firmly located within the act itself rather than bestowed on it by a second act, this locates Brentano's view as a one-level view of consciousness. It is this move that provides the key to avoiding the regress problem without any need to postulate unconscious mental states.

But despite this insistence on (and need for) an intrinsic view of consciousness, Brentano does, in the idea of a built-in 'secondary awareness' of our mental states, admittedly retain a hangover of the idea that consciousness is at least in part based in *consciousness of* our mental states. So, as is perhaps typical of transitional views, there is some tension in Brentano's position that must be addressed. I will return in Section III to discuss whether we can consistently combine the essential one-level structure of his view with the idea that each conscious act involves a secondary awareness of itself as well as a primary awareness of its object. But

first, it is of greater interest to see how he attempted to develop this view in a one-level fashion.

The ontological status Brentano claims for the awareness that makes an act conscious is that it is a dependent aspect of the original mental state.² Thus he claims that the view that 'the correlative consciousness which accompanies a mental phenomenon is [not] added to it as a second, distinct act; rather . . . it exists along with the phenomenon itself, as a distinct mode and quality of it' (1995: 133) is in full agreement with his. It is clear that this aspect is dependent, since it could not exist without the primary directedness of the mental state onto its object: 'Temporally they both occur at the same time, but in the nature of the case, the [primary awareness of the] sound is prior' (1995: 128). Its status as a dependent aspect of the original mental act likewise leads Brentano to allow, in principle, the possibility that a mental state could exist without this dependent aspect, though the reverse is not possible: 'A presentation of the sound without a presentation of the act of hearing would not be inconceivable, at least *a priori*, but a presentation of the act of hearing without a presentation of the sound would be an obvious contradiction' (1995: 128). But since he has argued that there is no good reason for postulating unconscious mental states, he does not think that such a thing ever actually occurs.

Brentano suggests that an additional benefit of his view over genuine higher-order views is that it enables us to preserve the idea that we have infallible knowledge of our own mental acts:

This alone makes possible the infallibility and immediate evidence of inner perception. If the cognition which accompanies a mental act were an act in its own right, a second act added on to the first one, if its relation to its object were simply that of an effect to its cause, similar to that which holds between a sensation and the physical stimulus which produces it, how could it be certain in and of itself? Indeed how could we ever be sure of its infallibility at all? (1995: 139)

If the awareness is part of the act itself, Brentano argues, there will be no 'distance' between them, and thus no room for error.³ But if we have a second act aware of the first one, there is room for the second act to be mistaken about its object just as we can be mistaken in our beliefs about external objects and events separate from the mental act in question. So, since he takes it as 'immediately evident' that our knowledge of our current mental states is infallible, he adopts the former view (1995: 140–141).

Thus, seen in context, Brentano's real contribution is not in providing a fore-runner to higher-order views of consciousness. On the contrary, although he inherits from the tradition the conception of conscious acts as those acts we are aware of, he attempts to minimise the kind of awareness required of conscious mental states. His real insight into how one should analyse consciousness is that we should analyse the awareness definitive of consciousness as a dependent aspect of that very mental state rather than something conferred on it by a

higher-order act, thereby providing a 'one-level' theory that makes consciousness an intrinsic feature of conscious mental states; it is this insight that, I will argue, we can still learn from today.

II. Higher-Order Theories

Ironically, the infallibility Brentano hails as an advantage for his theory is precisely the reason later authors abandoned accounts like Brentano's in favor of the genuine higher-order models of consciousness that then became dominant.⁴ The change of heart may have begun with Freudian suspicions of infallibility or general critiques of Cartesian infallibility such as Ryle's (1949: 154–163), but what most likely made it truly entrenched was the belief that infallibility was incompatible with materialist, functionalist and externalist views of mental states. As Armstrong puts it:

... even if we are only concerned to defend the view that the concept of a mental state is the concept of a state of the person apt for the production of certain sorts of behavior, it still seems that we cannot hold simultaneously that introspection is incorrigible. For can any knowledge of *causes* be incorrigible? Surely any statement that one thing is a cause, or potential cause, of another thing, however *arrived* at, is subject to the tests of future observation and experiment? And if it is so subject, how can it be incorrigible? So, since our analysis of the concept of a mental state involves causation, if introspective knowledge is incorrigible, as is alleged, then our account of the concept of a mental state is untenable. (1968: 103)

This line of argument applies to any theory that claims that mental state types are to be defined *even in part* in terms of something extra-mental (their causes or effects, relations to external events . . .), so anyone who thinks there is at least a functional/behavioural element in the concept of a belief, desire, etc. has reason to think that our knowledge of our own beliefs, desires, etc. is open to error since we might be wrong about the state's functional role or cause/effect relations. The same would go for anyone who takes even a partly externalist view of mental content, for again, if the content of a mental state is even in part individuated by its relations to things outside the mind (social or physical context, causal history, etc.), since we can be wrong about those, we can also be wrong about the contents of our own mental states.⁵ Higher-order theories seem to have the advantage of avoiding commitment to infallibility because, if consciousness is based in a separate mental act directed towards the first, there is room for the second state to misrepresent the first, just as first-order mental states can misrepresent external objects.

Yet while this motive may seem laudable, there are two distinct issues here that shouldn't be confused. The issue between higher-order theories like

Armstrong's and inner awareness theories like Brentano's is about *the means via which we have access to our own internal states*. On the inner awareness view our awareness is a built-in aspect of that very act itself, so there is no distance between act and awareness. On the higher-order view, the only access we have to each mental state lies in a higher-order mental state directed towards it.

The second issue at stake is *how mental kind terms are to be defined*: whether in terms of the state's causal/functional role, its relation to other things in the environment; or merely in terms of its inner, phenomenological character. Mental states can be classified in (at least) two ways (Chalmers 1996: 12): psychologically, in terms of their cause/effect relations to other mental states, inputs and behaviours; and phenomenologically, in terms of what it is like to experience such states 'from the inside'. It is the conviction that the correct way of defining mental kind terms is (at least partly) in terms of the state's causal or functional role that makes it seem essential to accept fallibility regarding our own knowledge and awareness of our mental states.

The two issues are relatively independent. To put it bluntly, the first is about what sort of access we have to what's in our heads, the second is about whether or not mental kind terms such as 'belief', 'desire', and so on are to be defined in terms of what is in our heads. If the right view about how mental kind terms are to be defined is partly functional, behavioural or causal, then our knowledge of the kinds under which our mental states fall is bound to be fallible on *either* the inner awareness or the higher-order view. Because if it is true, say, that a necessary condition for 'S believes P' to be true is that S be disposed to behave in a certain way, that can't be known with any certainty based on introspection. All I can be directly aware of, even on an inner awareness view, is what's in my head – no one, not Brentano, certainly not Descartes, claimed that we have infallible direct access to external causal relations. So if causal relations are a necessary component in determining what I believe, whether or not I am directly aware of what's in my head, I will not have any direct infallible awareness of what I believe (but only, perhaps, of a phenomenological residue such as seeming to believe). Similarly, if full or 'wide' content isn't determined by 'what's in the head', neither direct nor higher-order awareness of my internal states will give me direct or certain knowledge of the 'wide' content of my mental states (but only, perhaps, of some 'narrow' residue). Of course, Brentano and Descartes did not think of mental states this way, but rather in terms of their phenomenological character. Nonetheless, one could certainly accept this change in the view of how mental kind terms are to be defined and admit fallibility in that regard without giving up the idea that access to what *is* in the head (the phenomenology) is built into the act itself. The idea that our knowledge of our mental states must be fallible given causal, functional, or externalist views of mental states does nothing to decide the issue of whether inner awareness or higher-order views of access to our internal states is the better view.

All that inner awareness views claim we have direct access to is what our states are like from the inside – that is, to states phenomenologically, not psychologically, considered. (One can argue that the appearance-based classification doesn't

get at the 'nature of things' or provide the best definition of mental kinds, but that's not to the point: there still is such a classification and it can still truly describe the states.) So the only point at which a difference in fallibility would emerge between inner awareness and higher-order views would be regarding mental events considered purely phenomenologically. According to Brentano's view, if the awareness is part of the mental state itself, we might have infallible direct awareness of the phenomenology of our mental states; whereas according to the higher-order views, since our only awareness of one mental state can come from a separate state directed towards it, our awareness must be fallible, even regarding the phenomenology.⁶ So the higher-order views do entail a kind of fallibility not entailed by inner awareness views. But is it really a good thing to entail *this kind* of fallibility?

The idea that our awareness is also fallible regarding our own phenomenology or qualia is far less plausible than the idea that we are fallible regarding the states psychologically considered. As even Armstrong seems to notice, it sounds far-fetched to think that sincere claims like 'I'm experiencing pain now' or 'I'm having a greenness-experience now' could be wrong.⁷ It is the fallibilist who has some explaining to do here regarding how we could possibly be wrong in the way our current mental states seem to us, and under what circumstances we should ever reject sincere internal reports about how one's mental states seem to oneself; it is far from clear whether this difference is an advantage, and a reason for preferring higher-order views. In spite of its pervasive influence, the first and central motivation for dismissing one-level views in favour of higher-order views was a red herring.

Of course, fallibility is not the only motivation for adopting higher-order views. Another frequently-cited motivation is the need to distinguish various kinds of states from each other.⁸ For although Brentano believed that every mental state was accompanied by an inner consciousness of itself, there do seem to be states, whether of sleepwalking, blindsight, or intermittently felt pains, in which we have mental (even perceptual) states of which we are not aware. Higher-order views provide a natural analysis of these states as cases in which we have first-order representations that are not themselves represented.

This may be a fine way of handling such cases, but it, too, does nothing to motivate adopting a higher-order theory over a one-level view like Brentano's. Admittedly, Brentano held that all mental states were conscious, and so believed that there were no mental states of which we were not conscious. But one can easily leave behind his view that there are no unconscious states without altering his view of what consciousness is; and in fact that view of consciousness provides a natural way to analyse such cases. The inner awareness that accompanies conscious mental states is a dependent aspect of the state that the state could, in principle, exist without. Thus cases such as blindsight or sleepwalking could naturally be classified as mental states lacking that dependent aspect of awareness – an analysis parallel to that which higher-order theories provide. To assume that no one-level view could give an adequate account of these distinctions is to

confuse the view that consciousness is intrinsic to those states that possess it, with the different view that consciousness is intrinsic to *all* mental states.⁹

One final motivation often cited for adopting a higher-order conception of consciousness is that higher-order views enable us to provide an informative and naturalistically respectable 'explanation' of consciousness. This motive is already evident in Armstrong's account, as he points out that if we analyse consciousness as a higher-order awareness of lower-order states, we can conceive of consciousness as a kind of 'self-scanning' device. In fact, Armstrong argues that, if Central State Materialism is true, any inner awareness would itself have to be a physical process in the brain responsible for a kind of self-scanning (1968: 102–3). The fact that similar self-scanning devices are common to computers, alarm systems, and so on, is particularly congenial to functionalist views of mind, and ensures that we have a non-spooky 'explanation' of consciousness.¹⁰

Rosenthal makes the stronger claim that the only way we can hope to provide an informative, non-trivial explanation of consciousness is by abandoning the idea that consciousness is intrinsic to those states which possess it. His argument for this is as follows:

No informative explanation of state consciousness is possible unless we can represent it as having some articulated structure. But it will be hard to justify the idea that being conscious is an intrinsic property of mental states if that property does have some informative structure. Once an explanation assigns such structure, it will be equally plausible to regard being conscious as an extrinsic property of mental states. (1997: 736)

His hope is that, by explaining conscious states in terms of the unconscious states that make them conscious, one can then explain unconscious mental states in terms of something non-mental, and thereby 'bridge the intuitive gulf between consciousness and matter' and pave the way for naturalising the mind (1997: 735).

But why should we suppose that intrinsic properties cannot have structure, or that, if one discovers structure to some property, that would make extrinsic views of consciousness 'equally plausible'? There seems to me no obvious connection between a property's being intrinsic and its being simple; even Rosenthal (1997: 749 n24) admits that it is possible to view consciousness as a structured intrinsic property, and that Brentano's view attempts to do just that. Rosenthal fails to give a convincing argument that higher-order views can, while intrinsic views cannot, provide the basis for an informative explanation of consciousness.

Even the lesser claim that higher-order views can provide the basis for an informative explanation of consciousness is highly doubtful. The informative explanation of consciousness is supposed to go as follows: We explain mental states in terms of something non-mental. Then we explain conscious mental states as being those that are the objects of other (ultimately unconscious) mental states. There are at least two points to worry about in this 'explanation'. One is the large promissory note of explaining mental states in terms of something non-mental;

any benefits derived from the second half are of value only if the first half succeeds. The other is the question of whether the higher-order theory itself really succeeds in 'explaining' consciousness in terms of those states that are the objects of other (ultimately unconscious) mental states.

Moreover, even if the higher-order theory can fill in the gaps of this explanation, it doesn't seem to be consciousness as such that is explained. The very fact that higher-order monitoring of representational states is shared by computers, alarm systems, and other devices might make us suspect that the mere ability to represent representations is not sufficient to capture anything like the intuitive notion of consciousness. As Georges Rey (1983) argues, if this is really all that is required for consciousness, consciousness is a lot more prevalent than we think: All laptop computers, and most cars, have it, and many subsystems of a person would have it, too, without our being aware of it.¹¹

The point has also been made in some recent theories of consciousness such as those by Chalmers (1996) and Siewert (1998). Chalmers argues that, to get a complete view of consciousness, we need the phenomenological notion of consciousness, which is, according to Chalmers (1996: 26–28) also accompanied by the corresponding psychological state of awareness (the state that provides us information to be used in the control of behaviour). Ned Block also notes that identifying phenomenal consciousness with internal scanning inevitably misses the phenomenon that is supposedly explained: 'To identify P[henomenal]-consciousness with internal scanning is just to grease the slide to eliminativism about P[henomenal]-consciousness' (1997: 390). In short, not only do we lack good reason to think that a one-level theory cannot provide an informative explanation of consciousness; we also lack good reason to think that a higher-order theory can.

Thus on closer inspection, none of the major motivations for higher-order theories of consciousness provides any reason for adopting them over the one-level views we began with. On the other hand, we have many reasons to avoid higher-order theories. The original regress problem pointed out by Brentano still raises difficulties. The usual contemporary reply to this regress problem is to take the alternative Brentano avoids: stop the regress at an unconscious state directed towards a state one-order below it, and making the latter state conscious. Yet even if (unlike Brentano) we are happy to postulate unconscious mental states, this reply is implausible on several counts: It's odd to think that we could never be aware of what it's like to be in the mental state we are in, although, by being in that state, we *can* be aware of what it's like to be in an entirely different state; and it is hard to see how an unconscious state could be capable of making another state conscious (Smith 1986: 150). Other difficulties that are often raised to this kind of reply are, first, that we are left having to postulate an enormous number of unconscious mental states for whose existence we have no other evidence (Chalmers 1996: 230–231) and, second, that it is hard to see why *consciousness-of* mental states (but not of rocks or other things) should make *them* conscious.¹²

Many other difficulties have been pointed out more recently. Higher-order perception views are criticised, for example, for postulating additional mental

states that would not improve our epistemic access to the states they are allegedly about, or for postulating perception-like states that lack any distinctive qualia of their own (Dretske 1997: 785). Higher-order thought views are also criticised on the grounds that we can have first-order experiences that differ without any second order awareness of the fact that they differ (Dretske 1997: 784) or because they would yield the unacceptable result that (because they lack the concept of an experience, thought, etc.) children under age three can have only unconscious experience (Dretske 1995: 110–111).

So, if one-level views were wrongly abandoned in favor of problematic higher-order views, it might be a good idea to look at those theories again to see if a defensible one-level view can be developed by starting again from Brentano's theory.

III. Challenges for Brentano's Theory

To focus on Brentano's core thesis about the nature of consciousness, I will leave aside his contentious claims that all mental states are both conscious and intentional. The remaining core of Brentano's view of consciousness is that a mental state is conscious if it has built-in, as a dependent aspect of that very state, a direct, phenomenological, quasi-perceptual awareness that (ordinarily) makes one aware of the things in the world and also, secondarily, of that mental state itself.

There are two important objections to be wary of in developing a view like this. The classic objection to this kind of account, of which Brentano himself was aware, is that the (secondary) awareness of the mental act and primary awareness in the original act must be distinct mental states, since they have distinct truth conditions (Rosenthal 1997: 746–7). That is, the (first-order) thought that this is an orange tree has different truth conditions from the thought that I think that this is an orange tree, and so, insofar as truth conditions are relevant to the content of an act, the acts must have different contents and be distinct mental acts. But if they are distinct mental acts, then Brentano's supposedly one-level view turns out to be just a higher-order theory in disguise, with the second act directed towards the first, and Brentano after all would offer no alternative approach to consciousness.

Brentano's own response to this problem is not very helpful: He agrees that, if we individuate presentations by the 'number and variety of objects' presented, there would be two presentations, but suggests instead that presentations should be individuated by 'number of mental acts', and insists that there is only one act here (1995: 127). But surely it does seem that having different contents is sufficient for different mental acts – if we are not to individuate mental states (at least in part) in that way, what criteria should we use? Brentano is silent on this point. His other strategy to avoid this difficulty seems to lie in minimising the claim to the type of awareness involved of our own mental acts, insisting that it is not a kind of 'observation' that would indeed require a different mental act with a different

focus of attention, but a merely 'incidental' awareness that can be built into the same act along with the primary awareness of the act's object. Yet again, even if the awareness of the mental state is diminished to a secondary status, it is hard to see how we can avoid having distinct states with distinct contents if we insist that there is any awareness of our own mental act involved, even as a 'secondary' object.

The second, and more recent, objection is that any view that takes consciousness to lie in the *awareness of* our own mental states is based on a confusion in the use of the word 'conscious' (Dretske 1995: 100–101). States, on Dretske's view, are conscious if they make us (creatures) conscious of other things (trees, colours, etc.). But we are making a mistake if we infer that, since those states are conscious, we must be conscious *of them*:

... we must be careful not to conclude from this that because the states are conscious, we must, perforce, be conscious of them. That doesn't follow ... Conscious mental states – experiences, in particular – are states that we are conscious *with*, not states we are conscious *of*. They are states that make us conscious, not states that we make conscious by being conscious of them. They are states that enable us to see, hear, and feel, not states that we see, hear, or feel. (1995: 100–101)

There seems to be something quite right about this: Consciousness is usually a matter of being aware of things in the world. Introspective awareness of our own mental states can, of course, also occur, but that is a different matter (and perhaps a later development); there seems no reason to think that awareness of our mental states as objects, as well as awareness of things in the world, is required for consciousness as such.

In both cases, the troubles arise not from Brentano's one-level view as such, but rather from retaining the idea that we must be, in some sense, aware of our own conscious mental states. By taking his changes a step further and eliminating the idea of awareness-of our conscious mental states entirely from the definition of consciousness, perhaps we can develop a genuinely one-level view of consciousness that avoids these problems.

IV. Dretske's One-Level View

One-level views that do just that have been recently re-introduced in the form of so-called 'representational' theories of consciousness. Externalist views of representation have long raised hope that representation can be naturalised. Dretske's strategy is to broaden this approach to all mental states by identifying all mental facts – even those regarding qualia or phenomenology – with representational facts. Thus, on Dretske's theory, all mental states are 'natural' representations (1995: 8). Representational facts, in turn, are brought out of the 'private theatre' of the mind by identifying them with the (mind-external) properties represented by

a given mental state. Dretske combines this representational thesis with a bio-functional view of representation – the properties represented by a given mental state are those properties that the state has the function of indicating, where its function is determined by its evolutionary history.

Among our natural representations are our conscious mental states, which Dretske defines as those mental states that make the creature having that state conscious of the properties represented (and of the object – if any – bearing those properties). Thus, significantly here, conscious states are not (ordinarily) states of which we are conscious, but rather states that make us conscious of other things in the environment; it is that feature that ensures that we have a genuinely one-level account of consciousness, contrasting with higher-order views.

In its claim that consciousness consists (ordinarily) in awareness of the world rather than awareness of our own mental states, Dretske's theory seems entirely right-headed, and provides a useful alternative to higher-order conceptions of consciousness, while also recalling Brentano's original definition of conscious states as those providing consciousness-of something. But the deflationary attempt to identify consciousness with representation, and representation with properties represented, leads to a number of problems with this kind of one-level theory.

Most notably, Dretske's theory leaves us with no adequate way of distinguishing conscious states from various kinds of unconscious states, and so does not provide a full alternative theory of what consciousness consists in at all. Dretske himself acknowledges that there may be natural representations (such as homeostatic and other regulative mechanisms indicating, e.g., the level of glucose in the blood) that are not mental, or 'at least they are not conscious' (1995: 170 n6). But then, to have a theory that can do the work of the higher-order views it is designed to replace, he owes us an account of what the relevant difference is that distinguishes such non-conscious natural representations from those that are conscious.

To say that mental states are conscious if they make the creature conscious of the properties (and maybe the object) represented merely pushes the question back a step: What does it mean for a creature to be conscious of something, as opposed to merely having a representation of it? In virtue of what are certain natural representational states, but not others, capable of making their creatures conscious of things in the world? His only remarks that begin to make such a distinction are that the only natural representations suited to be 'experiences' are those 'whose function it is to supply information to a cognitive system for calibration and use in the control and regulation of behavior' (1995: 19). Yet this is also true of unconscious perceptions such as those involved in blindsight (and probably many bodily sub-systems) (Seager 1997: 101–2). Paul Davies (1997: 547) points out that this likewise fails to distinguish our conscious natural representations from those of 'lower' creatures such as cacti and clams that utilise natural representations to help them survive in their environment. In short, Dretske fails to provide any useful answer to what distinguishes conscious natural representations from unconscious natural representations, whether in humans or elsewhere.

A natural way to make the distinction between those representational states

that are and those that are not conscious would be to appeal to the internal phenomenological or qualitative character of conscious states, but this is precisely what Dretske cannot do, since his mission is to find a way of fully externalising the mental, even regarding its so-called qualitative or phenomenal features. He identifies the qualitative aspects of an experience with the properties the object is represented to have, and the properties an object is represented as having are those properties the object would have if the system were functioning properly (1995: 65 and 72). But this move to replace talk of qualia with talk of properties represented is itself problematic on two counts. First, certain qualia don't seem plausibly construed as representing anything at all: dizziness, vague depression, adrenalin rushes, all have distinctive qualia but may not represent anything about the environment or the states of our own bodies (Davies 1997: 545–6).

Secondly, it overlooks the fact that, even in cases in which qualia can be construed as having a representational function, they are not exhausted by that function. For the same external property can be represented by qualitatively extremely different features. The rapid acceleration involved in a sudden fall can be represented visually (one watches the cage fall) or kinaesthetically (sitting in the cage, one feels the downward acceleration of the fall). But though the same property is represented (and might well be represented with the same degree of accuracy), the phenomenology representing the property of downward acceleration is radically different in the two cases. To take another example, imagine two animals that evolved different sensors for the same purpose: to detect the presence of a toxic gas, and capable of detecting it to the same degree of specificity. When fume levels become toxic, one creature becomes nauseous; the other experiences a ferocious itch on its left ear (and both are thus motivated to leave the area). They represent the same property, and are sensitive to the same degrees of difference in toxicity, and both have these 'detectors' designed for the same purpose. All of this means that, according to Dretske's view, they are experiencing the same qualia: It seems to both that there is a toxic level of gas present. But surely their phenomenology – the means via which they become aware of the toxic gas – is widely divergent.

So although Dretske's theory helps show the way to developing a one-level account of consciousness, his motives in eliminating problems for naturalism and materialism lead him to a reductive view of consciousness that prevents his theory from providing an analysis of consciousness that can do the work of the higher-order views it was designed to replace, by distinguishing conscious from unconscious states. To devise a one-level analysis of consciousness that can offer a viable alternative to higher-order theories, we need to take a different route. Brentano's early one-level theory, developed long before such demands for naturalisation became the driving force behind analyses of consciousness, may show the way.

V. Towards a Modern One-Level Theory

What I have called the 'core' of Brentano's original view is this: a mental state is conscious if it has built-in, as a dependent aspect of that very state, a direct,

phenomenological, quasi-perceptual awareness that (ordinarily) makes one aware of the things in the world and also, secondarily, of that mental state itself. The problems raised in Section III for views like Brentano's arise from the last clause, attributing (secondary) *awareness of themselves* to conscious mental states. We are concerned to see whether we can do better by eliminating that clause and developing the remainder of the view.

Brentano's way of trying to preserve the idea that only one act is involved was to characterise the awareness involved in consciousness as a dependent aspect of the original act. That makes it, ontologically, something like a property of the first act, a way the first act is, rather than an independent act of its own. If we take the notion of a mental *act* seriously, a way that act *is* might be expressed adverbially, and indeed this is a natural – perhaps the most natural – use of the word 'conscious': We see, hear, think, etc. *consciously*.¹³ Seeing *consciously* that this is an orange tree (as opposed to merely seeing that this is an orange tree) does not involve bringing in a new mental state with a different content or different truth-conditions: We do not have an act of seeing and an awareness of that act of seeing; we simply have an act of seeing *awarely*. We need no more say that there are two mental acts than we would of believing *strongly* that this is an orange tree; to say it is believed strongly or seen consciously is merely to say something about the way in which the mental act is done. Thus the old argument that there must be two different states no longer applies.

Smith (1989) expresses a similar idea in his modern Brentanian/Husserlian view of consciousness, using a distinction between the 'modality' and the 'mode' of a mental act. The 'modality' of an act is the way via which something is presented. So, in a presentation of an orange tree, the tree may be presented visually or judicatively, clearly or hazily, etc. These are differences in the modality of the presentation. This is distinguished from the 'mode' of the presentation: the descriptive content that determines what is presented and how it is presented (as an orange tree, as a source of income, as a shady resting-place, etc.). Consciousness, according to Smith (1989: 16–17), is part of the modality of the presentation: For the act of seeing an orange tree to be conscious is not a matter of having a second act with a different content directed towards the first act, instead it is for that very act of seeing the orange tree to have as part of its modality: I am *consciously* seeing that orange tree. So in the mental act of seeing an orange tree, *see consciously* is the modality of presentation, *that orange tree* is the mode of presentation.¹⁴

But what kind of modification is involved by adding the adverb 'consciously'? What is it that distinguishes those mental states that make us *consciously aware* of things from those that remain unconscious? The answer I would propose is that the relevant difference lies in their phenomenological character – the fact that, in these states, things seem a certain way to us.¹⁵ If I am conscious that there is an orange tree before me, it is because it *seems to me* that there is an orange tree there. But although the focus of my attention is the orange tree (it is the 'primary object', in Brentano's terminology), nonetheless, the experience is itself conscious, not in the sense that I am aware of *it* (although, of course, I could explicitly turn my

attention to it in introspection if so desired); but in the sense that it has the phenomenal qualities that make me aware of the tree: it is what makes me see *consciously*.

So, I would suggest, there are two senses of 'conscious' at work here: a mental state itself can be (intransitively) conscious in the sense of having a phenomenological character; and that phenomenological character is what can make *us* (transitively) conscious of other things. Ordinarily, the two go together, so, e.g., to see *consciously* is to see in such a way that (unlike in cases of blindsight) the seeing has a (visual) phenomenological character, that enables us to be (transitively) conscious of the things that we see. Yet certain states (involving diffuse feelings such as vague depression or an adrenalin rush) may be merely conscious in the first sense without their representing, and making us transitively conscious of, anything else.

While this view preserves Brentano's central idea that consciousness is intrinsic to those mental states that possess it, not bestowed on them by other acts, the biggest change, at least rhetorically, from the Brentanian view with which we began lies in dropping the talk of conscious mental states as those we are (in any sense) conscious of. Some philosophers, particularly those sensitive to the phenomenological tradition that I am drawing on, may feel the loss of the idea that we have an 'inner awareness' of our conscious mental states, and may object that this change takes the view I am proposing too far from Brentano's original view to claim any connection with it.

The view I have proposed may certainly look a long way from Brentano if one thinks only of the typical sketch of Brentano according to which he defended an 'inner awareness' view of consciousness. But, as I have tried to draw out in the exposition above, this characterisation is misleading regarding his real motivations and course of argumentation. Brentano was not arguing for the idea that our mental states must include an awareness of themselves, on the contrary, he attempted to diminish the commitment to such awareness by reducing it from a full observation of the mental state itself to a mere 'incidental' or 'secondary' awareness, and by placing the awareness within the original mental state so that we have a one-level, intrinsic view of consciousness. What I am proposing is that we take Brentano's insights a step further and, to genuinely make good on the idea that there is but one mental act involved, not merely reduce but abandon the idea that consciousness is based in any kind of awareness of our own mental states as objects (as Brentano himself (1995: 128) admitted that we cannot simultaneously 'observe' our own mental states). By abandoning the idea that there is additional *awareness of* the mental state itself, we can provide a genuinely one-level alternative to higher-order accounts, developing Brentano's central idea that the awareness in consciousness is a dependent aspect of that very mental state.

Although this change does involve dropping Brentano's talk about consciousness involving *consciousness of* our mental states, I don't think this is any deep loss of meaning. For on this view it's not that the internal phenomenological character is unconscious; on the contrary, it is the immediately present character that makes it like something to be in that mental state, and enables us to be aware of

other things. It's just that it is inappropriate to say that we are '*conscious of*' the character of our own mental states (as if it were the object of our mental state), when instead, it is that phenomenology that makes us aware of other things. (Just as it would be inappropriate to say that a painting represents its own colours – these instead enable it to represent other things).¹⁶

There may also be those who are concerned that eliminating the notion of inner awareness omits something essential from an analysis of consciousness. There are several ways to soften this worry. First, I am not denying that inner awareness of our mental states can occur; in fact, it is perfectly consistent with my account that awareness of our conscious mental states may accompany all mental states. My point is merely that we should not take awareness of our mental states to be *definitive* of consciousness, though it may (or may not) turn out to be a common or even constant accompaniment to it. There are two good reasons for taking this approach: First, unless one can find some way to make good on the claim that there is only one mental state involved in the awareness of the world and awareness of the mental state, the view threatens to resolve into another higher-order theory with all of the associated problems. Secondly, it seems dubious that *every* conscious state – even those of small children, or adults completely absorbed in their work or activities – is accompanied by consciousness of itself (as well as of its 'primary' object). Although it may seem this way while we are in the process of doing phenomenology and philosophy of mind, when we pay attention to the course of our mental states themselves, there does seem to be something quite right about Dretske's observation that ordinarily, we are focussed on the world, and our conscious states make us conscious of objects and facts in the world, without our paying any (even secondary) attention to the progress of our mental states themselves.

Nonetheless, the view I am proposing does preserve the grain of truth behind the common association of conscious states with those we are conscious of. A mental state is made conscious by a phenomenology that ordinarily makes us aware of things in the world around us. Although that phenomenology is not ordinarily the focus of our attention, as an immediate part of that conscious state it is already and automatically *available* so that we can turn our attention to it if we so desire, and gain an awareness of the character of our own conscious mental states (in the way that we cannot gain direct awareness of unconscious mental states that lack that phenomenology). That is to say, if I consciously see an orange tree, that mental state has a phenomenological character that makes it seem to me that there is an orange tree there. Ordinarily, my focus is on the orange tree, but since there is also a phenomenology, I can turn my attention to that and examine what my experience of seeming to see an orange tree is like. So the grain of truth of this view is that conscious experiences are those that are *available for* direct introspection; we can focus attention on the phenomenology if we so choose.

Since the original reason for dismissing one-level views like Brentano's lay in their supposed claims to infallible knowledge of our mental states, another source of worry regarding this kind of account might lie in whether or not this account commits us to any kind of untenable claim to infallibility. But in fact, one virtue

of this view is that it doesn't involve us in *any* claims to infallibility, or fallibility, at all.¹⁷ If you genuinely conceive of the phenomenological awareness as an aspect of the original mental act, not a separate act directed towards the first, the question of whether the awareness is fallible or infallible does not properly apply. For fallibility and infallibility alike require the existence of two things: a representation and a thing represented. The awareness is an aspect of the state itself, it is not a thing representing the state that then might get it wrong, or necessarily gets it right. The mental state (awareness and all) can be wrong or right about the world, but not about itself. With respect to a painting you can ask: 'Is it an accurate representation (of her nose)?' But if you say, 'I don't mean of her nose, I just mean, qua representation, is it right?', that doesn't seem to make any sense. Similarly, we can ask if our phenomenological experience of red is right in the sense of asking whether the apple before us really is red, but not simply in the sense of whether that awareness itself is right or wrong. To dismiss a genuinely one-level view of consciousness for supposed infallibility could only be based on confusion.

VI. Conclusion

The development of analyses of consciousness presents one of those cases in the history of philosophy in which theories were changed for the wrong reasons. A viable one-level approach to consciousness was long overlooked by misinterpretation of Brentano, and by being wrongly associated with untenable infallibilism. Returning to the history of philosophy and carefully unweaving these issues can enable us to see past the blinders of the contemporary debate, and to formulate a theory that preserves the advantages of the other options while avoiding many of their difficulties.

There is, however, one advantage claimed by higher-order and representational theories that this analysis of consciousness lacks: providing a quick route to a reductive 'explanation' of consciousness. Yet these reductive explanations, as we have seen, seem either unlikely to be forthcoming, or unlikely to be explanations of *consciousness*. The fact the Brentanian account fails to provide any reductive explanation is hardly surprising, since Brentano was working long before the drive for naturalisation. In fact, looking back to the earlier history of the debate may provide a crucial advantage, since earlier authors lacked the motive to embrace an inadequate analysis of consciousness as a shortcut to 'explaining' it. Before we know whether or not consciousness can be reductively explained, we must begin with an adequate analysis of it – this, I think, is just a matter of taking seriously the problem of naturalistically explaining consciousness, rather than 'explaining' consciousness by defining it away as something else entirely. The Brentanian account does not rule out reductive explanation, it merely links the challenge of explaining consciousness to the challenge of explaining phenomenal character.

Considered purely as analyses of the phenomenon of consciousness that needs

explaining, the Brentanian one-level account seems to provide a better analysis than the two contemporary competitors. By bringing phenomenology back into the one-level account of consciousness, it can overcome the inadequacies of Dretske's account and can preserve the distinction between conscious and unconscious (natural) representations, whether in cases of blindsight or the representational states of bodily sub-systems, plants, and simple creatures. Since the phenomenological awareness is a dependent aspect in principle separable from the mental state qua (mere) representation, there may be cases in which the representational element remains without the phenomenology that makes us, as creatures, conscious of the things we are seeing, feeling, etc.¹⁸ Moreover, qualia need not be reduced to external properties represented, and may exist even without representing anything.

The theory also retains the two main advantages of higher-order theories: preserving the above distinctions, e.g. between conscious perception and blindsight, and avoiding commitment to the infallibility of introspection. Yet, by treating consciousness as an intrinsic feature of those states that possess it, it can also avoid the multitude of problems higher-order theories encounter in virtue of defining consciousness in terms of a second state directed towards the first.

Although it does take some care to develop a view like Brentano's in a genuinely one-level fashion, by wedding the one-level approach with phenomenological sensitivity we may be able to offer a more adequate analysis of consciousness than either contemporary higher-order or representational views.¹⁹

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NOTES

¹ For contemporary higher-order thought views see, e.g., Rosenthal 1997; Carruthers 1996. For higher-order perception or awareness views see, e.g., Armstrong 1968 and 1997; Lycan 1997. In addition to Brentano's more modern contribution, higher-order views are sometimes attributed a historical lineage reaching back to the 'inner sense' views of Locke and Kant (Lycan 1997: 755).

² This inner consciousness of one's current mental state is what Brentano calls simply a 'presentation' of that state – merely having it before the mind (as opposed to forming a judgment, belief, emotion, etc. about it). He later adds to this the view that, in addition to the presentation of itself, each mental state also has as an aspect of itself a judgement affirming its own existence (1995: 154). He also considers, but later rejects (1995: 276) the view that each mental state is accompanied by a feeling about it. But in each case, it is clear, these are not supposed to be separate states directed towards the first, but rather dependent aspects of the original mental state (1995: 154).

³ I actually think this is a mistake, for if there is really but a single act there is no distance between represented and representation, in which case neither the notions of fallibility nor infallibility can be sensibly applied. I discuss this below in the development of the positive view.

⁴ Avoiding Cartesian infallibility is a major motivation for adopting higher-order views according to Rosenthal (1997: 738) Lycan (1997: 756–7) and Armstrong (1968: 100–103).

⁵ Dretske (1995: 53–57) discusses this problem and possible replies to it.

⁶ Even this ‘infallibility’ would be quite limited. It does not mean that all of our judgments about that must be correct – if we misapply a concept we may think we’re seeing something maroon but have misunderstood the concept of maroon (so our experience is a purple-experience); if our claims about the phenomenology are in any way comparative (e.g. ‘this is the most pleasant experience I’ve ever had’) they can of course be wrong since we may mis-remember the comparative class. So, at best, only the awareness of the intrinsic phenomenology of our current experience (of what it seems like) would be infallible, if infallibility/fallibility applies here.

⁷ Thus Armstrong spends a lot of effort trying to make the idea plausible by suggesting that, if we had a highly-developed brain science that contradicted introspective reports – even of this kind – we should believe the brain-science (1968: 109–110). See Dennett (1991: 132–3) and Lycan’s reply (1997: 756–8).

⁸ Such motivations are discussed, for example, by Lycan (1997: 756), Carruthers (1996: 136–7), and Rosenthal (1997: 745).

⁹ David Rosenthal (1997: 745) seems to make exactly this mistake in claiming that intrinsic theories of consciousness cannot account for unfelt pains or unnoticed sensations.

¹⁰ Armstrong (1997: 726–7) discusses the analogy to computational systems.

¹¹ See also Lycan’s discussion of this problem (1997: 764–7).

¹² Lycan (1997: 758–9) discusses this objection, which he attributes to Dretske in conversation.

¹³ Even Lycan (1997: 759) notes that in talking of consciousness, ‘We begin with the adverbial form, as in “consciously thought” or “consciously felt”’; the adjective form ‘conscious’, he speculates, is a grammatical innovation demanded when we make the verb into a noun.

¹⁴ See also his earlier account of consciousness (1986: 149–156).

¹⁵ This notion of phenomenological character includes, but is not limited to, sensory qualia. Smith develops this generalised notion of phenomenological character, calling it ‘phenomenal quality’ (1989: 95–98).

¹⁶ Of course, there is also an important dis-analogy with the painting case. In the case of a painting, *we* must still be aware of the representation to be aware of the represented objects, whereas, on this view, consciousness is a primitive representation that enables us to be aware of things in the world without our being aware of our representations of those things. What Seager (1997: 107–9) calls the ‘deepest’ mystery of all about consciousness remains: How it can be that mental states (unlike paintings and other representations) enable us to be directly aware of the things represented, without being aware of the representation.

¹⁷ This seems to be one point where Brentano mistook the implications of his own theory and led us to believe that it leads to a kind of Cartesian infallibility that it does not in fact entail, if there really is but one act involved.

¹⁸ Contra Rosenthal’s suggestion that any views that take consciousness as intrinsic to the mental states themselves cannot account, e.g., for intermittently felt pains, intermittently noticed auditory sensations, etc. (1997: 745). Again, this kind of accusation is based

on conflating the idea that consciousness is intrinsic to those states that are conscious, with the idea that consciousness is intrinsic to *all mental states*. (A view that Brentano held, but which is easily separable from the core of his thesis about what consciousness is.)

¹⁹ Many thanks go to Johannes Brandl, Taylor Carmen, David Chalmers, Greg Jarrett, David W. Smith, and an anonymous referee from this journal, for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I also benefitted greatly from discussions following presentations of this work at the University of Hong Kong research seminar and at the Pacific Division APA in 1999, and wish to thank all those involved.

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