Lycan “Consciousness as Internal Monitoring”

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28.0 The main point:

The basic thesis of Lycan’s paper is that “what distinguishes conscious mental activity from un- and subconscious mental activity is second-order processing.”

First of all: that exactly, is this “second-order processing”. A theory of consciousness that claims that conscious states are those that are the subject of second-order processing is a theory that holds that conscious states are the objects of other mental states. One has a mental state. Call this “a” One has a further mental state that is of or about a. This mental state “b” is a second-order mental state. It’s content is a, and a is therefore conscious.

28.1 The Theory

According to Lycan: “consciousness is the functioning of internal attention mechanisms directed upon lower-order psychological states and events.”, or in other words, “conscious awareness is the successful operation of an internal scanner or monitor that outputs second-order representations of first-order psychological states”

It is important to note that this is a theory of state consciousness – not a theory of creature consciousness. In this sense, we are concerned with distinguishing states that are conscious from states that are un, sub, pre or otherwise “non” conscious.

28.2 Virtues

1. It distinguishes consciousness from mentation, consciousness from mere experience. In this sense, it can distinguish between human experience and animal experience.

2. The view allows from some grade of the unconscious.

3. It affords a solution to the problem of “knowing what it is like” (in short, to know what it is like is to have a mental state whose content is the experience itself, and that experience must experienced in the right way (directly). Therefore, I can only know what it is like if I have an experience of it.)

4. Solves the equivocation on pain – a pain may go unnoticed, but on the other hand, there can’t be a pain without an sensation of pain – how do we rectify these? On this theory, when one has a pain that is not felt, one has a 1st order experience. When one is conscious of that pain, one has a 2nd order experience whose content is the 1st order experience of pain.

28.3 Vices

Since the theory is made on an analogy to sensation, or “internal sensor”, it seems possible that the internal monitor could “break down”, and not monitor correctly. It implies that one could have an experience of which they are not aware (OK), but it also implies that one could have an experience of a mental state, without there being the mental state. And that seems crazy. Our introspective abilities seem incorrigible – I can always know the contents of my own mind. Can I have an experience of a pain without a pain? I don’t mean without bodily damage, I mean without the experi-
ence that is pain. Can I have an experience of an experience that is pain, without having the experience that is pain?

Lycan’s solution is to attack the thesis of incorrigibility – he uses examples from Dennett, but one of the most interesting is the case of “reactive disassociation.” In these cases, patients report that they have pain, but they do not mind it. But how is this supposed to bolster the case? They still have an experience of the experience of pain, it is just that the experience of pain no longer has its negative quality. It seems that Lycan is arguing that the experience a reactive disassociation patient has is not of the experience of pain, because to have an experience of the experience of pain just is to have an experience of something displeasing. But is this the simplest explanation?

28.4 Problem:

Explain why being conscious of a certain mental state is enough to bestow this quality of consciousness onto that mental state. I am conscious of a table, but that experience does not bestow consciousness to the table.

More specifically, what is special about the mental states that become conscious (as opposed to states of my stomach, e.g.) in virtue of which they can become conscious simply by being experienced?

Lycan’s response is this: states must be mental in order for them to be potential conscious mental states. The table does not become conscious when I experience it because it is not mental. The same holds for states of my stomach.

Reply: is this not simply avoiding the question – what is it to be mental? The problem of consciousness started (in the 19th century) as a problem of the mental. So rather than answer the problem, Lycan has just shifted the problem onto a new word.

28.5 Problem:

Dretske – there is a sense of “conscious” in which, “an experience can be conscious without anyone – including the person having it – being conscious of it.”

According to Dretske (and in one sense, Armstrong) to perceive something is to be in a conscious state of some sort, but there are cases where someone has a conscious state of this sort, but is not aware of it (witness the “hunt the thimble game”.)

Lycan’s reply: the Inner sense theory is not a theory of “perceptual consciousness”. It is a theory of conscious awareness – a theory of conscious states that one is conscious of being in.

Here’s a further point (which approximates Dretske’s) If I have a mental state that is unconscious, and then become aware of it, my higher order state bestows onto the 1st order state the property of being conscious. But when I have a conscious experience of the thimble, I have a mental state that is already conscious – albeit perceptually. So, when I become conscious of that conscious mental state, does it become consciously conscious? Or does the bestowing of consciousness fail? It is really a problem of overdetermination: if the state was already conscious, what does becoming aware of the state add to the state which it did not have already?

28.6 Rosenthal’s argument
Lycan’s response is to say that the analogy is not exact. The inner sense theory does not say that introspection is exactly like perception in every way. And second, we should not expect the second-order state to share the properties of the first order state (if it did, it would be the first order state).

The sensory qualities of the first order states are not the qualities of the experiences, but of the objects presented in those experiences. As a result, the qualities presented in the experience of the experience of the object should be the properties of the experience, not the sensory qualities presented in that experience.

28.7 Possible flaw:

Doesn’t the inner sense theory imply that there is a kind of “cartesian theatre” in the brain?

What about a “flashlight” in the dark? - The inner sense view certainly appears to imply such things...

Response: There need be no single internal scanner. Nor need there be a single “stage” across which the contents of our minds flow. There may be a network of internal scanners which can scan a network of mental events.

but doesn’t that open up the problem of being too liberal – that there may be highly sophisticated machines that self-scan, but that are not conscious?

The inner sense theorist response that the outputs of the scans must “contribute... specifically to the integration of information in a way conducive to making the system’s behavior appropriate to its input and circumstances.”

28.8 Another objection

Becoming aware of an experience or sensation often can change that experience or sensation (i.e. the taunting Viet Cong in Apocalypse Now) or the experience of eating a hot pepper – there is an initial revulsion, but it ultimately becomes rather pleasurable. How is this possible?

The inner sense theorist grants that it is possible – becoming aware of an experience already endows that experience with the property of being conscious, why could it not endow that experience with other qualities, such as “turning up the volume.”

This seems wrong to me. The qualities that change are not qualities of the experience, but qualities of the objects experienced. And we already said that those qualities are not conscious, but those 1st order experiences already are. So, the only thing a 2nd order experience can do is add to the scrutinizing power of the 1st order experience. And it seems to me that the opposite is often true – introspecting pain can make it decrease in intensity, e.g.

28.9 Rey’s last objection

Liberalism – If being conscious is simply a manner of having an internal scanner that makes integrative use of the information gleaned, then consciousness is more prevalent then we think – a computer scans its internal processes, and makes use of that information.

Replies – first, require that the monitor emit a “genuine representation” not just information. What does this mean?
2nd - being subdivided into proper parts does not matter – why should we think that it does?

3rd – make a distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness, and require that the kind of consciousness that the laptop lacks is the second.

4th. Consciousness is not an on/off affair.

It comes in degrees – there are very low levels of consciousness, and very advanced levels of consciousness. And since we only know what it is like to be conscious in the advanced sense, we cannot imagine what it is like to be conscious in the low sense. Therefore, we cannot imagine what it is like to be a notebook computer.

It appears that Lycan is arguing that the notebook computer is conscious (one Philosopher’s Modus Tollens is always another’s Modus Ponens). But that seems nutty.

Suppose he mental states of people who are badly injured, or under the influence of some drug – are they not semi-conscious?

Now imagine a line of machines going from VCRs to bio-mechanical robots. Which are conscious and which are not?

Or, consider the phylogenetic scale.

Of human infants.

Considering these may imply (Lycan thinks it does) that consciousness is a scale, and if so, Rey’s objection fails (but this is the hard part – it only fails if Lycan is committed to holding that the laptop computer / VCR is conscious in a limited sense).