



Book Review

Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory, by Uriah Kriegel

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Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory,
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In the last decades interest in consciousness from within philosophy of mind has stepped up enormously and with it the number of competing theories. Uriah Kriegel offers in his book 'Subjective Consciousness: A Self-Representational Theory' a provoking new naturalistic theory that combines the idea, made popular by Brentano, that conscious states are about the world but also about themselves with the tools of contemporary analytical philosophy.

Conscious experiences have a subjective dimension, undergoing them feels some way; *it is like something for the subject* to undergo them. When I look at the red apple close to my computer, there is *something it is like for me* to have this experience. This is the phenomenal character of the experience. Kriegel divides the problem of providing a comprehensive theory of consciousness into two different ones by identifying a conceptual distinction among two components of phenomenal character: the qualitative character and the subjective character.

A theory of qualitative character accounts for *what it is like* for the subject to undergo the experience, the concrete way it feels to undergo it. In this sense the qualitative character is what distinguishes the experience I have while looking at my red apple from the one I have while, say, looking at a golf course. On the other hand, a theory of subjective character explains what it is like *for the subject* to undergo the experience. It abstracts from the particular way having different experiences feel and concentrates on the problem of what makes it the case that having a conscious experience feels at all. The qualitative character is what makes it the phenomenally conscious state it is and the subjective character what makes it a phenomenally conscious state at all.

Kriegel regards subjective character as the core of the problem of consciousness, because the subjective character provides the existence condition of phenomenally conscious mental states; it is what distin-

guishes phenomenally conscious states from other kinds of states. Although he offers in chapter 3 an interesting and controversial response-dependent representationalist account of qualitative character, his main concern is the subjective character of experience and I will, therefore, focus on it in this review.

According to Kriegel's Self Representational theory (henceforth SR), a state is phenomenally conscious if it represents itself in the right way. Kriegel's master argument for self-representationalism comes in three steps:

The first one goes from subjective character to *awareness*. Phenomenally conscious experiences do not merely happen *in me*, like the beating of my heart, but are also *for me*. Kriegel maintains that a mental state can exhibit this *for-me-ness* only if I am in some respect *aware* of it. He further suggests that it is plausible that the right kind of awareness be also sufficient for a state to be *for-me* in the relevant sense. In such a case, given that a mental state is phenomenally conscious if it has *for-meness* or subjective character, a state would be phenomenally conscious if it is a state I am aware of in the right way.

The second step goes from *awareness* to *representation*. This step is supported by the following two principles that Kriegel assumes: i) being aware of something is a matter of representing it and ii) representing something is a matter of being in a mental state that represents it. Accepting them and the result of the previous step one can derive the conclusion that a state is phenomenally conscious if it is adequately represented by some mental state. This line of reasoning is very similar to the one that advocates of Higher-Order Representational (HOR) theories appeal to. What distinguishes SR from HOR theories is the claim that, in the case of phenomenally conscious states, the meta-representation is not performed by a numerically distinct state. So, in a third step Kriegel offers a collection of arguments against HOR theories of consciousness to conclude that a phenomenally conscious state is one that represents itself in the right way.

The idea of self-representation might appear contradictory at first glance and in chapter 6 Kriegel makes a laudable effort to make sense of it and to make it compatible with naturalistic theories of mental content. To this aim, Kriegel introduces the notion of indirect content and makes use of the mereological distinction between complexes and sums. Roughly, the difference between mereological sums and complexes is that the way parts are interconnected is not essential for

the former but it is for the latter. Kriegel concludes that a phenomenally conscious state, M , is a complex state that has two states, M^* and M^\diamond , as proper parts, such that M^* represents M^\diamond directly and M indirectly in virtue of representing one of its proper parts. M is not a mere mereological sum of M^\diamond and M^* , but a mereological complex. The difference between HOR and SR rests mainly on this metaphysical distinction and as one can see in chapter 7 where Kriegel carefully explores and presents some interesting evidence from neurosciences, he makes similar neurological hypothesis with regard to the brain structures that implement phenomenally conscious states as some HOR theories do.

I will now briefly present three worries that, I think, SR left unsolved.

In the first place, it doesn't seem plausible that indirect content enters the phenomenology and Kriegel fails to make the case in favor of it. The problem is that self-representation which determines the subjective character depends on the notion of indirect content and this is hardly compatible with the claim that subjective character is phenomenologically manifest. Kriegel considers this objection and tries to resist it:

My inclination is to contest the claim that the indirect content of a representation does not show up in the phenomenology [...] one might be tempted to hold that a normal perceptual experience [...] of freshly brewed coffee represents the coffee by representing its odor, [...] it seems that both are manifest in the phenomenology. However, by the light of the principle that only direct content enters the phenomenology, the coffee would have to be non-phenomenal. (p.230)

I disagree. It might well be that the coffee is part of the content of the experience, but not part of the content that determines the phenomenal character: the coffee itself is not phenomenologically manifest. Different substances with the same aroma would give rise to the very same kind of experience and even if one concedes that these two experiences would differ in content, they do not differ in the content that determines the phenomenal character of experience, because, taking representationalism for granted, both experiences have the same phenomenal character. If I smell the aroma of a substance X I have never smelled, seen, nor heard about before, I do not understand how X enters into the experience in the sense of being phenom-

enally manifest. Just consider another substance Y that has the same aroma. The experience one has while smelling X and while smelling Y is exactly the same. Therefore, neither X nor Y are phenomenologically manifest despite both being indirectly represented.

My second worry with Kriegel's proposal is that self-representationalism seems to be in tension with the phenomenological observation that motivates the distinction between qualitative and subjective character. I agree that all my experiences seem to exhibit a quality of *for-meness*: they are somehow marked as *my* experiences. That seems to suggest, that the experience I have while looking at the red apple is about the apple, but also somehow about myself. There is often an ambiguity in the use of 'self-representational' (present also in Brentano's writings). The expression 'M is self-representational' can mean either i) that M represents itself or ii) that M represents the self. It seems to me that the only sense in which M being self-representational can be said to be phenomenologically manifest is the second one: the experience is about both the world and the experiencing subject. If this is true, then SR fails to offer an account of the subjective character. Kriegel concedes that the phenomenological observation reveals these facts (p.177), but denies that they are constitutive of phenomenal consciousness: what is constitutive of a phenomenally conscious mental state is having a content like 'this mental state is occurring' and not one like 'I am in this mental state'. Kriegel suggests that, whereas the experience is self-involving in normal human adults, infants' or animals' experiences might fail to be so. Unfortunately, he leaves this claim unsupported.

Finally I want to cast doubts on the idea that self-representation, as Kriegel unpacks it, can guarantee sufficient conditions for being a conscious mental state; in other words, it is not clear that this condition cannot be satisfied by non-phenomenally conscious mental states. We have mental states that are represented by other mental states without thereby giving rise to any phenomenally conscious mental state. Consider a state M_H that represents M_L . Call M_{NC} the aggregate of M_H and M_L and suppose that M_{NC} is a non-phenomenally conscious mental state. Why is not M_{NC} a phenomenally conscious mental state? The only reply available seems to be that M_{NC} , contrary to M , is not a complex and therefore M_{NC} does not represent itself. If we had to appeal to M being phenomenally conscious in order to explain the fact that M is a complex, then SR would not be illuminating at all. So, either there is something in the way that M^* and M^\diamond interact that is

different from the way M_H and M_I interact or SR cannot characterize for-menness. According to SR, a mental state is conscious if it is a complex that satisfies some further condition (one proper part represents the other) but unless we are given reasons why a phenomenal conscious state like M is a complex and M_{NC} is not, SR cannot be considered an account of subjective character, for it fails to explain in virtue of what a mental state is a phenomenally conscious mental state. In chapter 7, Kriegel hypothesizes that M^* and M^\diamond are connected via synchronization of their firing rates. Unfortunately for SR connection via synchronization of their firing rates seems not to be exclusive of phenomenally conscious states. There is empirical evidence suggesting, for instance, that synchronous neurological oscillations are a plausible mechanism of medial prefrontal cortex driven cognitive control independent of consciousness. If M_H and M_I are connected via synchronization of their firing rates, then M_H and M_I are connected the same way that M^* and M^\diamond and it still has to be explained why M but not M_{NC} is a complex.

Kriegel's book is engaging and clear despite the elusiveness of some of the notions involved. It offers conceptual tools and arguments worthy of serious consideration for further research and, although the theory has some important elements that require further elaboration, it presents a compelling alternative in the current debate among theories of consciousness. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the philosophy of mind and in consciousness in particular.

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Physicalism, by Daniel Stoljar. New York: Routledge, 2010, 264 pp.

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This book belongs to the series "New problems of philosophy", edited by José Luis Bermúdez. According to the editor, the aim of the series is to provide a clear starting point for the study of a topic of huge but