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INTENTIONALITY AND INNER AWARENESS

abstract

The contemporary discussion on the subjective character of conscious experience is characterized by a stark contrast between higher-order intentionalism, according to which any state of awareness depends on the instantiation of intentional properties by mental states, and anti-intentionalism, according to which the inner awareness constitutive of subjective experience is fundamentally different from ordinary instances of external or introspective awareness, in that one's experience is not given to the subject as an ordinary intentional object. The purpose of this paper is to outline the most fundamental dimensions of variation among the different kinds of higher-order theories and to show, by providing a comprehensive analysis of the logical space available, that these seemingly incompatible views can be reconciled within an intentionalist framework.

keywords

Intentionalism; Inner awareness; Higher-order theories of consciousness; Illusionism

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1. Introduction: Consciousness and Intentionality

Whenever there is something it is like to be in a mental state, certain phenomenal properties are instantiated by that state. Those properties constitute the state's phenomenal character, which consists of a qualitative character (*what* it is like for a subject to be in that state) and a subjective character (the state's *for-me*-ness). Since conscious states differ with respect to their qualities but share the same subjective character, accounts of qualitative character determine the identity conditions of phenomenal character, whereas theories of subjective character, by abstracting from determinate qualitative properties, explain why only certain mental states get a phenomenal character in the first place (Kriegel, 2009, p. 75).

Higher-order intentionalism accounts for the existence of subjective character in terms of inner awareness of one's mental states, which is in turn explained by means of meta-intentionality. That is, on higher-order theories, conscious states are conceived as "mental states we are conscious of being in" (Rosenthal, 1986, p. 26), and inner awareness is taken to be constituted by the instantiation of higher-order intentional properties directed at the first-order states made thereby conscious.

In what follows, I will assess the major objections raised against the conception of subjective character as inner awareness proposed by higher-order theorists. After introducing the main challenges to the standard versions of the higher-order theory present in the relevant literature, I will argue that those objections raise genuine and substantial problems (section 2). Then I will introduce the self-representationalist formulation of higher-order intentionalism and argue that it is much better equipped to address those concerns than standard higher-order theories (section 3). Finally, I will argue that self-representationalism, despite its appeal, shares with standard higher-order theories a further, deeper problem: because of their reliance on the notion of representation, neither theory can genuinely explain how our first-order mental states become conscious (section 4). Thus, I will conclude by suggesting that higher-order intentionalism may still be conceived as a promising framework for understanding the nature of phenomenal consciousness only by questioning its representationalist commitments (section 5).

2. Standard Higher-Order Intentionalism

Higher-order theorists have traditionally debated over the nature of the psychological mode characteristic of inner awareness. According to the higher-order perception theory, the higher-order states responsible for the existence of inner awareness have a quasi-perceptual nature (Armstrong, 1980; Lycan, 1987), whereas on the higher-order thought theory the relevant higher-order states are taken to be thought-like (Rosenthal, 1986). However, despite their differences, these higher-order theories share the following distinctive theses:

- *Distinctness*. The higher-order properties responsible for the constitution of inner awareness are instantiated by mental states numerically distinct from the states made conscious.
- *Extrinsicness*. The property of having a phenomenal character is an extrinsic property of conscious states, holding in virtue of their relationship with the relevant higher-order state.
- *Representationalism*. Inner awareness is constituted by ordinary representations of the first-order states made conscious.

All three theses contribute to the instability of higher-order intentionalism, since their implications force the higher-order theorist to make questionable assumptions in order to preserve the consistency of the theory (in the case of *distinctness*), or its explanatory power (in the case of *extrinsicness* and *representationalism*). The present section will focus on the drawbacks of the distinctness and the extrinsicness theses, which only concern the standard versions of higher-order intentionalism.

Because of the distinctness thesis, the higher-order theorist is forced to characterize the relevant higher-order states as unconscious. Otherwise, a vicious infinite regress of conscious states would follow: if the relevant higher-order states are conscious then, according to higher-order theories, there needs to be a further level of conscious representation in virtue of which it is so, and so on *ad infinitum*. But once the threat of the regress is stopped by assuming that the relevant higher-order states are unconscious, the higher-order theorist is left with the insidious challenge of explaining how we can be conscious of a state's content without being conscious of the state itself. As Mark Rowlands puts it, "how can my thinking that I am in pain make me conscious of my pain if I have no idea that I am thinking that I am in pain?" (2001, p. 301). That is, since an intentional state's being conscious consists (at least in part) in its subject being aware of its content, it seems plausible that, conversely, an intentional state's being unconscious consists (at least in part) in its subject *not* being aware of its intentional content (Kriegel, 2009, p. 30).

Clearly, the higher-order theorist can acknowledge that there is "*a* way of understanding the concept of awareness such that a person only counts as aware of something if the mental state in virtue of which they are aware of that thing is itself a conscious one", but at the same time hold that this is not "the relevant sense of 'awareness' which is put to work" by higher-order intentionalism (Carruthers & Gennaro, 2020, §7.1). However, the task of characterizing this 'unconscious awareness' without thereby emptying the notion of awareness of its significance is likely to be complicated. In this respect, the higher-order perception theorists may be in a better position to provide a satisfying answer: just like ordinary cases of unconscious perception could be interpreted as making us aware, non-consciously, of what they are about, unconscious higher-order perceptual states could make us aware of the first-order states they represent. Indeed, when considering examples such as absent-minded driving or cases of subliminal perception, it may seem plausible that we can be made aware of our surroundings by entertaining unconscious mental states. Yet, in the case of unconscious perception, it is doubtful that a subject can be considered conscious of a certain intentional content only because that content is (unconsciously) being used to guide action. That is, even granting that unconscious perceptual states can make us somehow aware of their contents (because we make use of them to guide our actions), those contents are still by definition not conscious. Similarly, even if we may be somehow aware of our first-order states in virtue of entertaining unconscious higher-order representations, it is unlikely that such an unconscious awareness could make those first-order states conscious. Perhaps, as suggested by Carruthers and Gennaro (2020, §7.1), the criteria for awareness could be dissociated from consciousness,

because we may be aware of the intentional contents of our mental states without those states being conscious. But then the claim that being aware of our first-order states is sufficient to make those states conscious would lose its intuitive plausibility. Since the natural appeal of explaining consciousness in terms of intentionality resides precisely in the apparent essential connection between consciousness and awareness, once that connection is severed, the appeal of higher-order theories fades considerably. However, because of the distinctness thesis, the infinite regress of conscious states threatens the consistency of the theory and thus the higher-order theorist has no other choice but to appeal to unconscious awareness. Therefore, despite not giving rise to definitive objections against higher-order theories, the distinctness thesis should be rejected at least by some higher-order theorist – those assuming the reality of the essential connection between consciousness and awareness.

Because of the extrinsicness thesis, various philosophers questioned the sufficiency of the higher-order analysis by appealing to the so-called "generality problem" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 143). On the one hand, higher-order theorists assume that, for any mental state, having a phenomenal character *just is* being an object of awareness. But, on the other hand, being an object of awareness does not *in general* make conscious the object one is aware of. Thus, if being the object of a certain intentional state is what makes mental states conscious, then why is it the case that only mental states are conscious? (Dretske, 1995, p. 97; Byrne, 1997, p. 110).[1] Perhaps it is an analytic truth that only mental states can be conscious (Byrne, 1997, p. 111), but the generality problem cannot be solved by simply appealing to the ordinary usage of the word 'conscious', for what is required is precisely an account of the difference between mental and non-mental states able to illuminate the ordinary usage of that word (Van Gulick, 2004, p. 72).

A plausible answer to this problem may go as follows. Since conscious states are those mental states that one is conscious of being in, things like chairs cannot be made conscious just by being the object of an intentional state because, being non-mental entities, they are not states that one can be conscious of oneself as being in. After all, higher-order theorists do not hold the general claim that being the object of an intentional state is sufficient for being conscious, but only claim that consciousness is a matter of how one represents one's own mental life. That is, according to higher-order theorists, the reason why only mental states can be conscious has nothing to do with the meaning of the word 'conscious', but rather it is due to the fact that only mental states are such that we can be aware of being in them (in the relevant sense) – in representing a chair, I am not representing my own mental life, and thus there is no reason to expect higher-order intentionalism to apply to chairs.[2]

Yet, if being the object of a certain intentional state is sufficient to make mental states conscious, but analogous representational activities cannot make non-mental entities conscious, it seems that there must be something special about representing one's own mental life that is still left unexplained. And, due to the extrinsicness thesis, higher-order theorists are ill-equipped to spell out what that something special is. If it is true that, for

1 Rosenthal (1997, pp. 738-739) holds that this objection begs the question against the higher-order view, by presupposing a conception of phenomenal character as an intrinsic property of conscious states. Yet, the only assumption required to raise the generality problem is that non-mental entities can be the objects of intentional mental states without being conscious. Then, if being the object of a certain intentional state is what makes mental states conscious, why is it the case that only mental states are conscious? It seems that one can ask that question without assuming that consciousness must be an intrinsic property: the generality problem does not rely on the assumption that consciousness is not an extrinsic property of mental states but, rather, points at the implausible consequences of the assumption that it is (cf. Byrne, 1997).

2 Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

any mental state, having a phenomenal character is a purely extrinsic matter (i.e. being the intentional object of a higher-order representation), then the intrinsic properties of mental states should not play any role in the constitution of consciousness. Thus, on standard higher-order theories, the reason why only mental states can be conscious cannot be found in their intrinsic properties (which non-mental entities may lack), because having those properties is not supposed to be a necessary condition in order for them to become conscious. In Kriegel's words, it is only if the higher-order representation "gave rise to consciousness *by modifying* M" (the mental state made conscious) that "it would make a difference what characteristics M has" (2009, p. 143). Indeed, by assuming the sufficiency of the higher-order analysis, it follows that higher-order theories can even allow for the possibility that we are conscious of uninstantiated first-order states, i.e., that targetless higher-order representations could give rise to states of consciousness subjectively indistinguishable from cases in which the intentional objects of the higher-order representations are existing states. But then, if we do not need to entertain a mental state to be conscious of it, it should not matter whether or not a mental state has certain intrinsic properties, because those properties play no role in the constitution of phenomenal character.[3] And if no intrinsic property of mental states can explain why only mental states can be conscious, then the higher-order theorist is left with no explanation as to why only representing one's own mental life can give rise to consciousness. Therefore, unless the higher-order theorist is ready to give up the thesis that the existence of consciousness can be wholly explained by means of meta-intentionality alone, either she gives up the extrinsicness thesis, or she is left with no answer to face the generality problem.

3. Self-Representationalism

The higher-order theorist has a straightforward way out of these problems: to reject both the distinctness and the extrinsicness thesis, while still maintaining that the existence of consciousness can be explained in terms of meta-intentionality. This strategy is pursued by the proponents of self-representationalism, who hold that a mental state is conscious if and only if it represents itself (Carruthers, 2000; Caston, 2002; Kriegel, 2009).[4] On this view, conscious states are conceived as complex states, whose first-order and higher-order aspects are jointly necessary and sufficient for the constitution of conscious experience. Self-representationalism drops the distinctness thesis because the relevant higher-order representations are taken to be instantiated by the same mental state whose content becomes conscious and, for the same reason, the transformation of an unconscious state into a conscious one is no longer conceived as a purely extrinsic matter, but rather it is taken to involve changes in the state's intrinsic properties (i.e., the addition of higher-order properties). Thus, by adopting self-representationalism, the problems associated with the distinctness and the extrinsicness theses no longer threaten the viability of higher-order intentionalism.[5]

3 In fact, in a footnote, Rosenthal acknowledges that he is forced "to retreat on the claim that a state's being conscious is strictly speaking relational" (2005, p. 179).

4 Carruthers (2000) is not usually known as a self-representationalist, since he presents his theory as a dispositional variation of the higher-order thought theory. According to Carruthers, the existence of conscious experience depends on the (dispositional) availability of first-order states to higher-order thought systems. However, Carruthers defends his theory by appealing to consumer semantics (i.e. the view that a state's content depends at least in part on how the state can be used by various cognitive systems) and argues that availability to higher-order thought can enrich the content of first-order states, providing them with self-representational content: "the very same perceptual states which represent the world to us (or the conditions of our own bodies) can at the same time represent the fact that those aspects of the world (or of our bodies) are being perceived" (Carruthers, 2000, p. 242). Thus, self-representationalism seems to be the natural outcome of Carruthers' view.

5 It may be suggested that self-representationalism is a kind of "same-order" rather than "higher-order" intentionalism, since no higher-order states are involved. However, self-representationalism captures the

Since higher-order representations are conceived as aspects of conscious states, it becomes possible to consider those representations as conscious without thereby committing to the possibility of an infinite regress of higher-order states, because no further level of representation needs to be introduced: higher-order representations become conscious *qua* part of conscious states.

However, the threat of the infinite regress does not wholly vanish – it is just a different kind of infinite regress, concerning conscious representational properties instead of conscious states. For the higher-order representation can be considered as genuinely conscious, rather than as an unconscious aspect of a conscious state, only if the conscious state represents *all* of its representational properties (higher-order ones included). And if the conscious state consciously represents itself as representing itself (i.e. if its higher-order properties are conscious), then there needs to be a further level of self-representation in virtue of which it is so, and so on *ad infinitum* (Nida-Rümelin, 2014, p. 278).

Yet, since the higher-order representation is an integral part of the conscious state, the self-representationalist can stop the regress by appealing to the notion of indirect representation, i.e., the idea that a whole can be indirectly represented by means of the representation of a part of it. For example, a painting can indirectly represent an entire house by directly representing only its front. Clearly, the fact that something is part of a larger whole does not obviously imply that a representation of the former counts as an indirect representation of the latter – a table is part of the world, but no representation of a table could be conceived as an indirect representation of the whole world. Plausibly, in order for some representation to count as an indirect representation of something else it is required that the represented part amounts to a significant portion of the whole, and that it is well integrated into it. And although both conditions may be subject to some degree of vagueness, if conscious states are conceived as complex states whose first-order and higher-order aspects are jointly necessary and sufficient for the constitution of conscious experience, it is reasonable to suppose that both conditions are met. That is, it seems that first-order contents are indeed well integrated into the whole of which they are part (i.e. the conscious state) and that they amount to a significant portion of it, since they are necessary for its existence and they constitute most of its content. Thus, it seems plausible that a higher-order representation can indirectly represent the whole state of which it is part – thereby indirectly representing itself – by directly representing only a significant part of it, i.e. the first-order one (Kriegel, 2009, p. 225-227). Therefore, the self-representationalist, by rejecting the distinctness thesis, can conceive the higher-order representations responsible for the existence of inner awareness as conscious – *qua* indirectly represented by the conscious states of which they are part – and thus assume the reality of the essential connection between consciousness and awareness mentioned earlier without falling prey to any kind of infinite regress.

Similarly, if conscious states are conceived as complex states constituted by first-order as well as higher-order aspects, then the generality problem can be easily avoided. Because of the extrinsicness thesis, the higher-order theorist cannot appeal to intrinsic properties of mental states in order to explain why only mental states can be conscious, and thus has no explanation as to why only representing one's own mental life can give rise to consciousness. But, according to the self-representationalist, a mental state's becoming conscious involves

fundamental principles of higher-order intentionalism: it conceives as subjective character in terms of inner awareness, and it explains inner awareness by appealing to the instantiation of higher-order representational properties. Thus, it seems reasonable to consider self-representationalism as a variation of standard higher-order theories rather than as a radically different representationalist account of consciousness.

intrinsic changes to the state itself (the addition of higher-order properties) which do not take place when non-mental entities become objects of awareness. Thus, on self-representationalism, being the object of an intentional mental state can only make mental states conscious, because only mental states can instantiate the internal representational relation required for consciousness (i.e. the relation between first-order contents and higher-order representations of them, together with the indirect representation of the latter). Clearly, this solution to the generality problem, as well as the appeal to the notion of indirect representation necessary to stop the infinite regress, relies on the assumption that the difference between self-representationalism and traditional higher-order theories is not purely verbal. But, as Kriegel points out, once we introduce "a represented and a representor, it is not clear that there is a *substantive* difference between treating them as separate states and treating them as separate parts of a single state" (2009, p. 221). Thus, in order to show that the integration of higher-order contents with the first-order states they represent is not a simple stipulation, self-representationalists need to provide some criteria for determining whether or not two intentional contents are part of one and the same state. To this purpose, Kriegel (2009, p. 221) appeals to the distinction between mereological sums, whose parts are only contingently tied to each other, and complexes, whose parts are essentially interconnected. While a mereological sum can go out of existence only if one of its parts is removed, in a mereological complex breaking the connection between the parts is enough to destroy the whole, even if nothing happens to any of those parts. Thus, were conscious states shown to be mereological complexes, rather than just arbitrary mereological sums, self-representationalism would be safe from the threats of the infinite regress and the generality problem.[6] And, indeed, especially (but not exclusively) on the assumption that the subjective character of conscious states is a fundamental aspect of their phenomenal character, first-order states and the inner awareness of those states appear as essentially rather than contingently interconnected within conscious experience. For example, it seems plausible that given "a perceptual experience of the blue sky, the perception of blue and the awareness of that perception are unified by some psychologically real relation whose dissolution would entail the destruction of the experience" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 222). This psychologically real relation may be characterized in phenomenological terms, by appealing to the phenomenally manifest synchronic unity of conscious experience, as well as in sub-personal terms, by appealing to cognitive processes of informational integration. However, independently of one's preferred account of this psychologically real relation between first-order states and inner awareness, it seems clear that self-representationalists do have a sensible reason to believe that their proposal is substantially different from traditional higher-order theories, and thus that they have at their disposal the right theoretical tools to deal with the threats of the infinite regress and the generality problem.

4. Representationalism and Illusionism

Self-representationalism shares with standard higher-order theories a further difficulty, stemming from its commitment to the representationalist thesis. According to any higher-order intentionalist view considered so far, first-order states become conscious in virtue of being the intentional objects of ordinary, explicit representations. But the connection between subject and experience established by inner awareness appears to be more intimate

6 For similar reasons, the possibility of targetless higher-order representation would be precluded. That is, if the first-order and the higher-order aspects of a mental state are related in such a way that, were that relation broken, consciousness would vanish, then "it is incoherent to suppose that a mental state may represent itself to exist when in reality it does not exist" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 136). For the opposite claim, cf. Coleman (2015).

than the one ordinarily relating a representing subject with a represented content (Levine, 2001; Kriegel, 2009). For, while the very notion of representation involves the possibility of misrepresentation, the kind of acquaintance with our conscious states provided by inner awareness seems to have an epistemically privileged status, such that it does not admit the possibility of an appearance-reality distinction. That is, plausibly, the phenomenal character of an experience is necessarily fixed by the way in which that experience subjectively appears to be: "in the case of mental phenomena there is no 'appearance' beyond the mental phenomenon itself" (Kripke, 1980, p. 154). While we may perform various introspective tasks incorrectly, we cannot be wrong when it comes to knowing what it is like for us to have a certain experience, because the identity of our conscious states coincides with their subjective appearance. In a slogan, "phenomenal appearance collapses onto phenomenal reality" (Sacchi & Voltolini, 2017, p. 30). But on higher-order intentionalism, since it is "perfectly coherent to suppose that a mental state may represent itself [or another state] to be a certain way when in reality it is not that way" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 136), the qualitative properties consciously experienced as belonging to a mental state may differ from the ones that state actually instantiates. Thus, it may seem natural to conclude that, as suggested by various philosophers belonging to the phenomenological tradition, the inner awareness constitutive of phenomenal consciousness should be conceived as fundamentally different from ordinary, representational instances of awareness. According to this tradition, the intimacy of inner awareness depends on the fact that one's experience is not presented to the subject as an ordinary intentional object, but rather it is "simply lived through" (Zahavi, 2006, p. 279). As Martine Nida-Rümelin puts it, although there is an 'object of awareness' in the case of inner awareness as well, "that 'object' is not given as any content in the stream of consciousness." (2014, p. 279). For, otherwise, it could be misrepresented, thereby giving rise to an appearance-reality distinction incompatible with the fundamental features of inner awareness.

However, the intimacy of the connection between subjects and experiences may be captured within the framework of higher-order intentionalism, by construing the notion of inner awareness in terms of *constituting* representation. That is, it is possible that the instantiation of higher-order representations does not only determine the existence conditions of phenomenal character (by endowing subjects with inner awareness) but also fixes its identity conditions (by constituting the qualitative character of conscious states). Then, if "qualitative properties are *constituted* by the inner awareness representation of the conscious state" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 109), it is how first-order states are represented that determines the way in which the subject will experience them. And if "the first-order state can contribute nothing to phenomenology apart from the way we're conscious of it" (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 32), then no subject could ever notice, within phenomenology, that her mental states have properties different from the ones that her experience ascribes to them. Hence, it would subjectively seem that, indeed, the inner awareness of one's conscious states does not admit the possibility of an appearance-reality distinction – despite the possibility of misrepresentation (and perhaps even targetlessness).

Yet, although the appeal to the notion of constituting representation allows the higher-order theorist to provide a plausible explanation as to why inner awareness only *seems* to have such an epistemically privileged status, and thus to hold that it is just another ordinary instance of representational awareness, it comes at a high cost. For, if first-order states have no role in determining the qualitative character of experience, then it seems that no subject is ever *really* conscious of her mental states. That is, if the higher-order representations fix the identity conditions of phenomenal character, then we may at best "consciously experience veridical echoes of sensory states; but of the sensory states we are not conscious" (Coleman, 2015, p. 2710) because, on the 'constituting representation' view, the properties of first-order states

"are not part of the experience's phenomenal character, indeed are not phenomenologically manifest in any way" (Kriegel, 2009, p. 110). Thus, rather than providing an explanation of what makes our mental states conscious, higher-order theories can only account for the source of the *impression* that some of our mental states are conscious. Since the properties of a first-order state do not matter at all for the constitution of its phenomenal character, it follows that "what counts for somebody's being in a conscious state is just the occurrence in one's stream of consciousness of the relevant subjective appearance, the appearance of being in the state in question" (Rosenthal, 2011, p. 432). That is, what we are conscious of is never our actual mental life, but a mere reproduction of it.

Clearly, the higher-order theorist may object that this is just the traditional problem of illusion concerning perceptual experience adapted to the special case of mental states, and that there is no reason to worry too much.[7] Just as we do not believe that we are not ever really conscious of external objects simply because we could radically misrepresent them, we should not believe that we are not really conscious of our mental states simply because they may appear in consciousness as different from how they really are. However, the problem of illusion under consideration does not concern our representational relation with the world, but rather, our relationship with our mental states as they appear in consciousness. In the case of perception, we cannot be sure that we *really* know how the world is, but we have at least good pragmatic reasons to assume that our perceptual experiences provide us somewhat accurate reports. For example, we can often put to test the accuracy of our representations, e.g. by comparing the information from different sensory modalities, or constructing devices that make up for some of our biases. Differently, in the case of consciousness, we have no independent access to the contents of experience except for inner awareness. And if inner awareness is such that we only experience representations of our first-order states, we have no reason to suppose that those states really have the phenomenal qualities they seem to have within phenomenology. After all, since the properties of first-order states never make it to consciousness, none of our mental states could have any quality at all and yet indistinguishable conscious experiences could still arise.

In turn, this feature of higher-order intentionalism opens the door to a form of anti-realism, or illusionism, about consciousness, i.e., the view that although experiences are real, phenomenal consciousness is an illusion (Frankish, 2017). Illusionism can be conceived as an intermediate position between radical eliminativist positions and realism about consciousness. Differently from the eliminativist, the illusionist does not reject the notion of phenomenal consciousness nor its characterization in terms of 'what it is like'. However, differently from the realist, the illusionist denies the existence of phenomenal character and claims that the notion of 'what it is like' should be conceived in terms of conscious states *seeming* to have phenomenal character. That is, according to illusionists, once we have explained why it seems to us that we have conscious states, we have explained all there is to explain about consciousness: we can dissolve the 'hard problem' by solving the meta-problem, i.e. by explaining why it seems that there is a hard problem of consciousness to begin with, or why our conscious states seem to have peculiar qualitative properties.

7 The traditional problem of illusion can be summarized as follows. Since one and the same theory of perception must apply to both veridical and illusory experiences, given that in having illusory experiences we are not directly presented with ordinary external objects, it follows that we are never directly presented with ordinary external objects. However, although many philosophers do worry about this problem, none of them believe that it should lead us to suppose that we are never really conscious of external objects – i.e. that although perceptual experiences are real, perception is an illusion – but only that we are simply indirectly presented with those objects. Similarly, we may never be directly presented with our mental states and yet we could be conscious of them nonetheless.
Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this reply.

The higher-order theorist, wanting to defend the compatibility of the theory with realism, may point out that if phenomenal consciousness *is the impression* that a mental state has certain qualities, then for that state to have a certain phenomenal character is simply to be subjectively presented as having those qualities. Thus the reality of that phenomenal character does not depend on whether the mental state has the qualities that inner awareness attributes to it independently of that attribution. If the impression is real, the higher-order theorist may argue, although its content may happen to be inaccurate, then phenomenal consciousness is still conceived as real. Therefore, it may seem that higher-order intentionalism does not require phenomenal consciousness to be an illusion but rather, more weakly, simply that consciousness is only a matter of how things appear to a subject – but that makes it no less real. That is, while illusionists deny that experiences have phenomenal character and "focus on explaining why they seem to have them" (Frankish, 2017, 17), higher-order theorists can still claim that phenomenal character exists (albeit fixed exclusively by higher-order representations) by taking the impression of there being phenomenal character to be sufficient for the instantiation of said phenomenal character, i.e. by conceiving a mental state's having phenomenal character in terms of that state's seeming to have one.

Yet, the difference between these two readings of the conception of consciousness as a subjective impression (i.e. the illusionist one and the intentionalist one) is less significant than it may appear at first glance. In fact, to say that phenomenal consciousness is an illusion is not the same as saying that conscious experiences are not real, but only that their true nature, being illusory, is not as it appears within phenomenology (Frankish, 2017, p. 24), And that's exactly what higher-order intentionalists hold. For, on higher-order theories, phenomenology misleads us, in that it appears as presenting us with our first-order states and their qualities but it cannot, since those qualities are exclusively fixed by higher-order representations, and the contents of those states are never phenomenologically manifest. Thus, higher-order intentionalists clearly share with illusionists the view that "cognitive scientists should treat phenomenological reports as fictions – albeit ones that provide clues as to what is actually occurring in the brain" (Frankish, 2017, p. 26). The only apparent difference between higher-order intentionalists and illusionists is that, while "illusionists deny that experiences have phenomenal properties and focus on explaining why they seem to have them" (Frankish, 2017, p. 17), most higher-order intentionalists do not explicitly deny the reality of phenomenal properties. But that is only because higher-order theorists define a state's having phenomenal properties in terms of a state's seeming to have them. That is, higher-order intentionalists hide their eliminativist stance towards phenomenal properties by holding that the phenomenal nature of those properties does not depend on their being actually instantiated by the first-order states they are attributed to. But if all that is required for a mental state to have a phenomenal character is subjectively appearing as having one, then there is no theoretical need to admit into our ontology something like phenomenal properties, i.e., the properties of first-order states constituting their phenomenal character, in virtue of which there is something it is like to be in those states. Once it is assumed that the instantiation of phenomenal properties by first-order states simply amounts to the subjective appearance that those properties are instantiated, their existence becomes irrelevant for the constitution of conscious experience. Hence, when it comes to establishing what phenomenal consciousness really is, it does seem that higher-order intentionalism shares the illusionist view that "our sense that it is *like something* to undergo conscious experiences is due to the fact that we systematically misrepresent them (or, on some versions, their objects) as having phenomenal properties" (Frankish, 2017, p. 13).[8] That is, for the

8 It may be objected that, according to higher-order intentionalism, we do not misrepresent first-order states as

higher-order theorist as well as the illusionist, the intimacy of our relation with our conscious states, i.e. the fact that phenomenal appearance collapses onto phenomenal reality, is just due to the fact that appearances determine phenomenal reality. On both views, it is not the case that the phenomenal qualities of the mental states we are conscious of determine what it is like to be in those states; instead, any state's phenomenal character is exclusively determined by the way in which that state is represented to be. Ultimately, the only good reason to assume the reality of phenomenal properties is the thesis that this reality determines phenomenal appearances; if conscious experiences are conceived as subjectively presented collections of qualities fundamentally disconnected from the mental states to which we ordinarily ascribe them, as higher-order intentionalists suggest, then the assumption of an illusionist conception of phenomenal consciousness seems inevitable.

5. Conclusion: The Prospects of Higher-Order Intentionalism

We are left with a stark contrast between two different conceptions of consciousness. By assuming a realist perspective, our mental states and properties are supposed to play a role in the constitution of their phenomenal characters, whereas higher-order intentionalism seems to imply that inner awareness alone constitutes what we are conscious of. Clearly, the higher-order theorist may simply embrace illusionism, whose legitimacy has been defended by various philosophers (Dennett, 1991; Frankish, 2017; Graziano, 2019). However, it may be possible to reconcile higher-order intentionalism with a realist conception of consciousness by following the path opened by self-representationalists.

In section 2, I have argued that traditional higher-order theories of consciousness must face a number of objections because of the implications of some of their core theses (i.e. *distinctness* and *extrinsicness*). In section 3, I pointed out that self-representationalists, by dropping those theses, can easily avoid those objections and thereby put forward a much more promising version of higher-order intentionalism. In section 4, I have argued that the one thesis self-representationalists inherited from traditional higher-order theories (i.e. *representationalism*) turns out to have problematic implications as well (at least for those philosophers who embrace a realist perspective on phenomenal properties). Thus, perhaps the most promising higher-order theory can only be articulated once that last assumption will be dropped as well. After all, just like the distinctness and the extrinsicness theses, it seems that the representationalist thesis is not essential to defend the fundamental principles of the higher-order intentionalist framework – namely, the idea that the existence of phenomenal character depends on inner awareness, together with the thesis that inner awareness is constituted by the instantiation of higher-order intentional properties directed at the first-order states made thereby conscious. While the existence of any representation requires the instantiation of intentional properties, since all representations are about what is represented, the instantiation of intentional properties (i.e. the presence of 'aboutness') does not obviously entail the instantiation of an ordinary, explicit representation. Thus, it seems clear that the existence of consciousness could be explained in terms of meta-intentionality and yet, at the same time, deny that inner awareness is an ordinary representation of one's mental states. For example, consider the following display sentences: "the sign 'Keep Off' on a road; 'Shake well' on a bottle; the date written at the head of a letter; 'New, Improved' on a cereal box; '$100' on a dress, etc." (Zemach, 1985, p. 195). In all these sentences, the subject matter is not

having phenomenal character but, rather, those states get to have a phenomenal character because we represent ourselves as being in those states – so that no representation of phenomenal properties of states is required. Yet, on the 'constitutive representation' view, higher-order representations *must* ascribe phenomenal qualities to first-order states, otherwise they could not fix the identity conditions of their phenomenal character.

represented but rather, being within reach, it is simply presented – embedded in the discourse without using a symbol that stands for it. Analogously, occurrent first-order states, being already instantiated, could be simply presented – embedded into, rather than represented by, higher-order states. That is, higher-order states could work as quotational frames, allowing first-order states to be directly employed in consciousness, rather than merely represented (Coleman, 2015, p. 2716).[9] Clearly, the development of such a view is no easy task, and it goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, the mere possibility that the existence of phenomenal consciousness could be explained in terms of meta-intentionality without being reduced to a matter of (intentional) appearances is, on its own, very good news: higher-order intentionalism may still be conceived as a promising framework for understanding the nature of phenomenal consciousness, even without conceiving of it as an illusion.

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9 According to Coleman's Quotational Higher Order Thought theory (2015), inner awareness is constituted by higher-order thoughts able to "'quote' a sensory state, forming a larger composite structure wherein the sensory state is displayed" (2015, p. 2717). On this view, inner awareness is still explained in terms of meta-intentionality, but it is non-representational in nature, since any token first-order state is made conscious by directly embedding it within the demonstrating frame of a quotational higher-order thought.
Considerations leading to a similar outcome are put forward by Van Gulick's Higher Order Global State theory (2000; 2004), who argues that first-order states become conscious when they acquire a higher-order dimension in virtue of being recruited by a "globally integrated state that is the momentary realization of the agent's shifting transient conscious awareness" (2004, p. 74). On this view, inner awareness is still explained in terms of meta-intentionality, but instead of being constituted by "a separate explicit meta-representation" it is conceived as "an implicit aspect of the structure of the globally integrated state into which the lower-order state is recruited" (2004, p. 80).

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