

Review of: "Growing Confidence and Remaining Uncertainty About Animal Consciousness"

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Review of Growing Confidence and Remaining Uncertainty About Animal Consciousness

I am not a neurologist and therefore will confine my comments to one of the claimed objectives of the paper: to bridge the gap between (neurological) mechanism and phenomenology.

More than a review, I consider the text below as a proposition and invitation to continue the debate on this crucial question.

I have an issue with what consciousness consists of.

I understand that part of the problem addressed by the author is precisely that we do not understand what consciousness is.

Still, the reading of the article suggests the author has some implicit ideas about it, namely

- that consciousness is closely tied to experience,
- and that consciousness is more or less the *result* of a process of integration of some neurological perceptual activity.

To bridge the gap between phenomenology and this understanding of perception and experience, one would expect the author to provide a detailed explanation of the phenomenological interpretation of experience, which is a bit missing.

I have confronted the two approaches in an article just published in *Theory, Culture, and Society*, "Why Do Experts and Amateurs Diverge in Their Tastings? A Pragmatic Analysis of Perception." I try to sum up the contrast.

For Merleau-Ponty, as well as for James (not the author of *Principles of Psychology*, but that of the *Essays in Radical Empiricism* who takes a radically different viewpoint on experience), the above dualistic understanding is not relevant to understand experience. Both authors provide a few arguments and examples supporting this claim and look for an alternative, non-dualistic way where experience more or less equates existence.

Therefore, one may feel quite uneasy articulating the dualistic understanding of experience, the representational theory of perception which sees it as the interiorization of an external reality, namely, and the above phenomenological

understanding of perception/experience, because they both ground on antinomic ontologies. The dualistic interpretation states that there is a reality and a separate remote mind that “observes” it. For Merleau-Ponty, as well as James in his later works, this ontology is a presupposition at the source of multiple paradoxes. They thus discard the reality/mind construction and replace it by experience and its flow.

This notion allows one to draw a continuum between a large range of beings’ experiences, starting with inanimate yet resisting ones, following with all kinds of living beings, with more or less developed neural systems.

This is where consciousness recurs in the discussion.

There are many different sorts/modes/states... of consciousness (or experience depending on the chosen ontology). The author draws on the neurological variety of animals, but this is not necessary. Even we, human beings, enjoy different sorts/modes/states... of consciousness. When I walk, when I ride a bicycle, when I eat, I am not putting one foot ahead of the other and moving the weight of my body forward, pushing on each pedal one after the other, or carefully watching my balance, crushing and swallowing food while paying attention to only crush the food and not my cheeks or tongue. I am just walking, riding, and eating. However, another mode of consciousness may surge if “I” start to think about, to control, to produce these activities, or, in case of any issue, interruption... if experience seems to “switch” to another mode of consciousness, a (more) reflexive one in which “I” watches “me” as carrying out a series of interdependent “actions”.

Still, if no such breach occurs, experience will unfold according to a mode that may be compared to that of a worm, or a running ape, or a swimming squid.

This remark leads me to another difficulty with the text: its reading suggests that consciousness is not very different from reflexivity (“subjective experiencing” (p. 2)) and that reflexivity is a mode of consciousness where the “I” orders its “body,” at least a small part of it, to behave in the middle of an “environment”.

This equation of consciousness with reflexive consciousness strongly increases the intelligibility of the article's arguments and discussions, though some sentences or paragraphs would thus have to be revised (§4p2 among others).

If such is the aim of the author, the question of the emergence of reflexive consciousness could be framed with other philosophical work like that of Mead, Ricœur, and so many others.

- Ricœur, Paul (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris: Seuil.

I feel this rewording of the question addressed by the author would clarify and make more explicit the intellectual gaps reviewed in the article.

Phenomenology helps account for modes of experience where there is no “I” and points out a neural process from which this “I” would result. If there is any gap to bridge between phenomenology and the representational understanding of perception or consciousness, it could stand here, in the explanation of this switch, change, transformation... of experience, where “experience” becomes “the-experience-of-an-object-by-a-subject”. Such a perspective could also open up further distinctions such as on p. 9: “contrasting the first-person and third-person accounts of the same reality.”

