

The Nature of Consciousness
Handout [6]
William Lycan: *Consciousness as Internal Monitoring*

JeeLoo Liu

§ The Goal:

1. To argue that what distinguishes conscious mental activity from un- and subconscious mental activity is indeed second-order representing.
2. To defend the Inner Sense Theory against several objections.

§ Lycan's Inner Sense Theory of Consciousness

Scope: 'Conscious state' = the state one is conscious of being in.

[1] "consciousness" = the functioning of internal attention mechanisms directed upon lower-order psychological states and events.

[2] Attention mechanisms are devices that have the job of relaying and/or coordinating information about ongoing psychological events and processes.

[3] There are degrees of consciousness in different organisms, ranked by complexity and degree of internal monitoring, integration, and control.

[Question 1]: Does Lycan's theory need neurophysiological backing of his hypothesis of the existence of such a mechanism?

[Question 2]: Can this theory explain qualia or phenomenal experience?

§ Lycan's Main Argument:

- 1. The mind has no special properties that are not exhausted by its representational properties.**
- 2. All representations can be understood from the naturalistic point of view.**
- 3. Therefore, the mind can be well understood from the naturalistic point of view.**

[Notes on "representational"]:

The basic notion of a *representation* involves one thing's 'standing for,' 'being about,' 'referring to or denoting' something else. ⇒ the issue of a sign and its object.

_____ All mental facts are representational in the sense that the quality of experience; how things seem to us at the sensory level, is constituted by the properties things are represented as having. My experience of an object is the totality of ways that object appears to me, and the way an object appears to me is the way my senses represent it.

[Notes on "naturalism"]:

___ (i) Everything that exists and every event that takes place are empirically accessible features of the world.

___ (ii) Mental events are natural processes and can be given a naturalistic account.

___ (iii) A naturalistic account often includes an understanding of the biological machinery and an explanation of the neurophysiological mechanism of the brain.

___ (iv) Darwinism often accompanies naturalism.

§ Implications of the Inner Sense Theory

(i) An Appearance/Reality Distinction for Subjectivity

___ **Since an internal monitor is a physical device and so subject to malfunction, it might report falsely. Thus, the Inner Sense theory implies an appearance/reality distinction for subjectivity.**

(ii) No Incorrigeability

___ **An internal monitor could in principle fire without anything like a proper cause, given a false positive. Thus, the Inner Sense view predicts that it is possible for a person to be unveridically conscious or aware of a sensation that simply does not exist. (e.g. You might introspect a sharp, severe pain, when there is in fact no pain at all.)**

Three Claims: (to be examined in class)

(1) The Inner Sense view affords a perfect model of **consciousness of a stimulus in the absence of the subject's belief in that consciousness**: a first-order state is conscious in virtue of being scanned, and seems a certain way to its subject, but the scanning is not itself scanned.

(2) Moreover, a second-order monitor could break down and make **a first-order state seem to seem to me in a way that the state does not in fact seem to me.**

(3) In principle a neuroscientist could observe a first-order state being scanned by an unscanned monitor and know just what was going on.

§ Advantages of the Inner Sense View of Consciousness:

(i) It does distinguish awareness from mere psychological and conscious states/events from mere mentation.

(ii) The view affords some grades of un- or subconsciousness.

(iii) The Inner Sense account affords the best solution I know to the problem of subjectivity and "knowing what it's like."

(iv) The Inner Sense view sorts out a long-standing issue about sensations and feeling.

§ Objections and Replies

[A] Dretske's Objection:

___ (I) Why is consciousness (or just representation) *of* certain physical states enough to make those states *themselves* "conscious"?

___ (II) What is it that is so special about physical states of that certain sort, that consciousness of them make them -- and not just any old physical state -- conscious?

Lycan's Reply:

___ It seems psychological states are called "conscious" states when we are conscious of them, but nonpsychological things are not.

[Question: Is Lycan begging the question here? What makes some physical states mental and others nonmental?]

[B] Rosenthal's Objection:

___ (I) A regress: If the first-order state is felt to have a qualitative or phenomenal aspect because it gives rise to an internal perception that itself "involves some sensory quality", then the sensory quality of the second-order state would remain to be explained.

___ (II) If perceiving always involves some sensory quality and if internal monitoring is perceiving, then internal monitoring itself must indeed involve some sensory quality.

Lycan's Reply:

___ The Inner Sense theorist (Armstrong or I) does not contend that internal monitoring is like external perception in every single respect. And in particular, we should not expect internal monitoring to share the property of involving some sensory quality at its own level of operation.

[C] Dennett's Objection:

___ It is a priori unlikely that Mother Nature has furnished the human brain with any central viewing room or single monitor to do the viewing, nor is there any positive neurophysiological of such an organ.

___ The Inner Sense theory has it that conscious awareness is the successful operation of an internal scanner or monitor that outputs second-order representations of first-order psychological states. But an "internal scanner" sounds very much as though it presupposes an internal audience seated in a Cartesian Theater, even if it and the theater are made of physical stuff. Is the Inner Sense view not then committed to Cartesian materialism?

Lycan's Reply:

___ It should be clear that the Inner Sense view is not per se committed to Cartesian materialism. For even if an internal scanner resembles an internal audience in some ways, the "audience" need not be seated in a Cartesian Theater. There need be no single, executive scanner, and no one scanner or monitor need view the entire array of first-order mental states accessible to consciousness.

[Question: Do you think that Lycan's reply to Dennett's attack from neurological evidence is coherent and sufficient?]

[D] Rey's Objection:

___ (I) If all it takes to make a first-order state a conscious state is that the state be monitored by a scanner that makes integrative use of the information thus gleaned, then consciousness is a lot more prevalent than we think. Any notebook computer, for example, has devices that keep track of its "psychological" states.

___ (II) For that matter, individual subsystems of our own human psychologies doubtless involve their own internal monitors, and it is implausible to grant that those subsystems are themselves conscious.

Lycan's Reply:

___ (1) For consciousness we should require that our monitor emit a genuine representation, not just physical "information"....

___ (2) It should trouble no one that he or she has proper parts that are conscious. The proper part of you that consists of you minus your left arm is conscious, as is the part consisting of you minus your skin and most of your musculature.

[E] Searle's Objection

___ Consciousness is an on/off switch; a system is either conscious or not.

Lycan's Reply:

1. Cases of "semiconscious" patients are cases of consciousness "to a degree".
2. We can't draw a single line between consciousness and unconsciousness among artifacts of different degrees of complexity.
3. Nature contains a fairly smooth continuum of organisms, ranked roughly by complexity and degree of internal monitoring, integration, and efficient control. Where on this continuum would God tell us that consciousness beings?
4. Consider human infants as they develop from embryo to fetus to neonate to baby to child. When in that sequence does consciousness begin?

Therefore, one cannot simply assume that consciousness is an on-off switch.