

Steven Ravett Brown

On Conference Styles

Personal Reflections Provoked by ASSC-6

Generally, I find gatherings of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness more interesting and congenial than the Tucson conferences. There are at least two reasons for this, the first one obvious: the former is smaller. Less crowds, more chances to participate in discussions (a point I'll get back to later). The second reason reflects my predispositions, and of course those of the ASSC: the talks, research, and speculation are closely data-driven. I find it highly refreshing to attend talks on consciousness which are reporting experiments done by groups employing stringent quality controls, and to hear speculation which is carefully restrained to inferences that closely and clearly follow from consensually verified data. I find it hopeful that researchers have not abandoned lines of inquiry which have decades of experiments to back them up merely because they have not yet found answers to some particular questions. But hey, these are my own biases; I'm someone who thinks the *Skeptical Inquirer* is a valuable resource.

My rough impression of ASSC-6 (May 31–June 3, 2002, Barcelona) was that the plenary talks were on the average very good, ranging from good through to excellent. The short talks, unfortunately, were not usually of that quality. I heard interesting data poorly presented, philosophy which was really too specialized to belong properly at this conference, and some speculation which was simply — to my mind — unreasonable. The average gap in quality between the plenary and the symposia speakers, both as presenters and as researchers, was greater than it should have been, to the point of being uncomfortable at times. Nonetheless, they were not actually embarrassing, as they are many times at Tucson, and on occasions the ASSC symposia were quite the equal of the plenary talks.

Talks that stood out for me (and I did not attend them all) were Philip Zelazo's on recursion, Shaul Hochstein's, Tony Jack's, David Chalmers' summary of the symposium on Reportability, and Daphne Maurer's on neonatal synaesthesia.

Zelazo's talk was a fascinating one. The idea that the increase in levels of recursive processing correlates to an increase in 'consciousness of' seems very

Correspondence: srbrown@ravett.com

reasonable, and something that a philosopher could easily seize on (and they have, as we all know). However, what I think is more valuable at this point — and a lesson for philosophers — was that he took an experimental approach to what has been a philosophical claim, and produced evidence supporting it. The fact that he created methodologies to accomplish this is remarkable, and I applaud him. On the other hand, his approach was, I believe, too one-sided. Surely not all progress in insight and consciousness is due to the development of recursive mental processes. Piaget, after all, hypothesized many types of schemata and operations, and a viewpoint which reduces them to recursive levels would be too simplistic. I think that Zelazo should have mentioned alternative types of schema (or maybe a better term might be ‘modes’?) more than he did; I’m sure he doesn’t discount them.

By contrast the ‘Language of Thought’ concurrent session suffered from philosophical overkill. Too much logic and not enough data; we get this in philosophy conferences. I sit in talks such as Lau’s, Machery’s, and Werning’s (I missed most of Gimila’s) reflecting on their amazing grasp of logical thought, and wondering to what I’m possibly going to relate their topics, unless I want to write commentaries specifically on their papers.

I did admire that they did not all read their papers word-for-word, a practice I’m finding more and more abhorrent in conferences. If I want to read a paper, I’m perfectly able to do that on my own; I don’t need a reader. Watching a head reading, especially one who is not a professional actor (and thus is fairly expressionless) adds nothing to the content of a paper, in my very strong opinion.

I’m sorry, but I found Weiskrantz’s talk too bland and forgettable. Hopefully he will come up with something as radical and upsetting as his early ideas; that’s where the fun is, right?

Posters: I very much liked the intimate setting. We couldn’t avoid seeing them, and they were pretty good.

Jack’s talk was very good as a summary of introspective methodologies, and more importantly served to emphasize the ubiquity of introspection. I would have liked him to mention the use of introspective methods in linguistics as well, which it seems to me is rampant, unmentioned, and thus irresponsible. We need more people pointing out the use of introspection in various fields, and then creating methods of consensual validation within those fields particularly for introspective methods. The weakness of his talk, in my opinion, was that Jack did not really approach that latter issue in any specific way; otherwise it was excellent.

Rosenthal. . . . In a very vague and general sense, I think the idea of a ‘higher-order thought’ is a nice one; it certainly relates, for example, to Zelazo’s work, and to our intuitions about consciousness. I just think Rosenthal has pushed it too far, on, again, too little evidence and in addition has a theory too language-based. Surely, a HOT theory should be about mode rather than content of thought. Who am I to criticize Rosenthal, you say. Well, for those who attended the talk, I’ll just mention Jackendoff’s exchange with Rosenthal as exemplifying some of the objections to which I’m referring (Chalmers, also, zeroed in on the criticism of R’s point ‘B’). On post-talk exchanges, see my remarks below on conversations.

Chalmers' summary of the whole issue was excellent, especially, as I mentioned above, his objections to Rosenthal. My problem with Chalmers' presentations, in general, however, is that he talks too fast. Not that I don't hear him, catch his words, etc.; it's just that I'd like to have more of a feeling that he's really focused, rather than that he's skimming along trying to pack as much as he can into too little time. But perhaps I'm unique in this feeling. The content didn't suffer from it, just the feel of the presentation.

Hochstein's theory about 'slow' vs. 'fast' consciousness and focusing I found fascinating, and it relates extremely well, I believe, both to data on recursive levels, above, and also to cognitive linguistics' support of a 'middle' level of abstraction as the primary level for category formation. I'd like to see more on this, because it also relates to phenomenological analyses and the structure of gestalts. Good stuff, and data-driven. I would have liked to have seen some of those connections made in the talk, however.

I thought Douglas Meehan took too much for granted in several areas: about the value of O'Regan and Noë's speculations, about HOT theory, and about Sellars. Change blindness is an area which needs a great deal of further data before we start constructing theories of this degree of generality from it. On the other hand . . . why not? At least we get some good discussions out of them (but see my comments on conversations, below). I had the same problem, in effect, with Sergent's presentation: too much from too little.

I have severe problems with speculations about computer consciousness, for a variety of reasons. It's one thing to be a materialist, which I am, and quite another to talk about consciousness in current (and near-future) versions of computers. I could get into a major rant here, but I'll spare you that. Suffice it to say that I did not attend Steels' talk, and that I think that type of talk is suitable for Tucson but not for the ASSC, at this point in time.

For some reason, I missed all but the last few minutes of Jackendoff's talk. I regret this very much, because I have problems with language-based theories of consciousness, and I wanted to hear his arguments. From what I did hear, he went from a rather strong position on the necessity of language for consciousness to a weaker one, as he was questioned after the talk. It's hard to critique a position which takes 'language' initially to be restricted to natural spoken (and written) languages, and finishes including symbolisms which encompass non-verbal visual and/or kinesthetic structures. But perhaps I misunderstood, coming in late. The question of consciousness in aphasics is an interesting one here, and one which can now be answered, in detail and depth, with TMS studies. I'd like to see the results, and how they impinge on theories of language and consciousness.

The last talk I'll mention was Maurer's, which I liked very much. I have been a fan of Daniel Stern's theories of infant consciousness, and I was gratified to see them supported and significantly extended by Maurer's work. Nice experiments, and a wonderful illustration of the necessity and justification of data-based phenomenology. I think that the only issues I had were the lack of more studies (evidence of a lack of funding?), since work with infants is always difficult and less clear than with adults. A good place for some consensual validation by other

researchers, and I'm surprised, given how hot the area of synaesthesia currently is, that this hasn't happened. But perhaps studies are under way.

All in all, it was an excellent conference, for the above reasons. But also, very importantly, I had no impression that there was any significant rancour between any of the participants, and in fact that most comments were quite gratifyingly constructive. In other words, I got the feeling of a community of researchers actually attempting to solve problems with each other's help. Wow. Not what you get at philosophy conferences.

Now, here are my issues. After attending multiple conferences — in this field, in philosophy, and in my wife's (reproductive biology and epidemiology) field — I am not favourably impressed with the lecture format. Yes, there are people who can stand up, lecture, and educate us. I certainly need education in many areas. Yes, as-yet unpublished results or inferences (why rehash those published?) can be presented to us. Yes, we can all be together in a room and some few of us can raise our hands afterwards and make a short and hopefully useful comment. But I would like to see more constructive interaction in small groups.

The only conferences set up to do this, as far as I know, are the Gordon conferences, where a speaker presents, people go eat lunch, and then are thrown together in an intimate setting which more-or-less forces conversation for several hours. In other words, I see too many conferences where people go stand and talk, briefly, awkwardly holding little coffee cups, with colleagues, in between lectures. Too many lectures, not enough time to talk, and those conversations — unless one makes a real effort — are too often between people already familiar. One could object that one does not want to talk with many of those at the conference; that they are just not intelligent or educated enough, are too biased, or whatever. A valid objection, perhaps, for some conferences, but not, I believe, for the ASSC. And if the objection is valid, then perhaps the conference participants need to be more restricted. But my feeling is that this is not the case in this group; that virtually all attendees, at this last conference at least, were interesting people with whom conversation could be valuable, even fun.

Given that, why not do this: less lectures and more conversation time. The latter could even be scheduled: e.g., from 12.00 to 3.00, in room X, 15 people can talk with A or talk about B; and in room Y, 10 can talk with C or talk about D, etc. Not 'workshops', where some person lectures, but conversations. Perhaps someone and/or some topic could be 'featured': e.g., in room Z we're going to have a conversation with Marbach about phenomenology; or perhaps the initial topic alone could be set; or perhaps a moderator could keep the conversation centred. Or perhaps not. Maybe just notification that certain rooms are open from, say, 12.00 to 3.00, with coffee, tea, and nice comfortable chairs available.

Would this format be suitable for large conferences? I don't see why not; all it would mean would be that not everyone could use the 'conversation' rooms; why not have a cafeteria or something comparable, with chairs and some tables, perhaps, densely scattered around its floor, that people could arrange as they liked? Think of all the parties where conversations centred around the kitchen. At any rate, I think it's worth a try.