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Methodological and Conceptual Issues

*Report on the Conference
Toward a Science of Consciousness 2005
August, 17–20, 2005, Copenhagen, Denmark*

The organisers (Dan Zahavi, Oliver Kauffmann, Morton Overgaard, Nini Praetorius, and Andreas Roepstorff) are to be congratulated for having focused the plenary sessions on methodological and conceptual issues of consciousness. Also, the format of the majority of these sessions made them more gripping than usual: 45 minutes for the presenter, 20 minutes for the commentator, a brief reply, and about 10 minutes for the participants. To get a feel for these disputations: After Thomas Metzinger had ‘demolished’ Evan Thompson’s plea for ‘Mental training: A neurophenomenological approach’, the latter responded to the critique, closing in the spirit of, ‘I think I had the better of you, dear Thomas, but let’s continue over a beer.’



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Opening and Plenary Sessions

In the opening session the conceptual issues were introduced via *Radical Externalism*. Ted Hondrich (Seeing, thinking, wanting), François Tonneau (Neorealism and consciousness), and Ricardo Manzotti (An outline of an alternative view of conscious perception) each presented their own views on the session theme. Hondrich emphasized the differences between perceptual, reflective, and affective consciousness, yet, what consciousness seems to be, it *is*. For Tonneau, consciousness is not only a brain process. Dreams, illusions and hallucinations are identified as part of the environment over a more extended period than the present moment. Manzotti posits perception as a unity between neural activity in the brain and external events: A conscious mind is extended in time and space to include the external world.

And now to the six plenary sessions, getting also at methodological issues: As to *Mental training and consciousness: A neurophenomenological approach*, Evan Thompson pleaded for mental training of observers and reporters of mental life regarding attention, emotion and metacognitive awareness; this for instance via appropriate contemplation practices. Such training, including biofeedback, would also lead to changes in brain structure, function, and dynamics. Thomas Metzinger questioned (i) the validity of the first-person data referred to and their theoretical legitimacy, (ii) the concept of emergence as going beyond mysticism, and (iii) the clarity of the terminology used. Thompson admitted the speculative nature of some of his statements but presented counterarguments to (i), (ii), and (iii), which lead him to maintain his views as presented.

Speaking on *Conscious intention*, Patrick Haggard suggested that it is a correlate of the neural preparation of action, rather than its cause. He differentiated between two aspects of conscious intention: (i) being about to move, and (ii) predictive representation of effects. Both processes involve efferent processing, notably by the fronto-parietal circuits, also giving rise to the conscious experience of intention. Jean-Luc Petit referred to a number of relevant studies in arguing that there are too many ways purported to represent conscious intention. As already in Haggard's presentation, a critical, diverging interpretation of Benjamin Libet's experiments was part of the controversy. Haggard accepted that the various explanatory attempts were indeed not unitary but pointed out the need for differentiation, e.g. between phenomenological and epistemic content, between mind as reflection and mind as experience, etc.

Galen Strawson, a 'realistic physicalist', attempted to show *Why physicalism entails panpsychism*: As one cannot get from non-A to A (A cannot emerge from non-A), and at least some arrangements of matter *are* conscious or constitute consciousness, physical stuff in itself cannot be something wholly and utterly non-experiential, and hence has to contain such a component. Alva Noë, a 'direct realist', argued that Strawson was not radical enough, not phenomenological enough. A child's experience of the world, her interaction with her parents, are immediate ontological facts for her (as are a dancer's movement or a singer's song), not acquired via an epistemological process. For Noë, perception is a



*Typical views of Copenhagen:
The waterfront and (below) the bicycles*

coupling of sensorimotor activity with the environment, not primarily the ‘objective’ perceiving of something physical ‘out there’. Strawson questioned several of Noë’s arguments, specifically the view that experientialism has been convincingly demonstrated.

Changing her title, Petra Stoerig addressed the theme *State, phenomenal, and access consciousness*. *State* (S) consciousness comprises both consciousness and unconsciousness. *Phenomenal* (P) consciousness is about

contents, specifically qualia. *Access* (A) consciousness deals with voluntary action and can access stored and on-line information. Stoerig then put much meat on this skeleton, including clinical observations of comatose and vegetative states, which show specifically that all three forms of consciousness can persist in states of complete paralysis. However, (S) and (P) still cannot be assessed independently of interpreting overt behaviour, leading potentially to confound the neural correlates of conscious access with those pertaining to the conscious representation and state. Questions raised in the discussion by participants included the compatibility of Stoerig’s views with change blindness, workspace theory, and Evan Thompson’s previous arguments.

Next theme: *Neurophilosophy and neurophenomenology*. Shaun Gallagher illustrated the differences between these two approaches by way of dealing with *self* and with *intersubjectivity*. For at least one school of neurophilosophy, ‘No such things as selves exist in the world’ (Metzinger), ‘The brain makes us think that we have a self’ (P.S. Churchland). In contrast, neurophenomenology advances an externalist position, placing emphasis on embodied action in the world (Rosch, Thompson, Varela). As regards intersubjectivity, neurophilosophy favours simulation, neurophenomenology favours neuro-resonance processes. Thus the respective research projects start from different perspectives, and may provide data that support better one or the other approach, or a yet different one. Tim Crane largely agreed and emphasized that neurophilosophy is not pure everyday philosophy, nor neurophenomenology a common garden variety of phenomenology.

The last plenary session dealt with *Implicit self-understanding and the higher global state (HOGS) model of consciousness*. After a critique of higher order thoughts (HOT) and higher order perceptions (HOP) models,





*JCS authors relax between sessions:
Jo Edwards and Galen Strawson, and (below
right) your reporter with a colleague*

Robert van Gulick presented a model that treats the metacognitive component of consciousness as implicitly embedded in the structure of phenomenological consciousness itself. The model not only shows how basic features of (P) consciousness depend on implicit metacognitive understanding but also on situating the latter into a general teleopragmatic model of mind. Erik Myin objected that (i) mental states are ill defined, (ii) the transition from unconscious to conscious states is unclear, and (iii) the HOT concept is rather popular (but he does not accept

it). Van Gulick replied that HOGS is not reductive, that reflexive intentionality needs to be involved, and that we need a more sophisticated model of world and self and their interaction.

Concurrent Sessions and Posters

A total of 52 papers were accepted for concurrent sessions as well as 38 posters. Themes included Being and consciousness, Concepts and consciousness, Consciousness and modern physics, Dreams, words, and narratives, Embodiment and action, Laws and universals, Metamodels, Metaphysicalism, Models of the mind, Nature of intentionality, Neurophenomenology, Phenomenological perspectives on the mind, Social cognition and mirror neurons, Value meaning and the brain.

A reviewer can participate in all of the plenary sessions but only in some of the concurrent sessions (presently one in four). Therefore he/she can do less justice to them, what is written being more impressionistic than regarding the plenary sessions. Nevertheless something has to be said in the interest of the readers (and perhaps of future organisers). Obviously, the organisers can only work with what they get as a result of their call for papers. Also, they may feel that part of their task is to provide a discussion platform for researchers at the beginning of their career so as to let them benefit from the comments of the scientific community. These may be reasons why the usual answer to the question, 'What do you think about the papers in the concurrent sessions?' is 'There is an uneven distribution between outstanding and rather poor



papers'. It was not different in Copenhagen (despite the non-acceptance of a number of proposals). There was also a wide disparity in the accessibility of presentations. For instance, the paper on 'Dreaming as a source of data in consciousness research' was pitched at a very elementary level, while that on 'Questioning questions and explaining explanations: Consciousness and Canto's Continuum Hypothesis' came at a rather high technical level. This might be discernible from the abstract but it would be helpful if the target audience (e.g. general, medium level, experts) could be indicated in advance.

On a more formal, organizational level: some sessions had three contributions, others four. While it is understandable that the three contributors wanted to take up the full 90 minutes allocated for the session, this made it difficult to judge when to move between sessions in order to listen to different presentations.

Two Thoughts for the Future

Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity is a mark of this type of conference. There were neuroscientists, philosophers, medical practitioners, cognitivists, computer scientist, communication scientists, physicists, and psychologists. One would have liked to hear more from anthropologists, biologists, and why not theologians/religionists? Presumably, empirical researchers would have liked even more presentations of data, the philosophers more of an intellectual climate of the type usual at conferences on the philosophy of mind. However, the feeling was that the compromise achieved at this conference was overall satisfactory.

Quality of presentations

Some of the presenters, especially from Britain and Canada, did an outstanding job: a clear organisation (supported by visual presentations), a precise language, a perfect articulation, a largely free delivery, which made it a pleasure to listen. Unfortunately, this was not universal: some philosophers take 'reading a paper' very literally, burying their heads in the lectern, and we had some speakers (mainly Europeans) with thick accents that were practically incomprehensible to other non-native English speakers in the audience. Other speakers (Americans seem the chief culprits here) had a tendency to gabble at top speed while power point slides flashed by, etc. Again this can be hard on listeners for whom English is a second or even their third language. The question is what could be done to improve that situation? Maybe a pre-conference workshop on the topic, such as is planned for the Tucson conference next year, could help.

Diary

Before getting into the fringe and social events outside the lecture rooms, a word on Copenhagen itself, which like Prague, where TSC 2003 was held, is a beautiful and interesting city. What struck many a participant from outside Scandinavia was the high price level. For instance, the official cafeteria style luncheon at



JCS staff meet younger readers at the banquet

the Panum (University) Institute cost more than £10/\$17; a standard (that is not a superior) single room with breakfast in the conference hotel was about £70/\$120 per night; the minimum bus fare almost £2/\$4. A major reason for this state of affairs is the high level of the Danish value added tax: 25% (compared to 7.6% in Switzerland). Correspondingly, salaries in Denmark are higher by comparable amounts. All the same, the Danes have carved out

niches in the world economy, for instance in food exports and container shipping. Thus conferences, held in different towns and cities each time, offer an insight into life in the different places we visit.

As to the conference itself, there was not only much food for thought for the 150 participants from 30 countries. but also tasty food for the body. At the end of the first day, the Lady First Deputy Mayor of Copenhagen welcomed the participants to 'light refreshments' in the magnificent Town Hall with its elaborated wooden ceiling, impressive brass chandeliers, and a royally decorated area reserved for the Danish queen. These refreshments turned out to be a rich offering of seafood, typical Danish meatballs and pancakes, and much more, not forgetting beer and coffee. On the second day visitors to the posters were treated to sandwiches and beverages. And the third day was crowned by the banquet in the Tivoli Gardens. Also to be mentioned: Besides coffee and tea, cake and fruits were offered during the morning and afternoon breaks. On these and other occasions old friendships were reenergized and new ones created. In sum, all had an inspiring and enjoyable time, documented in van Gulick's closing multimedia show, still photographs from which illustrate this report.



Researching consciousness is a serious business in the Tivoli Gardens