

## What is it like to be HOT?

### ABSTRACT

In a recent paper, Fisette tries to show that Brentano's theory of consciousness can be considered as a higher order theory of consciousness (HOT), and a better one than Rosenthal's because Brentano —unlike Rosenthal— can answer all the objections traditionally posed to HOT theories, introducing the idea of self-consciousness and the distinction between implicit and explicit consciousness. In this paper, I will first reconstruct Fisette's main points, and then I pose some questions to his version of Brentano's theory. Finally I add some further reasons to reject higher order theories of consciousness.

**Keywords:** Philosophy of mind; Brentano; Higher order theory of consciousness; Consciousness.

### RESUMO

Em um artigo recente, Fisette tenta mostrar que a teoria da consciência de Brentano pode ser considerada como uma teoria de ordem superior da consciência (HOT), e uma teoria melhor que a de Rosenthal, porque Brentano, diferentemente de Rosenthal, pode responder a todas as objeções tradicionalmente feitas às teorias HOT, ao introduzir a ideia de uma auto-consciência e da distinção entre consciência implícita e explícita. Neste artigo, eu primeiramente reconstruirei os pontos principais de Fisette, e então questionarei a sua versão da teoria de Brentano. Finalmente, proponho algumas razões adicionais para rejeitar teorias de ordem superior da consciência.

**Palavras-chave:** Filosofia da mente; Brentano; Teoria de ordem superior da consciência; Consciência.

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Consciousness is, without any doubt, one of the most puzzling issues in philosophy. It is not surprising that so many people tried to give an account of this astonishing phenomenon. In his paper, Fisette analyses carefully Brentano's theory, and tries to show that Brentano's theory of consciousness can be considered as a version of the higher order theory of consciousness (HOT), and a better one than Rosenthal's. The central idea, in Fisette's words, is to show that: "Brentano subordinates subjective consciousness to state consciousness and then, state consciousness to self-consciousness." (p. 30). And in so doing, Brentano seems to have a theory similar to – but better than – Rosenthal's, because he can answer all the objections traditionally posed to HOT theories. It is in order to answer them that Brentano introduces the idea of self-consciousness and the distinction between implicit and explicit consciousness.

In this paper I will first reconstruct Fisette's main points, and then I will pose some questions to his version of Brentano's theory. Finally I will add some further reasons to reject higher order theories of consciousness.

## I

One of the main questions posed in Fisette's paper is whether Brentano should be read as a defender of a HOT theory of consciousness or not. HOT theories are reductive theories of phenomenal consciousness, a special kind of functionalist/representationalist theories. A higher order thought theory of consciousness claims that a given state, let us say the pain I am feeling right now, is conscious if and only if it is accompanied by a specific thought about that very pain, a thought that could be expressed as "I am presently feeling pain". The higher order mental state, the thought that makes conscious my pain, is a contentful state whose content involves a relation between the pain and me. This is what Rosenthal calls the "Transitivity principle" according to which the intransitive consciousness of the pain state depends upon the transitivity of the higher order state which is *about* the pain.

According to Rosenthal, Brentano's theory is not a HOT theory because, unlike HOT theorists, he does not understand consciousness as an "extrinsic, transitive and relational property of mental states." (p. 7), but as an intrinsic one. As I said above, according to HOT theories, there are two different (i.e. numerically distinct independently existent) mental states, a lower order state and a higher order one, and it is because the second one is about the first one that the first one becomes conscious. In the standard theory, the second order state is not intransitively conscious unless a third order state takes it as its intentional object. But Brentano, according to Rosenthal, also held that all mental states are conscious, and therefore he had to face the infinite regress

objection: given the fact that a higher order state is needed in order to make conscious each mental state, an infinite number of higher and higher order states are needed in order to make all of them conscious. This is the first problem Fisette poses to Brentano. But there are two more difficulties, which are related to each other. First, the relation between first order and second order mental states should be explained. And second, there is the problem of individuating these states, derived from the fact that it is not as clear as it seems whether Brentano held that first order and second order states were two different mental states (as Rosenthal holds) or just one state, i.e. it is not clear if he claimed that the first order and the second order states should be identified (because in the end, according to Rosenthal, it is not clear what is the connection between them, in Brentano's theory).

According to Fisette, Brentano answers these objections with the thesis of the unity of consciousness. The peculiar way in which Brentano answers to the question about the relation between first and second order states, conceiving the unity of these two states as a single mental act in which both states are "divisives" (p. 24-25) -i.e. constitutive parts of the very same act- is the key to face all of Rosenthal's objections. Because, this explanation of the relation between first order and second order states, avoids the infinite regress and answers at the very same time the question about how many states are there (the individuation problem).

But in order to be properly called a HOT theory of consciousness, Brentano should accept the transitivity principle, and it is not clear whether he accepted it or not. According to Fisette, Brentano's theory can be seen as a HOT theory if we take into consideration two ideas that are presented in his posthumous writings: first the distinction between implicit and explicit consciousness and second the idea of a mentally active agent. The first distinction is explained with a familiar example: the one of the driver who did not pay attention to the road, but who was implicitly conscious of it (although not explicitly: he did not pay attention to how many lights were in the border of the road, so he did not count them, but he was implicitly conscious of them because he did not pass any red light while driving). The second idea –the mentally active agent- is needed in order to give a proper account of the complexity of the conscious mental act: it is the mental agent who is conscious of himself in the process of experiencing X (a sound for example), who becomes conscious of X (the sound) i.e. while he is thinking about (transitively conscious of) his experience, the experience becomes (intransitively) conscious. We can see now why Fisette said what I quoted at the very beginning of this paper: "Brentano subordinates subjective consciousness to state consciousness and then, state consciousness to self-consciousness." (p. 30). With all these pieces at hand the puzzle can be solved: implicit consciousness (first order mental states) are what in the literature are called *qualia*, the elements of primary or pre-reflective

consciousness which are according to this reading of Brentano's view a necessary condition for having higher order thoughts, and hence for having transitive self-conscious mental states.

## II

I will not discuss Fissette's historical points about Brentano, neither the interpretation of Brentano he offers. I will pose some problems that I think can be raised against the account of consciousness attributed to Brentano by Fissette.

In the first place, it is not clear to me that the theory attributed to Brentano could be understood as a HOT theory, if –as I understand them- these theories are seen as reductive theories. According to Fissette's reading, Brentano is offering a theory of phenomenal or subjective consciousness (*qualia*, for short); in the beginning of the paper Fissette announce that Brentano was engaged in the project of solving the "hard problem" of consciousness, following Chalmers' words. So, he seems to be accepting the classical distinction between phenomenal vs. psychological consciousness offered by Chalmers 1996. And usually HOT theories of consciousness are considered as reductive materialist theories of phenomenal consciousness (and, in this sense, opposed to other non reductive dualist theories, such as Chalmers' one). But in the end of the article (p. 31) it seems that *qualia* are just necessary conditions for higher order consciousness and hence that higher order thoughts should no be identified with *qualia*, therefore the project was not to give a reductive account of *qualia* after all. What the distracted driver case shows seems to be that there are some implicit, pre-reflexive, phenomenal conscious first order mental states that are not the objects of any thought we actually have. But if, as Fissette says, qualitative experience constitutes only a necessary condition for having higher order thoughts, and they cannot be identified with second order thoughts as reductive theories hold, in what sense phenomenal states are conscious? Are they first order conscious? If the answer is yes, then HOT theories are superfluous, because we already had first order conscious states! Second order states are unnecessary in order to understand first order states as conscious.

In the second place, it is important to keep in mind that the distracted driver case is usually mentioned in the philosophical literature in order to distinguish between phenomenal consciousness (*qualia*) and psychological consciousness (or access consciousness) (BLOCK, 1995; CHALMERS, 1996). The idea is that some states are phenomenally conscious in the sense that they do not have any impact on the rational control of our behavior, they have no consequences in our actions or further thoughts. *Qualia* are just the way in which it feels like to be in a given state. And the *qualia* literature usually aims to show that both kind of states are distinct and can exists independently. But

both of them seem to be conscious, *qualia* are pre-reflexively conscious, or implicitly conscious, while psychological states are explicitly conscious. HOT theories – as the reductive theories they are – deny the existence of conscious first order states which are not constitutive part of second order states. But the cases mentioned seem to point to some first order states, which are pre-reflexively conscious without being psychologically conscious, i.e. without being the subject of any second order thought. If this is so, then it seems that, in the end, Brentano himself in his last writings denied higher order theories of consciousness and favored first order ones, because he accepted the existence of pre-reflexive conscious states of mind. If this is Brentano's view, I would be delighted, I defended elsewhere the idea that second order theories of consciousness are wrong. (PÉREZ, 2008).

In the third place, Rosenthal's HOT theory is not, in my opinion, the best version of HOT theories, because it requires that the first order state is an actual part or subject matter of a second order thought in order to be conscious. And because of that it cannot make room to cases like the distracted driver, where some first order states seem to be phenomenally conscious without being psychologically conscious. But dispositional HOT theories like the one defended by Peter Carruthers (2005), where a first order state is conscious just in case it *can* be the part or subject of a second order thought without being *actually* so, can incorporate those cases without abandoning the HOT theory. May be this is the version of HOT theories that Fisette thinks Brentano could have been defending. If this is so we can have a reductive HOT theory of consciousness and accommodate the distracted driver case, i.e. we can incorporate Brentano's pre-reflexive consciousness.

But as I said above, I do not accept myself HOT theories of consciousness because they are too demanding: they require that the subject can have thoughts, sometimes quite complex, involving some concepts such as "self" (as Brentano seems to demand with his idea of a mentally active agent), the concepts involved in mind reading abilities (in Carruther's version), or psychological concepts like "pain" (as a constitutive part of the thought "I am in pain" which makes conscious my pain state); concepts which does not seem to be available to some creatures which all of us would agree that can have some conscious mental states, creatures such as babies and probably some non human primates. So let me introduce, in the next section, some general worries against HOT, following this line of thought.

### III

In this last part of this paper, I would like to address the more basic question about the plausibility of HOT theories of consciousness in general. I

think that HOT theories of consciousness have many flaws that are not solved in Fissette's paper. In Pérez (2008), I objected the arguments given by Carruthers (2005) in order to prefer HOT theories instead of first order theories of consciousness and I still prefer these ones. So, I will try to develop in this last section of this paper the last suggestion I made above in order to reject HOT theories of consciousness.

The idea is simple: we should distinguish between the way in which we think and talk about phenomenal consciousness from phenomenal consciousness itself. In my opinion, the defenders of HOT theories of consciousness confuse both. For example, Carruthers (2005) offers six desiderata for a successful reductive theory of phenomenal consciousness. He says that a theory like this should explain (1) why phenomenally conscious states have a subjective aspect to them; (2) why there should seem to be such a pervasive explanatory gap between all the physical, functional and intentional facts, on the one hand, and the facts of phenomenal consciousness, on the other; (3) why people believe that the properties of their phenomenal experience are *intrinsic*, being non-relationally individuated; (4) why their possessors consider phenomenally conscious experience *ineffable*, (5) *private* and (6) *infallible, not just privileged known*.

Carruthers' strategy is to show that his HOT theory can explain these features, while first order theories cannot. But note that except for (1) all the other desiderata are concerned with *the way in which we conceptualize our experience*, that is, the way in which people think or know their experience, not with the experience itself. And in my opinion, the way in which we think or talk about our conscious states trivially presupposes that we can have thought about our conscious states involving concepts such as "self", "experience", "feel", "see", "pain", and so on. But it is not obvious that we should possess those concepts in order to be in the conscious mental state itself. Returning to the distracted driver case, we can say, for example, that the conscious experiences he had were not conceptualized and that is the reason why they did not enter into the rational decision making system, or were not stored in memory. But they were conscious in the sense that, if the co-driver asked the driver during the trip, in the appropriate moment, if he was seeing the red light he would have answered yes. But babies and non-human primates who do not possess complex concepts are able to have these conscious states without being able to conceptualize or report them. They cannot write a book about phenomenal consciousness but this is not a reason to say that they are not conscious. So we should not require the conceptual complexities that HOT theories require in order to explain phenomenal consciousness. Taking these considerations into account I think we should tip the balance towards first order theories of consciousness. HOT theories show the sin that many other philosophical theories show: they take the typical adult human being as the

paradigm in order to develop a philosophical theory; and as a consequence they cannot accommodate non typical examples.

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