Running on Empty: Comments on Prettyman
Richard Brown

I. The Role of the Empirical Cases

Let me now say something about Adrienne's objection to the empirical case that Hakwan Lau and I developed. Adrienne complains that we have missed Block's original challenge. His original challenge was not that there are no cases of empty thoughts, but rather that the higher order theory couldn't explain what was going on in such cases. Or, rather, that it looked as though the higher-order theory was committed to both there being a conscious state and there not being a conscious state in such cases. Now she also immediately goes on to recognize that there is a more charitable reading of what we are up to. She says while perhaps our aim in appealing to these empirical cases was to show that the empty thought objection can't be an objection to the higher-order theory because we have actual cases, or least plausible cases, where there seems to be conscious experience with our first-order representations. She is right to take us in his more charitable way but hasn't quite got the point of the empirical cases.

The main point I took from the empirical cases was an attempt to show that what was once a purely philosophical problem is now an empirical problem. Whereas we started by consulting our intuitions about empty thought cases now we can consult the data. So whether it is intuitive or not, if the data suggests that there are empty thoughts that none the less result in conscious experience then we should think that this is the case and look for some kind of explanation of how this could be the case. The second claim we made using the empirical cases was that some kind of higher-order view is able to make better sense of all of the experimental results.

Now, Adrienne's objection to this more charitable reading is that we have to give up any explanation for why the higher-order thought is its self a conscious state. Before we get to this we need to clear up an ambiguity.

II. Representing and Being Represented

Let's begin by looking at the central thesis of the higher order theory, as Adrienne understands it. She says, that the higher order theory is embodied in the following bi-conditional,

> HOTs: A mental state is conscious if and only if that state is represented by a further mental state, caused non-inferentially

A lot of confusion is caused by the fact that there are two readings of HOTs. On one reading a state is represented by a further mental state only when the state being represented exists. On this reading representing is a bit like looking at something. You cannot look at an object if the object is not there.

On another reading a state is represented by a further mental state whether it exists or not. We might call this second sense the intentional sense of representing since a mental state will count as being represented when it figures in the intentional content of a higher-order representation (as a first gloss we can say that a state 'figures' in the intentional content of a HOT when that content describes the first-order state to some degree of accuracy). We can formulate this alternative way as follows,

> HOTi: A mental state is conscious if and only if one has a further mental state representing oneself as being in that state, caused non-inferentially

Here the 's' could stand for 'success' and the 'i' for 'intensional'. On HOTs having a higher-order thought makes the first-order state conscious. On HOTi a higher-order thought makes one conscious of oneself as being in some first-order state. HOTs is put in terms of a state being represented and HOTi is put in terms of a state doing the representing.

Given this ambiguity we need to know whether the empty thought objection is equally dangerous to both. HOTi seems to be immune from much of the intuitive force of the empty thought objection. When one has an empty thought there is a mental state that is conscious. It is the one that you are representing yourself as being in. In this case it is an intensional object.

In the rest of this presentation I will first talk about Rosenthal and Weisberg's response endorsing HOTi and then I will discuss a way to save even HOTs from empty thoughts.

III. The Rosenthal-Weisberg Response

David Rosenthal and Josh Weisberg endorse something like HOTi over HOTs. They suggests that there is a state that is represented –the intensional state— and that state is the conscious mental states that you are in. And being in a conscious mental state is a property of the person not of some particular state. So what appears to be a mystery isn't really a mystery. When there is an empty thought there is a state that is being represented. It is just the intensional state that figures in the content of the higher-order thought. Since one is in a state that describes one's mental life as having some first-order state that first-order state is conscious (even though it is not tokened and so is merely intensional).

They give up one kind of explanatory power; namely that of explaining consciousness in terms of a relation between a first-order state and a further higher-order state. But the still have the explanatory power of the transitivity principle. That is to say that they see

phenomenology as a matter of mental appearances and they take HOTi as explaining the mental appearances.

Notice that this is why it is ad hoc to say that there is no consciousness (Gennaro), or even limited consciousness (sometimes Lau), in the empty thought cases. The explanation given is in terms of mental appearances and the mental appearances are the same in the empty thought case.

Block's objection to this line is that it cannot account for the way in which pain matters to us. Non-existent pains cannot matter in the way that conscious pains matter to us. Weisberg and Rosenthal have a theoretical story that allows them to say why non-existent pains matter: they matter because it appears to us as though we are in that state and so it will be painful for us. Some may find this idea uninviting but it follows straightforwardly from a certain way of thinking about representation (we need not dwell on it here).

IV. The HOROR

Suffice it to say that we may want to look for another way of thinking about the empty thought cases. For instance those like me will see the higher-order thought to be phenomenally conscious. This is because it is the higher-order state itself that accounts for there being something that it is like for me. Once we make a distinction between phenomenal consciousness and state consciousness we can see why the higher-order thought is itself phenomenally conscious. Phenomenal consciousness consists in there being something that it's like for the creature to be in various mental states. State consciousness consists in HOTs being true, phenomenal consciousness consists in HOROR being true.

> HOROR: Phenomenal consciousness just is a higher-order representation of a representation.

So in the case of the empty thoughts there is something that is like for the creature, at least assuming that there really is consciousness involved in such cases, so there must be some state that is phenomenally conscious. It sounds very strange to some people do think that the intentional non-existent state is the phenomenally conscious state in this case. This is especially strange since the states are supposed to be the ones which their something that is like for you to be in. And it seems to entail that you actually be in the state in question. So the higher-order thought on my view would be the phenomenally conscious state. But that state is not state conscious.

HOROR theory is in some respects like a first-order representational view in that it views phenomenal consciousness just as a certain kind of representation. It is al unlike a first-order view and more like the traditional higher-order view in that the kind of representation is a higher-order kind, in particular a representation of a representation.

State consciousness involves being the object of a representation phenomenal consciousness involves there being something that is like for you to be in that state. So perhaps in this case we could even say there is no mental state that is conscious in the sense of being state conscious. If one wanted to keep the relational view for state consciousness one could do so by claiming that no mental state was made conscious in the case of an empty thought. Notice that on this way of thinking we are thinking of the higher-order theory merely as a modest theory about what makes another state conscious. Where this pretty much analytically is equivalent to what states am I aware of myself as being in. Phenomenal consciousness then it is not representing yourself as being in a state is not the targets of the representation but on this view would just be the representation itself. Adrian then complains that we don't have any way to explain why that state is phenomenally conscious. There is no state that represents it. But as I've just shown that is to say only that that state is not conscious in the sense of my being aware of being in that state. It is not a state conscious state. Phenomenal consciousness can occur than in the absence of my being aware of that phenomenal consciousness. In this sense we can say that there is phenomenal consciousness without awareness. But this is not to get us into problems of phenomenological overflow.

On HOROR theory phenomenal conscious just is a higher-order representation, on a first-order view phenomenal consciousness is a property of first-order states. In fact some may see the term 'phenomenal consciousness' as a technical term that means 'property of a first-order state'. I take phenomenal consciousness to be a common sense concept that happens to have a technical name that has been given to it. That there is something that it is like for me to see blue or taste chocolate is beyond question. But it is a real question whether this property is accounted for by first-order or higher-order states (or a mix of both). This is an empirical question (I think Hakwan and Ned are trying to design an experiment to help us adjudicate between the two competing theories).

V. A First-Order Explanation?

Let me address Adrienne's alternative first-order explanation of Charles Bonnet syndrome. To be honest I'm not exactly sure how to take her proposal. So let me begin by asking Adrian a question that will help clarify this for me. Is it the case that she is suggesting that we can have first order representations of red which are not sensory representations but are beliefs and which can account for the hallucinations had by those who suffer Charles Bonnet syndrome? Or is it that there is only beliefs and no consciousness at all in her alternative account? So is it the case that she is suggesting that those judgments for are the experience of the Charles Bonnet subjects? Or is she rather just saying that we can explain the reports of these subjects in virtue of their having these various kinds of beliefs without there being any kind of conscious experience at all? If her claim is that you can account for Charles Bonnet experience with out any kind of phenomenal consciousness being president then I find that very suspicious. There doesn't seem to be any reason to think that these subjects are suffering from any kind of cognitive

deficit. They recognize that what they see is a hallucination and are otherwise in tact cognitively. And so there is no real reason to expect that they would make this kind of gross error about their own experience. On the other hand if review is a first order beliefs constitute phenomenal consciousness, which is perhaps something like Dan Dennett's view, that is very interesting but will turn out to be an empirical question (perhaps already decided?)

VI. We Don't Need No Stinking Explanations

In closing let me briefly mention Hakwan's own view, since Adrienne mentioned our paper jointly written together. Hakwan has said many times that scientists value fitting the data over explanations in the sense that Adrienne, myself, and David Rosenthal talk about. So he is perfectly happy to lose explanatory power. If it turns out to be the case that the best response is that the higher-order thoughts are themselves phenomenally conscious, and we don't have an explanation for why they are phenomenally conscious but this fits the data that we see then we should give up explanatory power. But not everyone is as happy as he is to give up explanatory power. Some might think that if you really do lose this advantage, that is the ability to explain why a state is phenomenally conscious, then you may as well be a first-order theorist like Ned Block is.

For my own part I am inclined to favor explanation over fitting the data. But I think we can give an explanation for why the higher order state is phenomenally conscious. The explanation is that phenomenal consciousness consists in the way that one's mental life appears to one and having the higher-order thought is the thing which accounts for there being the mental appearances of the right sort. So we can see why the higher-order state is phenomenally conscious. It is because phenomenal consciousness just is a particular kind of awareness. The higher-order state happens to be the right kind of awareness. Of course we can also see that my starting with our commonsense notions of what phenomenal consciousness is, which is to say if the notion of there being something that's like for one to be in certain states, we can empirically identify that as higher-order states with the kinds of methods that have developed been developed by Hakwan's lab (and others). So we have some explanation from the theory itself which would give us a reason to think that the higher-order thought is conscious and we have some reason from science to think that this is what phenomenal consciousness turns out to be. That seems like enough explanation to me. Now it's not the kind of explanation where you start with the state and then add a property to that state in virtue of it being looked at him. So we don't get that kind of explanation but that wasn't the kind of explanation we were ever supposed to get.

I'll leave it at that and look forward to the discussion.