

PRESENTATIONAL CHARACTER AND HIGHER-ORDER THOUGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Experiences, by definition, have phenomenal character. But many experiences have a specific type of phenomenal character: *presentational character*. While both visual experience and conscious thought make us aware of their objects, only in visual experience do objects seem present before the mind and available for direct access. I argue that Higher-Order Thought (HOT) theories of consciousness have a particularly steep hill to climb in accommodating presentational character.

1 PRELIMINARIES

Higher-Order Awareness (HOA) theories of consciousness claim that for any mental state m of a subject S , m is conscious—i.e. has some phenomenal character or other—only if S bears a higher-order awareness-of relation m^* to m .¹ Individual HOA theories primarily depart over (i) whether the awareness-of relation is representational or an acquaintance relation (and if representational, is it thought-like or perception-like?); and (ii) whether the relationship between m^* and the lower-order state m is non-constitutive or constitutive (and if constitutive, is m^* identical to m , or a proper part of m ?). The major players—Higher-Order Thought Theories (e.g. Rosenthal 2005), Higher-Order Perception Theories (e.g. Lycan 1996), Self-Representational Theories (e.g. Kriegel 2009, Gennaro 2011), and Higher-Order Acquaintance Theories (e.g. Hellie 2007)—are split on these points.²

¹ I will use the terms ‘awareness’ and ‘consciousness’ (and their cognates) interchangeably.

² Two points are worth clarifying here. First, in claiming that the awareness-of relation is an acquaintance relation, Hellie (2007) means that it is non-intentional. According to Hellie, for relation to be intentional is for it to be such that sometimes, among its relata are merely intentionally nonexistent entities. In this sense, Hellie has us consider *knowing-of* as a non-intentional relation: if John knows of

My focus in this paper is with Higher-Order Thought theories (HOT). HOT is perhaps the best-known variant of HOA theory. It can be stated as follows: for any mental state m of a subject S , m is conscious iff S has a mental representation m^* of herself as being m , where m^* is an assertoric, non-inferential, occurrent higher-order thought (i.e. a HOT).³ There are other ways to frame HOT, but this is the traditional formulation. Hence call this the *traditional* formulation of HOT.^{4,5}

My aim is to explore HOT's compatibility with a type of phenomenal character: *presentational character*. Phenomenal characters are properties that type experiences by what it is like for the subject to have them. Presentational character, being a type of phenomenal character, types experiences by what it is like to have them, but in a certain way.

Not all experiences have presentational character. Moods, like 'free-floating' anxiety, do not. There is something it is like to be anxious, but in being anxious, especially when that

the Wright Brothers' first flight, it follows that the Wright Brothers' first flight is real. (Of course, as Hellie concedes, knowing-of bares a metaphysical connecting to intentional relations of awareness since knowing-of entails *believing-in*). On Hellie's acquaintance theory, then, m^* is a non-intentional relation of awareness like knowing-of. Second, when the relation between m^* and m is a constitutive, part-whole relation, the relevant notion of parthood, as Kriegel points out, is *logical* parthood, not spatial or temporal (2006: 146). For instance, when John stands in the relation of fear to the proposition *that the zombie apocalypse is immanent*, John necessarily also stands in the belief-relation to the proposition *it is possible that the zombie apocalypse is immanent*; John's belief, as Kriegel puts it, is not something in addition to his fear, but is somehow inherent in it (ibid). Likewise, on this version of HOA, our awareness of our conscious states is a logical part of those conscious states.

³ This assumes that consciousness is a property of states. This is almost always how HOT—and all variants of HOA theory, for that matter—is formulated, and I will assume this throughout. This is why I include it in the 'traditional' formulation of HOT. However, as considerations regarding cases of 'empty HOTs' often reveal, whether this is the best way to understand HOT is an open matter. For instance, Berger (2014) and Brown (2015) have each argued for a different construal of HOT based largely on this issue. (e.g., that consciousness is not a property of states, but a property of *individuals*). However, nothing in what follows will turn on these alternatives. What is of issue is how phenomenal character is determined, and both follow what I am calling 'traditional' HOT in this regard (See also fn. 14).

⁴ Going forward, I drop 'traditional'. Context will make clear when I depart from this usage.

⁵ I will use 'HOT' to refer to the *theory*, and expressions like 'a HOT', 'her HOT', 'the HOT', 'empty HOTs', etc. to refer to m^* , i.e. the state of HOA awareness or HOT itself implicated by HOT (the theory).

anxiousness is free-floating and not obviously about something, we (or our state of being anxious) do not instantiate a presentational character, even if we (or our state) instantiates a phenomenal character of some other kind. But many experiences *do* have presentational character. Compare having a conscious thought about The White House with having a visual experience of The White House. In both cases, I am in a mental state that has The White House as its object. In both cases, I am aware of this object. Even so, there is a vast phenomenological difference in the way I am aware of The White House when thinking compared to the way in which I am aware of The White House when having a visual experience. In having a visual experience there is a phenomenological sense in which The White House is *directly present* for the subject that is absent in conscious thought. An experience has presentational character when its object seems directly present in this sense (cf. Valberg 1992; Sturgeon 2000).⁶ Sometimes, I will say use the expression ‘phenomenally presents’—that an experience ‘phenomenally presents its object’. This is just another way of saying that an experience *has* presentational character with respect to its object.

HOT has a problem with presentational character, I will contend, because if HOT is true *no* experiences have presentational character. So at its most general, my argument is this:

- P1** If HOT is true, no experiences have presentational character.
- P2** But some experiences do have presentational character.
- ∴ HOT is false.

⁶ Scott Sturgeon refers to this aspect of visual phenomenal character as “scene-immediacy,” telling us:

Its phenomenology will be as if a scene is made manifest to you. This is the most striking aspect of visual experience...Visual phenomenology makes it for subject as if a scene is simply presented. Veridical perception illusion and hallucination seem to place objects and their features directly before the mind (2000:9)

I assume **P2**.⁷ The paper's central aim, then, is to defend **P1**. Let me be upfront about how I see the dialectic. While it is simple enough to make presentational phenomenology salient by examples, offering a theory is another matter (cf. Chudnoff 2012). Even the *naïve realist*, for whom phenomenal character is constituted by a perceiver standing in a relation of acquaintance to particular physical things and their properties, can only tell part of the story if, as I'll assume, hallucinations have presentational character too.⁸ Presentational character, in short, is a problem for everyone.

These facts put constraints on the charges we can reasonably impute against HOT and how **P1** can be defended. For if no one has a satisfying full-fledged theory of presentational character—if no one has of yet given us, say, satisfying reductive necessary and sufficient conditions for when a mental state has presentational character—that HOT does not either is par for the course. Yet while it may not be fair to expect HOT to *account* for presentational character, it is fair to expect HOT to be able to *accommodate* presentational character. For if HOT makes it such that it is *impossible* for an experience to have presentational character, that *does* place HOT at a relative, and quite serious, disadvantage.

Given this, I suggest we view the dialectic in the following way. Because we are not demanding a full-fledged theory, the advocate of HOT can always fall back on what one might think of as *The HOT-Theoretic Gambit*. It goes something like this:

⁷ A word about scope: I am only concerned with perceptual experience, specifically *visual* experience. Perhaps *all* perceptual experiences have (a form of) presentational phenomenology, or even some non-perceptual experiences (Chudnoff 2012). For our purposes, however, I am only concerned with HOT's ability to accommodate the visual case.

⁸ While the naïve realist is often assumed to have the inside track on presentational character, this is not wholly uncontroversial. For instance, Boyd Millar (2014) has recently argued that naïve realist views are no better off at accounting for presentational phenomenology than (first-order) representationalist views. For another attempt to account for presentational phenomenology within a representationalist framework, see Schroer (2012).

- I grant you there is presentational phenomenology. This much is undeniable. But as you admit, you don't know what makes a state have presentational character instead of non-presentational phenomenal character, and neither do I. But since we have strong antecedent reasons to believe in HOT, there must be *something* in the HOT-theoretic explanation of consciousness that differentiates having presentational character from having non-presentational phenomenal character. For all we know, the right species of thought *does* ground presentational phenomenology, and HOTs is that species.

Similar gambits can be made for other views of consciousness: *The First-Order Representationalist-Theoretic Gambit*, *The Qualia Realist-Theoretic Gambit*, and so on. My strategy is to push back on the HOT-Theoretic Gambit by pressing the HOT theorist on what that 'something' might be. Above all else, what I want to show is that The HOT-Theoretic Gambit is—more than anything other gambit—a bad bet. Even if presentational character is a problem for everyone, HOT faces a pernicious version of the problem because it cannot accommodate presentational character. HOT is *inconsistent* with presentational character.⁹

Here's the plan. I'll begin in § 2 by saying a bit more about presentational character. In § 3 I'll spell out some of the more germane aspects of HOT, and articulate the sub-argument for **P1**. The first cut of argument will be stated rather baldly. Again, the reason is dialectical. HOT faces a unique challenge in accommodating presentational character. On HOT, the sole determinant of phenomenal character is the content of a type of thought, a HOT. But one might think that in *being a type of thought*, HOTs, even if capable of making us aware of their objects,

⁹ Let me forestall a potential worry. Given how we have formulated HOT theory, one might wonder: how can HOTs present objects like The White House given that the object of a HOT is a first-order state *m*? Though it is tricky to get a grip on the sense in which we are aware of our first-order states on HOT, the HOT theorist would still (presumably) allow that in having a visual experience of The White House, it *seems* as if we are aware of The White House (even if we are actually aware of an experience of The White House). And this is all we need for the question of accommodating presentational character to be salient. I thank an anonymous review for bringing this point to my attention.

are *ipso facto* precluded from phenomenally presenting their objects. Thus, HOT faces a puzzle: we need to know what is special to HOTs such that they can accommodate presentational character and are not, as it were, *mere* thoughts. So I'll state the argument first, and then explore such special features in § 4, arguing that each fails: no feature of the traditional HOT-theoretic explanation of consciousness can ground presentational character. I wrap up in § 5, exploring some future directions.

2 FOUR BRIEF CLAIMS ABOUT PRESENTATIONAL CHARACTER

To help fix ideas, I am going to briefly make four claims about presentational character.

First, to say that an experience has presentational character is not to say that it only has presentational character. An experience's *total* phenomenal character is the totality of what it is like for the subject to have that experience, but a total phenomenal character can be constituted by different kinds of phenomenal properties, both presentational and non-presentational. Total phenomenal character, in other words, is *heterogeneous*. For this reason, the persnickety way of putting things would be to introduce the locution 'presentational character with respect to *p*'. Elijah Chudnoff (2012: 56) gives an example of a visual experience that represents your friend as smiling and as happy that helps here. In such a case, there is presentational character with respect to the proposition that your friend is smiling but not with respect to the proposition that your friend is happy, even though your friend's being happy figures into your experience's 'total' phenomenal character.

Second, it was said that experience has presentational character when its object seems to be directly present. Though common parlance, an object's seeming to be 'directly present' is ambiguous. Consider how John Searle describe presentational character:

If, for example, I see a yellow station wagon in front of me, the experience I have is directly of the object. It doesn't just 'represent' the object; it provides direct access to it. The experience has a kind of directness, immediacy and involuntariness which is not shared by a belief I might have about the object in its absence...The visual experience I will say does not just represent the state of affairs perceived; rather, when satisfied, it gives direct access to it, and in that sense it is a presentation of that state of affairs. (1983: 46)

Notice Searle's use of "directness" and "immediacy": visual awareness affords us a form of access that is "direct" and "immediate" lacking in the case of pure thought. But as Robert Schroer has pointed out, on at least one gloss this way of putting things is misleading (2012). To see this, let's distinguish between *epistemic* and *phenomenal* directness. On the former, one's awareness of x is epistemically direct if one's awareness of x is not mediated by some distinct entity y , as when I am aware *that* the water is boiling by my awareness *of* the teapot whistling. Schroer's point is that when Searle employs terms like "direct" and "immediate" to describe the presentational phenomenology that is unique to visual experience he is *not* claiming it is direct in this epistemic sense. For thoughts can also confer epistemically direct awareness. Rather, what Searle is describing is the sense in which presented objects seem, as it were, *right there* or *graspable* in a way the objects of thought are not. In this sense, one's awareness of presented objects is phenomenally direct.

Third, some say objects of perception are presented as mind-independent or as distinct from awareness. Millar (2014) calls this *object-distinctness*. I do not know if perceptual experience is transparent. It seems fairly clear, however, that an experience's having presentational character with respect to P does not entail object-distinctness with respect to P . Millar cites pressure-phosphene experiences an example. According to Millar, in such cases it

does not seem to you that you are aware of something that has an existence apart from that experience. Still, pressure-phosphene experiences have presentational character (ibid: 240).

Fourth, some claim that perceptual experiences are like perfectly transparent windows; when you attempt to attend to your experiences, you see right ‘through’ them, and the only features you can become aware of seem to be features of your ambient environment. You never aware of what seem to be intrinsic features of the experience itself (e.g. Harman 1990; Tye 2002). Following common parlance, let’s call this feature *transparency*. I do not know if perceptual experience is transparent. It seems fairly clear, however, that an experience’s having presentational character does not entail that it is transparent. Again following Millar, transparency would only follow from an experience’s having presentational character if we assumed “*being able* to turn one’s attention to a feature that seems *not* to belong to objects in the ambient environment would make it *impossible* for objects in the environment to seem immediately present in a perceptual experience” (2014: 241). In other words, we would have to assume that by merely turning your attention to features that seemed not to belong to any physical objects, such features would necessarily, as Millar puts it, “crowd out” environmental objects (ibid: 241). Like Millar, I see no reason to make this assumption.¹⁰

Even with these clarificatory points, some may still find the notion of presentational character elusive. I don’t know how to convince someone of a phenomenological claim, and

¹⁰ I will add a fifth claim, but only as an aside. According to some, being presented makes an epistemic difference. In virtue of an object being presented to its subject, a subject is placed in a position to acquire non-inferential knowledge of it, and demonstrative reference to it. Mark Johnston (2006) and Chudnoff (2012) claim that if a perceptual experience justifies you in believing that *p*, it does so by instantiating the property of having presentational character with respect to *p*. I’m inclined to agree with Johnston and Chudnoff, but will remain agnostic for present purposes. In this way, I only assume the phenomenological datum that is presentational character, not any of its epistemic ramifications.

citing the many authors who have evoked presentational character (as distinct from other types of phenomenal character) would carry little dialectical force for the skeptic.

To the unconvinced, I offer the following. Focus on the visual case. Then, fix the concept ‘presentational character’ in purely comparative terms, between visual experiences and occurrent thoughts: ‘presentational character’ picks out that phenomenological quality, whatever it is, that marks the difference between what it is like to be aware of an object O by having an occurrent thought about O and what it is like to be aware of an object O by having a visual experience of O. *That* is the phenomena I am claiming to be incompatible with the traditional HOT-theoretic explanation of consciousness. And so long as one concedes there is such a difference between thinking about O and visually experiencing O, we should have a fix on our phenomenon of interest.

3 THE ARGUMENT

In any event, such is all I’ll say about presentational character. But with this fuller characterization in hand, we are now in a better position to articulate the sub-argument for **P1**.

It goes like this:

S1 If HOT is true, m^* (the HOT) entirely fixes the phenomenal character of experience.

S2 HOTs are thoughts.

S3 Presentational character is a type of phenomenal character.

S4 Thoughts *as such* do not have presentational character.

So:

S5 HOTs do not have presentational character. [S2, S4]

Thus:

S6 If HOTs do not have presentational character, no experience (on HOT) has presentational character. [S1, S3]

Therefore:

P1 If HOT is true, no experience has presentational character. [S5, S6]

Let's begin by noting a few basic points. **S2** and **S3** are true by definition. While this is less obvious, so is **S1**: as we'll see, it follows from HOT as described. Fleshing out this point will be the focus of the rest of this section. Finally, **S6** follows from **S1** and **S3**, but this won't be obvious until we say a bit more about **S1**. But before we address **S1**, let me say a bit about **S4**.

S4 is key. There are two ways of understanding **S4**. By saying 'thoughts as such do not have presentational character' we might mean thoughts *qua* object of awareness have no presentational character. This might be true, but it is beside the point for our purposes: HOTs are only objects of awareness themselves in cases of *introspective* consciousness, where m^* (the HOT) is the object of a yet further state of higher-order awareness m^{**} (another HOT). But we are not interested in introspective consciousness (yet).¹¹ Rather, when **S4** says 'thoughts as such do not have presentational character' what is meant is the objects of thought are not phenomenally presented in awareness.¹² Of course, if **S4** just said '(first-order) thoughts do not have presentational character', we would be warranted in assuming **S4**. But this is not what **S4** says. It says that thoughts *simpliciter*—i.e. HOTs included—do not have presentational character. So, since the object of a HOT is a first-order state and its content, even if that first-order state is a perceptual one, if HOTs are not suitably different from ordinary first-order thoughts there is no hope for presentational phenomenology: none of the features that figure into the higher-order content will be presented to the subject. Or so I will argue. Naturally, it is

¹¹ I discuss the ramifications of introspection for HOT and presentational character in § 4.

¹² So **S4** is consistent with cognitive phenomenology (e.g. Pitt 2004). **S4** only says that, regardless of whatever phenomenal character thoughts may have, it is not *presentational* character. I discuss cognitive phenomenology in § 4.

here that the most serious battery of objections will surface. To counter **S4**, the HOT theorist will need to point to a feature of HOTs that could accommodate presentational character. We'll explore these options thoroughly in § 4.

So let's now turn back to **S1**. Like all variants of HOA Theory, HOT is usually interpreted as following an *object-conception* of state-consciousness (Dretske 1997).¹³ The state that is conscious is the lower-order state *m*, i.e. the *object* of the higher-order state of awareness *m**. But it is well known that—*unlike* other versions of HOA Theory—on HOT phenomenal character is entirely fixed by *m**—specifically, by the way *m** represents *m* as being. On HOT, consciousness is a matter of “mental appearance” (Rosenthal 2009b: 166), and how our mental states appear to us is a matter of how *m** represents them as being.

That the target first-order state plays no role in determining phenomenal character is made evident by cases of ‘radical misrepresentation’ or ‘empty HOTs’, i.e. cases where *m** represents one as being in a state that one actually isn't in. Take Karen Neander's (1998) well-known triplets example. Each triplet—we'll call them *A*, *B*, and *C*—each of whom has an assertoric thought expressible as ‘I have a sensation of green’ is helpful here. *A* has a (first-order) sensation of green; *B* has a sensation of red; and *C* has an empty HOT—she has no first-order sensation at all. The question, then, is whether, on HOT, there is a difference in the phenomenal character between the triplets' respective experiences, and further, whether *C* actually has an experience at all, given that her HOT is empty. HOT says that the phenomenal

¹³ As opposed to an *act-conception*, as on (first-order) *representationalist* theories of consciousness (see, e.g., Dretske 1997). When state-consciousness is identified with a creature's *acts* of awareness, the creature need not be aware of these states for them to be conscious. What makes them conscious is not, as Dretske puts it (ibid), *S*'s awareness of them, but their role in making *S* conscious of something else, e.g. some external object.

character, and thus what-it-is-like-ness, for all three triplets is exactly the same. Here is how David Rosenthal puts it:

Suppose my higher-order awareness is of a state with property P, but the target isn't P, but rather Q...A higher-order awareness of a P state without any P state would be subjectively the same whether or not a Q state occurs. The first-order state can contribute nothing to phenomenology apart from the way we're conscious of it. (2004: 32)

If one has a sensation of red and a distinct HOT that one has a sensation of green, the sensation of red may nonetheless be detectable by various priming effects. But what it will be like for one is that one has a sensation of green. Similarly if one has that HOT *with no relevant sensation at all*. (Rosenthal 2009a: 249, emphasis mine)

What it's like for one [on HOT] is determined by the way the higher-order awareness represents the first-order state...Consciousness is a matter of mental appearance...that mental appearance is due solely to the higher-order awareness. (2009b: 166)

Josh Weisberg concurs:

[W]hat it is to be in a conscious state is to be aware of oneself as being in that state. This awareness, in turn, is explained by HO (higher-order) representation...It is the intentional content of the HO representation that matters for consciousness, not the presence of the target first-order state of the HO representation... (2011: 439)

Note Weisberg's last claim. He tells us '[i]t is the intentional content of the HO representation that matters for *consciousness*', not consciousness *as it is in non-veridical* cases. The content of HOTs, in other words, fixes phenomenal character *tout court*.¹⁴

All of this follows from the HOT theorist's response to Neander. Because the triplets all

¹⁴ Arising out of these issues is the worry that on HOT we can be in conscious states that do not exist. This claim has been subject to much derision (e.g. Block 2011), and while some HOT theorist's seem to bite the bullet (e.g. Weisberg 2011), not all do (e.g. Berger 2014, see also fn. 2). But again, this issue is not to the point for us, as what consciousness is a property of and what exhausts phenomenal character are two different issues. We only care about the latter here.

have (i) the same HOT, (ii) experiences with the same phenomenal character, yet nevertheless (iii) different content at the first-order level, the first-order level plays no role in determining what it is like for *A*—i.e. the triplet with an *accurate* HOT. On HOT, phenomenal character is determined by a kind of *higher-order* content. First-order contents are otiose insofar as phenomenology goes.^{15,16}

Further, we can now see how **S6** follows. Phenomenal character is determined by a kind of higher-order content (**S1**). Presentational character is a type of phenomenal character (**S3**). But if no higher-order content carried by a HOT determines any presentational character, no experience has presentational character.

In § 1, I remarked that the problem of accommodating presentational character is a *prima facie* particularly trenchant one for HOT. It should now be clear why. The only determinant of phenomenal character on HOT is a thought or thought-like state, viz. a HOT. Thoughts, by their very nature, do not seem to present their objects. So HOT theorists face a puzzle that other theorists don't: what is it that is special about HOTs such that they do (or can) phenomenally present their objects, but first-order thoughts do not? In essence, the HOT theorist needs to show how **S4** doesn't stick. This is the HOT-Theoretic Gambit.

4 THE HOT-THEORETIC GAMBIT

¹⁵ As an anonymous reviewer reminds me, this doesn't mean such contents plays no role on traditional HOT. Amongst other things, they play a role in perceptual discrimination (Rosenthal 2010: 374).

¹⁶ Kriegel (2009) describes first-order content as content involving neither representations nor representational properties. The subject matter of first-order contents is the subject's ambient environment, including her body. If a content *c* involves representations or representational properties, then *c* is *not* first-order content, but a higher-order content. A higher-order content may be something like 'I am in a state with the content 'the ball is red'; a first-order content may be the 'the ball is red'. On self-representationalism—or at least Uriah Kriegel's variant (*ibid*)—phenomenal characters are identical to a compresence of first-order and higher-order contents. I discuss Kriegel's view further in § 5.

The gambit is simple. The HOT theorist points to some feature F of HOTS, offering F as a candidate for the following conditional: S has an experience with some presentational character ϕ if S has a mental representation m^* (a HOT) and m^* has F . Again, ‘candidacy’ is key: we are not looking for a story of how F in fact plays this role, or a defense of the fact that F plays this role. The tenor of the gambit does not require a full-fledged theory or an account, but only asks for an F that is a possible candidate for such a role. In this regard, I want to suggest two constraints. The first is fairly obvious:

The Metaphysical Preclusion Constraint (MPC): Whatever F is, it cannot be a feature ordinary first-order thoughts can possess.

MPC is clearly necessary since if ordinary first-order thoughts did possess F , and F is sufficient for presentational character, then first-order thoughts would have presentational character. But *ex hypothesis* they don’t. An F must be such that it is the sort of thing a first-order thought is *precluded* from having.

The second constraint speaks to our datum that it does not seem to be *thoughts* that phenomenally present their objects. It goes like this:

The Phenomenal Preclusion Constraint (PPC): Whatever F is sufficient for presentational character, when a HOT has F , it cannot seem like it is a HOT (i.e. a type of thought) that has presentational character.

PPC runs the risk of being misconstrued. It is a phenomenological datum that thoughts do not seem to have presentational character. When we have a thought, the object of that thought is not phenomenally presented to us in the way the objects of visual experience are phenomenally presented. HOTS are a species of thought. So, while it may be that, HOTS are *in fact* suitably different from first-order thoughts such that they *do* phenomenally present their

objects, it ought not *seem* to us as if they do. For otherwise, we would have never thought our supposed datum was an actual datum to begin with. Even if a suitable HOT is sufficient (and necessary) for presentational character, we must be ‘blind’ to the fact that it is a *thought* that has presentational character. I’ll say more on this in a bit.

Candidate *Fs* divide into three classes: (i) properties unique to the attitude of HOTs, (ii) properties unique to the content of HOTs, and (iii) complex *Fs*, e.g. the conjunction of a property unique to the attitude of HOTs with a property unique to the content of HOTs. I’ll argue no class (i), class (ii), or class (iii) property meets both MPC and PPC.

We begin with class (i). HOTs must be assertoric, occurrent, and non-inferential. Each attitudinal property plays a unique role. Consider the property of being assertoric. One might object HOT makes consciousness cheap (e.g. Balog 2000). Since a suitable HOT is sufficient for conscious experience, why bother going through all the trouble to seek pleasurable experiences, when we can, as it were, ‘think’ our way to them? But as Rosenthal points out (2000: 233), this is one reason why HOTs must be assertoric attitudes. Assertoric thoughts are not easy to have just any old time. It is easy to have thoughts about Santa Claus, but not so easy to form an occurrent, assertoric thought that Santa Claus is here in this room—“really to believe it, as we might say” (ibid). But *F* could not be the property of being assertoric for the simple reason that first-order thoughts can be assertoric. Just as I can really believe that I see Santa is coming down the chimney (a higher-order assertoric attitude), I can also really believe that Santa is coming down the chimney (a first-order assertoric attitude). So the property being assertoric does not meet MPC.

The same goes for being non-inferential and being occurrent. Again both properties play a

unique role in HOT's setup. Since there can be cases in which one infers from publicly accessible evidence that one is, for instance, angry without the anger being thereby rendered conscious the HOT must be non-inferential (Rosenthal 1997: 737). And since being merely disposed to have a thought about something does not by itself make one conscious of it, the HOT must be occurrent (ibid: 742). But because we have non-inferential and occurrent first-order thoughts such features cannot *on their own* ground presentational character because we have non-inferential and occurrent first-order thoughts. Thus, the properties being non-inferential and being occurrent fail to meet MPC as well.

Let's now turn to class (ii). One potential *F* that can be ruled out is the property of having higher-order content. Yes, HOTs (of course) do have higher-order content, and first-order thoughts (of course) do not. So meeting MPC is not the issue. The problem is that HOTs are not always about perceptual states. Richard Brown and Pete Mandik (2013) have argued that if HOT is true, we can have (first-order, non-introspected) thoughts with propriety phenomenology. Suppose one first has a suitable HOT about one's first-order pain sensation. Here, the pain will become conscious. Yet now suppose one has a suitable HOT about one's thought that the Eiffel Tower is tall. As Brown and Mandik point out, if we deny cognitive phenomenology, one will then need to say that though the thought is conscious, there is nothing that it is like for this creature to consciously think the thought. But this would be—by the edicts of HOT itself—absurd; after all, the two higher-order states are in every relevant respect the same.

Whatever sort of phenomenology cognitive phenomenology is, however, we can say this: it is not presentational phenomenology. There are many ways to understand the cognitive

phenomenology thesis (see, e.g. Bayne & Montague 2011). Sometimes the idea is put in terms of attitudes: not only there is something it is like to desire that P and there is something it is like to believe that P, but what it is like to *desire* that P is different from what it is like to *believe* that P. Sometimes the idea is put in terms of contents: not only is there is something it is like to desire that P and there is something it is like to believe that Q, but what it is like to desire that P is different from what it is like to desire that Q. Sometimes the idea is put in terms of attitudes *and* contents. But bedrock is this: there *is* something it is like to believe that P and desire that P, and such cognitive phenomenology is *irreducible* to other types of phenomenology.¹⁷ The point, I take it, is that cognitive phenomenology—whatever it is—is *not* like typical sensory phenomenology.¹⁸ Naturally, this does not imply that the relevant phenomenal difference is the absence of presentational character. But given the vividness of presentational character, if proponents of cognitive phenomenology were asserting that the sort of phenomenology thoughts have *is* presentational, the *denial* of cognitive phenomenology would be perverse. Presumably, the phenomenology is a bit subtler.

So if anything, *F* has to be the *right sort* of higher-order content. This moves us into category (iii): complex *F*s. We know that HOTs have *de se* content since it is not enough that a HOT represent a lower-order state (say, a sensation of green) as having certain properties to be

¹⁷ In fact, all we need here is Pitt's claim that cognitive phenomenology is *proprietary*: that what it is like to think a particular thought is different from what it is like to be in any other sort of conscious mental state (i.e., a sensation, perceptual experience, etc.). We do not require the additional claim advanced by Pitt (2004: 4) that cognitive phenomenology is also *distinctive*, i.e. that what it is like consciously to think a particular thought is different from what it is like consciously to think any other thought.

¹⁸ Galen Strawson's (1994) notion of 'understanding experience'—for instance, when two subjects hear the same spoken sequence of sounds, yet one understands the language and the other does not—is often submitted as a paradigmatic example of cognitive phenomenology. The idea is that at a sensory level their auditory experience is phenomenologically the same, but what it is like for them is still very different. I think this is a clear case where, if we are to countenance this sort of phenomenology at all, it obviously cannot be presentational in nature.

conscious of that state with respect to those properties. We saw above that the HOT must also represent the *subject* of consciousness. HOTs make one conscious of *oneself* as being in a certain state because it has the content that one is, oneself, in that state (Rosenthal 2004: 165).¹⁹ But taken on its own, the property of having higher-order *de se* content runs afoul of the same issue as the property of having (mere) higher-order content. I can have a HOT with the content 'I am thinking that Eiffel Tower is tall'. This is higher-order *de se* content, but not one that is sufficient for presentational character.

I think the best bet, then, is something like this. HOTs represent first-order states as having certain properties, and we are (purportedly) conscious of those state with respect to the properties we represent them as having. Amongst these properties are qualitative properties which, as Rosenthal puts it, are "properties that resemble and differ from other properties in ways that parallel the similarities and differences among a range of perceptible properties of physical objects or, for the case of bodily sensations, a range of bodily conditions that we can sense" (2000: 236).²⁰ For example, a state of seeing a red ball can be conscious in virtue of the HOT 'I am seeing something red'; the higher-order state will make us aware of the first-order state in respect to some of its some of its qualitative properties (here, *redness*) but not all of them. So maybe the proponent of HOT can leverage this by saying something like this: S has an experience with some presentational character ϕ when S has a suitable mental representation

¹⁹ Such essentially indexical self-reference is required on HOT. Here's Rosenthal: a state's being conscious must consist "in one's having a suitable thought that one is, *oneself*, in that state" (1997: 741, emphasis mine; cf. 2004; 2012: 25) for otherwise, "it might turn out that in any particular case that the state was a state of somebody else" (1997: 750, fn. 39).

²⁰ Rosenthal seems to use "mental quality" (2010) and "sensory quality" (1991) as synonymous with 'qualitative properties'. For instance, here is his definition of sensory quality: "Sensory qualities are properties of states of organisms, families of which bear certain systematic relations to families of properties of physical objects and processes to which the organism can respond" (1991: 26). This is very similar to the definition given above.

m^* of herself as being in a perceptual state m that has a qualitative property ϕ . Our (complex) F , then, is just the property of having an assertoric, occurrent, non-inferential HOT with the content that ‘I am seeing something [enter qualitative property]’. When a HOT has this F , I experience something red, and its redness is phenomenally presented to me.

On the face of it, this proposal does well. MPC is not an issue, because no first-order thought has higher-order content of any kind. The proposal also has the benefit of blocking worries about distinguishing the conditions under which we are in states with non-presentational phenomenal character and states with presentational phenomenal character. For here the HOT represents one as *seeing* a red ball, not *thinking* about it. However, the trouble is that it does not meet PPC.

To see this, here’s a starting question: why do we believe thoughts lack presentational character, or that there is a significant phenomenological difference between the way we are aware of an object when we think about it relative to when we have a visual experience of it? The same way we know anything about our experience’s character: by attending to, or introspecting, it’s details. We already saw above (§ 3) a bit about how introspection works on HOT, but it will be helpful here to say a bit more now.

HOTs are not always conscious. A HOT m^* is conscious only when it is the object of yet another HOT m^{**} . When this happens, we are introspectively conscious. But what is the phenomenal character of introspectively conscious experiences on HOT? It’s not identical to any first-order content, like ‘the ball is red’. It cannot be, since we know that first-order content are always unconscious on HOT. On HOT, phenomenal character is identical (or at least fixed by) to the higher-order content of a HOT—something like, say, ‘I am seeing that the ball is red’.

Now, if the phenomenal character of introspectively conscious experiences on HOT were also identical to *those* sorts of higher-order contents, there'd be no threat to PPC. For then introspection would only reveal the fact that one, oneself, was seeing a red ball. Nothing more, nothing less: no hint that it was a *thought* that carried such content. Alas, it is not. When we introspect on HOT, m^{**} has what we might call a *third-order* content, a species of higher-order content. So instead of introspecting the content 'I am seeing that the ball is red' we introspect something like 'I am having a thought that I am seeing that the ball is red'. This is so because m^* —the HOT with which I think 'I am seeing that the ball is red'—is now *itself* an object of awareness. But now PPC is not met. For when we introspect it *will* seem like thoughts present their objects, as what we will introspect will be the HOT (m^*) itself.

One might object that PPC begs the question in favor of **S4** and against HOT. In effect, I am insisting that first-order thoughts both seem like they do not have presentational character and not actually have presentational character, while making it a constraint that *if* HOTs have presentational character, it cannot seem like they do upon introspection. Is this fair? I think it is. Think of the situation this way. When it comes to accommodating presentational character, HOT is at a disadvantage from the get-go. On their view, phenomenal character, and thus presentational character, is fixed by content of a type of thought, a HOT. But it is a phenomenological datum that thoughts do not seem to have presentational character. So the HOT theorists faces the challenge of showing how thoughts *have* presentational character without making it seem like it is a *thought* that is phenomenally presenting its object. Yet if HOTs did have presentational character, given how introspection works on HOT, it would invariably seem like HOTs present their object whenever we introspect. *But it doesn't seem this*

way. If it did, there would be no puzzle to begin with—the gambit would be unnecessary. We would just say, ‘well, first-order thoughts don’t present their objects, but HOTs do, so they *must* be suitably different, never mind what that suitable difference is.’ In a way, this reflects the two poles of our datum. Our datum is not merely the metaphysical claim that

Metaphysical Datum: First-order thoughts do not *have* presentational character, i.e., they do not phenomenally present their objects.

But also the broader phenomenological claim that

Phenomenological Datum: Thoughts as such do not *seem* to have presentational character, i.e., it does not seem to be a *thought* that is phenomenally presenting its object.

MPC is meant to reflect our Metaphysical Datum; PPC is meant to reflect our Phenomenological Datum. And note the difference in scope. If the Metaphysical Datum ‘said thoughts *as such*’ we would beg the question against HOT in light of our dialectical constraints; The HOT-Theoretic Gambit, like other gambits, is predicated on the idea that no theory has a leg up on explaining why experiences have presentational character. All we can claim, confidently, is that first-order thoughts do not *have* such characters, and that if HOTs *do* have presentational character—if they phenomenally present their objects—when we introspect it does not *seem* like we have a thought (here, a HOT) with presentational character. So employing PPC in the service of our *modus tollens* begs no salient questions. Only if PPC precluded HOTs from *having* presentational character would the question be begged. MPC so precludes first-order thoughts, but that is neither here nor there.

Finally, note there is no recourse in suggesting that what this argument demonstrates, if anything, is that presentational character is just impossible on HOT *qua* theory of introspection, not HOT *qua* theory of consciousness; jettison HOT’s story of introspection, and pressure from

PPC evaporates. For these theories are really two sides of the same coin. Even if we did not want to call what happens when we have a third-order state (m^{**}) directed at a higher-order thought ‘introspection,’ when we *did* have such a m^{**} , we would still be aware that it was a thought that was ‘doing’ the presenting. And rejecting that we *could* have an m^{**} about an m^* in this way would simply be ad hoc absent independent reason to think otherwise.

5 CLOSING THOUGHTS

Here is where we are. The HOT theorist is forced to find some distinctive feature of HOTs that can possibly ground presentational character, without running afoul of MPC and PPC. We’ve found none. Of course, our argument is only conclusive if the features canvassed above are jointly exhaustive, but at least insofar as *traditional* HOT goes, I know of no others.

An obvious next step is to look at non-traditional variants of HOT. To close, here’s a suggestion: let first-order contents play a role in determining phenomenal character. Kriegel’s self-representational theory presents a useful model here (2009). On his account, phenomenal character is a compresence of higher-order and first-order contents. We can co-opt this by letting the ‘analog’ first-order contents of perceptual states do some phenomenal lifting. We can say that such contents fix the presentational aspects of conscious experience, while higher-order contents (of HOTs) fix the non-presentational aspects. A HOT, on this view, is still *necessary* for conscious, because (the idea goes) all conscious states include non-presentational phenomenal character. This comports well with the HOT theorist’s antecedent commitments, as they are already committed to a non-presentational form of self-awareness being a necessary condition on a state’s being conscious—we are aware of *ourselves* as being in a certain state (Rosenthal 2004). Since (i) conscious states are still states we are conscious *of* (not

with), (ii) the higher-order state of awareness is still a HOT, and (iii) there is no constitutive relationship between the HOT and *the first-order state*, this does not amount to a massive abandonment of traditional HOT.²¹ And MPC and PPC are non-issues, since it is not the content of a thought that is responsible for presentational character.

So maybe this isn't too steep a price to pay for the possibility of presentational character. But then again, we are buying just that—possibility. Is this worth it? I don't know, but I'm not a HOT theorist.²²

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²¹ I am not implying that attempts to accommodate presentational character with a broadly HOT-theoretic explanation *must* appeal to first-order contents in this way. Other non-traditional variants might start with emendations to the HOTs themselves. Consider Millar's (2014: 249) recent extension of a proposal made by Searle (1983: 48). Searle claims that when you have a visual experience of a particular object your visual experience represents that object as causing that very experience, and this is sufficient for presentational character. Yet as Millar points out, this won't do, because a thought about a particular object can represent that the relevant object is causing that very thought and still lack presentational character. The patch, Millar suggests, is to say that visual experiences represent their objects as the direct cause of that very experience (because thoughts, Millar claims, do not bear a direct causal link to their objects). The HOT theorist might run with this idea saying, for instance, when I have a visual experience of a red apple, the content of my HOT—identical to the phenomenal (i.e. presentational) character of that experience—would be 'I am seeing a red apple and this [experience, seeing] directly causally depends on the apple's being red.' One problem with this proposal is that it makes accommodating presentational character in conceptually unsophisticated creatures far less likely. For now such creatures would not only have to employ (and thus possess) the concept CAUSE in the higher-order content, but the complex concept DIRECT CAUSE. Naturally, this is an empirical matter, but even if the former concept can be possessed by the conceptually unsophisticated, the latter will *prima facie* be a much tougher sell. But more important given the thread of this paper, this option does nothing to touch PPC. Since it is still a HOT that is fixing phenomenal (and thus presentational character), we can still have a further third-order thought that represents ourselves as being in (the first) HOT. The general lesson, then, is that however we emend the traditional HOT-theoretic explanation, we either (i) find some way of meeting PPC within HOT's current account of introspection, or (ii) find some non ad hoc adjustment of HOT's account of introspection that precludes us from being aware of our HOT's as thoughts.

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