

## Commentary on Joseph Gottlieb's "Verbal Disputes in the Theory of Consciousness"

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I would like to thank Aaron Henry and the Brains blog for the opportunity to think about Gottlieb's fascinating and thought-provoking paper. Gottlieb develops a procedure for showing that the HO-FO dispute is verbal, and then carries out this procedure in detail. Overall, I find the result convincing (and exciting!), even though there are a couple of issues that I will try to challenge.

Instead of speaking of HO theorists and FO theorists in general, I will focus on Rosenthal (a HO theorist) and Block (a FO theorist) specifically, as it makes (for me) the discussion easier to follow (plus Gottlieb, to a significant extent, focuses on Rosenthal and Block too).

The basic dialectic is this. Block rejects NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY ("A mental state is like something for its subject only if its subject is in some way aware of that mental state"). Rosenthal accepts it. Gottlieb argues that, first, it is charitable to interpret Block as speaking FO-English; second, that Rosenthal will grant that NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY is false in FO-English. It follows that Rosenthal will agree that Block's view (a mental state is like something for its subject even if its subject is not aware of it), is true in FO-English. This means that the dispute is verbal.

What is FO-English? FO-English incorporates what Gottlieb calls "the Affective View" into the meaning of "what it like" phrases. That is, in FO-English, "there is something it is like for a subject to be in a mental state" means that the subject has *an affective relation* to the mental state (or, equivalently, that the subject feels something in virtue of being in that state).

In this commentary, I will first (Section 1) present considerations against interpreting Block as speaking FO-English, suggesting instead that perhaps Block speaks (what I will call) IA-English. I will then claim that even if my suggestion is right, Gottlieb argument still goes through. Then (Section 2) I will suggest that, given that the Rosenthal-Block dispute is verbal, perhaps there is a way to salvage a different, non-verbal dispute, that is in the vicinity of the verbal one. Both of the points I will make focus on the issue of attributing a state to the individual (the person, the subject), rather than to her brain or to a subsystem (Gottlieb mentions this issue too, albeit in passing). This issue is prominent in the recent debate about unconscious perception (see, e.g., Phillips 2018, 2019).

### 1. Is it charitable to interpret Block as speaking FO-English?

Gottlieb claims that it is charitable to interpret Block as speaking FO-English. Block (2008) considers the case of extinction, in which a visual representation of a face is inaccessible (is "extinguished" by the sight of a different object), despite normal activation of the fusiform face area (FFA). Block raises (favorably) the possibility that the patient with extinction has a conscious experience of this extinguished (and hence inaccessible) face. This involves there being something it is like for the patient to have this experience. What makes this experience "for the subject?" Block says that it is "for the subject" because it is in the subject's visual field:

"[W]e can understand the [inaccessible] face experience as *his* experience by noting that it is in *his* visual field. One could meaningfully ask, for example, whether it is the same half of his visual field in the vertical dimension as his experience on the right, or which is closer to the periphery, the one on the left or the one on the right." (Block 2008, p. 292)

Gottlieb comments:

“The answer that Block suggests—that the face occurs in his visual field—is exactly what we would expect a FO theorist to say if she ascribed to the Affective View. For, according to the Affective View, all ‘for the subject’ does, as an argument of the verb phrase ‘is like’, is draw out the fact that there is a subject who is standing in an affective relation to a mental state—i.e., for whom there is something it is like. And that, in effect, is what Block is saying; GK’s experience is ‘for him’ because the face occurs in his visual field.” (the target paper, p. 333)

So Gottlieb interprets Block in terms of the Affective View. However, on its face, Block's account makes no appeal to feelings, or to affective relations between the subject and the face representation (or the experience). It is plausible to interpret Block as saying that the extinguished face representation has a qualitative character (i.e., involves shape qualities, color qualities, etc.), and is "for the subject" because it is in the subject's visual field. This last claim is naturally interpreted as a claim about attribution to the individual. That is, Block acknowledges that conscious states should be *attributable to the individual*, i.e., to the person (rather than merely to the brain or to a subsystem within the person). They are individual-level (or person-level). In other words, my suggestion is that perhaps Block treats the notion of “for the subject” as (roughly) equivalent to “attributable to the individual.” Block then suggests that the inaccessible representation of the face is attributable to the individual because it is in the visual field, and the visual field is a personal-level phenomenon. Given this interpretation, it is not clear what room is left here for an "affective relation between the subject and the representational state." All we have here is a representational state, with qualitative character, which is attributable to the individual. And its attributability to the individual amounts to no more than its being "in the visual field."

Thus, I'm not sure that it is charitable to attribute the Affective View to Block. Consequently, I'm not sure it is charitable to interpret him as speaking FO-English. But I admit that the issue is confusing to me. It is not clear what the claim about qualitative character, when combined with attributability to the individual, implies. Maybe it implies that the subject has an affective relation to the relevant state. But it seems that showing this will require an explicit argument.

In any case, even if I'm right, it seems that Gottlieb's argument still goes through. Suppose we hold that, for Block, "there is something it is like for the subject to see the face" *means* that the visual representation of the face has qualitative character and is attributable to the individual. Call this IA-English (for Individual Attribution). If Block is speaking IA-English then his rejection of NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY amounts to claiming that individual attribution of a representational state with qualitative character does not require awareness of that state (since "being in the visual field" is sufficient for individual attribution). It seems plausible that Block does hold this view. It might, therefore, be charitable to interpret Block as speaking IA-English.

Suppose this is right. In order to derive the conclusion that the dispute is verbal (given Gottlieb's framework), one needs to show that Rosenthal will agree that NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY is false in IA-English. That is, one needs to show that Rosenthal will grant that a state with qualitative character can be attributed to the individual even if the subject is not aware of it. Does Rosenthal grant this? As Gottlieb stresses, Rosenthal says that qualitative character can occur without being the target of awareness ("thin phenomenality"). Moreover, Rosenthal clearly grants that higher-order thoughts (HOTs) need not be a target of awareness (i.e., of other HOTs). Since HOTs are attributable to the individual, it seems that Rosenthal grants that a state can be attributed to an individual even if the individual is unaware of it. These two points imply that Rosenthal grants that a state with qualitative character can be attributed to an individual even if the individual is unaware of it. This implies, in

Gottlieb's framework, that the Rosenthal-Block dispute is verbal. In sum, Gottlieb's argument apparently still goes through even if FO-English is swapped with IA-English.

2. Is there a substantive dispute in the vicinity of the verbal dispute?

Suppose that Block is speaking FO-English (or IA-English) and that Rosenthal agrees that NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY is false in that language. It follows that the dispute is verbal. But perhaps there is a different, substantive dispute in the vicinity. A philosopher might claim that "being in the visual field" is not sufficient for individual attribution, because (e.g.) a state is attributable to the individual only if this state is "available for guidance of intentional action" (following Phillips 2019). This philosopher will say that there is nothing it is like for the subject to undergo the representation of the extinguished face (with its qualitative character) because this representation is not attributable to the subject. Block will dispute this, claiming (perhaps) that "availability for guidance of intentional action" is not necessary for individual attribution. This looks like a substantive dispute, and it is in the vicinity of the Rosenthal-Block dispute. The point is that even if Gottlieb is right, and the present Rosenthal-Block dispute is verbal, still one of the central points of disagreement (namely the case of extinction) can be described as a substantive (non-verbal) disagreement.

#### Bibliography

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