

## Commentary on Gottlieb's 'Verbal Disputes ...'

Gottlieb aims to explain exactly what higher-order (HO) and first-order (FO) theorists of (phenomenal) consciousness disagree about by focusing on the "disputed sentence:

NAGELIAN TRANSITIVITY A mental state is like something for its subject only if its subject is in some way aware of that mental state."(325)

HO theorists think that this claim (which I'll call 'NT') is true, but FO theorists think it is false. They disagree, Gottlieb argues, because they (perhaps only implicitly) adopt different views concerning the meaning of 'what it is like' sentences. Their disagreement, then, is verbal.

I think it's plausible that FO and HO theorists do understand 'what it is like' sentences differently. But I don't think that we should accept Gottlieb's argument for this claim. That said, I think that Gottlieb's paper is a valuable addition to the debate. It puts pressure on both FO and HO theorists to explain how they understand 'what it is like' sentences, and to explain why it is reasonable to understand these sentences in that way. Whether or not the disagreement is, at bottom, verbal, clarifying how these sentences are understood will make it easier to see exactly what FO and HO theorists disagree about.

I'll give four reasons why we should not accept Gottlieb's argument. In brief, they are that (i) FO theorists can accept NT, (ii) NT is not the disputed sentence, (iii) the view of 'what it is like' sentences that Gottlieb ascribes to HO theorists is not the operator view described by Stoljar, (iv) HO theorists should not adopt the view Gottlieb ascribes to them. The result is that no view of 'what it is like' sentences is ascribed to HO theorists, so it's unclear how they understand 'what it is like' sentences. But Gottlieb needs such an understanding if he is to show that Hirsch's sufficient condition (325) for there being a verbal dispute is satisfied.

### **(i) FO theorists can accept NT**

Where S is a subject, and M is a mental state of that subject, Nagelian Transitivity is the following claim:

NT     M is like something for S only if S is aware of M.

The antecedent of NT is

(a)     M is like something for S.

I don't think that it is obvious what (a) means. We might hope that the two accounts of 'what it is like' sentences that Gottlieb considers will help us here: (a) at least looks like it belongs to the family of 'what it is like' sentences. The affective view (327) holds that:

A     There is something it is like for S to be in M iff there is some way that S feels as a result of S's being in M.

The operator view (328) holds that:

O     There is something it is like for S to be in M iff there is some way such that it seems to S that S's being in M is that way.

So if (a) means the same as (b)

(b)    There is something it is like for S to be M.

Then we know what (a) means, depending on which view we adopt.

*Does (a) mean the same as (b)?* We might think it obviously does, because we think that (b) is a "grammatical variation" of (a) in the same way that 'Eve is loved by Adam' is a grammatical variation of 'Adam loves Eve'. But this is not so. To see why, consider two sentences similar in structure to (a) and (b):

(c)    A mile takes some time for Kyle.

(d)    There is some time it takes for Kyle to walk a mile.

It's clear that (c) is not a grammatical variation of (d). This suggests that (a) is not a grammatical variation of (b). Is it possible that (a) means the same as (b) even though they are not grammatical variations? Sure, it's possible. But it's unclear why we should think that it is true.

The two views of 'what it is like' sentences, then, leave unclear the meaning of (a). This makes it hard to tell how either FO or HO theorists understand (a) and NT, and hard to tell whether they think that NT is true. But we might think that there are views "nearby" A or O which can help us to understand (a), such as:

A'     X is like something for S iff X feels some way to S.

O'     X is like something for S iff X seems some way to S.

I can see why someone might want to accept either A' or O': I can make sense of 'My stubbed toe is like something for me' as meaning 'My stubbed toe feels some way to me'; and I can make sense of 'The tomato is like something for me' as meaning 'The tomato seems some way to me'. So, even if it's unclear whether, and if so, how, we could infer A' from A, or O' from O, these views give us ways of understanding (a) which seem at least *prima facie* plausible to me.

So we can understand NT as:

(1) M seems/feels some way to S only if S is aware of M.

But this looks like something a FO theorist can accept. Just as tomato can only seem some way to me if I am aware of it, so a mental state can only seem some way to me if I am aware of it.

This is the first reason why we should not focus on NT: both FO and HO theorists can accept it.

## **(ii) NT is not the disputed sentence**

Does the fact that FO theorists can accept NT mean that they accept some HO theory of consciousness? It might seem so: Gottlieb claims that NT is just what results from combining the Nagelian Conception of consciousness (321) (which both sides accept)

TNC M is conscious iff there is something it is like for S to be in M.

and Transitivity (320) (which only HO theorists accept)

T M is conscious only if S is aware of M.

But this claim is false.

Combining TNC and T results in

NT\* There is something it is like for S to be in M only if S is aware of M.

not

NT M is like something for S only if S is aware of M.

FO theorists deny NT\*, and so don't accept a HO theory of consciousness.

NT\* entails NT if we accept:

(2) M is like something for S only if there is something it is like for S to be in M.

But it's unclear why we should accept (2). Certainly, it doesn't obviously follow from either A or O, and FO theorists will deny (2).

So even if Gottlieb's argument works when we focus on NT, it's unclear why this matters: the disputed sentence is NT\* not NT.

## **(iii) The operator view**

Does Gottlieb argument work when we focus on NT\*? I don't think it does, because the view of 'what it is like' sentences that Gottlieb ascribes to HO theorists—and which they need to accept

if they are to understand NT\* as Gottlieb claims they do—is not the operator view as described by Stoljar (2016).

Gottlieb illustrates the operator view (327–28) with the following claim which, according to the view, holds because of what ‘there is something it is like for Michael to  $\varphi$  x’ means:

- O     There is something it is like for Michael to  $\varphi$  x iff there is some way such that it seems to Michael that Michael’s  $\varphi$ -ing x is that way.

The right hand side of O is ambiguous. It could be that what seems some way to Michael is *Michael’s  $\varphi$ -ing x*, i.e., something (perhaps an event? Or a state of affairs?) which involves both Michael and a  $\varphi$ -ing of x. Or it could be that what seems some way to Michael is just the  *$\varphi$ -ing x*; the reference to Michael is just to tell us *which*  $\varphi$ -ing x—Michael’s, not Michaela’s, not Mitchell’s—seems some way to Michael. The disambiguations give us two versions of the operator view:

- O1     There is something it is like for S to be in M iff S’s being in M seems some way to S.  
O2     There is something it is like for S to be in M iff M seems some way to S.

Gottlieb assumes that the view of ‘what it is like’ sentences that HO theorists accept is O2. We can see that this is so by noting that from NT\*

- NT\*    There is something it is like for S to be in M only if S is aware of M.

we need O2

- O2     There is something it is like for S to be in M iff M seems some way to S.

to get us to the sentence which Gottlieb says represents how HO theorists understand NT\*, namely U2 (334):

- U2     M seems some way to S only if S is aware of M.

It’s clear that O1 can’t get us from NT\* to U2 (and that neither O1 nor O2 could get us from NT to U2). But it’s also clear from Stoljar’s description of the operator view (Stoljar 2016, 1186), that it is stated by O1, not O2. This matters because Gottlieb implicitly accepts the conclusion of Stoljar’s argument (Stoljar 2016, §3) concerning the logical form of ‘what it is like’ sentences. O2 does not look like a plausible account of the meaning of sentences with this logical form.

If we’re looking for an explanation of why HO theorists might understand NT\* as U2, then we still haven’t found what we’re looking for.

#### **(iv) HO theorists should reject O2**

Finally, I'll argue that HO theorists should not endorse O2, even if we can explain why this is a plausible view of 'what it is like' sentences. Here's O2 again (with 'phenomenally' added before 'seems' to emphasise that—as always—it is the phenomenal sense of 'seems' that is in play here):

O2    There is something it is like for S to be in M iff M phenomenally seems some way to S.

And here is a general claim about what is required for something to phenomenally seem some way to someone (as always 'conscious' is short for 'phenomenally conscious':

G      If X phenomenally seems some way to S, this requires that (i.e., this is because) S has a conscious experience of X (i.e., which takes X as an object).

G is certainly true when X is an ordinary object, like a tomato.

If X is a mental state, M, and M is conscious, then, by TNC

TNC    M is conscious iff there is something it is like for S to be in M.

there is something it is like for S to be in M. By O2, this means M phenomenally seems some way to S. By G, this means that S has a conscious experience—call it M1—which takes M as an object. Since M1 is conscious, then, by TNC, there is something it is like for S to be in M1. This means, by O2, that M1 phenomenally seems some way. And, by G, this means that M1 is the object of a conscious experience, M2. And so on.

It seems to me that the obvious response for HO theorists here is to reject O2, but then, as before, we lack an explanation of why HO theorists understand NT\* as U2, and so Hirsch's sufficient condition for there being a verbal dispute is not satisfied: Gottlieb's argument fails.