

Conference Report: ASSC-12, Taipei (Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness)

The recent conference in Taipei of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC) was a fantastic opportunity to meet a large number of Asian postgraduates I would probably have never met otherwise – some of whom may subsequently be lured to next year's ASSC conference, in Berlin. It was also an opportunity to revisit a number of themes of personal interest. Although the neuroscience talks outnumbered the philosophy talks (roughly reflecting the difference in membership numbers within the ASSC), as a philosopher I will focus on the philosophy.

First, although it has not become central in my thesis (which is attempting to develop an enactive theory of concepts), I have a very strong intuition that our multiple concepts of self play a critical role in the coordination and structuring of our conceptual thought. The concepts of self is both like and in fundamental ways unlike the other concepts we possess; and, perhaps, the ways in which it is different from other concepts helps explain the role that it plays.

Thomas Metzinger's keynote address helped me understand much better what Metzinger means when he says things like no one has or has ever had a self. I'm still not sure to what extent I agree with him (e.g. whether “ontologically, no such things as selves exist”), but his central point is well taken: that our sense of self as a stable, even static, entity cannot possibly match the underlying reality: to the extent we depend on such a conception, there is the appearance of a necessary fiction, but a fiction nonetheless. If there is any basis to an ontological self – and I suspect there is – it's not at all what the phenomenal self would suggest.

So on the one hand, I'm not convinced that a first-person perspective is quite the “vague metaphor” that Metzinger takes it to be: difficult to describe in non-subjective, non-first-person terms, sure, but isn't that the point? I suspect that most of us really are quite clear what we mean by “I”, even if we can't articulate it, even to ourselves. On the other, I think Metzinger is very close to being right in the things he says about the role the self plays in providing a sense of coherence and unity. I am encouraged as well that Metzinger takes phenomenal self as a serious matter to be explained and not simply explained away.

On a related note, Kristina Musholt gave a poster presentation – one poster board over from my own poster presentation – on the conceptualization of self and the relationship between self-consciousness, non-conceptual content and intersubjectivity. She asks: at what point does a self (implicitly required in any consideration of conscious experience) become aware of itself *as* a self? Among her conclusions: having a first-person perspective is *not* the same as being self-conscious (indeed, is prior to); and being self-conscious arises (can arise?) only in a social context: i.e., subjective self-consciousness depends upon intersubjective experience.

Certainly I'm inclined to agree that, at the very least, the social dimension transforms both our concept and our experience of self. Further I agree with what I take to be her implicit conclusion, that there are multiple concepts of self relating to different levels of abstraction away from the underlying fundamental nature of the organism: the self as the physical organism, the self as the experiencing (mental) entity, the self as *myself*, and so on, all of which have an unfortunate tendency to get conflated.

Second, concepts are often if not typically described as mental representations, and so I have the frustration, as Nicholas Georgalis gave expression to in his talk on Cognition and Consciousness, that the term “representation” is often used without being defined, and that what usually should be called representations get conflated with, to use Georgalis' terminology, “information-bearing states”. If being a representation requires an agent using the representation *as* a representation – if it requires intentionality – then talk of unconscious or sub-personal representations risks confusion at best and incoherence at

worst. I would go further, I think, than Georgalis, and, in the terminology of Sussex University's Inman Harvey, define representation as a four-part relation of p using q to represent r to s , where p and s may be the same or different agents. I also would be more willing than Georgalis to attribute representational states to certain non-humans; although the lack of linguistic medium prevents us from confirming these representational states directly, there are some ingeniously designed experiments (e.g., with the parrot Alex) that, I believe, make the attribution of representational states a fairly safe conclusion.

Third, there is the question of phenomenal concepts, which some philosophers, including ASSC speaker Yasuko Kitano, would use to address the so-called explanatory gap: the difficulty of accounting for phenomenal experience in purely objective, third-person terms. Phenomenal concepts are concepts of things in experience and so to be distinguished from concepts of, e.g., things in the world. Kitano considered, and rejected, such well-known objections to phenomenal concepts as Jesse Prinz's claim that the explanation offered by phenomenal concepts can better be explained in terms of non-conceptual "mental pointing". In the end I remain unconvinced whether phenomenal concepts can do the job that is required of them, though hopefully I have a better grasp of why some find them so intuitively appealing.