

A conversation with Professor Michael Tye, August 24, 2016

Participants

- Professor Michael Tye – Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas
- Luke Muehlhauser – Research Analyst, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Tye.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Professor Tye of the University of Texas as part of its investigation into which types of beings should be of moral concern, and thus a potential target for the Open Philanthropy Project's grantmaking. This conversation focused on one particular factor plausibly relevant to whether a being should be of moral concern or not — namely, whether that being is phenomenally conscious, and what the character of its conscious experience is. Conversation focused on approaches to investigating which types of conscious states animals are likely to experience, and included topics from Professor Tye's forthcoming book, *Tense Bees and Shell-Shocked Crabs*.

Inferring similar causes from similar effects

The question of which types of entities are conscious is difficult in part because we do not have:

- An analytic definition of consciousness, in objective terms
- Consensus on an empirical theory of consciousness

Without relying heavily on any particular theory of consciousness, Professor Tye's approach to the above question makes use of the principle that, if similar effects are observed in nature, it is reasonable to infer similar causes, absent reasonable defeaters for that inference. By this principle, animals exhibiting behaviors similar to those that humans do when, e.g., experiencing pain, can be inferred to be experiencing pain, absent some reasonable defeater for that inference. For example, a potential defeater in fish might be their lack of a neocortex (Professor Tye discusses whether this is an adequate defeater in his book).

Gradient rather than binary consciousness

Rather than viewing consciousness as an "on or off," binary feature, Professor Tye's representational theory of consciousness would likely allow for degrees of consciousness and edge cases in which it is ambiguous whether an entity is conscious. Professor Tye does not rely on his own theory of consciousness in his forthcoming book, however.

Potentially informative investigations

Professor Tye thinks more investigations observing animal behavior under certain

conditions and attempting to infer the animal's emotional state (e.g. Melissa Bateson's experiments on anxiety in bees) could be beneficial.

Other people to talk to

- Thomas Polger, Professor of Philosophy, University of Cincinnati
- Lynne Sneddon, Director of Bioveterinary Science, University of Liverpool.
- Melissa Bateson, Professor of Ethology, Newcastle University

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