

Commentary on Wolfgang Prinz and Michael Graziano

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May 18, 2015

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I have a series of questions which I want to put to Wolfgang Prinz and Michael Graziano.

The broad thrust of my questions might be put like this. Both theories involve taking as primary a third-person perspective of subjectivity or awareness, a perspective of it as seen by an onlooker with a side on view. More than this, they aim to show that other perspectives, and in particular a first person perspective, are dispensable in the sense that we can construct these from a third-person perspective. Thus Wolfgang talks about importing from a third-person perspective on another's experiences and actions, and Michael explains awareness in terms of a model of attention which describes attention as a relation between a subject and a thing. My aim in what follows is to explore reasons for thinking that other perspectives, the first-person perspective

and the perspective we adopt when we do things together, are indispensable. It is not that I think another perspective has primacy. My guess is that none are primary and that all are indispensable in the sense that you cannot construct any one from the others.

OK, now for some questions.

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My first question is, What about us? Let me explain

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‘minds [are] open systems whose basic makeup is determined through social interaction and communication’

Prinz (2012, p. 33)

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Wolfgang Prinz offers a contrast between two directions. It seems to me that there is an additional possibility.

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Couldn't it be that before either of us can think about the actions and mental states

of individuals, we are acting together?
And not only acting together but making
use of the machinery for explanation and
prediction which Wolfgang Prinz says is
needed for the construction of a will?

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I'm not sure but I think I think Wolfgang
suggests that we need to have individual
agents in place before we can act together.
I think this because he describes

‘the will as an individual device to serve
...’ ‘the requirements of collective control’

Prinz (2012, p. 137)

But the notion of common coding seems
to invite us to think in another way ...

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To say that there is common coding is to say that there is

‘a shared space of representation that uses the same set of representational dimensions for coding one’s own action and foreign perception’

Common coding doesn’t just mean that I can represent your actions and my actions in the same way. It also means that I can represent things we do together in the ordinary way that I can represent actions. Suppose we move a table together. Given common coding, I can represent our actions in the same way as I would represent your actions or my actions if either of us were doing this alone. Actions are

represented in terms of events.

So, as I understand it, common coding suggests it is coherent to suppose that Animals could act together before they can recognise any individual agents at all.

Indeed, complementary mirroring seems to be a case of animals acting together without necessarily recognising any individual agents.

In that case, why is it right to think of the roots of subjectivity as involving a transition from you to me rather than from us to you and me?

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My second question is about awareness, Michael Graziano's attention schema and development.

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Let me start with some background on the question for Graziano. His view is that there is a model of attention which allows me to make decisions about whether I, or anyone else, is aware of something:

(1) 'my brain [...] constructs a set of information, A, that allows me to conclude that I am aware of the content [X].'

Graziano (2013, p. 70)

It's important for what follows that this model is used both in making decisions about oneself and about what others are aware of.

Of course, he also goes further and says that ...

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(2) 'awareness is an attention schema.'

Graziano (2013, p. 69)

The idea is that being aware of something is a matter of the model of attention attaching a feature to it. That is ...

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I.e. ‘the property of awareness is ... a chunk of information, that can be bound to the larger object file.’

Graziano (2013, p. 21)

My first question is just about step 1. Forget about whether this is awareness—I’ll come to that in a moment.

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A range of findings suggest that two-year-olds make judgements about awareness which, to adults, seem wrong.

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In fact children's judgement about awareness seem to change over a year or longer, gradually becoming more adult like

Taken at face value, this is evidence that young children have a model of attention that is quite different from typical adults'.

Of course, you might suppose that children's performance on these tasks does not truly reflect their underlying model of attention but is a consequence of some extraneous factor. But given the variety of methods used, it would be hard to take this line.

So I think we have strong reasons to hold that, at some age, children's judgements about what others are aware of are based

on a model of attention which is strikingly different from most adults' model.

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This has an interesting consequence for Michael Graziano's theory. ...

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Graziano (2013, p. 70)

(2) 'awareness is an attention schema.'

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The idea is that being aware of something is a matter of the model of attention attaching a feature to it. That is ...

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Graziano (2013, p. 21)

2 year olds have a different attention schema from that of most adults’. So they attach the property of awareness to different object files than adults do. In particular, if you blindfold a 2-year-old at the start of a hiding game, then take the blindfold off before actually hiding the object, the 2-year-old will not attach the property of awareness to the object that is hidden and so will not be aware of this object.

Let me summarise this reasoning ...

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one- and two-year-olds' representations of awareness differ systematically from most adults'

one- and two-year-olds' attention schema differs systematically from most adults'

Conditions under which 1- and 2-year-olds' are aware of a thing differ systematically from conditions under which most adults are aware of a thing.

There isn't an objection in view yet. After all, lots of scientific theories have surprising consequences.

But I do think there is an objection. This is because awareness typically affects behaviour, as deficits like neglect show.

If (3) were true, one- and two-year-olds should fail to search for, or talk about objects in cases where they are unaware of them. In fact, they should show signs of being quite significantly impaired. But as far as I know they don't.

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You can prevent a two-year-old from finding the chocolate by hiding it while she isn't looking but not by blindfolding her before you hide it.

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My third question is about phenomenology.

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NB So there is an assumption that we can explain subjectivity without thinking about the qualitative aspects of experience.

I want to suggest that there are reasons to doubt that we can separate subjectivity from the qualitative aspects of experience. I think this will make trouble for a central claim that both Prinz and Graziano make in form or another.

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Consider this question:

What is like you?

Clearly it can't be a subject of experience or an agent since the point of the 'like you' perspective is to explain how these things are constructed. Instead it must be a body. This is clear when we consider the constructivist claims both Prinz and Graziano make.

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In both cases, Prinz and Graziano, the theories are constructive in the sense that they do not regard the theories as answerable to anything that is awareness or subjective.

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I want to remind you about this observation from Brentano ...

At the same time, hearing a tone does not involve hearing a subject. Likewise, seeing a tree does not involve seeing a perceiver. So how is the subject 'entailed in the act'?

The answer surely involves fact that hearing and seeing typically result in experiences which are perspectival.

When you see a tree or hear a tone, you do so from a point of view. The point of view is not represented, it is not part of what you perceive. But the experience is organised around this point of view.

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We can bring this out by contrasting two types of change: you rotate or an object rotates. Although the two rotations may result in your seeing the same aspect of the object, they involve a different alteration in your experience.

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So it seems that some experiences implicitly specify their subjects in virtue of being organised around a point of view. I think this leads to a dilemma.

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Phenomenology is like the bad fairy in cinderella. No one wants to invite her to the party, but not inviting will only make things worse for you or your daughters.

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My fourth question is about the idea that experience matters for objectivity, the fact that our thoughts and theories can be false.

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How could visual experience (say) of an apple enable you to think demonstrative thoughts about it?

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On Graziano's view, the answer is that, strictly speaking, visual experience does not enable you think demonstrative thoughts about objects.

And Graziano has to say this because on his theory there is no way that awareness could enable you to think demonstrative thoughts about an object. After all, on his view awareness is just another layer of information processing. I'm less sure

how things go on Prinz' theory, but as far as I can tell this view also can't explain how visual experience enables you think demonstrative thoughts about objects.

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I want to focus on the intuition, not the fact. It is not a theoretical claim but a feature of commonsense thinking about visual experience that visual experience enables us to think demonstrative thoughts about objects. Graziano and Prinz can deny that this is a fact, but their theories need to explain the intuition. So let me ask another question, How can either theory explain the intuition?

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I think both explain it in roughly the same way. On Michael's view, awareness is modelled as a relation between a subject, S, and a thing, X. So it's clear that I would think of awareness as putting me in touch with X, and so being able to think about it. Likewise, on Prinz' view, I come to think of myself as having mental states by first ascribing them to others, and in ascribing them to others I am relating others to objects. So again the 'intuition of mental access' can be explained even if the intuition is, strictly speaking, wrong.

But I think these theories explain too much ...

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The gist of these questions is this. Let's stop taking one perspective or aspect of subjective experience to be primary and trying to construct others. I suspect that the first-person perspective, phenomenal aspects of experience and the social are all indispensable. What I have learned is not that something is primary, but rather that things typically thought about as narrowly first-person phenomena are actually intrinsically bound up with the social. It's not about deciding what is primary and what is constructed; it's about tracing the ways in which different perspectives are interdependent.

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Graziano's model is additive in a strong sense. There are these three components, and you can have the outer two, S or X, independently of awareness. (Awareness is something which involves a model of the relation between S and X.) This is very clear from the book:

‘Suppose that you are looking at a green object and have a conscious experience of greenness. ...

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So awareness is a chunk of information that can be added (or not) to a state, and when you add that information you get

awareness.

Graziano's model is additive in a strong sense.

One tiny question I had was, How can this view accomodate situations where you are aware of only some of the features of an object although you are receiving perceptual information about many of its features? Here is an example ...

CUT THIS QUESTION. The model must be able to deal with such cases because after all you are attending to different things!

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I couldn't find an apple so I'll have to make do with a green square Suppose you attend to the shape and let's say you've seen lots of these so you're really focussed on the shape. You might say, sincerely, 'I was aware of the shape but not the colour.' Even so, you are computing its categorical colour properties, as is shown by the fact that you can get odd-ball effects for changes in categorical colour properties. So X includes information about shape plus information about categorical colour. But on the additive model, A gets added to X or not. Given the additive nature of the model, how can we distinguish this case, in which there is awareness shape from a case in which

you are aware of categorical colour and shape? Is the idea, for example, that the awareness feature gets bound to something other than an object, perhaps a partial object?

So this was my question about whether we have a full explanation of how people make decisions about awareness.

I also want to note a question about how the model of attention changes across development.

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Recall the two steps ...

(1) 'my brain [...] constructs a set of information, A, that allows me to conclude

that I am aware of the content [X].’

Graziano (2013, p. 70)

(2) ‘awareness is an attention schema.’

Graziano (2013, p. 69)

It is striking that children’s understanding of awareness appears to develop quite gradually over the first years of life. For example, some findings indicate that two-year-olds treat people as unaware of things if they have been bindfolded at some point during a hiding episode, even if their eyes were open at the crucial moment (Dunham et al (2000)).

Reluctant to infer from judgements direct to the model, but plausible that there are changes.

Consequence of Graziano's theory is that these changes should be reflected in the nature of children's awareness.

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$S + A + X$

Experience involves a subject, S, being aware, A, of a thing, X. Roughly speaking, Prinz focusses on the subject of experience, S, and Graziano about the awareness, A, the thing in the middle. (Graziano says his theory is about the thing that 'lies between the "I" and the "X,"' (p. 30)). I want to start with two questions about the X, the first for Graziano and the second for Prinz.

References