

CONSCIOUSNESS AND THEORY

Philosophy 77300, David Rosenthal
Spring 2022, Thursday, 2-4

Group A or B

Consciousness is often said to be the most difficult phenomenon to understand and explain. A major goal of this course will be to uncover several assumptions that underlie this idea. One such assumption is that in the case of consciousness, unlike every other phenomenon, we cannot distinguish between appearance and reality. A related assumption is that theorizing about consciousness is not only impossible, but inappropriate. These assumptions are rarely—if ever—argued for; indeed, they are often left unstated, though even then one can see them playing a role in encouraging the idea that consciousness resists understanding and explanation.

To address these assumptions and assess their merit, we will focus for the first part of the course on the contrast between so-called higher-order and first-order approaches to consciousness. It will turn out that first-order approaches undermine the very possibility of giving an informative description of consciousness. And a phenomenon that we cannot even describe will thereby automatically resist understanding, theorizing, and explanation.

First-order approaches tend to assume that all psychological functioning and mental states, properly so called, are conscious. Higher-order approaches, by contrast, readily accommodate unconscious mental states and psychological functioning, and indeed most such views require their occurrence. So in the second part of the course we'll examine the case for mental states, properly so called, that occur without being conscious. In the third and final part of the course, then, we'll take up several issues about how consciousness operates if mental states can indeed occur without being conscious.

Reading material will almost always be available online.