

## Interview with [Ephilosopher](#) (March 2001)

by Uriah Kriegel for [ephilosopher.com](#)

Professor Rosenthal teaches philosophy at the City University of New York.

*David Rosenthal is a leading figure in today's discourse on the [nature of consciousness](#). He has published [numerous articles](#) in various professional journals in philosophy and cognitive science. He also the editor of [The Nature of Mind](#) and [Materialism and the Mind-Body Problem](#). He is currently preparing a book--[Consciousness and Mind](#), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. This book will feature revised versions of a dozen of his main articles on consciousness, including a pair of previously unpublished articles. In this interview with Uriah Kriegel, Rosenthal discusses his philosophical outlook on consciousness and the human mind.*

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, when and how did you decide to go into philosophy?

**David Rosenthal:** My decision to go into philosophy was gradual. I hadn't thought of being an academic when I went to college, and was in fact pre-med. But being pre-med I wanted, while I could, to get a good background in history and the humanities. I decided to be a history major because that major allowed the greatest number of elective courses, which I needed for pre-med and wanted also for study in the humanities. In my second year of college, which was at the University of Chicago, I took a highly impressive year-long course in philosophy, which led to my taking so much more philosophy, and though I remained a history major, I ended up doing more in philosophy than in history. Trying to dispel my lingering doubts about whether I wanted to be an academic, a professor of mine nominated me for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for graduate work, which I chose to take at Princeton, in philosophy. I've never been unhappy about that course of events, though I wouldn't at all have been able to predict it in advance.

**Ephilosopher:** Was there a noticeable difference in philosophical style in those days, between Chicago and Princeton?

**David Rosenthal:** My undergraduate work in philosophy at Chicago was almost entirely a matter of studying historical figures, and it was very much under the influence of the "Aristotelian" approach to historical figures developed by Richard McKeon. I didn't study

much with McKeon himself, but the approach to philosophical study there had a big impact on me, and colored for some time the way I thought about philosophical work. So it was a very big change for me to do graduate work at Princeton, where the history of philosophy played a minimal role at the time. In a way I ended up starting from scratch, becoming immersed in philosophical issues and problems once again, but now solely on the basis of contemporary discussions, and I found this new start extremely salutary.

**Ephilosopher:** Who were the influential figures in your intellectual development? Did you have any teachers who were important in the formation of your main ideas?

**David Rosenthal:** The professors at Princeton whom I most admired and from whom I got the most were Richard Rorty, who supervised my dissertation, Paul Benacerraf, and Carl Hempel. They all provided for me, in rather different ways, models of what fine philosophical work can be. Studying with Rorty also led me to be familiar with some of the work of Wilfrid Sellars, who visited Princeton for a semester when I was beginning work on a dissertation that was in part about him. I had many enriching interactions with Sellars that spring, which led to a lasting relationship, which continues to influence me.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, you are best known for your contributions to the theory of consciousness, and we will talk about that momentarily. What are your other major interests in philosophy and outside it? Are there any philosophical doctrines or theories you feel most attached to (beside your theory of consciousness, that is)?

**David Rosenthal:** In the philosophy of mind, my other main interests are intentionality, and especially the relation between thinking and speech, and the mind-body problem. I also have various interests in the philosophy of language, particularly a number of topics central to the writings of W. V. Quine, such as meaning, logical form, reference, and translation. Quine's views on these topics have had a big influence on me. I also retain some interest in the history of philosophy, mainly ancient philosophy and 17th-century rationalism. Outside of philosophy, my major interest is music, especially piano music. I end up playing less than I wish these days due to other demands on my time, but music is very important to me.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, your theory of consciousness is considered by many to be the most credible naturalist account out there. But when you talk about consciousness, what exactly are you talking about? I am asking you this because, unlike many philosophers who work on consciousness, you do not seem to regard it as one and the same as qualia, or the sensory qualities of experience. What is consciousness for you, then?

**David Rosenthal:** You're quite right that I don't see the topic of consciousness as restricted to issues about qualia. Qualitative states, such as pains and aches and visual sensations, obviously all sometimes occur consciously, but they all occur nonconsciously, as well. This is well-known in psychology; nonconscious, subliminal perception is well-established in experimental work; for example, subjects can be wholly unaware of stimuli that have various distinctively perceptual effects. These perceptual effects vary, moreover, depending on the color or sound or shape of the stimulus. But these are exactly the ways conscious experiences vary in response to differences in stimuli. So, people are often in states that track stimuli in just the ways that conscious experience does even when they are wholly unaware of those states. In short, people are in qualitative states that

simply aren't conscious.

**Ephilosopher:** So if the problem of consciousness is not the problem of qualia, what exactly is the problem of consciousness, according to you?

**David Rosenthal:** Since qualitative states occur not only consciously but also without being conscious, what we need to explain is the difference between these two ways of occurring—the difference between qualitative states that are conscious and those which are not. But qualitative states aren't the only mental phenomena that occur sometimes consciously and sometimes not. Every kind of mental state occurs both ways; states such as believing, desiring, doubting, wondering, intending, perceiving, joy, and annoyance all occur both consciously and without being conscious, and in all these cases we must explain what that difference consists in. In virtue of what is it that the conscious states are conscious? So it's very misleading to think of consciousness solely as an issue about qualia, or conscious qualitative properties.

**Ephilosopher:** Are there any other problems about consciousness we need to address, as you see the theoretical landscape?

**David Rosenthal:** Although the major task in explaining consciousness is to say how conscious states differ from mental states that aren't conscious, there are other questions as well. We also want to understand what it is to be conscious of something, as when we see or hear things, or think about them in suitable ways. Some theorists believe that this question is related to the issue about what makes some mental states conscious, but if so, that needs to be shown, and it needs to be shown just what the relationship is.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, how would you explain to our readers the main idea behind your approach to consciousness?

**David Rosenthal:** Thoughts, experiences, and feelings often occur consciously, but they also sometimes occur without being conscious. What's the difference between seeing something consciously and seeing it subliminally, or wanting something consciously and wanting it but not consciously? One thing that's clear is that, when one sees something consciously, one is aware that one sees that thing, and when one wants something consciously, one is aware of wanting it. When seeing or wanting something isn't conscious, by contrast, one simply isn't at all conscious *of* seeing or wanting that thing. What distinguishes the conscious cases from the cases that aren't conscious is that only in conscious seeing or wanting is one conscious *of* one's seeing or wanting.

**Ephilosopher:** This could play out in several ways, however. You have argued extensively for one specific version of this story. How would you characterize your own version, as against other possible versions?

**David Rosenthal:** As I already mentioned, we're conscious things in various different ways, by seeing or hearing those things or sensing them in some other way and by thinking about them. Since we sometimes sense things or think about them when the thinking and sensing aren't themselves conscious, we can be conscious *of* things by being in mental states that aren't conscious states. Conscious states are mental states we're conscious of being in, and we're conscious of things by sensing them and by thinking about them. So one possibility is that mental states are conscious when we sense those

states. That is actually the most popular traditional view about consciousness: we are conscious of our mental states by way of some kind of "inner sense." But the "inner sense" view doesn't work. Every sense has some distinguishing quality--color for vision, sound for hearing, and so forth. But we know of no qualities special to "inner sense." The idea of an inner sense is really just an empty way of saying that we're conscious of our mental states in some way we know not what, much like saying that opium makes people sleep because it has a dormative virtue. How, then, are we conscious of our mental states? The only other way we're conscious of anything is by being having a thought about that thing as being present. So, when a mental state is conscious, it must be that we're conscious of it by having a thought about it--what I have called a *higher-order thought*. Mental states are conscious in virtue of being accompanied by higher-order thoughts about them.

**Ephilosopher:** It would seem, from what you say, that according to your theory of consciousness, neither the monitored state nor the monitoring state is in and of itself conscious. Yet consciousness emerges from their suitable co-occurrence.

**David Rosenthal:** Obviously, mental states that occur consciously have the property of being conscious; states that aren't conscious don't have that property. The question is what exactly that property consists in. On my view, the property of a state's being conscious is not an intrinsic property; no state whatever is conscious in and of itself. Its being conscious is always a matter of its being *related* to another mental state, namely, a higher-order thought to the effect that one is in that state.

**Ephilosopher:** But this feature of your theory of consciousness seems to make it particularly vulnerable to zombie objections. Zombies are creatures physically like us but lacking consciousness. If neither first-order nor second-order state is in and of itself conscious, why couldn't there be a zombie that harbored these two states but had no conscious life?

**David Rosenthal:** A zombie is supposed to be a creature that has no conscious life but is in every other way just like us. What does being "in every other way just like us" amount to? If it means having experiences with accompanying higher-order thoughts, then zombies are impossible, since anything whose experiences are accompanied by higher-order thoughts will have a conscious life. It doesn't matter that experiences and higher-order thoughts are not *in and of themselves* conscious, since the property of a state's being conscious isn't ever a property that states have in and of themselves. One can of course *imagine* some creature has experiences that aren't in and of themselves conscious but are accompanied higher-order thoughts, and *imagine* that this creature has no conscious life. But that's just to say that one can imagine that my theory is wrong, which of course one can do. My theory a hypothesis about what it is for mental states to be conscious, about what the *property* of a state's being conscious actually is. It's not meant as an analysis of the *concept* of consciousness, or anything of that sort.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, let me raise one final difficulty for your theory. According to your theory, what it is like for the subject to be in a conscious state is determined by how that state is represented by the second-order state. But what happens when there is a misrepresentational second-order state, with no first-order state at all? It seems your theory commits you to saying that, in such cases, the subject is under the false impression that she is having a particular kind of conscious experience, when in fact she is not. Doesn't that strike you as absurd, though?

**David Rosenthal:** Answering this question requires a lot of care in how we put things. We can get a feel for what's at issue by considering a case that actually occurs. Dental patients sometimes seem to themselves to feel pain even when the relevant pain nerve endings are dead or anaesthetized. The widely held explanation is that these patients feel sensations of fear and vibration *as though those sensations were pain*. We certainly have no trouble understanding this explanation. But how should we describe what's happening *specifically in terms of the patient's conscious states*? It's undeniable that the patient is in some conscious state, but what *kind* of conscious state is it? From the patient's subjective, first-person point of view, the conscious state is a pain, but we have substantial independent reason to say that there simply *is no pain*. How we describe this case depends on whether we focus primarily on the state *of which* the patient is actually conscious or on *the way* the patient is conscious of it. The trouble is that these two things come apart; the patient is conscious *of* sensations of fear and vibration, but conscious of them *as pain*. So it's not at all absurd, but only unexpected, that one be conscious of oneself as being in a state that one is not actually in. It's worth noting that this divergence between the state of which somebody is actually conscious and *how* that person is conscious of it has practical importance. The area of so-called dental fear is of interest to dentists and to theorists because patients who understand what's happening readily come to be conscious of their sensations *as sensations of vibration and fear*, which is not especially bothersome. How one represents one's experiences does determine what those experiences are like for one. Is this really the kind of case you asked about? You asked about what happens when one has a higher-order thought that one is in a state that doesn't occur. But maybe we should describe the dental case rather as a higher-order thought that misdescribes its target; it misdescribes sensations of fear and vibration as a sensation of pain. But I think it will never matter which way we describe things. When a higher-order thought occurs, there are always other mental states, as well. So whenever a higher-order thought doesn't accurately describe any state that actually occurs, we can say either that it misdescribes some actual state or that it's about some nonexistent state; it won't make any difference which way we characterize the situation.

*Part II of this interview:*

**Ephilosopher:** It seems that most folks working on consciousness nowadays--both in philosophy and the cognitive sciences--share two strong but conflicting sentiments. The first is that it is very hard to conceive how consciousness could be made out of neurons. The second is that there is nothing else for it to be made out of. Different folks manage their feelings on this issue differently: some let the former dominate the other (and become dualists) and some let the latter dominate the former (and become materialist). People from the first group will feel that your approach to consciousness is a disguised form of eliminativism (the view that consciousness does not really exist). How would you alleviate their worry? Is there any hope that a philosophical argument will induce defection to the materialist camp?

**David Rosenthal:** I know that some people say it's hard to see how consciousness could be "made of" neurons, but I'm not sure what the real difficulty is. Of course, consciousness isn't a *thing*, and so it's not *made of* anything; it's a *state* of people and other living organisms. But the problem is supposed to be how anything like *consciousness* could even be a *state* of organisms, or of any material objects whatever.

Why do I find it puzzling what the difficulty is supposed to be? Well, for one thing, it's

unclear just what kind of understanding people are after here. What would it be to *understand*, in the relevant way, how material objects could be conscious? One thing that people sometimes say is that, except for consciousness, it's obvious how everything follows from basic physics. But that's not so. We can't just start with basic physics and logically deduce how chemical interactions and biological functioning will go; we need to posit bridge various principles that tell us that certain basic physical processes result in particular kinds of chemical interaction, and so forth. And we have every reason to think that we'll get that kind of understanding for the bridge between neurological processes and mental functioning. Indeed, neuroscience is already making striking headway in that direction.

**Ephilosopher:** All this is fine as far as it goes. But there is a sticking feeling that consciousness is just too different from matter to be explained by it, even with the aid of bridge laws. Is this feeling simply an illusion?

**David Rosenthal:** This is another way of putting the discomfort about consciousness and the neurons, namely, as a worry about whether the properties that occur in consciousness are the *right sort* of properties to be explained by reference to the neurons. Consciousness, some people say, is just too "elusive," and those of us who think otherwise just aren't paying attention to what we know perfectly well from our own conscious experience.

But people who say this kind of thing never tell us in any detail just what it is about consciousness that is so elusive, or just what the nature is of the properties that cannot be explained by reference to neurons. It's easy enough simply to claim that we can't explain something in a certain way, but figuring out whether that's actually so requires knowing with some specificity just what it is about consciousness that resists physical explanation. Saying that one knows perfectly well from one's own case what it is that can't be explained doesn't help at all. Of course we all know about consciousness from our own case. But that doesn't tell us what properties of consciousness are supposed to resist physical explanation and what it is about those properties that resists such explanation. This is something that the people who worry about consciousness and the neurons seldom talk about.

Thomas Nagel has argued that physical explanation proceeds independently of individual points of view, but that points of view of precisely what's essential to consciousness. But it's not clear just what he has in mind by points of view. One possibility is the way individual have different vantage points on their environment, but that can be described physically. Another possibility has to do with the conscious qualitative properties of experience--*what it's like* for one to experience things. But it's arguable that we can explain those qualitative properties in terms of their roles in perceiving.

Descartes held that consciousness was a basic principle, different from but no less basic than fundamental physics, and this idea seems to have persisted. If we sign on to Descartes's idea, the game is over; we cannot then imagine how consciousness could be explained by anything physical. Some who adopt that view think the "Hard Problem" of consciousness is to explain, then, how anything physical could even have consciousness. The way to break down this idea is to do the hard work: to show in great detail, as neuroscientists are already doing, how particular kinds of conscious state do correspond to particular kinds of neurological states. That's the *real* "Hard Problem" of consciousness.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, in an Ephilosopher interview, Jaegwon Kim has recently voiced his opinion that the philosophy of mind is going in the next few years to slowly move away from its focus on consciousness, and will reorient its agenda towards related but wider questions, such as the nature of the self or subjectivity. In his opinion, we have reached a deadlock in discussions of consciousness, where it seems there is no chance anyone would come up with a new argument that would actually convince anybody on the other side. What do you think? Where do you see the philosophy of mind heading in the next few years?

**David Rosenthal:** I mainly agree with Kim in substance, but would describe things somewhat differently. My guess is that Kim follows those who identify the topic of consciousness with issues about conscious qualitative states. These issues, about what it would take to explain what it's like to be in various qualitative states, got much of their initial impetus from Nagel's work in the 70's. I agree that this discussion has largely run its course, and that it's become pretty unsatisfying, with neither side showing much sign of coming around.

But as I said earlier, I think it's better to see issues about consciousness more broadly, as a matter of what distinguishes the mental states we count as conscious from those we don't—the question of what it is in virtue of which some mental states are conscious and others aren't. So, though I agree with Kim that less attention will come to be paid to questions about conscious qualitative states, I don't think that that means that attention will shift away from consciousness.

**Ephilosopher:** How, then, would you characterize the shift you think will occur?

**David Rosenthal:** I agree with Kim that the philosophy of mind will increasingly focus on questions about the self and agency. So, if we think of consciousness mainly or exclusively in terms of what we should say about qualia, we could describe this shift as away from consciousness and toward broader questions about subjectivity.

But if the main issue about consciousness is rather what the difference is, for mental states of all kinds, between the states that are conscious and those which aren't, things look different. The question of what it is in virtue of which some mental states are conscious arises with thoughts, desires, and all the so-called intentional states. So understanding the nature of agency will very likely mean understanding consciousness, since desires, decisions, and intentions can all occur either consciously or not. Indeed, issues about free will presumably arise only when our intentions are conscious. How we think about consciousness will also affect what we think about the nature of the self, since our sense of self relies both on conscious and nonconscious mental states that we are in.

So I believe that the discussions of self and agency that are now developing will be intimately connected with our understanding of the nature of consciousness; indeed, this is already evident in writers such as Jose Bermudez, Quassim Cassam, and Susan Hurley. The connections that questions about self and agency have with consciousness won't, to be sure, have much to do with qualia, but with the more general question about what it is for mental states to be conscious at all.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, what are your own projects for the future? Are there any new questions you hope to tackle in the next few years?

**David Rosenthal:** In keeping with my answer to your last question, I have recently been working some on questions about the self— what it is to be a self and the related issue of what it is to be conscious of oneself as a self. Being a self is more than just being a creature with mental endowments. Many nonhuman animals that function mentally and have conscious mental states still don't have selves; having a self takes more than just mental functioning. But it's not easy to say just what more it takes. Still, it's likely that having a self has something to do with the way a creature is conscious of itself. So even though the question about the self isn't simply about consciousness, we also can't wholly separate that question from what we say about consciousness.

I'm also interested in a second issue that relates to consciousness, but goes beyond it. Some writers, such as Quine, Daniel Dennett, and Donald Davidson, have argued that mental functioning is best understood in terms of the interpretations we make of others' behavior. Others have rejected that interpretivist line, arguing that this is merely a third-person approach to mental phenomena, which can't do justice to the first-person dimension of mind—what it's like for one to be in conscious mental states. I believe a reconciliation is possible of these competing theoretical pulls. That reconciliation relies on the idea that consciousness itself is a matter of how creatures interpret themselves; the conscious, subjective dimension of mental functioning arises only when such self-interpreting occurs. When mental occurrences aren't conscious, by contrast, we can describe them objectively and independently of such interpretivist considerations.

**Ephilosopher:** Professor Rosenthal, thank you for interviewing with Ephilosopher.