

**(1997). Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 45:740-746****Commentaries****David M. Rosenthal** 

The recognition in psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology of scientific reasons to posit mental states that are not conscious marks a watershed in our understanding of the mind. Partly, this is because such posits greatly extend our ability to explain both behavior and conscious mental functioning.

But there is another reason, equally important. We distinguish among thoughts, feelings, and sensations by virtue of their characteristic representational properties. In particular, we describe thoughts and emotions in terms of the things they are about and how they represent those things. And we characterize sensations by reference to their qualitative properties and the things those properties represent.

Many mental states are conscious states—that is, we have access to them that appears immediate and spontaneous. Focusing on the conscious cases led traditional theorists to assume that only conscious states can have the representational properties characteristic of mental states. It is notoriously difficult, however, to give any informative account of these representational properties if they are seen as necessarily involving consciousness. By contrast, it is relatively straightforward to explain those properties when they are conceived of as occurring independently of consciousness. There is nothing inherently problematic about representational properties once consciousness is detached.

Recognizing that thoughts, feelings, and sensations often occur without being conscious is therefore the first step to understanding their nature. But more is needed; the distinctive properties of mental states must themselves be independent of consciousness. This means that mental states will not, in themselves, be conscious states. And that is Solms's “fundamental proposition of psychoanalysis.”

Adopting this proposition is therefore essential to a satisfactory understanding of the mind. Nonetheless, I want to raise a difficulty about the particular theory of consciousness Solms adopts, after which I shall put forth an alternative account.

Consciousness, according to Solms, consists in perceiving things: external objects and events, our own affective states, or our memories and cognitive states. Perceiving our own internal states differs from ordinary exteroceptive perceiving only in that a different sensory modality is operative, and even that internal, subjective modality “is not essentially different” from the various external modalities. So, just as physical objects are not in themselves conscious, neither are the internal

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states of affect, memory, and cognition. These states are conscious only when we perceive them, and only by virtue of being perceived.

This picture leads Solms to assert, convincingly, that when, e.g., we feel pain, the unpleasant affect we perceive by our internal perceptual modality is the very same event that we could in principle perceive, by sight, as a brain event. Solms believes that this contravenes current thinking in cognitive science and philosophy, but the view that mental events are literally identical with brain events is actually one of the dominant positions in these fields.<sup>1</sup>

Still, that question aside, perceiving is not the best way to explain how we have conscious access to our own mental states. Perceiving something does make one conscious of it. So, if we did perceive mental states, say our own affective states, those states would be conscious. But perceiving itself can occur without being conscious, as happens with subliminal perception, peripheral vision, and exotic dissociative neurological deficits such as blindsight (**Weiskrantz 1986**).

The need to acknowledge unconscious perceiving is obscured in Solms's discussion because of his tendency to identify the objects we perceive with the perceptions we have of them. Solms urges this qualified philosophical idealism<sup>2</sup> because of his conviction, reasonable in itself, that our grasp of physical reality is unavoidably a function of the way we perceive it. It hardly follows, however, that the “entities we experience as physical objects ... are perceptions.” This matters for explaining consciousness. If internal states become conscious by being perceived and we identify what is perceived with our perceiving of it, all perceiving will itself be conscious.

Possibly for this reason, Solms often seems to assume that perceiving is invariably conscious; the only mental phenomena that are literally unconscious are unperceived states of affect, memory, and cognition.<sup>3</sup> But at other points he seems instead to hold that conscious perceiving is perceiving of which we are aware in turn by means of

<sup>1</sup> See Rosenthal (1971). Like other brain events, those which are identical with individual conscious events are themselves caused by other brain events, as Searle (1995) insists.

<sup>2</sup> It is qualified by his appeal to Kantian things-in-themselves. But because these things-in-themselves, which lie beyond any possible experience, are unknowable, they do little to diminish the idealist cast of Solms's theory.

<sup>3</sup> Freud too held that not all types of mental state could, properly speaking, be unconscious, but he drew the line somewhat differently: "It is surely of the essence of an emotion, that we should be aware of it. ... Thus the possibility of the attribute of unconsciousness would be completely excluded so far as emotions, feelings and affects are concerned" (1915, p. 177).

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introspective awareness, which, he tells us, "combines aspects of various modalities."

Perceiving, whether conscious or not, makes us conscious of things. And when perceiving is conscious, we have conscious access to it, access that is absent when the perceiving is unconscious. And here a difficulty arises for Solms's perceptual model of consciousness, because we cannot have conscious access to perceiving itself by way of some higher-order perceiving. The properties of various sensory modalities are represented in consciousness as occurring together. But no single perceptual modality can represent properties of different modalities, since each modality is dedicated to a single range of sensory properties, such as color, sound, affect, and the like. Nor could several higher-order modalities combine perceptions from several distinct modalities, since those higher-order modalities would themselves need to be unified. Perceiving is not the way we become conscious of our conscious mental states.

Among the ways of being conscious of things, only thinking is independent of specific sensory properties and modalities. So we can avoid this problem only if we explain the way we are conscious of our conscious states on the model of our having thoughts about those states. I shall call these thoughts *higher-order thoughts* (HOTs). A mental state is conscious, on this hypothesis, if it is accompanied by a HOT to the effect that one is in that very state (Rosenthal 1986b, 1997, in press c).

When a mental state is conscious, we are conscious of it in a way that seems to us unmediated and spontaneous. This apparent directness may explain much of the appeal to Freud (1900) and others<sup>4</sup> of a perceptual model, since perceiving also appears to be direct. But perceiving actually involves considerable mediation. And in any case the HOT model can explain the intuitive immediacy in question.

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Consider two cases. In each I am angry and have a HOT that I am. But in one case I have that HOT *only* because somebody I believe, say, an analyst, told me that I am angry. In the other case, my HOT that I am angry remains unconscious or, if conscious, seems to arise spontaneously and noninferentially. In both cases I have a HOT that I am angry, but only in the second case is my affective state conscious. The model can readily provide for this, by requiring that mental states are conscious only when the HOTs one has about them do not seem to one

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man's own mind" (Book II, chap. 1, §19).

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to be based on any inference. If inference does occur, one must remain unconscious of it.

It is crucial that HOTs do not themselves need to be conscious thoughts. Having a thought about something makes one conscious of that thing even when the thought is not conscious. HOTs are themselves conscious only when we are conscious of our mental states in the deliberate, attentive way characteristic of introspective consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a vicious regress would result if a mental state could not be conscious unless the HOT that is about that state were also conscious.

The operational test of a mental state's being conscious is that one can report being in that state. Conscious states are those mental states we can spontaneously tell others about. The HOT model explains this connection between reportability and consciousness. Reporting a mental state means asserting that one is in that state. But whenever we say anything, we express a thought that has the very same content as our assertion. So to report a mental state, one must express one's thought that one is in that state. The best explanation, therefore, of our ability to report mental states just in case they are conscious is that, when they are, we have HOTs about them that we can verbally express.<sup>6</sup>

For many conscious states, there is something it is like to be in those states. And it might seem that perceiving our conscious states would help explain this, since it seems typically that there is something it is like to perceive things. But there is something it is like to perceive things only when the perceiving is itself conscious. And we cannot, on pain of regress, consciously perceive all our conscious mental states.

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In any case, there is reason to think that HOTs are responsible for the distinctive qualitative character of conscious sensations. Learning a new vocabulary for subtle sensory distinctions typically results in new sensory qualities' becoming conscious. Conspicuous examples occur in wine tasting and musical experience. The best explanation is that the new vocabulary enables us to have more finely grained HOTs about our

<sup>5</sup> Nonhuman animals, and even very young children, lack the ability to be introspectively conscious of their mental states (Rosenthal in press b). But there is no reason to doubt that infants and many nonhuman mammals have nonconscious HOTs, and hence that some of their mental states are conscious. And perceiving by inframammalian animals and even by lower mammals may all be, in effect, subliminal.

<sup>6</sup> See Rosenthal (1986a, 1993). These considerations can be extended to explain why, although cognitive states often remain unconscious even when expressed in nonverbal behavior, verbally expressed thoughts are always conscious (Rosenthal in press d). We can even explain why verbally expressed *cognitive* states are invariably conscious, but verbally expressed *affective* states need not be. These observations, moreover, are compatible with the occurrence of parapraxis (Rosenthal in press a).

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sensations, so that those sensations come to be conscious in respect of more finely differentiated qualitative properties. The

same explanation extrapolates to less subtle differences among our conscious experiences, and even to the difference between an experience's being conscious or not. HOTs are responsible for there being something it is like to have our conscious experiences.

There is another reason why a perceptual theory of consciousness has traditionally been favored. Our perceptions of things normally represent things as they are. By contrast, our thoughts are often inaccurate. So perceiving our conscious states may seem to conform more closely to the intuitive idea that conscious states are the way they appear to us.

But again the advantage is illusory, since perceptions too may at times represent things inaccurately. Occasionally we even appear to perceive things that do not exist at all. Neither model insulates against error. Still, this points to something important about the way mental states are conscious. On either a perceptual model or the HOT hypothesis, it is possible that one's conscious states are not as they appear to us to be, and even that we sometimes seem to be in conscious states that we are not in fact in.<sup>7</sup>

One cannot rule this out by insisting that the state one is conscious of bears some causal relation to one's consciousness of it—whether one's perception of it or one's HOT about it. What causes us to be conscious of our mental states leaves unaffected our subjective sense of what it is like to be in the conscious state. As is evident from the examples of wine tasting and musical experience, what matters for what it is like to be in a state is only how one is conscious of it, not what caused one to be conscious of it in that way. So the state one is conscious of being in need not cause one to be conscious of it and, indeed, need not exist.

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Consider dental patients, who occasionally report pain even when anesthetic or nerve damage makes pain impossible. The usual hypothesis is that patients are conscious of other mental states—fear and a sensation of vibration from the drill—as if those states were pain. Once this is explained, the patient's consciousness of any new sensations is accurate, but the memory of what the earlier experience was like remains unchanged. The way one is conscious of one's

<sup>7</sup> Freud evidently recognized this. As remarked in footnote 3, he held that emotions cannot literally be unconscious. But we do “speak,” he noted, “in a condensed and not entirely correct manner, of ‘unconscious feelings’” (1923, p. 22). We do so when our feelings, though not literally unconscious, have a representational character that is repressed or misrepresented (1915, pp. 177-178).

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mental states, even when this is inaccurate, determines what those states are like for one. Moreover, it is arbitrary whether we say here that one is inaccurately conscious of a mental state or conscious of a state that does not occur.

This raises an important question for psychoanalysis. Suppose an analyst's interpretation leads to a patient's coming to be conscious of some memory or experience. On both perceptual and HOT models, the patient's consciousness of that memory or experience may be inaccurate. And what it is like to be inaccurately conscious of one's mental states is subjectively indistinguishable from veridical consciousness of them. So the states psychoanalysis brings to consciousness may often not be as they seem to us subjectively; indeed, they may even fail to exist. This must be squared with our understanding of the mental processes by virtue of which psychoanalytic procedures are efficacious.

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