# Why and How Inner-Awareness is Unconscious

Jakub rightly points out that Brentano doesn’t just think intentionality is the mark of the mental, he also thinks all mental phenomena are conscious. This isn’t simply a consequence of Brentano’s view that all mental phenomena are intentional: someone could accept that but hold that some intentional mental phenomena are unconscious. Rather, it’s a consequence of that view plus Brentano’s thesis that all mental phenomena are self-presenting. It’s that self-presentational intentional character that gets one to the thesis that every mental phenomenon is an object of inner-awareness, and, hence, conscious. So Brentano’s thesis that all mental phenomena are conscious is optional, and does constitute a substantive proposal on his part that is additional to his claim that all mentality is intentional. To Jakub’s credit then, he has highlighted that Brentano proposes two marks of the mental, in effect; something I certainly didn’t notice, and haven’t seen noted in the literature.

Jakub argues that Brentano’s opponents can resist arguments such as those due to Chalmers and Montague that we are aware of our inner awareness of mental states, i.e. that we actually experience or are conscious of these states’ property of being conscious—that awareness itself has some kind of phenomenal manifestation. I have no real quibbles with Jakub here. I too find those arguments unconvincing, not to mention that I don’t like their conclusions, and I’m grateful to Jakub for poking holes in them. What I want to do is take a step back and look at the broader dialectic, as Jakub I think rightly frames it, with the overall aim of being even stricter and more intolerant than Jakub is regarding the options available to the friends of awareness of awareness.

I notice that the issue as Jakub frames it is whether inner awareness is *ordinarily* unconscious, or not. The dispute seems to be between a figure like Rosenthal, on whose view our inner awareness—constituted for him by higher-order thoughts—is unconscious, and those, apparently like Chalmers and Montague, who argue that in fact in ordinary perceptual consciousness there are reasons to think our awareness is itself conscious. Those reasons are, roughly, that we can attend to features of awareness if we choose to make them salient, such as the blurriness of vision, or our capacity to distinguish perceptual awareness from its objects. I don’t want to comment on the specific arguments of Chalmers and Montague; I find them at least as ineffectual as Jakub does.

What catches my attention is that the debate framed in this way allows that *we are at least sometimes* aware of inner awareness: after all, Rosenthal, Jakub’s main adversary for Chalmers and Montague, only makes a claim about ordinary or typical experience. And he does hold that in introspection one’s HOT becomes conscious—since he models introspection as the presence of a still higher-order thought with the content that one has a higher-order thought about whichever perceptual, sensory, or cognitive first-order state one is in. One has, on this picture, in other words, a first-order state, plus a HOT which renders that conscious, and, in addition, a further, *higher* higher-order thought that represents the first HOT and makes it, in turn, conscious. When one has such a ‘HHOT’, if you will, one is able to report the content of the first HOT, and thus report one’s conscious state as such, as in ‘I am visually conscious of a room of people before me’. Expression of the HOT requires it to be conscious, and that is a product of its being represented by the HHOT. And, further, since the HOT constitutes inner awareness on Rosenthal’s scheme—not that he would put things quite in those terms— it follows that he thinks that, in introspection at least, inner awareness becomes conscious.

I take a harder line, and I don’t think Rosenthal should say this. So I will make the case for a denial that inner awareness can ever be conscious. What I say is I suppose mainly directed at Rosenthal in the end. But before I get to Rosenthal I will make a point about the big picture, reveal some motivations for taking the hard line I mention, and put a question to Jakub about his view.

What Jakub is helping people like me and Lockwood, in particular, to deny is that there is any phenomenology of awareness. I myself need to deny that since an argument Chalmers uses against me depends on the claim that there is awareness phenomenology. Jakub describes the ‘*no-inner-awareness-phenomenology* thesis’, as he calls it, as following from the thesis that inner awareness is ordinarily unconscious. The ‘*no-inner-awareness-phenomenology* thesis’ is his thesis 4, and is implied, he says, by the ‘*non-conscious inner-awareness* thesis’, his thesis 3. But as I’ve mentioned, the precise target claim in Jakub’s paper about inner awareness is that it is not *ordinarily* conscious. And, despite what he *calls* thesis 4, when he formulates it this qualification is also present. He formulates the *no-inner-awareness-phenomenology* thesis thus: ‘Inner awareness is *ordinarily* phenomenologically absent from experience’ (my emphasis).

Now of course this allows that at least sometimes inner awareness *is* phenomenologically present in experience. More worryingly, for me, it leaves room for someone to propose a thesis that is weaker than the one Jakub ascribes to Chalmers and Montague, but which is still distinctly threatening for the sort of view I want to defend.

Given how Jakub formulates 4—and it is 3 and 4 as formulated, i.e. with the ‘ordinary’ qualification included, that Jakub explicitly defends in his paper—a Chalmers or a Montague, even if they accepted Jakub’s objections to them, might suggest that at least inner awareness is always itself a *possible* object of awareness. That is, for any episode of inner awareness, we *could* become conscious of it, and, closely following this thesis, they might claim that any episode of inner awareness at least *could* become phenomenologically present. This would mean that, for any mental state of which we were consciously aware, our inner awareness of this state could in principle become part of our conscious experience too, with the relevant accompanying phenomenology distinctive of awareness of awareness (whatever *that* phenomenology is supposed to be; this is something I struggle to make sense of). I wonder if Jakub himself would be happy to entertain this *pervasive potential awareness of awareness thesis*, viz.:

5. For any mental state of which we are innerly aware, that inner awareness itself is a possible object of awareness.

as well as the the *pervasive potential phenomenology of inner awareness* thesis that, if we follow Jakub’s logic, is implied by it (5), viz.:

6. Inner awareness, though ordinarily phenomenologically absent from experience, is always at least potentially phenomenologically present in experience.

For my part I dislike these theses very nearly as much as I dislike the ones Jakub discusses, and I want to reject them. One reason concerns the aforementioned argument that Chalmers makes against me in a different context. I won’t go into what the argument is about. But his argument depends on the claim that a certain theory of mine cannot capture the phenomenology of awareness. For my purposes in defending myself against Chalmers, it won’t much matter whether there is *ordinarily* or *always*, or even only *extraordinarily*, a phenomenology of awareness: if there is *any* phenomenology of awareness Chalmers may well be right that the theory of mine in question cannot capture it, and that theory will thereby be refuted. So for purposes of defending myself against Chalmers I do not want to admit any phenomenology of inner awareness, ever.

I have said that Jakub’s thesis 4, that inner awareness is ordinarily phenomenologically absent from experience, allows that inner awareness is still potentially a feature of any experience. These both might seem to be claims that are a lot less profligate than the claim that certainly Uriah Kriegel puts forward, and I think Galen Strawson, and plausibly Montague and Chalmers too, that inner awareness is *always* also something we are aware of and therefore, in some sense, phenomenologically omnipresent; a kind of constant of experience as some of these people sometimes say. But I don’t find that these theses really differ much in profligacy, or, as I would say, extravagance and phenomenological implausibility. For thesis 6 says that any experience can feature awareness of awareness, any experience of whatever kind. And so what’s to stop every experience, for some subject, or even for all subjects of a suitably trained population, becoming endowed with awareness of awareness and the consequent phenomenology of awareness?

If it’s a matter, following Rosenthal, of taking an introspective stance on one’s conscious experience (something also suggested perhaps by the way Chalmers asks us to *attend* *to* visual blurriness to get a grip on a kind of phenomenology of awareness), then let’s imagine an individual or a group suitably trained so as to adopt, constantly, an introspective stance on their experience—a group of mediating Buddhist monks for example. For these subjects, it follows, their every experience features awareness phenomenology and awareness of inner awareness. Why should one object to such a possibility? One big answer will be because, like me, one doesn’t know what awareness phenomenology is supposed to be and doesn’t—seemingly—experience it oneself. But if that’s one’s motivation, it’s not of much comfort, I am arguing, to halt one’s position at the point of claiming that awareness phenomenology is *ordinarily* absent, not if I’m right that that lets in theses 5 and 6. These create quite enough profligacy of unwelcome awareness phenomenology, or can do. So we should take a harder line against awareness of awareness and awareness phenomenology.

Another point for Jakub: If, as per thesis 5, any episode of inner awareness can itself be something of which we are innerly aware, this opens the door to a proposal about a mark of the mental that is really only a bit weaker than the one Jakub ascribes to Brentano, viz.:

7. Every mental phenomenon is at least potentially an object of inner awareness.

Only if inner awareness is never conscious will this be false of inner awareness. And if even inner awareness can be conscious, itself an object of inner awareness, then, it seems, nothing stands in the way of saying that it is a mark of a mental phenomenon that one could become conscious of it. This proposal comes very close to John Searle’s connection principle, that all truly intentional states are potentially conscious. I wonder if Jakub is happy to endorse something like 7.

I myself am not. It rules that zombies by definition can have no mental states, even though as zombies are often discussed they can have at least intentional states. 7 also rules that a deeply repressed Freudian unconscious state, or a *mental* state that for some reason cannot be grasped by the mechanism, whatever it is, that enables consciousness, is no such thing: it is non-mental.

Of course the modality will matter here: 7 will be very much weaker if the claim is that it is only metaphysically possible for a mental state to be conscious, weaker still if the modality is merely ‘epistemic’. I think Searle plausibly has a nomological sense of modality in mind. A mental state is one that, given the current mental setup of the subject, could become conscious. To me this seems to make mentality a hostage to fortune, to threaten certain results in cognitive science. For example it arguably makes dorsal stream activity non-mental, since this is, many people believe, non-introspectible.

But when I used to play cricket and faced a fast bowler, when I did manage to hit the ball without consciously seeing it due to its speed, 7 would seem to rule that part of my action-generating sequence in batting—a key component in fact—was literally non-mental. I find this result unacceptable. Seeing and acting on the ball via the dorsal stream is not just a bit of computation sub-serving my action in hitting the ball: it is a good chunk of the action sequence. I think it would further follow, plausibly, that hitting the ball was not even an action of mine, but a mere reflex. But that is a deeply flawed way to view batting and cricket, however mindless it may sometimes appear to onlookers!

Now we come to Rosenthal, who is an interesting case for the present discussion for a reason Jakub does not discuss. If Rosenthal holds that inner awareness, i.e. HOTs, is sometimes conscious, does that mean that he allows that there is such a thing as the phenomenology of inner awareness? It would seem on the face of it that that would have to follow: If we are conscious of x then x has a phenomenology, plausibly. And Rosenthal holds that HOTs can become conscious, if HHOTs target them. So it would follow that there would be a phenomenology associated with a conscious HOT. And since HOTs constitute what we are calling inner awareness, for Rosenthal, it follows in turn, it seems, that there is a phenomenology of inner awareness, if only in introspective contexts. This would put Rosenthal firmly on board with 5 and 6.

In fact Rosenthal, I think, thinks he can evade this result. The key to this is that he denies there is any phenomenology of thought. So when inner awareness is conscious, i.e. a HOT, there need not be any phenomenology associated with this conscious thought—since conscious thoughts in general lack qualitative properties, Rosenthal believes.

If this strategy worked, Rosenthal would be able to accept 5, and 7 too—he could go as far as saying that any mental phenomenon, including inner awareness, is possibly conscious—and he would still be able to deny 6. Denying 6 is the thing that matters to me most. So if this Rosenthalian line works it might represent a sort of compromise option or middle ground, between the position I currently incline to, which would deny 5, 6 and 7, and those who would endorse all of them. Perhaps some kind of reconciliation is available then, a philosophical island in the middle of the river, a bit like the lovely islands in the Vltava in Prague, which both sides can depart their extreme banks and have a party on—all masked-up of course.

Unfortunately this isn’t going to work, I think. Actually I’m not sad about that. But I don’t myself think that Rosenthal’s doctrine on thoughts and their supposed lack of phenomenology quite makes sense. I’ll explain why, then sum up the consequences of all I’ve said.

In a paper entitled ‘The Kinds of Consciousness’ Rosenthal says that intentional states or propositional attitudes, even when conscious,

typically lack sensory qualities...desires, thoughts, wonderings have no qualitative character, though individual intentional states may often be accompanied by qualitative states keyed in some way to the content and mental attitude of the intentional state in question

I read Rosenthal as saying here that as types, thoughts—I’ll count all the things he mentions as thoughts—lack qualitative character or phenomenology, but that when you have a token thought you may also have some sensory conscious state with a relevant phenomenology.

For example if I think ‘I dreamt of a green dragon last night’, possibly a visual image of a green dragon might accompany that thought. There’s obviously a link between the phenomenology of the visual image and the content of the thought, since Rosenthal uses this term ‘keyed in’. And there would have to be such a link, because otherwise the sense in which the visual image ‘accompanied’ the thought would just be that they came at the same time. But since we have lots of thoughts and visual images, and other sorts of phenomenology, at a time, it would be then very hard to say anything about what made that image an accompaniment, in a strong enough sense, of the thought—what made it belong to the thought, so to speak. This would be an epistemic point—we couldn’t tell what made the image pertain to the thought—but also a metaphysical one: there wouldn’t seem to be anything, in fact, to tie the image to the thought. So things like visual images, to accompany thoughts in the right sense, to belong to them, must be keyed into their contents—in a sense I won’t say anything further about because it’s a large and difficult topic. It’s also not really my problem: at least, not mine alone.

The thought is conscious, but we are to believe, on this view we’re trying to attribute to Rosenthal, that it has no phenomenology at all. I just can’t see how this is going to work. Let’s start with this ‘keying in’ idea, that the visual phenomenology of the green dragon image is fitted to the thought content somehow. What could that fitting or keying in to amount to? If the thought content is not conscious, in the sense of not experienced, then there isn’t anything really for the image to be keyed in *to*, certainly nothing we could discover: remember that the thought is, by hypothesis, *already* conscious in this situation. This is as good as it gets, in respect of the thought becoming prominent in mental life. We can introspect it, sure, tokening a HHOT and thinking ‘I am consciously thinking about the green dragon I dreamt last night’, but that operation doesn’t make the *original* thought somehow any ‘more conscious’.

I think to make good on the keying-in idea Rosenthal is going to have to say that the conscious thought has some phenomenology—cognitive or thought phenomenology, since it is definitely for him not going to have sensory phenomenology. Put it this way: phenomenology can only key in to or suit or be fitted to, or belong to, in the right sense, other phenomenology.

There are other pressures on Rosenthal to say something like this. After all, he does hold that the thought content is conscious—what else could be conscious when we have a thought? Moreover he thinks the attitude we bear to the thought, that is the proposition, is conscious. He explains consciousness in terms of awareness. So he holds that we are aware of our attitude and of the content we take that attitude to, e.g. the belief that we dreamed of a green dragon last night. In still other terms, the thought content and attitude both feature in the stream of consciousness—this is a phrase Rosenthal is unafraid to use, and he uses it often.

Well, I put it to you, if the content and attitude of a thought feature in the stream of consciousness, and we are aware of them, then they have phenomenology of some sort. That is really just saying the same thing, that they make some appearance or manifestation in consciousness. It follows from what Rosenthal says that it is different experientially, consciously, for me to think that p and to think that q. It is different, also, to wonder whether p, and to doubt that p, and to hope that not p. These are all different conscious states. Presumably I can introspectively focus on their differences. I just cannot see a way for Rosenthal to say all this without saying that there is a phenomenology of thought—well, two phenomenonlogies really, or a combined one: a phenomenology of content and one of attitude. Surprisingly, this interpretation of Rosenthal, which is so far mine alone I must stress, takes him even further than David Pitt, the well known advocate of cognitive phenomenology (as he likes to remind me, he coined the term). For Pitt only holds that there is content phenomenology, and is doubtful that our attitudes are themselves conscious.

The best way I can read Rosenthal is as denying that thoughts have *sensory* qualities. If we read his talk of qualitative character as being restricted to sensory qualities, then we can make sense of his denial that thoughts have qualitative character. But since he says thoughts can be conscious, that we experience them, there is even a ‘what it is likeness’ belonging to them—he explicitly links Nagel’s what it is likeness to consciousness, saying this is a pre-theoretical way of thinking that all theories of consciousness must make connection to or risk losing any contact with everyday notions of consciousness—he is committed, I think, to their having phenomenology, albeit of a non-sensory kind. He would not want to put it in these terms, but I see him as committed to cognitive phenomenology, including attitudinal phenomenology. I happen to be very sympathetic to this position.

Now, if *that’s* right it’s not open to Rosenthal to hold 5 and 7 without endorsing 6: his commitment to our being able to introspectively make a HOT—Rosenthalian inner awareness—conscious, to have awareness of awareness, would entail that the HOT, targeted by the unconscious HHOT, had phenomenology. And this seems on the face of it correct: if thoughts, including HOTs, can be conscious, then that means they have phenomenology or what-it-is-likeness.

But, and here’s the kicker, it seems to me pretty plain then that we *never* have conscious HOTs. I have a hard enough time understanding plain awareness phenomenology. But I have no clue as to what the phenomenology of a conscious HOT would be. I can do some inner speech, like ‘I’m consciously thinking about philosophy now’, but presumably there has to be more to it than that, as it would seem to be auditory phenomenology in that case, and we’ve said that Rosenthal bans sensory phenomenology from the fabric of thoughts.

Let me recap a bit: I’ve said that if Rosenthal thinks thoughts can be conscious he must think they have phenomenology when they are. And he holds that HOTs can become conscious in introspection. From this it follows that these HOTs would have distinctive phenomenology. I have even less clue as to what that phenomenology would be than when people like Chalmers and Montague talk about the phenomenology of plain inner awareness.

What should we infer? I think we should infer that Rosenthal should put a ban on introspection. We cannot, it turns out, introspect, that is, make HOTs conscious. And I’ve never known quite what people mean by introspection. So I’m happy enough with that result.

Where do we end up? I explored the idea that Rosenthal could accept 5 and 7 without 6, so that one could still claim potential inner awareness, aka consciousness, was a mark of the mental. But it turns out that he cannot avoid 6. 6, however, to my mind, is highly distasteful. So we should deny 5 as well. And when we do that there is no need to hold on to 7. We should take a hard line and say that there is never awareness of awareness, and no phenomenology of inner awareness, ever. So that’s *why* inner awareness should be understood as unconscious.

What about the *how*? That part is easier: I’m inclined to say, as I think Rosenthal should too, that inner awareness is supplied by HOTs which remain unconscious. This is the route to acknowledging that consciousness is inner awareness, consistently with the phenomenological fact, as I see it, that inner awareness does not manifest in experience.