

Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*
Handout [11]

Alex Byrne: *Some Like It HOT — Consciousness And
Higher-Order Thoughts*

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Goals:

1. To examine Rosenthal's version of the HOT hypothesis, and the arguments he supplies to support it.
2. To argue that even if the hypothesis were true, it would not satisfactorily explain phenomenal consciousness.

§ HOP vs. HOT

HOP: (The Perceptual Mode Theory; the Spotlight theory; the Inner Sense theory)



Locke: Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man's own mind.

Armstrong: Consciousness is no more than *awareness* (perception) of inner mental states.

Difficulties:

A subject need not believe the testimony of his senses. In this respect perception is unlike belief. If we take the inner eye story seriously, I should be able to doubt the testimony of inner sense. But this does not seem to be possible...

Second-order: I may believe that there is <i>no</i> tree before me ...
First-order: It may appear to me that there is a tree before me ...

For this reason, the perceptual model of consciousness does not seem to me to be promising.

HOT: *higher-order thought hypothesis*

1. Awareness = occurrent belief

2. Consciousness is no more than awareness (belief) of inner mental states by the person whose states they are.

§ *P-Consciousness* vs. *A-consciousness*

[*P-consciousness*]

A mental state that is phenomenally conscious is a state that there is something it is like to be in.

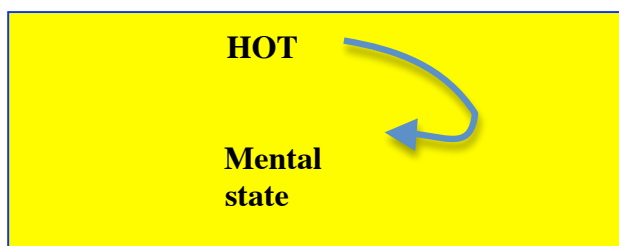
[*A-consciousness*]

An access conscious state is one whose content is available for various cognitive operations: action, reasoning, and verbal report.

On focus here will be on whether the higher-order thought hypothesis can explain phenomenal consciousness in terms of certain kinds of nonconscious mental states.

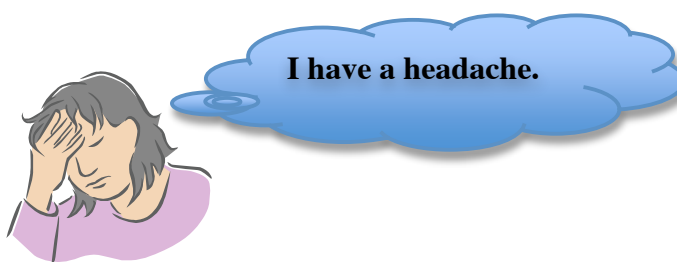
§ The Higher-order Thought Hypothesis

A higher-order thought, or HOT, is a thought about some mental state.



Rosenthal's Theses:

1. A mental state is conscious just in case one has a roughly contemporaneous thought to the effect that one is in that very mental state.
2. Rosenthal is committed, as he of course recognizes, to the existence of nonconscious states that have sensory qualities – nonconscious headaches, visual experiences, and so forth.
3. A higher-order thought itself may well not be the object of a further higher-order thought, and if it is not, then it is not conscious. Typically one's higher-order thoughts are not themselves conscious thoughts.



Rosenthal's Argument:

First, Rosenthal notes the distinction between reporting and expressing.²¹ If I assert that *p*, I am not only *reporting* that *p*, but also *expressing my thought* that *p*. So, if I assert that it's raining, I am *reporting* an external state of affairs – that it's raining – and also *expressing my thought* that it's raining.

Now suppose a mental state *S* of mine is a conscious state, and suppose I have the capacity to report my mental states. Then, in virtue of the fact that *S* is conscious, I can report that I am in *S*. That is, I can express my higher-order thought that I am in *S*. So, whenever I am in a conscious state *S*, I have the ability to report that I'm in *S*, and hence the ability to express my higher-order thought that I am in *S*. It does not immediately follow from this that I am actually having, whenever I am in *S*, the higher-order thought that I am in *S*. But, says Rosenthal, “[i]t is unclear how one could have the ability to express some particular thought without actually having that thought. The best explanation of our ability to express the higher-order thought in question is plainly that one actually has that thought. (p. 109)

A mental state *S* of mine is a conscious state → I have the ability to express some particular thought that I am in *S* → I am actually having the thought that I am in *S*

A mental state *S* of mine is an unconscious state → My inability to express some particular thought about *S* → My not having the thought about *S*

§ Dretske's Objection**t-1: Fred with moustache****t-2: Fred without moustache**

Suppose I see Fred on Monday, and see him later on Friday, spending some time talking to him in broad daylight on both days. Suppose that Fred has a moustache on Monday that he has shaved off by Friday. And suppose that I do not notice that Fred has done some shaving. Nonetheless, surely I saw the moustache on Monday, and failed to see it on Friday. My conscious visual experience of Fred on Monday was different from my conscious visual experience of Fred on Friday: the Monday experience was of a moustache, among other things; the Friday experience was not of a moustache. The point is just that I am not aware that these experiences differ. (p. 113)

Q: The conscious content of a mental state is the content specified by the higher-order thought about that state. Now there is no problem here for conscious *thoughts*. But can the content of a visual experience – for instance my visual experience as I gaze on a sunny day towards the San Gabriel mountains – be captured in a single thought?

Rosenthal's reply:

We're seldom if ever conscious of all the detail that's represented in our sensory states, even sensory states at the center of our visual field. And the amount of detail we're conscious of often changes. When that happens, moreover, it needn't be the sensory state that changes, but only the way we're conscious of that state. The higher-order thought hypothesis explains these things. Higher-order thoughts represent sensory states in greater or lesser detail. So a higher-order thought might represent one's sensory state as being just of a bookcase with lots of things on it. But the higher-order thought might instead represent the sensory state in greater detail, as including a thimble. In the first case one is conscious of seeing the bookcase but not the thimble; in the second case one's conscious of seeing both (MD, 915).³³

§ Byrne's Objections:

1. *The inexpressibility problem:* The concepts that I can deploy in thought may be inadequate to characterize fully the content presented by the visual sensuous manifold, just as one may lack the resources to describe exhaustively the content of a painting.
2. *The problem of the unthinkable thought:* There seems no reason to suppose that the proposition describing the content of my visual experience is one that I could think, for it would surely be an immensely complex thought (imagine the length of a sentence of English that expresses it).
3. *The problem of introspection:* If I do actually have such an unwieldy thought, by introspection I ought to be able to make it conscious. Yet when I try to become aware of my awareness of my visual experience, I do not stumble on such a monstrous thought.
4. *The problem of mistaken HOT:* What about cases where the higher-order thought gets matters wrong?

Evidently, given the distinctness of the higher-order thought and the mental state it is about, such cases are possible. For instance, I may be seeing that there's a cat on the mat, and my higher-order thought may be that I am seeing that there's a dog on the mat. What would happen then? What would I consciously experience? (p. 119)

Suppose I have the higher-order thought that I am in a certain sensory state, and suppose I'm not in this state. Having got this far, there is only one answer to the question of what I will consciously experience: it will seem to me, phenomenologically, that I am in this sensory state. (p. 121)

§ Conclusion:

- 1. There are cases where the higher-order thought only partially captures the content of the mental state it is about (esp. with sensory states).**
- 2. There may be cases where the higher-order thought is mistaken about the content of the conscious mental state.**
- 3. So I judge the higher-order thought hypothesis to be a heroic failure when it comes to phenomenal consciousness.**