David Rosenthal is a well-known defender of a particular kind of theory of consciousness known as the higher-order thought theory (HOTT).  Higher-order theories are united by what Rosenthal calls the Transitivity Principle (TP), which states that a mental state is conscious iff one is conscious of oneself, in some suitable way, as being in that mental state.  Since there are various ways to implement TP and HOTT commits one to the view that any mental state could occur unconsciously it seems to predict that a mental state’s being conscious doesn’t have any significant function to perform.  An unconscious mental state, according to the theory, has most of its causal connections already, as evidenced by priming studies, subliminal perception, and other empirical findings. Given this, one early objection to HOTT was to emphasize this consequence of the theory. Since consciousness does have a function any theory which predicts that it doesn’t must be suspect. Rosenthal’s primary goal in this paper is to defend HOTT against this objection. In fact he argues that if we could establish that consciousness has no function independently of HOTT we would then have an analogous argument for it: Since consciousness doesn’t have any significant function any theory which predicts that it doesn’t fares better.

Before we get to the argument a few caveats are in order. Firstly, Rosenthal is here only interested in the question of what function a mental state’s being conscious has. It is plain that a creature’s being conscious or being transitively conscious of things serve functions. But since any mental state can occur consciously as well as unconsciously we have the further task of identifying what function state consciousness serves. Secondly, Rosenthal restricts his attention to the function of intentional states like beliefs, desires, intentions, and volitions and does not consider qualitative mental states (though he does elsewhere). Finally, Rosenthal is careful to point out that the denial of a function for state consciousness does not entail epiphenomenalism about consciousness. Something is an epiphenomenon when it has no causal powers at all. The notion of function that Rosenthal is interested in is the biological notion of something that confers an adaptive advantage to an organism. His argument is aimed at the conclusion that state consciousness has no function in this sense. This leaves open the possibility that state consciousness has causal powers, and Rosenthal admits this. He maintains, though, that these causal powers are too varied and unstable to confer any adaptive advantages to the creature.

Rosenthal examines several proposed functions for state consciousness including the claims that the function of consciousness lies in facilitating rational thought, intentional action, and executive function but I must leave these arguments mostly to the reader. The actual argument Rosenthal gives proceeds in several different sections and I do not have the space to examine them in the detail necessary to do them justice. I will limit myself to the first, as the idea that the function of consciousness lies in facilitation of rational thought underlies many otherwise disparate theories of consciousness ranging from Armstrong’s version of higher-order perception theory, to Block’s access consciousness, to various incarnations of global workspace theory. It should be noted that doing so skips a lot of interesting argumentation and detail; especially interesting is Rosenthal’s brief review of how HOTT fits with and explains a wide variety of experimental results including Libet’s famous experiments and his brief argument that Dretske style first-order theories implicitly introduce higher-order machinery when answering prevalent objections.

The argument against all proposed functions for consciousness generally proceeds negatively by considering the proposed function and showing there is reason, whether commonsense, experimental, theoretical, or some combination of these, to think  it is really something the creature would have even if the mental states in question were not conscious. For instance, in response to the claim that the function of consciousness lies in it facilitating rational thought, Rosenthal adduces experimental results showing consumer choices are more rational when the choices are made unconsciously, as well as commonsense pre-theoretic considerations like our everyday experience of an answer to a problem just coming to us ‘out of the blue’. He also argues from a purely theoretical standpoint to show we would not expect conscious intentional states to have any added function. The rationality of a mental state is tied to that state’s intentional content, which as previously noted, can occur unconsciously, thus, whether one accepts functional-role semantics or not, any functionality associated with rational connections can be captured by unconscious intentional contents and their relations to other intentional contents.

Having dispatched the various proposed functions for consciousness the only task that remains is to try to explain why intentional states are ever conscious in a way that does not make use of the notion of a biologically adaptive function. Rosenthal does this in a broadly Sellarsian way. Showing consciousness has no function is tantamount to providing evidence for HOTT and Rosenthal invokes it in his account of how mental states first become conscious. He first notes that the explanation will proceed differently in the case of qualitative states, and reminds us that he is here restricting his focus to intentional states. We begin with language using creatures that have thoughts and desires that are always unconscious. At some point these creatures might posit the existence of theoretical entities to explain their verbal and non-verbal behavior. Once they do this they will acquire the concepts they need to attribute mental states to themselves and to others. Yet since these higher-order thoughts are not spontaneous and unmediated from a first person point of view they will not result in the corresponding first-order state’s being conscious. These people’s awareness of their own mental states, at this point, will be subjectively on par with their awareness of the mental states of other people. Eventually, with a lot of practice at applying this theory, they would develop a disposition to have the relevant thoughts attributing to themselves various intentional states in an automatic, seemingly unmediated, way at which point they would have conscious intentional states. He is thus able to explain the genesis of state consciousness without appeal to any notion of function.

In short, this article presents a careful and challenging argument against one of our most prized pre-theoretic intuitions about consciousness and is therefore of immediate interest to anyone with even a passing interest in consciousness, though it will be of particular interest to those working in the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies.