

## Conscious Thinking

David Pitt

Late twentieth-century theories of thought and thinking in the analytic philosophical tradition focused on the problem of how it is that presumably purely physical beings such as ourselves can be in states (or have brains that are in states) that are *about* things, or have “intentionality,” and that can bear logical relations to each other such that sequences of them may be *rational* or *irrational*. Typically, such theories ignored the fact that some thoughts are *conscious*, on the assumption that what makes a state a thought and what might make it conscious are metaphysically distinct. In recent years, however, the number of theorists holding that no adequate theory of intentionality can leave out consciousness has been growing, and the philosophical orthodoxies of the last century have increasingly come into question.

To say that a mental state is *intentional* is to say that it has a *content* – something analogous to the *meaning* of a sentence.<sup>1</sup> The sentence ‘Blood is red’, for example, has (in English) a particular meaning, and in virtue of this meaning (derived from the meanings of its constituent terms) is *about* blood, and *says that* it is red. The sentence ‘Mud is brown’, in contrast, has a different meaning, and is about something else and says something different about it. Further, these sentences have, in virtue of their meanings, *truth conditions* – that is, they specify the worldly conditions under which they are true (or false) – as well as *logical properties* – relations of consistency, inconsistency and entailment to other sentences. The sentence ‘Blood

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘intentional’ here in application only to propositional attitudes and the constituent thoughts that render them intentional, skirting the issue of the intentionality of perceptual and other sensory experiences.

is red' is true iff blood is red, and false otherwise; 'Blood is red' and 'Mud is brown' are logically consistent with each other (they can both be true); 'Blood is red' and 'Blood is brown' are not consistent with each other (they can't both be true); and 'Blood is red and mud is brown' logically entails 'Mud is brown'. Exactly analogous things may be said about the *thoughts* that blood is red and that mud is brown. (Indeed, it's a traditional assumption in analytic philosophy of language that the meanings of sentences derive from (or *are*) the contents of the thoughts they are (by convention) used to express.) Thus, thoughts have contents, which determine their truth conditions and logical relations to each other.<sup>2</sup>

Philosophical theories of intentionality and rationality have typically been committed to "naturalism" (the view that these phenomena can be explained in terms consistent with the natural sciences – in particular, neurophysiology, biology, and, ultimately, physics), and have typically sidestepped the question of consciousness. Attempts to explain the propositional attitudes (belief, hope, desire, fear), their contents (what they're beliefs *in*, hopes *or* desires for, fears *of*), as well as the logical relations among them, have generally not taken account of the fact that some of them are conscious. The reason for this is, I believe, twofold. On the one hand, since there's very good evidence that there are *unconscious* thoughts and thought processes, it would seem that what makes a mental state a *thought* has little, or even nothing, to do with what makes it conscious. On the other hand, this is a lucky break, since no one has the slightest idea what consciousness is or how to provide an explanation of how it could arise from brain activity. If intentionality and consciousness can vary independently of one another, the latter may safely be ignored when theorizing about the former. Whatever explanation there may be for consciousness generally may simply be combined with whatever theories of intentionality and

---

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Fodor (beginning with Fodor 1975) has championed the view that in fact we think

rationality turn out to be the right ones in order to explain conscious thought and thinking.

In addition, there has been widespread optimism about the feasibility of naturalistic explanations of rationality and intentionality. The conception of the mind as a kind of computer, and of thinking as a kind of rule-governed symbol manipulation, gained new life in philosophy through the work of Hilary Putnam, who hypothesized that the mind is a kind of Turing machine (see Putnam 1973/2002 and Turing 1950).<sup>3</sup> Turing showed how a merely material device – and one of no particularly special or interesting physical type – could engage in characteristically *intellectual* operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. A thing needn't have an immaterial soul in order to have a *mind*. (Turing himself argued that a computational device that was conversationally indistinguishable from a human being would thereby *literally* deserve the honorific 'thinker'. Contemporary cognitive science has explicitly extended the realm of the computational (at least in principle) to virtually every "mental" operation.)

The problem of intentionality – the problem of *how it could be that* a physical object could be in states that are *about* things – is also widely believed to have been (as far as philosophers are concerned) essentially solved by an approach introduced into the philosophical literature by Fred Dretske (Dretske 1981). Dretske showed how a merely material object could be in states that *carry information about* the existence or condition of other things, and argued that the property of carrying information is a kind of *proto-intentionality*. The rings of a tree, for instance, *represent* the tree's age; the presence of smoke *indicates* the presence of some sort of combustion; the occurrence of a certain sort of spots on the skin *means* measles. These relations, which hold in virtue of lawful relations of *cause and effect* between the phenomena, are sufficiently *like* the "aboutness" of intentionality (witness the language we use to describe them)

---

in a "language of thought," a system of mental representations with sentence-like structures.

to suggest that they could be the basic materials from which genuinely intentional systems such as ourselves might be constructed (by, e.g., evolution). The basic ingredients of intentionality are ubiquitous in the natural world.

Of course, trees, clouds of smoke, and skin don't actually *think*; so there's a good deal more work to be done to explain how these basic ingredients are exploited to produce genuine minds. (Characteristically, philosophers disagree, vigorously, about how (and whether) this is to be done. See, e.g., Millikan 1984, Dennett 1989, Fodor 1990, Dretske 1995.) The central problem has been to distinguish intentional systems such as ourselves, which are capable of states that *misrepresent* the world, from purely informational systems, which cannot. (Since an effect cannot occur uncaused, and is, necessarily, caused by whatever caused it, it's not possible for it to carry misinformation about its cause. To do so it would have to be caused by something that didn't cause it.)

These conceptual breakthroughs have been a source of excitement and genuine hope that the longstanding mystery of what our minds (our *cognitive* minds, at least) are and how it is that we have them might be solved within the bounds of natural science. Our *phenomenal* minds – our conscious experiences, with their qualitative characters – may remain a mystery (but see below); yet, given that the cognitive and the conscious are metaphysically distinct, we may nonetheless hope for a naturalistic explanation of a significant portion of our mental lives.

There are those, however, who deny that the problem of cognition (intentionality and rationality) and the problem of consciousness (qualitative experience) can be segregated in this way. They persist in the Cartesian intuition that, *somehow*, there cannot be thought – or cannot

---

<sup>3</sup> The explicit construal of thinking as symbol manipulation can also be found in Hobbes.

*really* be thought – or thinking in the absence of consciousness.<sup>4</sup> John Searle, with his “Connection Principle” is probably the best known of these, though there are others, such as Galen Strawson. (See Searle 1992 and Strawson 1994.) For such philosophers, though there are conscious states that are not thoughts, there’s something about what makes a mental state conscious that’s essential to making it intentional – i.e., to making it a thought.

One way of substantiating the Cartesian intuition is to provide reasons for thinking that there’s a “phenomenology” of conscious thinking, which is essential to its identity as *thinking*. To say that a state or process has a *phenomenology* is to say that it has features in virtue of which there’s “something it’s like” (in Nagel’s (1974) phrase) to be in it or to undergo it. For example, the experience of being in pain has a distinctive sort of qualitative character (phenomenology), which is quite different from that of the experience of, say, hearing thunder or tasting chocolate: *what it’s like* to be in pain is quite different from what it’s like to hear thunder or to taste chocolate. The thesis that there’s an essential phenomenology of conscious thought (which has been defended by, among others, Goldman (1993), Strawson (1994), Siewert (1998), Horgan and Tienson (2002) and Pitt (2004)) holds that there is something it’s like to consciously think a thought, which is distinctively *cognitive* (i.e., not visual or auditory or olfactory or gustatory or ...), and which *individuates* the thought (makes it the thought that it is, and distinguishes it from other thoughts), in a way analogous to that in which, say, the distinctive *auditory* phenomenology of the sound of thunder distinguishes it from the sound of sleigh bells, or the distinctive *gustatory* phenomenology of the taste of chocolate distinguishes it from the taste of garlic. What makes a mental state a *thought* is its having a distinctive phenomenology of the cognitive sort.

---

<sup>4</sup> Descartes himself held that consciousness and mentality are co-extensive – that is, all

Given the widely shared (but, in my view, not inevitable) intuition that in order for a state to have phenomenality (i.e., to be a phenomenal state) it must be conscious, this view has the problematic consequence that *there can be no unconscious thoughts or thinking*. Given what we have learned from Freud and from contemporary cognitive science about the existence and, perhaps, *primacy* of unconscious mentation, however, it seems intellectually recidivist (at least) to advocate a return to a Cartesian view of the mind. Searle and Strawson have attempted to tackle this problem – the former with the view (Searle 1991) that unconscious intentional states are, necessarily, *potentially* conscious, and the latter (Strawson 1994) with the view that though a particular state need not be conscious in order to be intentional, an unconscious state can only be intentional if it's a state of a creature capable of being in conscious states. Neither of these views seems completely satisfactory. (*What is the property that unconscious states have that can render them intentional? Why should the intentionality of an unconscious state depend upon the consciousness of some other state?*) Though there are other ways one might try to face down the problem. For example, one might simply bite the bullet and deny that in general consciousness is necessary for phenomenality. This would of course break the connection between thought and consciousness, but not between thought and something very close to consciousness (viz., phenomenality, a necessary condition for it).<sup>5</sup>

One approach to the phenomenology of conscious states – *representationalism* (or *intentionalism*) – might be thought to be of some use here. Representationalists (Dretske 1995, Tye 2000, Lycan 2006) hold that the phenomenal contents of conscious mental states are a species of intentional contents. On this view, the qualitative features associated with a conscious

---

and only conscious states and processes are mental.

<sup>5</sup> One might also deny that states conscious *in themselves* need be conscious *for their possessor*.

perceptual state, those one would mention in characterizing what it's like to be in that state, are the qualitative features of the thing(s) perceived. They come to be associated with the perceptual state in virtue of the latter's *representing* them, in a manner not essentially different from that in which intentional states such as thoughts and beliefs represent their contents. (The *styles* of representation may be different – e.g., perceptual representations may have an image-like structure, while cognitive representations may have a sentence-like structure – but the features that determine which properties are represented are of the same basic type in both cases, viz., “tracking” or informational relations, of essentially the type suggested by Dretske.) The qualitative feature one might mention in characterizing one's visual experience of the sky at noon on a clear day, for example – the *blueness* – is a property *of the sky*, not of one's experience. (To maintain otherwise is to commit what Place (1956) termed the “Phenomenological Fallacy.”) The only qualitative properties there are, are the qualitative properties of extramental objects; so there's no special problem of explaining how a mental state could “have” conscious qualitative character.

Moreover, the explanation of the qualitative character of experiences on this type of theory is independent of the explanation of consciousness. Typically, consciousness is explained in terms of first-order representation – a creature *C* is conscious *of a thing x* iff *C* is in a state *S* that represents *x* – where this first-order representational state need not itself be conscious (in the sense that its possessor need not be aware of being in it; such awareness requires a higher-order representation). (See Dretske 1995; Rosenthal 2005.) Thus, on the representationalist account qualitative character and consciousness are metaphysically independent.

Representationalist approaches face two serious problems, however, one internal and the other in application to the present problem. The internal problem is the explanation of the

qualitative character of dreams and hallucinations – experiences in the absence of instantiated properties to represent. Though this problem has been addressed (see Dretske, Tye and Lycan, op. cit.), it's not clear that it has been solved. In the context of phenomenally constituted thought content, the problem is the identification of *objective* qualitative properties to serve as cognitive phenomenal characters. (But see Stalnaker 2008 for an attempt to come to grips with it.)

*David Pitt*

## References

- Dennett, D.C. (1989). *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Dretske, F. (1981). *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Dretske, F. (1995). *Naturalizing the Mind*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Fodor, J.A. (1975). *The Language of Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fodor, J.A. (1990). *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Goldman, A (1993). "The Psychology of Folk Psychology," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 16, 15-28.
- Horgan, T. and Tienson, J. (2002). "The Intentionality of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Intentionality," in *Philosophy of Mind, Classical and Contemporary Readings*, D.J. Chalmers, ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 520-533
- Lycan, W.G. (2006). *Consciousness and Experience*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Millikan, R. (1984). *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Nagel, T. (1974). "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83, 435-450.
- Pitt, D. (2004). "The Phenomenology of Cognition, Or, *What Is It Like to Think That P?*" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69, 1-36.
- Place, U.T. (1956). "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" *British Journal of Psychology* 47, 44-50.
- Putnam, H. (1973/2002). "The Nature of Mental States" (originally published as "Psychological Predicates," in W.H. Capitan and D.D. Merrill, eds., *Art, Mind, and Religion*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 37-48), in *Philosophy of Mind, Classical and Contemporary Readings*, D.J. Chalmers, ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 73-79.
- Rosenthal, D. (2005). *Consciousness and Mind*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J.R. (1991). "Consciousness, Unconsciousness and Intentionality," in *Philosophical Issues, I: Consciousness*, E. Villanueva, ed., Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 45-66.
- Searle, J.R. (1992). *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Siewert, C. (1998). *The Significance of Consciousness*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stalnaker, R. (2008). *Our Knowledge of the Internal World*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Strawson, G. (1994). *Mental Reality*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Turing, A. (1950). "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 59, 433-460.

Tye, M. (2000). *Consciousness, Color and Content*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.