

Some notes on the words “aware” and “conscious”

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David Rosenthal, in his unpublished paper, “Two Concepts of Consciousness”, argues as follows:

- (1) Materialist accounts of the mental cannot handle the phenomena of consciousness, where those phenomena are conceived in the classic manner.
- (2) There are two concepts of consciousness; the classic or Cartesian concept, and the non-classic, or (as I call it) cognitive, concept of consciousness.
- (3) The cognitive concept of consciousness poses no more difficulty for the materialist than do Intentional states in general (mental states like beliefs and desires, the identity-conditions of which are the contents of the states, given in “that ...” clauses in sentences like, “Rosenthal believes that the cognitive concept is true”).
- (4) The materialist should embrace and defend the cognitive concept.

The cognitive concept of consciousness says that the consciousness of a mental state “amounts to” the fact that the agent who has the mental state has another mental state, the content of which is that the agent has the first

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mental state. [Two preliminary remarks on this view. First, what kind of second order mental state is required? Typically it is a belief; sometimes other mental states are discussed (varying grades of consciousness could be explained by saying that someone first believes, then knows, then experiences that she has a certain desire).¹ Since Rosenthal holds that sensations can, like beliefs, be both conscious and unconscious, perhaps a mental state can become conscious by being sensed. But the account can only work as well as the account of how sensations can fail to be conscious. My basic disagreement with Rosenthal is that his view uses a notion of awareness that includes, and hence cannot be used to explicate, the notion of consciousness. Rosenthal does not work by exploiting differences among the kinds of second order mental states the cognitive concept can appeal to; I will assume that the job of explication is to be done by ordinary Intentional states.

Second, Rosenthal at least is unclear on what the "amounts to" above amounts to. The cognitive concept could be a bit of philosophical analysis, something to the effect that the concept of consciousness either does or (after reflection) should demand a cognitive treatment; then the proposal should be cast in the form

C: a mental state *m* is conscious iff there is another mental state *n* whose content (or suitable correlate of content, for sensation) is that the agent is in mental state *m*.

Rosenthal at one point implies that he has something different in mind:²

One can then formulate a materialist explanation of the consciousness of mental states by hypothesizing that those mental states which are conscious cause one to have the roughly contemporaneous second-order thought and that this causal pattern is a matter of neural or other suitable somatic connections.

This plus other remarks to the effect that we know almost nothing about mental states suggest that Rosenthal thinks of the consciousness of a mental state as being the result of that mental state's causing another mental state, and that the causal connection is much like the causal connection that obtains among photons of certain energies and changes from the cis- to the trans-isomer of the visual pigment rhodopsin. This seems like a bad way to read

¹Steve Yablo suggested this in George Myro's seminar on consciousness, Spring 1984.

²Rosenthal, *op.cit.* p. 15

Rosenthal, since if his thesis is an empirical hypothesis, even if it turns out to be true materialism could nonetheless remain in trouble if it remains possible that we could have had conscious mental states in the Cartesian fashion. A better way to read him makes his thesis a stronger analysis, one like

C': a mental state *m* is conscious iff there is another mental state *n* whose content (or suitable correlate of content, for sensation) is that the agent is in mental state *m*, and furthermore *m* causes *n*.

Here the causal connection will be like the one that causal theorists of perception like Grice and Searle assert holds between perceptions and the things the perceptions are about. C' as it stands is probably not adequate, for the second-order thought most likely has to be indexical (the agent must have the thought "I am in *m*"). My remarks will be addressed to suitably emended versions of C'; hence I take it that counterexamples to such an analysis show that the cognitive concept is false.]

I find the cognitive conception implausible. In what follows I shall discuss the ways we use the terms "conscious" and "aware". I will exploit what seems to be an ambiguity in the use of the phrase "aware of" to show that Rosenthal's thesis has a prima facie plausibility, but on reflection is either false or circular. I conclude with some doubts concerning the strength of my remarks against Rosenthal's position.

I start with a comparison of the "grammars" of the terms "aware" and "conscious", that is, their syntactic form, their meaning, some inferences their use licenses, and typical patterns in which they can occur.

Both words can be used as adjectives, although the ranges of their application differ. Things can be conscious, in several senses.³ If a thing has the potential for consciousness (in the second sense) then it is conscious in the first:

The species *Homo sapiens* is conscious.

Spock thinks that computer over there is asleep: he thinks it's *conscious!*

and things that are conscious in the first sense have spells of consciousness in the second sense:

³cf. Dennett citing Scriven on the first two, in Dennett, *Content and Consciousness*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), pp. 126-7

She's awake and conscious again.

"Aware" cannot be used in this way: persons can be aware *simpliciter* if they are particularly responsive to things, usually to things in a defined area:

He's an aware sort of fellow, he follows politics.

Further, mental states can be conscious (in two ways) but never aware. If one knows well and endorses one's own intentions or purposes or tendencies to act, then they can be said to be conscious:

St. Peter was a conscious borrower.

Such intentions or purposes need not be conscious in this stronger sense:

His intention to borrow was conscious.

His belief that John would loan him money was conscious.

I don't think we say anything like this:

*His intention to borrow was aware.

*Her perception of the figure was aware.

The "Intentional" uses of these terms are those in which the term takes an object. People are aware of something or aware that something is the case (or aware of something being the case):

The cat is aware of the fly.

The fly is aware that the cat is crouching to pounce.

The cat is aware of our coming home.

Or with just the object:

I'm aware he is a scoundrel.

And of course we can be conscious of things, conscious that so-&-so, or conscious of so-&-so's being the case:

Nancy is conscious of a cricket chirping in the room.

The Intentional senses of these terms mean almost the same as "know that": they indicate that the agent is apprised of the state of affairs or object in question:

Henry is aware of the situation in Cambodia.

I am conscious that one of the steps in her proof is invalid, but she understands the subject well.

“Aware of” and its kin are often used simply to report knowledge. Both “aware of” and “conscious of” carry a suggestion that the agent is likely or prepared to act on his knowledge. Saying that the county agricultural inspector is aware of the state of our storage shack suggests he will do something about it; saying he knows about it doesn’t, or doesn’t so strongly. “Conscious of” and its kin seem to be used to concede some fact; one knows that p but wants to discount it for present purposes, or, one knows that p but would like to set it aside as not relevant to action.

There are certain points where the “factivness” of these terms break down. Suppose John is dreaming that he is walking down a street, and in our report of his dream we say, “And suddenly he became aware of a shadowy figure beside him”. I am not sure how to treat such cases in detail, but they seem as peripheral here as do cases where we say, “I just knew it would be you on the phone” in the analysis of knowledge.⁴ Another case of possible non-factivness: We can be acutely or supremely conscious of things, particularly personal traits:

He was acutely conscious of the tic in his eye.

She was supremely conscious of her right to continue.

I’m not sure but I think people can be mistaken about things like this; someone might behave neurotically as though they had a tic.

There are some more subtle semantic differences between the terms “conscious” and “aware”. Being conscious that so-&-so has a strong flavor (now weaker than two hundred years ago) that the so-&-so reflects some fault of the agent:⁵

I’m conscious that I left the tap running in the basement.

He must have been conscious that, though he thought adultery sinful, he was an adulterer. (MacCauley)

She being conscious, did of her own accord ... make confession of her wickedness. (1656, H. More)

⁴George Myro in the seminar cited.

⁵Oxford English Dictionary for the MacCauley and More sentences.

Which term is stronger? There is an entailment from “conscious” to “aware”. If I am conscious of a cat, I am aware of the cat; if I am conscious that there is a cat on the mat, I am aware there is a cat on the mat. The entailment the other way doesn’t seem to go: if I roll over in bed when and only when the door slams when you come in (and I stay asleep), in some sense I am aware of the door slamming but I am not conscious of the door slamming. Or (this from Dennett, *op.cit*) one can perform a whole series of actions automatically, hence not consciously, that involve some sort of awareness of various obstacles; suppose we argue heatedly about referential opacity as we drive from here to Sacramento, a drive I make five times a week. I am aware of the traffic and aware of the blocked-off lanes on the bridge, but what I am conscious of is the positions you are arguing. In what follows I will not play on these differences.

To return to the cognitive concept of consciousness. Which of these terms and uses report on the phenomenon this concept applies to? Saying a person is conscious is one; I think the only use of the term “conscious” that is guaranteed to report the phenomenon of consciousness for particular mental states is the one in which we say of particular beliefs or sensations that they are conscious. But we also report this phenomenon when we say that someone is aware of her mental states or conscious of her mental states:

She was aware as she dove of her intention to get her hands straight out over her head.

He was conscious of hearing a gnat’s wing over the tent.

Dennett, for instance, in an effort to introduce order into our tangled ways with words, suggests we use the terms “aware of” and “aware that” when we want a consciousness-term that is Intentional, and use the term “conscious” when we want to say that a person is conscious. Then

[w]e also speak of conscious and unconscious motives or desires, but these can be assimilated under the Intentional idioms, as motives and desires we are conscious of. (*his italics*) (Dennett, *op. cit*, p.115)

Hence Dennett doesn’t think there is anything seriously different between being aware of a belief and the belief’s being conscious. And Rosenthal uses this sense in these statements of the cognitive concept:

for a state to be a conscious state, whoever has it must be to some degree aware of it in a way that does not rely on observation or inference (p.13)

most promising account of the consciousness of mental states is to identify a mental state's being conscious with one's being aware of one's being in that mental state and to regard this, in turn, as simply a matter of one's having a roughly contemporaneous thought that one is in that mental state. (p.15)

What both these suggestions do, I think, is fail to notice something like an ambiguity in the term "aware of": we are not aware of our thoughts and sensations the same way as we are aware of houses and people. Clearly we cannot be aware of a house in the way we are aware of a thought, when that means the thought is conscious; but we can be aware of our thoughts and sensations in the way we are aware of other people. That is, we can have a mental state that is conscious, i.e., a state we are aware of, and furthermore that mental state is directed on another mental state that is not conscious. Actually the situation is slightly more complex than a two-way ambiguity; I shall try to make this clear by following these terms through a series of entailments Rosenthal endorses in the passages above.

Here is the series:

m (a mental state of A's) is conscious iff
 A is aware of m iff
 A thinks that he, A, is in m.

And letters for the details:

A: if m is conscious, A is aware of m.
 B: if A is aware of m, A is aware that he, A, is in m.
 C: if A is aware that he, A, is in m, A is aware of m.
 D: if A is aware of m, m is conscious.

I mentioned A above; it is not very controversial. B is questionable, but after some discussion I will propose we accept it for present purposes. C is false. D, I think, is also false; Rosenthal and Dennett think it is true because they fail to notice this ambiguity. I discuss C because it raises some issues that are relevant to B and seem relevant to D (although I argue they are not).

Reasons for *disbelieving* B are these: i) animals and babies do not have the conceptual resources to have any beliefs properly reported using “that” clauses (cf. Dennett, p.116: “Was the bird aware of the cat as a cat, or just as a hulking presence, or even just as danger?”). But they do have something like *de re* attitudes that are directed at objects and that do not involve complete propositions, grasp of which is attributed using “that” clauses; ii) all creatures that have full-blown propositional attitudes must also sometimes have such *de re* attitudes and one can have *de re* attitudes without a corresponding *de dicto* attitude. About i), I do not think the line can be drawn that distinguishes creatures that are, from those that are not, capable of having attitudes that can be reported using “that” clauses. This is obviously a major issue, but I think it is not relevant to the concerns of this paper. About ii) I will have more to say in a moment. So allow me B with suitable reservations. I am interested in the sufficient condition.

In discussing C and D I shall first look at cases not involving mental states, then those that do. I am thus treating the cases that do not involve mental states as the general case of the use of these terms. I point out along the way ground for suspicion about this treatment.

C either is trivially true or interestingly false, depending on which sense of “aware of” we use. For things other than mental states first: Suppose I am aware that there was a cricket in Nancy’s room last week. I need not now, nor then, be aware of Nancy, the cricket, or of Nancy’s room. On the other hand, if we take “aware of” merely to indicate I am apprised of the relevant facts about the object in question, then I am aware of these things. Suppose we are talking about the county agricultural inspector and you say, “He is aware of the tree in the back yard”. You make no claim about how he knows this, about whether he saw the tree or was told about it, and you make no claim about what the inspector is thinking about now.

For mental states the situation is slightly different. We always get the “apprised of” sense. If I am aware that I believe it rains on Mars then I am aware of my belief that it rains on Mars. But in the sense of “aware of” in which the mental state is conscious, I can be aware that I have certain beliefs, but not be aware of them. Some cases: I am aware that I have many beliefs about arithmetic, for instance that $893^2 > 2^5$, but that belief is not conscious, and in one sense at least I am not aware of the belief. Sam, asleep in the corner over there, is aware that he has that same belief (since, as I am assuming, he knows some basic arithmetic and knows that he knows it), but since no mental states of his are conscious, he is not aware of that belief.

What of the sense of “aware of” in which I can fail to be aware of Nancy while being aware that Nancy has a cricket in her room? Can I be aware that I believe that Nancy has a cricket in her room, yet fail to be aware of my belief or fail to be aware of myself? I think not. I think the situation is this: there are *three* senses or uses of “aware of” we need to examine. Mental states that are conscious are ones we’re conscious of; when we know of a certain object, or are apprised of its existence and its importance to plans, laws, etc., we are aware of it; and when we observe an object we are aware of it. Now one can be aware *that* some fact obtains without being aware of any of the objects that are involved in the fact’s obtaining, because one doesn’t observe them. But usually one’s knowledge of one’s own mental states does not rely on observation, and hence the issue of whether one has observed them does not arise; so it is hard to see how one could be apprised of one’s mental states without being aware of them in this sense. Cases in which our knowledge of our own mental states does rely on observation are ones in which the best explanation for, or best interpretation of, a whole pattern of speech and thought and behaviour, says that one has, say, a certain desire. There are two aspects of this procedure that get in the way of our claiming that we observe these mental states. First, in general when we infer something’s existence from a mass of observations we need not observe the thing itself. Second, mental states are not observable the way artifacts and natural objects are. In particularly clear cases I might be said to observe a belief. Imagine a cat pursuing the piece of cheese you’ve cut for a snack while reading. No matter how emphatically you steer her away she keeps climbing toward you hand. She is so single-minded you can see her desire for the cheese. But even here there seems to be something strained, and in more complex cases (a philosopher arguing for the proposition that cats cannot have thoughts) we do not observe people’s particular mental states.

Returning to the general case of C (for all things we might think about), we might try adding in a condition to avoid cases in which one knows a fact “by inference” and hence is not aware of any particular object involved with the fact; the condition will require some more direct epistemic link. The way I learned about Nancy and the cricket was by reading about them in the newspaper. I could instead have learned about them by observation, e.g., by hearing the cricket in Nancy’s room. Learning about a state of affairs by observation guarantees that one will be aware of something in the favored, “consciousness”, sense, since observation involves perception and perceptions

are invariably conscious.⁶ We still don't get a complete sufficient condition, even adding in observation, since something more is needed in order to pick out the object of which I am aware. I am aware that Dennis broke the window – I see it – but Dennis is nowhere to be seen. But I am observing the broken window, so I am aware of the window. In fact, as we saw with mental states, it is not clear that one will always be aware of *some* object a proposition is about if one knows that proposition “by observation”.

The notion of a direct, non-inferential epistemic link between agent and object suggests the notion of a *de re* propositional attitude. Let me review a bit of the history of the *de re/de dicto* distinction before comparing it with the “aware of”/“aware that” distinction. Quine notes there is all the difference in the world between wanting a certain sloop (call her *Nellie*) and merely “wanting relief from slooplessness.” Both desires can be expressed in English with, “Van wants a sloop.” Hence the problem: how best to represent the difference? Another case of Quine's: the sentence, “John thinks someone is a spy,” can either express the urgent information that John can help us out at Interpol, or that John, a reasonable man, thinks governments still use the deplorable institution of spying on each other. A *de re* propositional attitude is one had by someone who wants *Nellie* or who is possessed of urgent information. There are as many *de re/de dicto* distinctions as authors writing about them, but this should get us started.

The first thing to note is that while the “of” locution has been adopted to mark this distinction, (“Of the *Nellie*, Van wants that sloop,” “Of Boris, John believes him to be a spy”), the latter locutions are technical (used in the

⁶Note this is a difficult question also. Rosenthal holds that sensations can be unconscious, and presumably his theory will allow for perceptions that do not cause the necessary second-order thoughts, so he seems to allow for unconscious perceptions. I think we can imagine a case involving something like an unconscious perception: imagine someone to have a sort of hysterical blindness, such that there are some classes of things they simply cannot see. Nevertheless we can best explain their behaviour (performing actions that tend to rid the immediate environment of the offending objects) on the basis of beliefs they could only have acquired by the ordinary means, viz., perceptions. Here the person is not conscious either of the perceptions or beliefs but seems to have them for all that.

If this case is possible, then use of the phrase “aware” of will carry even less of a suggestion that one has conscious mental states in connection with that of which one is aware. The possibility of such a case is not so much a prediction flowing from Rosenthal's theory, but a phenomenon the possibility or impossibility of which must be explained by *any* theory that denies all mental states are conscious (I take it, any acceptable theory). Hence it is not clear that the case provides support for Rosenthal's position.

service of a project in semantics), while the ones we are discussing are part of ordinary speech. So while there are facts about the ordinary uses which make them suitable for marking the technical distinctions, it would be surprising if they turned out to be the same. We have already noted the relevant facts, I think: one sense of the phrases that use the “of” locution involves the notion of observation. And when one knows things about something one is observing, that information can seem to be pretty urgent (it need not; it seems barely possible that someone could know of the thing in front of him that it was in front of him and that he was observing it, and that’s all). But urgency of information is not enough to yield awareness of an object in either the “consciousness” or the “observation” sense. It might be true of me that of Ortcutt, I believe him to be a spy, and that I can tell you exactly how to get ahold of him, but I might now be thinking how nice it would be to own a sloop. And I do not have to be observing him now, nor ever have observed him.

These remarks leave open the question whether having a *de re* propositional attitude of another of one’s mental states is sufficient for the latter to be conscious. Here is a quick and dirty answer. The very idea of a *de re* propositional attitude is one that serves confused purposes, those of giving the semantics of certain sentences using the resources of things going on in the psychologies of those the sentences are about. Since the notion will be as confused as the purposes there is no real point in worrying whether we can get the notion of consciousness out of the notion of a *de re* attitude. This is not a very satisfactory saying a great deal more about and I am not going to say it here. For what it’s worth this course promises an answer to objection ii) to inference B, since the hope is that there really is nothing special in the distinction between having a belief *of* some object and having a belief that the object has some property.

A more satisfactory response is this. The notion of a *de re* attitude is one designed to capture a particularly intimate relation between agent and object of attitude. But for many of our mental states there is no similar question about our relation to them, since we *are* particularly intimately related to them. Even unconscious beliefs, the ones we cannot become conscious of, are either beliefs about which we have *no* beliefs, or about which we have beliefs that relate us particularly intimately to them, since they are *our* beliefs.

To sum up. C is true, trivially, if by “aware of” we intend the sense in which one is aware of something if one knows something about it, and false if we intend the sense in which one is aware of something only if one is in a

conscious mental state directed on it, or the sense in which one is aware of something only is one is observing it.

We have more or less covered the grounds on which D can be false for non-mental items; the agricultural inspector will do. For mental items the trick is to produce a case in which someone states knowledge (or occurrently knows) that she has a certain belief, in much the same way as the inspector is aware of the tree (except here the knowledge must not be “by inference or observation”), but where that mental state of hers is not conscious. I think this is such a case. Giacomo and Giuliana are standing in the kitchen arguing about how they will work on dinner. They want fresh pasta, and Giacomo is trying to persuade Giuliana to do the job. He says, “You don’t want to make the pasta because you think that’s a man’s job.” (Giacomo is the more enlightened but lazier of the two.) Giuliana replies, “I’m perfectly aware of my belief that men should make the pasta; I don’t want to do it because my hands hurt tonight.” Giuliana’s knowledge is neither by observation nor by inference; it is rather that somewhat peculiar knowledge we have of our own mental states. The peculiarity of this knowledge is sometimes equated with conscious access to it. While Giuliana could have such access, I take it she need not. Hence this peculiar knowledge may involve but is nonetheless distinct from conscious access.

Here is another case, similar to the agricultural inspector’s: suppose philosopher P has been arguing for a long time in great detail for a certain position, and suppose we know P has expressed a belief that we think is inconsistent with the position. You remark to me, “Yes, true, P believes that; he is aware of his belief but he’s trying to see a way around it.” We are not committing ourselves to P’s belief being conscious.

There is a wrinkle I have been avoiding in talking about Rosenthal’s theory. I have not mentioned the causal link between mental states. Both these examples fail to be good counterexamples to Rosenthal’s view because the second-order thoughts are caused by other things than the thoughts they are about. I have two responses. First, I do not yet see why one mental state’s causing another mental state that is about the first, need involve consciousness at all. Certainly neither of them alone will do the trick, so why should both? The reason this “gut reaction” is particularly relevant is that in other philosophical uses of the notion of causation (the analysis of knowledge; of perception; of intentional actions) one can more or less immediately see how the notion is useful (the reason for an action is the one that makes it happen). The situation with consciousness is different. Strenuously anti-

causal action theorists are prepared to admit that we talk of actions being performed because someone had certain beliefs. For instance Wittgenstein concedes this weak point in the *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 177:

when I reflect on what I experience in such a case [one where I intentionally copy an “arbitrary doodle on a bit of paper”] I look at it through the medium of the concept ‘because’ (or ‘influence’ or ‘cause’ or ‘connexion’).

But I don’t see any correlate for the case of consciousness. We do not, for instance, say [*We* do not say ...] a given mental state is conscious because it caused another mental state, in however weak a sense one pleases. Rosenthal can reply that his is an empirical thesis, in which case we are arguing to cross purposes; or that we are tacitly accepting the Cartesian concept, and that our intuitions are shaped by this concept. It is not clear to me from what Rosenthal writes that we cannot have some of these intuitions without buying all the Cartesian concept’s unpalatable consequences.

The second response is this, that I suspect we will still not get a sufficient condition because it should be possible to produce cases in which a mental state causes another in a very peculiar fashion. Here is a “deviant causal chain” counterexample to the “causal theory of consciousness.” As P plans strategies to get around his unfortunate belief, he is aware of this belief, and his planning is caused by this belief (he is planning because this unfortunate belief lies in his way), but the belief is not conscious. (I think it would be far easier to produce cases using the resources of the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious, since beliefs that are unconscious in this sense by definition do not become conscious, except after long periods of investigation and treatment, yet display themselves in their effects, including thoughts that one has them. But use of such a strong notion begs the question what consciousness is.)

Let me close with a note on the relevance of these remarks to Rosenthal’s paper. I have treated it as presenting an analysis of the concept of consciousness. I have argued that the analysis fails, because “aware of” is ambiguous. If it is used in the sense which guarantees consciousness, the analysis is circular; if it is used in the sense in which it signals knowledge, the analysis is false. Dugald Owen suggested that these points miss Rosenthal’s thesis, however. Rosenthal is concerned that his account can “save the phenomenological appearances”. (p.22) One can something like an argument to the best theory, where success is measured by the cases covered

and the unpleasant consequences avoided. I have not proposed an alternative account, nor have I made any effort to save these appearances. In particular I have said nothing concerning the prospects for materialism if the cognitive concept is unacceptable.

My response is again sketchy and lazy, and repeats a point made earlier. An argument to the best theory should save as many of the appearances as possible, but it also must save the most important appearances. In this case I do not see how the appearance that one cannot explicate the notion of consciousness using as resources items that need not be conscious has been explained away, other than by exploiting the ambiguity we've discussed. I grant the necessary conditions the theory proposes, but the sufficient ones seem unacceptable. Since the other appearances this theory saves are appearances other theories seem to have no special trouble with, I think recasting Rosenthal's position in this form will not help.