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Wirklich. Wirklichkeit. Wirklichkeiten  
Nietzsche über „wahre“  
und „scheinbare“ Welten

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## Conscious and Unconscious Mental States in Nietzsche's Philosophy of Mind

The present paper deals with the following questions: from the standpoint of Nietzsche's philosophy, which is the nature of the mind? Do we have to construe it as a *res cogitans* or rather as the collection of a multitude of various mental states? Answering these questions implies dealing with a conundrum of contemporary philosophical and scientific debate, that is consciousness. Actually, if – as it will be argued – Nietzsche's thought allows to differentiate unconscious mental activities (Cf. NL 40[15], KSA 11, 635; NL 14[144], KSA 13, 328–329) from conscious mental ones, it is a long way off saying that the mind is identical with consciousness, as Nietzsche maintains the Platonic-Cartesian tradition would do instead.

Nietzsche regards the human being as a complex and stratified entity, whose conscious phenomena are only „End-Erscheinungen“, the latest although not the most important link of the organic evolutionary chain (Cf. NL 7[1], KSA 12, 248). According to him, the peripheral and central nervous system is very complex, and it cannot be reduced only to consciousness. He claims that „there is no ground whatever for ascribing to spirit the properties of organization and systematization. The nervous system has a much more extensive domain; the world of consciousness is added to it“ (NL 14[144], KSA 13, 329). By means of this argument, Nietzsche aims at giving consciousness a new place within a wider and more complex domain in a clear anti-Cartesian way.

At a general level, there exists something organic, that is the body as a „Leib-Organisation“<sup>1</sup>, the seat of mental phenomena and what they emerge from. At a particular level, there exists the mind that includes both conscious and unconscious mental phenomena. Since neither a unique thinking substance nor a unique bodily substance is given, because the human being is the complex whole of manifold organic and (conscious and unconscious) mental phenomena, consciousness is not anything transcendent, separated off from and superior to the organic and unconscious mental processes.

According to Nietzsche, consciousness is neither *causa sui* nor *finis sui*, because it requires a multitude of phenomena of different kinds, which lead to the occurrence of conscious mental states because of their complexity, but only as one of many equally likely outcomes (Cf. NL 34[124], KSA 11, 462). Conscious mental states do not exist for

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Günter Abel, *Nietzsche. Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr*, Berlin, New York 1984, 157–161.

their own sake, rather they are part of the evolutionary chain from which every human being stems, who develops indeed for achieving the most likely equilibrium with the surrounding environment, according to Nietzsche's opinion as well as to an evolutionary and Darwinist view.

In the history of ideas, the Nietzsche – Darwin relationship has been heavily debated and considered mainly controversial, also because of the explicit criticism Nietzsche addressed to certain aspects of Darwin's theory and, above all, to the interpretation that Spencer gave of it. Darwinists are charged by Nietzsche with overrating the instinct of self-preservation, which he claims to suggest that man must repress his own various potentialities for self-preservation. That would imply the prevalence of the „mittleren Typen“ and even of „der untermittleren Typen“ over „den höher gerathenen Typen“, „Glücksfällen“ (NL 14[123], KSA 13, 303). On the other hand, Nietzsche blames Darwin for explaining the evolutionary process almost only by appealing to the organism fitting to the environment. On this theoretical ground, Nietzsche was rather inclined to adopt the biological theory of ‚self-regulation‘ supported by the anatomist and biologist Wilhelm Roux.<sup>2</sup> Roux recognises the organism to play a role in the inner organisation and subsequent new arrangement of the material it receives from the environment. This view does not narrow evolution to a fitting function. Anyway, this criticism does not bar Nietzsche from accepting Darwin's paradigm, which on the contrary makes up the context within which he works up his own theory of ‚self-regulation‘.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, as far as consciousness is concerned, Nietzsche argues that conscious mental states are part of the evolutionary chain, and so they are supposed to give their contribution to attaining the man-environment equilibrium that enables man to survive and to preserve himself.<sup>4</sup> It is just this evolutionary explanation that justifies the ‚natu-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilhem Roux, *Der Kampf der Theile im Organismus. Ein Beitrag zur Vervollständigung der mechanischen Zweckmässigkeitslehre*, Leipzig 1881.

<sup>3</sup> For Nietzsche-Darwin and Nietzsche-Roux relations see: Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, *Der Organismus als innerer Kampf. Der Einfluss von Wilhelm Roux auf Friedrich Nietzsche*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien*, 7 (1978), 189–235; Jorge Salaquarda, *Nietzsche und Lange*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien*, 7 (1978), 230–260; Paul Mostert, *Nietzsche's Reception of Darwinism*, in: *Bijdragen tot de Dierkunde*, 49 (1979); C. U. M. Smith, *Clever Beats Who invented Knowing: Nietzsche's Evolutionary Biology of Knowledge*, in: *Biology and Philosophy*, 2 (1987), 65–91; Werner Stegmaier, *Darwin, Darwinismus, Nietzsche. Zum Problem der Evolution*, in: *Nietzsche-Studien*, 6 (1987), 264–287; John Richardson, *Nietzsche contra Darwin*, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 3 (2002), 37–575.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. NL 2[95], 1885–1887, KSA 12, 107–108. In the contemporary debate on consciousness and the mind-body problem, Damasio's theory seems to approach such an evolutionary explanation of the origin of consciousness. According to Damasio, consciousness is „a device capable of maximizing the effective manipulation of images in the service of the interests of a particular organism“ that by means of this very feature „would probably have prevailed in evolution“, since „survival in a complex environment, that is, efficient management of life regulation, depends on taking the right action, and that, in turn, can be greatly improved by purposeful preview and manipulation of images in mind and optimal planning“ (Antonio Damasio, *The feeling of what happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*, London 1994, 24). Edelman's work (that Damasio himself takes explicitly into account) seems to point out the same issues. Edelman claims that „an adequate theory of consciousness based on brain structure and function must be an evolutionary theory that is consistent with the principles of development. If we assume (as any such theory must) that the consciousness arose as a result of evolutionary processes affecting brain structures, we will not find it likely that

ralization' of consciousness, whose role is narrowed in comparison with that played by the body and by unconscious mental states, but not to such an extent that it would be deprived of any evolutionary value. Consciousness is indeed what enables the body to achieve perfection by satisfying and favoring its organic natural finality (Cf. NL 24[16], KSA 10, 655). Were the interpretation of Nietzsche's view of consciousness limited only to his criticism against the Platonic-Cartesian model of consciousness, which brings to the fore the charge against it with concealing the humble features of the body, along with its instincts, and unconscious processes, the construal of Nietzsche's thought would likely face the risk of underestimating his characteristic evolutionary stance.

Instead, to appreciate this standpoint, this paper emphasizes that in Nietzsche's philosophy of mind a crucial distinction is made between conscious and unconscious mental states. Meaningful implications are meant to follow from this distinction. On the one hand, Nietzsche always ascribes a conceptual nature to consciousness, or to the collection of different conscious mental states. Hence, in the terms of the contemporary philosophical debate, it can be reasonably maintained that consciousness has always a conceptual content. On the other, since conscious mental states are only one part of human beings cognitive activity, it can be ascribed to Nietzsche the view that the manifold unconscious mental states, which make up the remainder of this conscious activity, have instead always a non-conceptual content.

To Nietzsche consciousness does not exhaust the domain of knowledge, rather it only provides schemes in form of concepts and categories that simplify the sense-data manifold, the sensory individuality and difference. As Nietzsche boldly states in the aphorism 354 in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, consciousness occurs when a thought „is done in words, that is to say, in the symbols for communication“ so that „the development of speech and development of consciousness go hand in hand“ (FW, KSA 3, 592). The function of consciousness is to turn the individual nature of ‚Sinneseindrücke‘ into what Nietzsche calls their ‚Durchschnittliches‘, the ‚Gemeinschafts- und Heerden-Natur‘ in which similar things, though different in many respects they may be, are reduced to identity by constructing concepts in such a way to retain some common features selected among many single representational contents and to remove the distinguishing features for a successful communication to obtain (Cf. FW, KSA 3, 592). A much more dated back work than *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, though not much different as its theoretical content, such as *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*, provides us with another example of that claim: „Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept ‚leaf‘ is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. This awakens the idea that, in addition to the leaves, there exists in nature the ‚leaf‘: the original model according to which all the leaves were perhaps woven, sketched, measured, colored, curled, and painted – but by incompetent hands, so that no specimen has turned out to be a correct, trustworthy, and faithful likeness of the original model“ (WL, KSA 1, 880). The concept of the leaf gets its shape just by letting the individual differences down, because they are not conceptualizable, that is they fall out of the conceptual domain. Hence, on the one

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such processes emerged precipitously [...]“ (Gerald Edelman, *The remembered Present. A Biological Theory of Consciousness*, New York 1989, 11).

hand, Nietzsche suggests a genealogy of concepts, which – according to the aphorism 354 – are a characteristic feature of consciousness, explained as a function of the primordial self-preservation instinct of man, who must communicate with one another in the social dimension for needs of help and protection. On the other hand, he denounces the consequence of that conceptualization, that is the thoroughly arbitrary and falsifying claim of the existence of primordial shapes, for example that of ‘the Leaf’ whose pattern all the single leaves would be formed upon.

Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that to Nietzsche consciousness, that is the collection of different conscious mental states, is always conceptual or – borrowing this expression from contemporary debate – it has always a conceptual content.<sup>5</sup> But since according to Nietzsche conscious mental states are only one part of human being’s cognitive activity, the remainder of this activity, that is the manifold unconscious mental states, should be supposed to have a nonconceptual content.

It is no coincidence that in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* Nietzsche claims that consciousness is only an accidental feature of representation (*Vorstellung*), and contends that Leibniz was the first to notice that (Cf. FW, KSA 3, 598). This implies that the range of our mental representations does not coincide with consciousness, and accordingly that mental representations do not possess only a conceptual content, as McDowell would have it.<sup>6</sup> Actually, Nietzsche holds that there are such too fine grained and subtle world aspects that cannot be representationally recovered by any conceptual and abstract semantic structure. This momentous argument, once it is recognized, allows the interpretation of Nietzsche’s theory to emphasize its implications for the contemporary debate about mind and consciousness and the structure of their content.

Katsafanas claims that in Nietzsche’s thought, conceptual features are the main characteristic of consciousness, while non-conceptual features are the main characteristic of unconscious states.<sup>7</sup> However, he seems to dwell too little upon the fact that the fine grained and rich nature of contents is what makes the content of many unconscious states non-conceptual. And according to Nietzsche, it is just that fine grained and rich nature that resists any attempt at classification. As Katsafanas construes Nietzsche’s thought, indeed, every mental state can be either conscious or unconscious, since the same perceptual experience might turn from being unconscious or non-conceptual into being conscious or conceptual, as soon as it is given an organization by expressible concepts and then it is articulated into words. But arguments can be made against the view that the content of conscious mental states could be the same as that possessed by unconscious states provided that the only difference is its conceptualization by consciousness. The specific feature of the content of unconscious mental states is just its being too rich, fine grained and subtle in such a way to escape any form of conceptualization. If we can be said to perceive a particular green shade only at a non-conceptual level, because it is a too fine grained and subtle content, then it is not possible for it to be also the content of a conceptual experience, just because it is not liable to conceptualization. And if we try

<sup>5</sup> See Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge 1996; cf. NL 11[145], KSA 13, 67 f.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noticing that Cf. Paul Katsafanas, *Nietzsche’s Theory of Mind*, in: *European Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (2005), 4.



to conceptualize it by recording it into the ‚bottle-green‘ or ‚olive-green‘ categories, we are going to simplify it or, as Nietzsche would put it, to falsify it somehow, betraying its being such and such a rich individual perception.

In the same way, Evans reasoned that there is such a fine grained level of the world that it escapes concepts, notwithstanding that it can be perceived in a non-conceptual way.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Evans argued for the existence of a non-conceptual content, suggesting that our cognition is such to have a representative content of its own, although it is not conceptualizable.

Otherwise, McDowell defends the view that an experience endowed with a non-conceptual content could never constitute a true cognitive activity, since experience must always have a conceptual content. He reasoned that the fine grained features of, say, perceptual color experiences could be arranged by the use of demonstratives, which is grounded in the individual sample's occurrence we can always refer to by such an expression as ‚that shade‘.<sup>9</sup> Were that not the case, it would be not an experience at all, but only a blind intuition that would prove thoroughly useless for cognition.<sup>10</sup> McDowell concedes that there could be concepts that show to have various degrees of determination, but they are anyway to be regarded as concepts.

Instead, Nietzsche can be supposed not to accept this argument. To him the concept as such has a simplifying function that is satisfied by removing the differences, that is the individual and unrepeatable particularities. Therefore, the concept cannot even retain the fine grained and individual characters of the intuitive impressions that qualify as being considered non-conceptual. Nietzsche's considerations in *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne* about what he calls ‚plötzliche Eindrücke‘ as well as about the ‚intuitive metaphors‘ might be considered as suggesting the existence of unconscious perceptual cognitive states. Indeed he claims that these intuitive metaphors are individual. Therefore they escape any form of recording or literally any registering into a repertoire (‚Rubricieren‘) that is conceptual and show a „starre Regelmässigkeit“, a „Kastenordnung“ and the „Reihenfolgen der Rangklasse“ (WL, KSA 1, 882).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 122, 154.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 57 f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*, 54 f. Nietzsche's theory can be construed to meet the criticism Crane addressed to the notion of conceptual content as it was worked out by McDowell. Crane claims that McDowell takes the conceptual content to be the same as the linguistic content, so that the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual contents depends on having a language or not. On the contrary, Crane argues that it is possible to have a concept of X without having the related linguistic structure, rather merely having only an idea that individuates that kind of X. That being the case, McDowell's argument that the green shade is conceptually graspable by referring to it as ‚that shade‘ derives from the fallacy of identifying conceptual and linguistic content. ‚That shade‘ is only a linguistic expression that does not possess any of those properties one can ascribe to a concept, such as being liable to inference, being eventually recalled or imaged as that particular content and being an argument of reasoning once its experience is gone. According to Crane, the ‚that shade‘ expression does not allow to manage and reprocess the content it refers to except when a subject is presented with it. Therefore, a ‚that-‘ expression is nothing conceptual and accordingly it does not ensue from it that the experience of that particular green shade would fall under the conceptual domain. See Timothy Crane, *Elements of Mind. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford 2001, 152–155.

Nietzsche often refers to consciousness as something the instinct would oppose to. Consciousness would be made up of trials, mistakes, fatigue, while the instinct would be embodying the perfection, the thorough naturalness of an action (cf. NL 15[25], KSA 13, 421). Nietzsche seems to use it elsewhere similarly as it does in the case of the perfect mathematician who „employs his combinations unconsciously“ (NL 14[111], *ibid.* 288).

Accordingly conscious states are simply those the subject learn something through such as the warcraft for the soldier, the combination of symbols for the mathematician or the driving skills for a young man. During his learning the subject cannot but paying attention to what he does every time he does it, making errors and learning hardly from his own mistakes. But when he learns something in a perfect way, he will do it without thinking about it, that is unconsciously or instinctively. The unconscious should be intended as something like an automatic process which could not take place were it not preceded by such a learning through trial and errors stages as that described by Nietzsche as ‚Bewusstwerden‘. Hence unconscious states stem from conscious and attention driven states, but they are also always able to change into conscious states as soon as what is done in an automatic and instinctive way changes from being implicit into being explicit.

But it is necessary to emphasize that this kind of the unconscious has apparently nothing to do with those unconscious mental activities Nietzsche singles out at a mainly perceptual level which avoid any form of conscious conceptualization and categorization because of their individual and subtle characteristics (Cf. NL 11[113], KSA 13, 53 f.; NL 2[95], KSA 12, 108). In that case it is not a matter of either internalizing something by learning until it becomes automatic or making explicit something implicit as it could happen with the grammatical rules. For instance, in JGB 20 Nietzsche refers to the „grammatischen Funktionen“ as „unbewusste Herrschaft und Führung“ as just something implicit which becomes conscious as soon as it is explicated, for example, in grammar books, wherein some experts, the grammarians, state explicitly the rules and the structures every subject already implicitly complies with without being aware of them. That qualifies as the only case for which Anderson’s interpretation could be accepted, according to which to Nietzsche concepts are unconscious in the same way the grammatical functions are.<sup>11</sup> But that interpretation is not to overlook that there are some inner and outer perceptions that can never be the content of conscious states since they are not conceptualizable and linguistically communicable. And the fact that these perceptions are not selected by conscious mental activity does not imply that they do not exist. They do exist even though at a non-conceptual unconscious level.

It is in this context that this paper tries to show how Nietzsche’s theory of mind admits of a non-conceptual perceptual level to obtain. Making reference again to the aphorism 375 in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, it is possible to argue that taking consciousness only as an accident of representations means to acknowledge the existence of unconscious representations, that is of mental states that have a content, which make them representations, even though they are unconscious given the non-conceptual characteristics of their content. That argument implies that perception, which is mainly an unconscious representation, is necessarily requested for a cognitive process to obtain (Cf. FW, KSA 3,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. R. Lanier Anderson, *Sensualism and Unconscious Representations. Nietzsche’s Account of Knowledge*, in: *International Studies in Philosophy*, 34 (2005), 95–117.

559). As far as this issue is concerned, Anderson goes as far as arguing for a ‚Nietzschean sensualism‘ by the claim that Nietzsche’s theory of knowledge grants priority to the „unconscious sensory intuitions“ that grasp the rich and fine grained nature of sensory matter, which otherwise just because of these two characteristics is out of reach for conscious experience, whose content turns out to be an incomplete and limited rearrangement of what experience attains nevertheless by means of the sensory intuitions themselves.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, this paper tried to show that Nietzsche assumes the existence of unconscious mental states that are different from and irreducible to consciousness, which in turn does not coincide *tout court* with the mind as it is construed by Descartes. Being conscious is a property that is shared by some mental states, indeed many but not all of them, which coincide with what is usually called mind. This implies that not only the mind is no more identified with the Cartesian *res cogitans*, but also that mental states are manifold and show to possess various characteristics, which ultimately prove to be irreducible to one another.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Anderson, *Sensualism and Unconscious Representations*.

