



Inquiry

An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy

ISSN: 0020-174X (Print) 1502-3923 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/sinq20>

Nietzsche on the Nature of the Unconscious

Paul Katsafanas

To cite this article: Paul Katsafanas (2015) Nietzsche on the Nature of the Unconscious, *Inquiry*, 58:3, 327-352, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2013.855658](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2013.855658)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2013.855658>



Published online: 08 Jan 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 844



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Nietzsche on the Nature of the Unconscious

PAUL KATSAFANAS

Boston University, USA

(Received 28 May 2013; accepted 12 August 2013)

ABSTRACT *This paper argues that Nietzsche develops a novel and compelling account of the distinction between conscious and unconscious mental states: he argues that conscious mental states are those with conceptual content, whereas unconscious mental states are those with nonconceptual content. I show that Nietzsche's puzzling claim that consciousness is 'superficial' and 'falsifying' can be given a straightforward explanation if we accept this understanding of the conscious/unconscious distinction. I originally defended this view in my 'Nietzsche's Theory of Mind: Consciousness and Conceptualization' (2005, *European Journal of Philosophy* 13: 1–31); since then, the view has come under criticism on several fronts. Brian Leiter and others suggest that there is not enough textual evidence for the view. In addition, Leiter, Mattia Riccardi and Tsarina Doyle argue that, rather than aligning the conscious/unconscious distinction with the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction, Nietzsche endorses a higher-order thought model of consciousness. Riccardi also objects that Nietzsche must treat some unconscious mental states as conceptual. In this essay, I defend the interpretation in light of these objections. I provide new textual evidence for the interpretation, show that Nietzsche extracted aspects of the view from Schopenhauer's work on consciousness, consider the possibility that Nietzsche endorses a higher-order thought theory, and respond to Riccardi's objection.*

I. Introduction

In a list of the most puzzling claims made by Nietzsche, pride of place might well be given to his idea that consciousness is necessarily superficial and falsifying. Nietzsche writes, 'Due to the nature of *animal consciousness*, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world generalized and made common.'¹ He tells us that consciousness is a

Correspondence Address: Paul Katsafanas, Boston University, Philosophy, 745 Commonwealth Avenue, Room 534, Boston, MA 02446, USA. Email: pkatsa@bu.edu

¹Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354.

‘simplifying apparatus’;² it ‘is presented only with a selection of experiences—experiences, furthermore, that have all been simplified, made easy to survey and grasp, thus falsified’.³ For these reasons, Nietzsche maintains that consciousness ‘involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization’.⁴

What does Nietzsche mean by these claims? Why and in what sense does consciousness render our experiences superficial and falsifying? I have argued that we could explain these claims by investigating Nietzsche’s account of the conscious/unconscious distinction.⁵ In particular, I argued that Nietzsche endorses a novel view of consciousness: he argues that conscious mental states have conceptual content, whereas unconscious mental states have nonconceptual content. Nietzsche understands concepts as generalizations from experience; accordingly, I argued, any conceptual mental state will be a generalized or superficial version of a nonconceptual state. Moreover, because concepts have their meanings determined in holistic fashion, and because no one system of concepts is best or uniquely correct, pressing nonconceptual content into a conceptual framework will distort or falsify that content.

While this interpretation provides a straightforward explanation of the way in which conscious thought is superficial and falsifying, it has come under criticism. Brian Leiter and others have suggested that there is not enough textual evidence for the view. In addition, Leiter, Mattia Riccardi, and Tsarina Doyle have argued that, rather than aligning the conscious/unconscious distinction with the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction, Nietzsche endorses a higher-order thought theory of consciousness.⁶ According to this theory, a mental state is conscious when it is the intentional object of a higher-order, unconscious mental state. Riccardi has also objected that Nietzsche must treat some unconscious mental states as conceptual. If this were right, then my account of the reasons for which consciousness falsifies would need to be rethought.

In this essay, I defend the claim that Nietzsche aligns the conscious/unconscious distinction with the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction in light of these objections. The structure of the essay is as follows. Responding to the criticism that I did not provide enough textual evidence for the interpretation, Sections II and III offer extensive discussions of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on conceptual thought. In particular, I argue that Nietzsche develops his ideas about consciousness by drawing on Schopenhauer’s distinctions between conceptual and nonconceptual mental

²Nietzsche, *Writings 2, Kritische Studienausgabe* 11:34[46].

³Nietzsche, *Writings 30, Kritische Studienausgabe* 11:37[4].

⁴Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354.

⁵Katsafanas, ‘Nietzsche’s Theory of Mind’.

⁶Leiter, ‘Nietzsche’s Theory of the Will’; Leiter, ‘Katsafanas on Nietzsche on Consciousness’; Riccardi, ‘Nietzsche on the Superficiality’; Doyle, ‘Nietzsche, Consciousness’.

states. In light of this new textual evidence, Sections IV and V explain how Nietzsche can account for both conceptual, conscious and nonconceptual, unconscious versions of perceptions, beliefs, emotions, and processes of reasoning. Section VI provides additional grounds for thinking that Nietzsche would align the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction with the conscious/unconscious distinction. Section VII investigates the possibility that Nietzsche endorses a higher-order thought theory of consciousness; I argue that, rather than serving as a competitor to my interpretation, the higher-order thought theory can be seen as a *consequence* of the idea that conscious thoughts are conceptual. Finally, Section VIII critiques Riccardi's claim that unconscious thoughts can be conceptual. In light of these arguments, Section IX concludes that Nietzsche does, indeed, analyze the conscious/unconscious distinction in terms of the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction.

II. Conscious Thinking as Conceptually Articulated

Nietzsche's most explicit and detailed discussion of the nature of consciousness comes in a section from the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, in which he makes several interesting claims. He begins by noting that consciousness is not an essential mark of the mental:

We could think, feel, will, remember, and also 'act' in every sense of the term, and yet none of this would have to 'enter our consciousness' (as one says figuratively). All of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror; and still today, the predominant part of our lives actually unfolds without this mirroring—of course including our thinking, willing, and feeling lives. . . .⁷

Nietzsche's talk of seeing mental life in a mirror suggests that he associates consciousness with some form of introspective awareness.⁸ However, this truism is only the beginning of an account of the unconscious: everyone agrees that unconscious states lie outside of awareness, but there is massive disagreement about *why* and *in what respect* these states are introspectively inaccessible. Let us examine Nietzsche's stance on these issues.

Having associated consciousness with introspective awareness, Nietzsche goes on in *The Gay Science* to note that this awareness (or 'mirroring') is not

⁷Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354. There are a number of other sections in which Nietzsche discusses the existence of unconscious mental states. Some of the more notable ones are: *Daybreak* 115, 119, 129, *Gay Science* 11, 333, 355, *Beyond Good and Evil* 20, 32, 191, 192, 230, *Genealogy of Morality* II and III, *Twilight of the Idols* VI.3–5, *Ecce Homo* II.9, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 12:5 [55], 12:9[106], 12:10[137], 13:11[83], 13:11[113], 13:11[145], 13:14[144], 13:14[145].

⁸Additionally, the talk of mirroring might suggest doubling of mental states. I return to this point below.

necessary for thinking, willing and feeling. So, he wonders, ‘*To what end does consciousness exist at all when it is basically superfluous?*’ His answer is puzzling:

it seems to me that the strength and subtlety of consciousness is always related to a person’s (or animal’s) *ability to communicate*; and the ability to communicate, in turn, to the *need to communicate* . . . *consciousness in general has developed only under the pressure of the need to communicate* . . . that our actions, thoughts, feelings, and movements—at least some of them—even enter into our consciousness is the result of a terrible ‘must’ which has ruled over man for a long time: as the most endangered animal, he *needed* help and protection. . . .⁹

This is his second point: consciousness develops so as to fulfill a need for communication.

Now, in itself this claim is rather bizarre. Many animals that are presumably incapable of introspective awareness nevertheless communicate quite effectively with one another: the bee communicates the location of pollen, the ant signals the approach of danger. Communication of this form does not require introspective awareness. So Nietzsche must have something else in mind—he must intend something more than the forms of communication that are universal in the animal kingdom.

In fact, it shortly becomes clear that Nietzsche has in mind *linguistic communication*:

Man, like every living being, thinks continually without knowing it [denkt immerfort, aber weiss es nicht]; the thinking that rises to *consciousness* is only the smallest part of all this—the most superficial and worst part—for only this conscious thinking *occurs in words, which is to say signs of communication* [denn allein dieses bewußte Denken geschieht in Worten, das heisst in Mittheilungszeichen], and this fact uncovers the origin of consciousness. In brief, the development of language and the development of consciousness (*not* of Reason but merely of the way Reason enters consciousness) go hand in hand. . . .¹⁰

The central claim in this passage is that conscious thinking, and only conscious thinking, occurs in words.¹¹

What does it mean for conscious thinking to occur in words? Nietzsche understands words as ‘acoustical signs [Tonzeichen] for

⁹Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰Ibid. Emphasis in original.

¹¹Nietzsche begins to develop this view at least as early as *Daybreak*. See Nietzsche, *Daybreak* 115, 257.

concepts'.¹² That is, words express or signify concepts. As a result, there can be no words without concepts, for words just are expressions of concepts. Nor can there be concepts without words: 'concepts [are] possible only when there are words' [Begriffe, erst möglich, wenn es Worte giebt].¹³ Thus, for Nietzsche words and concepts go hand in hand; to think in words is to think by means of concepts.¹⁴ Accordingly, in writing that conscious thinking occurs in words, Nietzsche is claiming that conscious thinking is conceptually articulated. In other words, conscious mental states have conceptual content. Further, since Nietzsche claims that conscious states, and only conscious states, have conceptual content, it follows that unconscious mental states do not have conceptual content; unconscious states must have a type of nonconceptual content. Accordingly, the distinction between conscious and unconscious states is coextensive with the distinction between mental states with conceptual content and those with nonconceptual content.

But what is it for a mental state to have conceptual content? First, a word on contents. Contents have conditions of adequacy or correctness. These conditions are fulfilled when the intentional object of the mental state has the properties that the content represents it as having.

To claim that a state has conceptual content is to make a claim about the *kind* of content that the state has. In particular, it is to make two claims about this content: first, the content comprises simpler parts, namely concepts; second, these concepts are structured or composed in a certain way in order to constitute the content. For example, consider the belief *that the peacock is turquoise*. The content of this belief appears to be conceptually articulated; the content appears to comprise two concepts, <peacock> and <turquoise>, which are structured in a certain way, namely in a subject-predicate fashion, in order to form the belief.

If a mental state has conceptual content, then a person who lacked the relevant concepts could not entertain the mental state. For example, someone who lacked the concept <peacock> or <turquoise> could not believe *that the peacock is turquoise*, for she would lack the resources needed to formulate the belief.

By contrast, consider a *perception* of a turquoise peacock, and suppose that the content of this perception is not conceptually articulated. Arguably, someone who lacks the concepts <peacock> and <turquoise> could still have

¹²Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 268.

¹³Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 11:25[168].

¹⁴In connecting words and concepts, Nietzsche is drawing on Schopenhauer, who discusses this issue repeatedly. See, for example, *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* §26, where Schopenhauer writes that concepts are not perceptible, and so 'would slip entirely from consciousness and be absolutely of no avail for the thought operations . . . if they were not fixed and retained in our senses by arbitrary signs. Such signs are words.' He goes on to note that words 'always express universal representations, concepts.'

a perception that represents the turquoise peacock; for example, a newborn baby can look at a turquoise peacock, and her perception will represent it. The newborn lacks the concepts <peacock> and <turquoise>, so the content of her perception cannot be conceptual; the constituents of her perception's content cannot be concepts. Nevertheless, the newborn perceives the turquoise peacock, and her perception has definite, structured content, for her perception is different from her perception of a brown peacock, and different again from her perception of a turquoise flower.

To say that a state has conceptual content, then, is to say that the state's content has concepts as constituents, so that entertaining the mental state requires possession of the relevant concepts. To say that a mental state has nonconceptual content is to say that the state's content does not have concepts as constituents, so that entertaining the mental state does not require possession of concepts. And Nietzsche's surprising claim is this: conscious mental states have conceptual content, whereas unconscious states have nonconceptual content.

Of course, this discussion raises some questions. First, the view that I have just attributed to Nietzsche might seem anachronistic: the last twenty years or so have seen a profusion of work on the conceptual or nonconceptual character of various mental phenomena, but could *Nietzsche* really be concerned with these questions? Moreover, do Nietzsche's brief remarks about consciousness and language really suffice for attributing to him the view that conscious thoughts are conceptual? I address this point in Section III, showing that the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction was discussed explicitly and at length by Schopenhauer; in developing his views on consciousness and conceptualization, Nietzsche is building upon these discussions. Second, the idea of conceptual and nonconceptual content places a great deal of weight upon the notion of a *concept*, so we need to understand just what Nietzsche takes a concept to be. We turn to this in Section IV.

III. Schopenhauer on the Conceptual/Nonconceptual Distinction

At the heart of Kant's theory of mind is the claim that all cognition involves the deployment of concepts. He argues that 'the cognition of every, at least human, understanding is a cognition through concepts'.¹⁵ As he reiterates, 'thinking is cognition through concepts'.¹⁶ All thought is conceptual thought. And a number of neo-Kantians who were prominent in the nineteenth century echo this claim: F. A. Lange, for example, believes empirical phy-

¹⁵Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A68/B93.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, A69/B94.

biology proves that data from sense impressions are structured to form a perception, in which the structuring involves conceptualization.¹⁷

Schopenhauer thoroughly rejects this Kantian orthodoxy. He writes: ‘Kant’s great mistake . . . [was that] he did not properly separate perceptual knowledge from abstract knowledge; from this there arose a terrible confusion.’¹⁸ Put simply, Schopenhauer’s claim is that Kant was right about abstract knowledge but wrong about perceptual knowledge. Abstract knowledge is conceptually articulated in the way that Kant describes, whereas perception is nonconceptual. And, indeed, abstract knowledge is generated by rendering the nonconceptual content of perceptual states conceptual. Let me explain.

Schopenhauer is drawn to the view that there are nonconceptual mental states because he starts with the idea that only human beings have conceptual capacities: ‘concepts form a peculiar class, existing only in the mind of man, and differing entirely from the representations of perception’.¹⁹ This is why he finds it important to distinguish states with nonconceptual content from states with conceptual content: the former will be entertained by both human beings and the other animals, while the latter will be unique to human beings. Since animals perceive the world, but do not possess conceptual capacities, the content of perceptions must be nonconceptual. The same goes for feelings: a hedgehog can fear a dog, a moose can have an urge to protect its young; but these feelings cannot be dependent on the possession of concepts. Schopenhauer puts it succinctly: ‘the animal feels and perceives; man, in addition, thinks and knows’.²⁰

All animals enjoy an awareness of the world, the capacity to feel, and—we see below—even some knowledge of causal connections. These mental phenomena are nonconceptual. Human beings—the animals with the capacity for concepts—supplement these nonconceptual forms of awareness with conceptually articulated thinking. This, Schopenhauer tells us, makes possible a new form of thinking: *reflection*, which involves the capacity for abstract thought.

Schopenhauer introduces the notion of reflection as follows:

Another faculty of knowledge has appeared in man alone of all the inhabitants of the earth; an entirely new consciousness has arisen, which with very appropriate and significant accuracy is called *reflection*. For it is in fact a reflected appearance, a thing derived from this knowledge of perception, yet it has assumed a fundamentally different nature and character.²¹

¹⁷Lange, ‘History of Materialism,’ II, §3.

¹⁸Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, I, 437.

¹⁹Ibid., I, 39.

²⁰Ibid., I, 37.

²¹Ibid., I, 36.

So reflection is a new capacity, which gives our minds a different nature. How so? Well, Schopenhauer defines concepts as ‘representations that are abstract not perceptive, universal not individual in time and space’.²² Concepts are *abstract* or *general*, non-individual representations. Whereas my perception represents an individual, particular tree in front of me, my concept <tree> represents something abstract, something general. As concepts represent abstractions, they are independent of particulars. Thus, mental states with conceptual contents are no longer tethered to perceptually present objects; they can range over objects distant in time and space; they can concern relations between abstract objects; and so forth.

Accordingly, conceptual thought (reflection) is not anchored to determinate perceived objects: in addition to gazing at the tree directly in front of me, I can contemplate the relationships between trees and shrubs, I can think of elms and maples, I can ponder the fact that trees are members of the plant kingdom. And more: in freeing us from perceptually present objects, this new form of consciousness gives us the capacity to contemplate the future and the past. I can think of the way this tree will look in the winter; I can remember how another tree looked last spring. In general, conceptual thought enables us to entertain mental states that are not anchored to perceptually present objects.

The ability to entertain conceptual thoughts gives rise to many new capacities, such as the capacity to have desires that relate to the distant future (e.g. a desire for one’s great grandchildren to have good lives), abstract concepts (e.g. a desire to understand physics), plans (e.g. a desire to write a great book by the time one is fifty), and so on.²³ Not only does conceptual thought enable a new range of desires and capacities for temporal planning, it also engenders (or arises together with) language: ‘The animal communicates his feelings and moods by gesture and sound; man communicates thought to another, or conceals it from him, by language. Speech is the first product and the necessary instrument of his faculty of reason. . . .’²⁴

In sum, then, Schopenhauer claims that the acquisition of concepts, and the concomitant possibility of thoughts with conceptual contents, is what leads to the profound differences between the minds of human beings and those of the other animals. Reflection is the ability to have mental states that are not anchored to perceptually present objects; entertaining these states enables us to conceive of general or abstract objects, to contemplate the past and future, and to communicate in a new way.

²²Ibid., I, 40.

²³Ibid., I, 36.

²⁴Ibid., I, 37.

IV. Conceptual and Nonconceptual Perceptions

In Schopenhauer, then, we have a divide between two kinds of mental states: those with nonconceptual content and those with conceptual content. The latter are involved in all episodes of reflection; the former are involved in more rudimentary forms of thinking, such as perceiving, feeling, and—I return to this below—certain forms of knowing.

Nietzsche's model of consciousness develops out of these ideas. I have suggested that Nietzsche identifies conscious mental states as those with conceptual content, and unconscious states as those with nonconceptual content. So, for example, whereas Schopenhauer treats all perception as nonconceptual, Nietzsche distinguishes two different forms of perception: one involving nonconceptual contents, the other involving conceptual contents. The former are unconscious, the latter conscious.

How are we to draw this distinction between nonconceptual and conceptual perception? In making sense of Nietzsche's ideas, it is crucial to understand that perceptions with nonconceptual content still have definite, structured content—just not *conceptually* structured or articulated content.²⁵ Nietzsche's insight, garnered from Schopenhauer, is that the sense organs just by themselves generate perceptions with determinately structured content. For Kantians, this means that the output of the sense organs is conceptually articulated. Nietzsche, however, follows Schopenhauer in claiming that perceptual content could be determinately structured in a way that does not involve concepts; there is no need to attribute conceptual capacities to a being in order to make sense of the fact that the being has perceptions with determinate content. This is an insight that Schopenhauer stressed: the other animals perceive the world, but lack concepts; thus, perceptions with nonconceptual yet determinate content must be possible. These are Nietzsche's unconscious perceptions.

So conscious perceptions do not differ from unconscious perceptions in that the former have structured content while the latter lack structured content; rather, they differ in the kind of structure that they have.

What, exactly, is the difference between the conceptual structure of conscious thought and the nonconceptual structure of unconscious thought? In his notebooks, Nietzsche claims that we sometimes 'see things coarsely and made equal [grob und gleich gemacht die Dinge sehen]', where this type of seeing involves 'subsuming [subsumiren]' and 'schematizing [schematisiren]' the perceived object.²⁶ Nietzsche elaborates upon this idea in his published works, writing that our conscious experience presents 'a surface- and sign-

²⁵See, for example, the following, where Nietzsche notes that a mental state 'that removes itself from our consciousness and consequently *becomes unclear can* thus be perfectly clear in itself [was aus unserem Bewußtsein sich entfernt und deshalb *dunkel wird, kann* deshalb an sich vollkommen klar sein]. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 12:5[55]. Emphasis in original.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 13:14[152].

world, a world generalized and made common [eine Oberflächen- und Zeichenwelt, eine verallgemeinerte, eine vergemeinerte Welt].²⁷ Again, he writes: ‘Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image [Bild] that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is new and different.²⁸ He goes on to provide an example, writing that we often ‘do not see a tree exactly and completely with reference to leaves, twigs, color, and form; it is so very much easier for us simply to improvise an approximation of a tree [ein Ungefähr von Baum hin zu phantasieren].’²⁹

Nietzsche’s idea is that our perceptions sometimes represent objects in a way that is not sensitive to all of the detail of the object, but is instead sensitive only to the general type to which the object belongs. This type of perception represents the tree as an instance of the concept <tree>, rather than representing it in its full detail; it does so by emphasizing certain general features of trees at the expense of the individual details of this particular tree.

Perceptual content would be conceptual if the perceived object were represented as an instance of some concept, that is, as a token of some type. And this is just what the remarks above suggest: some of our perceptions represent their objects as instantiating certain concepts. However, as the passages quoted above make clear, not all of our perceptions do so;³⁰ some perceptions represent their objects in a definite way, but do not represent them as instantiating concepts.

This gives us a way to make sense of Nietzsche’s remarks: unconscious perceptions have nonconceptual content, in the sense that they represent their objects in a definite way, but do not represent them as instantiating concepts; conscious perceptions have conceptual content, in the sense that they represent their objects as instantiating concepts.

Recently, there has been a wealth of empirical work on this kind of phenomenon, which psychologists call *categorical perception*. Categorical perception is seeing an object as a token of some type, an instance of some category. A number of studies have demonstrated that ‘categories’, as psychologists call them, or ‘concepts’, as philosophers would call them, influence the observer’s perception. I give a few examples.

First, consider gestalt shifts. The duck-rabbit is a nice illustration. Upon first perceiving this image, one might see nothing but a curved line. However, a moment later the image snaps into the picture of a duck; and if you squint a bit, it shifts to a rabbit. There is some resistance experienced in trying to shift these perceptions; once you have seen the image as a duck, it is hard to see it as a curved line or as a rabbit. A natural way to interpret

²⁷Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354.

²⁸Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 192.

²⁹Ibid. 192.

³⁰Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe* 13:14[152]; *Beyond Good and Evil* 192.

this phenomenon is that an element of one's conceptual repertoire is deployed, and sensory stimuli are fitted into its framework. Put differently: if you did not have the concepts <duck> and <rabbit>, you would continue to see nothing but a curved line.

The impact of concepts on conscious perception is also apparent in the ways in which experts and novices in particular domains perceive objects: an agent with command of the English language will consciously see this page (or hear these sentences) quite differently than someone who has no knowledge of English. (Compare, for example, the way that you might see or hear a paper written in Cyrillic or Greek.) An expert geologist will see the cliff's layers of rock differently than will the casual hiker. The mechanic will see the car engine in a different way than will the ordinary driver. These phenomena have been tested and confirmed; there are no questions about *whether* they occur, only about how pervasive they are and what the mechanism for their occurrence is. As Goldstone and Hendrickson conclude in a recent literature survey,

Language, at both phoneme and word levels, tends to regularize object descriptions. Giving multiple objects the same label increases their subjective similarity, particularly if the objects are well fit by the label. More generally, the existence of CP [categorical perception] makes the theoretically important point that people organize their world into categories that, in turn, alter the appearance of this perceived world.³¹

Nietzsche believes that what is today called categorical perception is a pervasive phenomenon.

So for Nietzsche, there are two kinds of perceptions. Some perceptions—the unconscious ones—involves a mere discriminatory ability. Others—the conscious ones—involves a classifying awareness that presents the perceived object as a token of some type.

Notice that, in drawing this distinction, we must credit Nietzsche with a certain view of concept-possession. In particular, Nietzsche must maintain that concepts are more than mere discriminatory capacities. For example, one does not possess or apply the concept <food> merely because one is able to discriminate edible and inedible items. So Nietzsche would not credit an ant or an amoeba with the concept <food> merely because it reacts differently to edible and inedible items.

Concepts must be more than mere discriminatory abilities. For Nietzsche, concepts are *classificatory* abilities; possessing a concept involves the ability to classify various objects as falling under the concept. For example, possessing the concept <food> involves the ability to classify ice cream, sushi and other types of food as falling under the concept. This might seem like a mere discriminatory ability, but it is not, for the following reasons: concepts are

³¹Goldstone and Hendrickson, 'Categorical Perception', 75.

systematically related to other concepts, and concepts can be employed in nonperceptual contexts.³² This is what is meant by saying that concepts are classificatory capacities. An ant, or an amoeba for that matter, can distinguish food and nonfood, in the sense that it can respond differently to the two types of object. But a human being can do something more. First, she can relate the concept <food> to other concepts, for her concept <food> is part of a whole system of concepts that stand in various relations to one another. Second, these concepts can be employed in nonperceptual contexts. A human being can relate concepts even when tokens of the concepts are not present: she can think ‘sushi is a type of food’, ‘food is nourishing’, ‘some food tastes better than other food’, and so on. As we saw above, this is what Schopenhauer calls *abstract* thinking, by which he means thinking that is not anchored to a perceptual context, thinking that involves more than mere discrimination. For Nietzsche, then, concepts are classificatory capacities, in the sense that concepts have systematic structures and can be employed in nonperceptual contexts.³³

In sum, Nietzsche’s account of concept possession involves three features: a person possesses a concept F if and only if she can discriminate instances of F (*a* is F, or *Fa*), she can employ F in conjunction with other concepts (*Fa* and *Ga*, all F’s are G’s, etc.), and she can employ F when instances of F are not perceptually present (F’s are G’s, etc.). There is nothing unusual in this; it is a fairly standard account of concepts, requiring discriminatory abilities, appreciation of some interconceptual relations, and the capacity for abstract thought.

So Nietzsche’s claim that there are both conceptual and nonconceptual perceptual contents amounts to this: some perceptions involve a classifying awareness, which presents objects as instances of concepts that the perceiver can employ in abstract thought; other perceptions involve awareness of objects which does not present objects as instances of concepts that the perceiver can employ in abstract thought. Or, put differently, conscious perceptions involve a classifying awareness, whereas unconscious perceptions involve only a discriminatory ability, only a perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment.

Thus, Nietzsche’s claim that conscious perception takes the form of words makes perfect sense: conscious perception has conceptual content, for

³²This is why Nietzsche so frequently mentions concepts and ‘systems’ or ‘schemas’ in the same breath. *Beyond Good and Evil* 20 is characteristic: Nietzsche notes that ‘concepts are not anything capricious or autonomously evolving, but grow up in connection and relationship with each other’, and he goes on to discuss ‘the innate systematic structure and relationship of these concepts’. Cf. *Kritische Studienausgabe* 11:26[61], 12:6[11], 12:9[144], 13:14[152], *Kritische Studienausgabe* 12:5[22]/*Writings* 110, 12:9[106]/161.

³³The fact that understanding one concept requires understanding its place in a system of concepts is discussed by Simon, ‘Das Problem des Bewusstseins’; Abel, ‘Bewußtsein—Sprache—Natur’, 22–7; Constâncio, ‘On Consciousness’.

conscious perception involves categorization or classification of the perceived object, whereas unconscious perception, lacking any such conceptualization of the perceived object, has nonconceptual content.³⁴ And indeed, we can see this view at work in *Beyond Good and Evil* 268. In that passage, which begins with the question ‘what is commonness [Gemeinheit]?’ Nietzsche writes, ‘words are acoustical signs [Tonzeichen] for concepts; concepts, however, are more or less definite symbols [or ‘pictorial symbols’, Bildzeichen] for frequently recurring and associated sensations, for groups of sensations’.³⁵ Words pick out or express concepts; concepts are symbols or signs that pick out what is common in various particular perceptions. For example, the word ‘tree’ expresses the concept <tree>, and the concept <tree> picks out (let’s say) tall plants with a wooden trunk. In *Beyond Good and Evil* 268, Nietzsche suggests that one possesses such a concept only if one can employ it in thought and communicate it—and he emphasizes that when our experiences are partially constituted by this concept, they will be rendered more ‘common’. They will be generalized or superficial versions of the originally unconscious experiences.

V. Extending the Model to Other Types of Mental States

So far, my argument that Nietzsche identifies the conscious/unconscious distinction with the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction has focused on perceptual states. But Nietzsche wants to extend this account to other kinds of mental states as well.³⁶ If my reading is correct, we should be able to find nonconceptual and conceptual analogues of feelings, willings, thoughts, and so forth. For reasons of space, I treat beliefs, processes of thought and emotions; I elide the discussion of willing, which raises many complications.

³⁴There are a number of passages that support this interpretation. Perhaps the most important ones are *Gay Science* 354, *Beyond Good and Evil* 192, 268 and *Kritische Studienausgabe* (13:14 [152]), parts of which have been discussed above. See also *Gay Science* 114, *Beyond Good and Evil* 230 and *Kritische Studienausgabe* (12:9[106]), which present similar accounts. In his published works, Nietzsche rarely engages in explicit discussions of the distinction between conscious and unconscious states; I therefore take it to be of the first importance that these few explicit discussions, such as *Gay Science* 354, strongly support the interpretation that I am advancing.

³⁵The claim that concepts are *Bildzeichen* (in Kaufmann’s translation, ‘image signs’) might suggest that Nietzsche thinks of concepts as mental images (thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point). This is compatible with my claim that concepts are classificatory capacities: Nietzsche may think that the activation of these classificatory capacities involves the tokening of a mental image. For example, when my concept <tree> is activated through my conscious perception of a tree, Nietzsche may think that I have a mental image of a tree. However, I hesitate to put too much weight on this term *Bildzeichen*, as this is its only occurrence in the entire *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. I suspect that rather than intending to convey any substantial philosophical point by using *Bildzeichen*, Nietzsche simply liked the sound of the *Tonzeichen/Bildzeichen* contrast.

³⁶Cf. Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354.

Let's start with beliefs and processes of thought. It might seem that these kinds of mental phenomena are necessarily conscious: will not believing, calculating and so forth be conceptual? I think we can gain some clarity on this point by considering Schopenhauer's treatment of this issue. Schopenhauer argues that there is a form of nonconceptual thinking, believing, and reasoning; he calls it 'intuitive knowledge'.

Intuitive knowledge is always valid only of the particular case, extends only to what is nearest, and there stops, since sensibility and understanding can really comprehend only one object at a time. Therefore every continuous, coordinated, and planned activity must start from fundamental principles, i.e. from an abstract knowledge, and must be guided in accordance therewith.³⁷

Intuitive knowledge is anchored to perceptually present objects, whereas abstract or conceptual knowledge is not. To illustrate this distinction, Schopenhauer contrasts an experienced billiards player with a scientist:

an experienced billiard-player can have a perfect knowledge of the laws of impact of elastic bodies on one another, merely in the understanding, merely for immediate perception, and with this he manages perfectly. Only the man who is versed in the science of mechanics, on the other hand, has a real rational knowledge of those laws, that is to say, a knowledge of them in the abstract.³⁸

Schopenhauer's billiards player can look at the position of the billiard balls, aim his cue, and make the shot. He does not articulate his knowledge conceptually; he acts in a less reflective, more automatic fashion. A nonhuman animal might do the same: when the squirrel gauges the distance to the next branch, leaps and steadies itself, it employs a form of thinking and reasoning; when the wolf coordinates with other members of its pack to track and capture the moose, it displays a form of thinking and believing. Or so, at any rate, Schopenhauer claims; this is what he has in mind when he writes that nonhuman animals have beliefs and knowledge of causal relationships. If we accept these characterizations, we can see a difference between conceptual and nonconceptual beliefs and judgments. This difference shows up in the fact that the nonconceptual beliefs and judgments are automatic and anchored to perceptually present objects, whereas conceptual beliefs and judgments are attention-consuming and can range across objects that are distant in time and space, as well as abstract objects.

³⁷Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, I, 53.

³⁸*Ibid.*, I, 56.

Moreover, Schopenhauer thinks we can see how these two forms of knowledge interact with one another in human beings:

it is remarkable that, in the first kind of activity, where one man alone is supposed to execute something in an uninterrupted course of action, rational knowledge, the application of reason, reflection, may often be even a hindrance to him. For example, in the case of billiards-playing, fencing, tuning an instrument, or singing, knowledge of perception must directly guide activity; passage through reflection makes it uncertain, since it divides the attention, and confuses the executant. Therefore, savages and uneducated persons, not very accustomed to thinking, perform many bodily exercises, fight with animals, shoot with bows and arrows and the like, with a certainty and rapidity never reached by the reflecting European, just because his deliberation makes him hesitate and hang back.³⁹

So conceptual thinking is attention-consuming and comparatively slow. Nonconceptual thinking, on the other hand, is automatic, fast and does not consume attention.⁴⁰ Although Nietzsche is far less explicit about this than Schopenhauer, we can assume that he has something similar in mind. The nonconceptual thoughts and beliefs are those that are manifest in skills and forms of relating to the world; the conceptual thoughts and beliefs are the ones that we articulate to ourselves in words.

So beliefs and thinking can come in both conceptual and nonconceptual variants. What about emotions and feelings? Here, the distinction seems even clearer. I have many emotions and feelings at the unconscious level; some aspects of them are conceptualized and thus conscious. The particular way in which they become conscious depends upon the concepts I possess. The same nagging ache might come to consciousness as the conceptualized emotion of grief, or bitter regret, or resentment, or loss, or sin, or dishonor. Nietzsche's reflections on the ways in which the unconscious feeling of bad conscience are conceptualized, in certain social contexts, as guilt, provides a clear indication of this.⁴¹

Finally, a word on conscious and unconscious motives. Again, I think the point is fairly clear. A wolf can have a desire to demonstrate subordination to the pack leader; a beaver can have an urge to build a dam. They hardly need to possess the concepts of subordination and dams to do so. In the case of

³⁹Ibid., I, 56.

⁴⁰There is an interesting analogy here with recent empirical work on consciousness, which treats conscious processes as resource-intensive and comparatively slow, whereas unconscious processes are typically automatic and fast. For helpful overviews, see Muraven and Baumeister, 'Self-Regulation and Depletion'; Hassin, Uleman, and Bargh, *New Unconscious*.

⁴¹See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* II. I discuss this case at length in Katsafanas, 'Nietzsche's Theory of Mind'.

human beings, we might contrast someone with an inchoate, unconscious desire to ingratiate himself with his boss with someone who consciously entertains an analogous desire.

VI. Why Align the Conscious/Unconscious Distinction with the Conceptual/Nonconceptual Distinction?

The previous section argued that it is coherent to distinguish between conceptual and nonconceptual mental states. But we still face a difficult question: why align consciousness and conceptualization? If Nietzsche were merely stipulating that we should use the word ‘conscious’ to refer to those states with conceptual contents, then his claim would be of limited interest. For we might accept the claim that mental states come in both conceptual and nonconceptual versions, and yet not see any reason to identify conscious states with conceptual states. We need independent reasons for doing so. And, in fact, Nietzsche has at least four such reasons: I address three of them here, turning to the fourth in the next section.

First, Nietzsche follows Schopenhauer in thinking that, while many animals have minds, only human beings are conscious.⁴² He also thinks that language, and thus conceptual vocabularies, are unique to human beings. Thus, the most obvious distinction between the minds of human beings and the minds of other animals is our ability to form conceptual states. If we are looking for a distinction in the mental, then, the natural place to draw it is between conceptual and nonconceptual states.

Second, and more importantly, on Nietzsche’s account conscious states are *accessible* to us in a way that unconscious states are not; in particular, they are *communicable*. Nietzsche links consciousness not only to language, but also to the need for communication. When a mental state becomes conscious, Nietzsche notes that it is ‘fixed’, and therefore capable of being ‘communicate[d] to others’.⁴³ The idea is that communicating a thought to another person requires conceptualizing the content of the mental state, for the content must be expressed linguistically, and so must be conceptually articulated. So, for example, if I happen to be perceiving a tree, and someone asks me what I am perceiving, I will say something like ‘I am perceiving a tree’; and this requires that the perceptual content be conceptualized, representing the tree as an instance of the concept <tree>.

Third, conceptualization enables a form of *introspective awareness*. Nonconceptual elements cannot be communicated to others: they cannot

⁴²Cf. Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 354. Or at least he *usually* does. *Gay Science* suggests that some nonhuman animals are conscious. It is important to note that when Schopenhauer and Nietzsche deny that nonhuman animals are conscious, they are not denying that nonhuman animals have experiences, affects and even forms of thought. Rather, they are claiming that when these mental events occur in animals that lack concepts, they occur nonconsciously.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 354.

be spoken. But the same point applies in the first-person case: if my state has not been conceptualized, I cannot communicate it to myself. We can see this even in relatively simple cases, such as wine tasting: an inexperienced drinker takes a sip of wine, and notices nothing more than a slightly bitter taste. An experienced drinker takes a sip of the same wine and notices flavors of cherry, earth and so forth. The experiences are in one sense the same: we can assume that the two drinkers have analogous olfactory and gustatory stimuli. However, they conceptualize these experiences in different ways: the expert, with his wealth of experience, can consciously discriminate among sensations in a way that the novice cannot. As Nietzsche puts it, ‘The “inner experience” first enters our consciousness after it has found a language that the individual *understands* ... i.e., a translation of a state into states *more familiar* to the individual’.⁴⁴ Arguably, the same thing happens with emotional states: a vague aching pain might be conceptualized as grief, remorse, sinfulness, and so on.

VII. Does Nietzsche Endorse a Higher-Order Thought Theory of Consciousness?

This brings us to a fourth, related point. Tsarina Doyle, Mattia Riccardi and Brian Leiter have recently argued that Nietzsche adopts a higher-order thought (HOT) theory of consciousness.⁴⁵ The HOT theory claims that an organism’s mental state *M* is conscious iff the organism has a non-inferential higher-order representation with the content that it is in *M*. For example, suppose I have desire to impress Claire. This desire will be conscious iff I have a non-inferential higher-order mental state with the content *that I desire to impress Claire*; otherwise, it will be unconscious. It is important to note that the higher-order state is typically unconscious. So, according to the HOT theory, a conscious state arises when two unconscious states combine in a certain way: one takes the other as its object. The presence of a second-order state with the appropriate content makes the first-order state conscious.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Nietzsche, *Writings* 271/*Kritische Studienausgabe* 13:15[90]. Consider the following passage, which suggests that making something conscious simplifies it: ‘[u]sing the same words is not enough to get people to understand each other: they have to use the same words for the same species of inner experiences too; ultimately, people have to have the same experience base’. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* 268.

⁴⁵Doyle, ‘Nietzsche, Consciousness’; Riccardi, ‘Nietzsche on the Superficiality’. Brian Leiter has offered this argument in a critique of my 2005 paper on his blog; see Leiter, ‘Katsafanas on Nietzsche on Consciousness’.

⁴⁶This also gives a natural account of introspection: I am introspectively aware of my perception when I have a third-order state that takes the second-order state as its object. The HOT theories come in several varieties: theorists differ on whether the higher-order representation should be treated as a *thought* or a *perception*; whether an *actual* higher-order representation is necessary for consciousness or only a *disposition* to have the higher-order representation in certain

Both Doyle and Riccardi believe the HOT theory is suggested by Nietzsche's association of consciousness with 'mirroring' in *Gay Science* 354 (quoted above): after all, the HOT theory maintains that consciousness requires a *doubling* of mental states (two unconscious states result in one conscious state).⁴⁷ Moreover, the higher-order thought will, so to speak, reflect or mirror the unconscious one (more precisely, the higher-order thought will take the lower-order thought as its object). Riccardi also argues that Nietzsche's 'description of one's being conscious in terms of the ability to "know" what distressed him, to "know" how he felt, to "know" what he thought' suggest this model.⁴⁸

Doyle, Riccardi and Leiter present the HOT theory as a *competitor* to my reading of Nietzsche: they suggest that if the HOT theory is true, then Nietzsche must reject the idea that the conscious/unconscious distinction is the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction.⁴⁹ In fact, though, the HOT theory is compatible with—and, on certain views, even a *consequence* of—the claim that conscious thought is conceptual. Let me explain.

Many proponents of HOT theory argue that forming higher-order thoughts requires conceptual capacities.⁵⁰ If consciousness requires higher-order thoughts, and higher-order thoughts have conceptual content, then having conscious states requires having conceptual states. Thus, Nietzsche would have good reason for thinking that consciousness requires conceptualization.⁵¹

There is one complication: strictly speaking, according to this model it would be the higher-order unconscious thought, rather than the lower-order conscious thought, that was conceptual. In other words, the conscious-making state, rather than the conscious state itself, would be conceptual. This is very close to Nietzsche's claim that conscious thinking is conceptual, but does not match perfectly. However, we can do still better: a certain version of the HOT theory does match perfectly, treating the conscious state itself as conceptual.

circumstances; and so on. These points will not be relevant for our purposes, so I pass over them here. Doyle and Riccardi both credit Nietzsche with the *thought*-based version: what makes a state conscious is not some form of inner perception, but instead the having of higher-order thoughts. Doyle, 'Nietzsche, Consciousness'; Riccardi, 'Nietzsche on the Superficiality'.

⁴⁷Nietzsche also speaks of mirroring in his notebooks; for example: 'Is the whole of conscious life perhaps only a reflected image [Spiegelbild]?' *Kritische Studienausgabe* 10: 24[16].

⁴⁸Riccardi, 'Nietzsche on the Superficiality', 8.

⁴⁹See, for example, Doyle, 'Nietzsche, Consciousness', 29.

⁵⁰Rosenthal, for example, claims that higher-order thoughts require conceptual resources, albeit 'relatively minimal' ones. However, some HOT theorists maintain that the HOTs that take as their objects *sensory states* do not require conceptual capacities. As Doyle puts it, 'proponents of higher order theory argue [that] higher order thoughts that accompany intentional states presuppose sophisticated conceptual abilities that require language in a way that higher order states that accompany sensory states do not'. Nietzsche would have to deny this, holding that all higher-order thoughts are conceptual. Rosenthal, *Consciousness and Mind*, 6; Doyle, 'Nietzsche, Consciousness', 21.

⁵¹To be clear, the reasoning in this paragraph would establish only that conscious thoughts are conceptual. It would not establish that unconscious thoughts are nonconceptual.

Rocco Gennaro argues for a version of HOT theory according to which the higher-order thought is incorporated into one conscious state: the conscious state is a composite state, which includes both the meta-thought and the original unconscious state.⁵² In other words, on this view the meta-thought is intrinsic to its target state. Gennaro calls this the Wide Intrinsicity View (WIV): the conscious states are complex, containing both a world-directed mental state and a metapsychological thought.

This model fits better with Nietzsche's language, for the conscious state itself will be (partially) conceptual, whereas the originally unconscious state need not be conceptual.⁵³ Moreover, this model accounts for Nietzsche's frequent claims about the way in which unconscious states are *transformed* or *altered* by becoming conscious. In the simplest version of HOT theory, the higher-order thoughts simply light up the lower-order thoughts, bringing some of them to awareness, but not changing their contents. However, more complex versions of HOT theory—such as Gennaro's—treat the higher-order thought as *changing* its object. For, as Gennaro puts it, the 'very nature of conscious states is colored by the concepts brought to bear on them'.⁵⁴ He explains, 'the MET [= higher-order thought] actually changes the nature of the conscious state, so that, unlike HOT theory, the object of a MET is not merely passively there unaltered by the MET'.⁵⁵ What was formerly an unconscious world-directed state becomes a complex conscious self- and world-directed state. So, if Nietzsche endorsed something like Gennaro's version of HOT theory, then (i) conscious states would be conceptual and (ii) the conceptualization would, as Nietzsche claims, transform the originally unconscious state.⁵⁶

⁵²Gennaro, *Consciousness Paradox*.

⁵³Gennaro allows that the unconscious state can be conceptual; for example, he writes, 'unconscious mental states also involve some conceptualization and categorization'. If my interpretation is correct, Nietzsche would reject this claim. Gennaro, *Consciousness Paradox*, 78.

⁵⁴Gennaro, *Consciousness and Self-Consciousness*, 29.

⁵⁵Gennaro, *Consciousness Paradox*, 92.

⁵⁶One might worry that the HOT theory still poses a problem for the alignment of the conscious/unconscious divide with the conceptual/nonconceptual divide. As I pointed out above, on standard versions of the theory the conscious-making state (the higher-order thought) is unconscious and conceptual, whereas the conscious state (the object of the higher-order thought) is conscious and need not be conceptual. I have suggested that Gennaro's version of the HOT theory overcomes this problem: on this view, the conscious state is a composite of a formerly unconscious state and a higher-order conceptual state. But suppose, now, that we reformulate the worry: the conscious state, insofar as it incorporates a formerly unconscious state, would be partially nonconceptual. I think we can avoid this problem by interpreting the formerly unconscious state as *transformed* by its incorporation into a composite, conscious state: the formerly unconscious state's content, which had been nonconceptual, is rendered conceptual by its incorporation into the composite conscious state. This, I take it, is part of what Gennaro is getting at when he claims in the quote from p. 92 above, that the target state is not unaltered by its incorporation into the composite state. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to be clearer on this point.)

Of course, there is a danger of anachronism in trying to fit Nietzsche's model of consciousness into these contemporary categories; it seems that it could only be an improbable accident if Nietzsche's theory of consciousness mapped onto some contemporary theory. However, in this particular case, the danger is far less severe than it initially seems. For, as Gennaro points out, the WIV model of consciousness is—more or less—a precisified version of *Kant's* theory of consciousness. Eliding considerable detail, Kant claims that conscious experience is the joint product of a passive faculty of sensibility and an active faculty of understanding: understanding imposes concepts on the material that sensibility provides. Once the data of sensibility has been pressed into a conceptual form, it becomes conscious.⁵⁷ This is what the WIV view describes as the formation of a composite first-order state and conceptual meta-state.

Given that something like Gennaro's model is endorsed by Kant (and attacked by Schopenhauer, as we saw above), it makes sense to see Nietzsche as adopting a version of it. In particular, here is a reconstruction of how Nietzsche might have arrived at this model: Kant's Transcendental Deduction is an account of the way in which sensory inputs are given a conceptual form, and thereby enter into consciousness. These 'synthesized' or conceptualized mental events are cognitions; the un-synthesized, inaccessible, unknowable material upon which the transcendental synthesis is performed can be interpreted as unconscious mental states or processes.⁵⁸ In short: if our conscious mental states are those that have undergone an act of transcendental synthesis, we can posit un-synthesized and unknowable mental processes upon which these acts of synthesis are brought to bear. These would be nonconceptual mental states. Yet these nonconceptual states would lie outside of consciousness, forever inaccessible. For this reason, they can be understood as unconscious mental states (though Kant himself does not use that term).

We can see Nietzsche as adopting this roughly Kantian model, while going beyond Kant in two ways: first, he gives a far more important role to these nonconceptual processes, which he calls 'unconscious'. Second, he makes a small but monumentally important shift to the Kantian version of the theory: whereas Kant thinks that the conceptual framework into which sensibility is pressed is *necessary and ineluctable* (this is what Kant's Categories attempt to chart), Nietzsche thinks it is *contingent and historically changeable*. For Nietzsche, there is no one best or uniquely correct set of concepts. Put briefly, Nietzsche believes that concepts arise via a series of historical accidents and often track what is salient, useful, or valuable to a

⁵⁷As Kant puts it, 'the cognition of every, at least human, understanding is a cognition through concepts'; 'Thinking is cognition through concepts.' Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A68/B93, A69/B94; cf. A50–51/B74–76.

⁵⁸For a helpful analysis of this point, see Gardner, 'Schopenhauer', 388–9.

community rather than what most adequately captures experience. (Consider, along these lines, Nietzsche's critique of our concepts of agency and responsibility.)

In sum, Nietzsche's claims about conscious falsification are based on the following three claims: (i) the particular ways in which unconscious states become conscious depends on the concepts that the agent possesses; (ii) concepts are generalizations from experience; (iii) there is no one best or most adequate set of concepts. In light of these claims, Nietzsche concludes that conscious thoughts will be generalized and distorted versions of unconscious states.⁵⁹

VIII. Riccardi's Argument That Unconscious States Are Conceptual

So far, I have argued that we have good reason for interpreting Nietzsche's conscious/unconscious distinction as the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction. However, in a perceptive article, Riccardi offers an interesting criticism of this theory. He writes,

According to Katsafanas' account, Nietzsche holds that conceptualisation is indissolubly associated with consciousness. Given that he takes conceptualisation to be responsible for falsification, the two theses follow that (a) unconscious mental states are not-yet-falsified *qua* still non-conceptualised, and that (b) conscious mental states are falsified *qua* conceptualised ... I will argue against (a) and show that (b) requires some substantive qualification if it is to accurately capture Nietzsche's view.⁶⁰

In developing these points, Riccardi focuses on *Beyond Good and Evil* 192, which I discussed above. On my reading, Nietzsche's claim that we see an approximation of a tree is a claim about conscious perception: conscious perception, being conceptualized, represents the particular tree as an instance of the concept <tree>, and thereby simplifies it. Riccardi, however, notes that there is already simplification at the unconscious level: 'unconscious processes ... transform what Nietzsche refers to in the *Nachlass* as the "chaos of sensations" into a full-fledged perception'.⁶¹ In other words, the unconscious perception of the tree will already involve some visual processing at the preconscious level (consider a simple example: the blind spot in the middle of our perceptual field will be filled in nonconsciously; various wavelengths of light are converted into perceptions of color; and so on). Riccardi suggests that this preconscious visual processing involves

⁵⁹I discuss this argument at greater length in Katsafanas, 'Nietzsche's Theory of Mind'.

⁶⁰Riccardi, 'Nietzsche on the Superficiality', 10.

⁶¹Ibid, 11.

conceptualization. If this were correct, then even unconscious perceptions would have conceptual content, and the conscious/unconscious distinction would differ from the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction. As Riccardi summarizes his argument,

Nietzsche does not bind consciousness and conceptualization together as tightly as argued by Katsafanas. The perception of a tree ... typically involves generalization, an operation [Nietzsche] takes to be genuinely conceptual although it does not require one to be self-conscious of the perception one is having.⁶²

In response, notice that Riccardi and I are in agreement that there are three stages of visual processing:

- Stage 1: Various nonconscious, subpersonal data is taken in by our sense organs.
- Stage 2: These data are processed into unconscious perceptions.
- Stage 3: The unconscious perceptions are processed into conscious perceptions.

The disagreement between us arises over the nature of Stage 2. Riccardi believes that the processing mentioned in Stage 2 requires conceptualization: the subpersonal sensory data are given a conceptual form. I, on the other hand, argue that while sensory data are indeed processed to form unconscious perceptions, this processing does not involve conceptualization.

So the dispute hinges on the question of whether the transformation of sensory data to unconscious perceptions involves conceptualization. Riccardi argues that it does, for the following reason: Helmholtz and Liebmann—two philosophers who were very influential in Nietzsche's day, and whom Nietzsche studied—argued that unconscious perception was conceptual. Summarizing Helmholtz's and Liebmann's view, Riccardi writes

the recognitional ability provided by one's possession of a given sensory template suffices for one to perceptually represent an O as instantiating the corresponding type. Crucially, such an ability qualifies as conceptual, though one's exercise thereof requires neither mastery of a language nor self-consciousness.⁶³

In other words, because unconscious perception involves recognitional abilities, it qualifies as conceptual. If this were right, there could be unconscious conceptual contents, and the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction would not map onto the conscious/unconscious distinction.

⁶²Ibid, 14.

⁶³Ibid, 12–13.

Now, I certainly grant that this is a *coherent* view; many philosophers and scientists past and present attribute concepts quite liberally, crediting, for example, the ant with the concept <food> merely because it can recognize and discriminate edible and inedible items. But, as I discussed in Section III, there is also a strand of thinking according to which concepts demand more sophistication: a creature does not possess a concept merely in virtue of enjoying discriminatory or recognitional abilities, but must, in addition, demonstrate the capacity to engage in abstract thought (i.e. thought that is not anchored to a perceptual context). This view is unambiguously endorsed by Schopenhauer and very strongly suggested by Nietzsche's association of concepts with linguistic abilities.⁶⁴ If we adopt this more restrictive view of concepts, then the mere fact that unconscious perception involves recognitional abilities is no longer sufficient to show that unconscious perception is conceptual. I think the balance of textual evidence (surveyed in Sections III and IV) suggests that Nietzsche endorses this more restrictive view of concepts. Accordingly, while unconscious perceptions do require processing of sensory data, this processing is not the same as conceptualization. So, contra Riccardi, Stage 2 does not involve conceptualization, and unconscious perceptions have nonconceptual content.

Why is this an important distinction? That is, why does it matter whether we treat unconscious perceptions as conceptual or nonconceptual? It matters because we get very different accounts of Nietzsche's claim that consciousness falsifies.

On my view, consciousness falsifies precisely because it is conceptual: conceptualizing a mental content both generalizes it and potentially falsifies it.⁶⁵ But this explanation is not available to Riccardi; he needs to give a different account of why conscious thought is uniquely falsifying. Riccardi suggests that we can account for this aspect of Nietzsche's view by claiming that, although conscious and unconscious thoughts are both conceptualized, conscious thoughts employ *different* concepts than unconscious thoughts.

In particular, Riccardi argues that his view can account for 'a peculiar kind of falsification' that occurs only in conscious states.⁶⁶ First, we acquire a 'shared psychological vocabulary'—a kind of folk psychology—that we use to articulate our conscious states. Second, owing to the linguistic structure of conscious thought, our conscious thoughts are attributed to a subject—an 'I' or 'Ego'—which 'acts as the bearer of the relevant attitudes'.⁶⁷ This misleads us into thinking that there is a 'soul, or subject, that we take to be substantial

⁶⁴To be sure, Nietzsche read Helmholtz and Liebmann, and, as Riccardi notes, he underlined certain passages in which they speak of unconscious inferences. But we cannot infer, from this, that he accepted their permissive view of concepts; after all, he also read Kant and Schopenhauer, who endorsed the restrictive view of concepts.

⁶⁵For the details, see Katsafanas, 'Nietzsche's Theory of Mind'.

⁶⁶Riccardi, 'Nietzsche on the Superficiality', 13.

⁶⁷Ibid, 13–14.

and efficacious' as well as 'intrinsically conscious'.⁶⁸ Nietzsche rejects these notions of the self; hence, the falsification he attributes to conscious thought might be this.

In sum, Riccardi suggests that we should read Nietzsche as follows:

- Unconscious states have conceptual contents, which simplify sensory data.
- Conscious states have conceptual contents, and the particular concepts that they employ make reference to souls and selves. This falsifies unconscious states by attributing them to a soul or self.

So conscious states falsify unconscious ones not merely in virtue of being conceptual, but in virtue of the particular kinds of concepts that they employ.

However, this seems problematic as an interpretation of Nietzsche. For it entails that conscious states are only *contingently* more falsifying than unconscious states: if we began employing different concepts—concepts that did not make reference to a soul, for example—then conscious thought would be no more falsifying than unconscious thought.⁶⁹ So, on Riccardi's reading, it is only an accident that conscious states are more distorting and falsifying than unconscious states. But Nietzsche's remarks on consciousness do not suggest that it is only contingently more falsifying than unconscious thought; quite the opposite. See, for example, the passages quoted in the first paragraph of this essay: they do not treat the defects of consciousness as correctible.⁷⁰

Thus, there are two problems with Riccardi's view. First, the claim that there can be unconscious conceptual states rests on the assumption that Nietzsche associates concept possession merely with recognitional capacities, whereas the texts suggest that his view of concept possession is more demanding. Second, even if we waive this difficulty, Riccardi's interpretation would make the falsifying effects of consciousness contingent rather than necessary. My interpretation avoids both of these problems and thus seems preferable.

⁶⁸Ibid, 14.

⁶⁹I say 'no more falsifying than unconscious thought', rather than 'not at all falsifying', because as Riccardi emphasizes even unconscious thought will involve some 'low-level' falsification.

⁷⁰Riccardi responds to this point (personal communication) by pointing out that if consciousness is necessarily bound to language, and language always involves some form of falsification, then consciousness will always be falsifying. However, if linguistic terms can be reconfigured—if, for example, we can develop terms that more adequately describe agency—then this defect, too, would be correctible, and the conscious would be no more falsifying than the unconscious.

IX. Conclusion

If the above arguments are correct, then Nietzsche endorses the following model of consciousness: conscious mental states are those with conceptual content, whereas unconscious mental states are those with nonconceptual content. States with conceptual content are introspectively accessible and communicable, whereas states with nonconceptual content are not. This interpretation of Nietzsche's theory of consciousness not only fits the textual evidence discussed above, but also explains why Nietzsche claims that consciousness is simplifying and falsifying. Consciousness is simplifying because concepts are universal or general. Thus, representing a particular conceptually will simplify the particular: it will elide some detail. Moreover, there is no one set of concepts or conceptual relations that is necessary or best for all agents; conceptual schemes are socially and historically contingent. It follows that there is no one necessary or best way of rendering unconscious content conscious. In sum: reading Nietzsche's conscious/unconscious distinction as the conceptual/nonconceptual distinction not only fits nicely with the textual evidence, but gives us a straightforward explanation for Nietzsche's otherwise puzzling claim that conscious thought is necessarily simplifying and falsifying.

References

- Abel, Günter. 'Bewußtsein—Sprache—Natur: Nietzsches Philosophie des Geistes'. *Nietzsche-Studien* 30 (2001): 1–43.
- Constâncio, João. 'On Consciousness: Nietzsche's Departure from Schopenhauer'. *Nietzsche-Studien* 40 (2011): 1–42.
- Doyle, Tsarina. 'Nietzsche, Consciousness, and Human Agency'. *Idealistic Studies* 21 (2011): 11–30.
- Gardner, Sebastian. 'Schopenhauer, Will and the Unconscious'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. Christopher Janaway, 375–421. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Gennaro, Rocco. *Consciousness and Self-Consciousness: A Defense of the Higher-Order Thought Theory of Consciousness*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 1996.
- Gennaro, Rocco. *The Consciousness Paradox: Consciousness, Concepts, and Higher-Order Thoughts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.
- Goldstone, Robert, and Andrew Hendrickson. 'Categorical Perception'. *Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 1 (2010): 69–78.
- Hassin, R., J. Uleman, and J. Bargh. *The New Unconscious*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Katsafanas, Paul. 'Nietzsche's Theory of Mind: Consciousness and Conceptualization'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2005): 1–31.
- Lange, F.A. *The History of Materialism and Criticism of its Present Importance*. Trans. E Thomas. New York: Humanities Press, 1950.
- Leiter, Brian. 'Katsafanas on Nietzsche on Consciousness'. *Brian Leiter's Nietzsche Blog*. May 1, 2008. <http://brianleiternietzsche.blogspot.com/2008/05/katsafanas-on-nietzsche-on.html>

- Leiter, Brian. 'Nietzsche's Theory of the Will'. *Philosophers' Imprint* 7, no. 7 (2007): 1–15.
- Muraven, Mark, and Roy F. Baumeister. 'Self-Regulation and Depletion of Limited Resources: Does Self-Control Resemble a Muscle?'. *Psychological Bulletin* 126 (2000): 247–59.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1968.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1968.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. Ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1967–1977.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 1968.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking, 1954.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Writings from the Late Notebooks*. Trans. Kate Sturge. Cambridge, 2003.
- Riccardi, Mattia. 'Nietzsche on the Superficiality of Consciousness'. In *Nietzsche on Consciousness and the Embodied Mind*, ed. Manuel Dries. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming.
- Rosenthal, David M. *Consciousness and Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1974.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. 2 vols. Trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover, 1969.
- Simon, Josef. 'Das Problem des Bewusstseins bei Nietzsche und der traditionelle Bewusstseinsbegriff'. In *Zur Aktualität Nietzsches*, vol. 2, ed. Mihailo Djuric and Josef Simon, 17–33. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1984.