

THE STRENGTH OF THE MIND: ESSAYS ON CONSCIOUSNESS & INTROSPECTION

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Our mental states have varying degrees of strength; our pains are more or less intense, our mental imagery is more or less vivid, and our perceptions of sound are more or less striking. What explains these varying degrees of strength? And, do they have something in common? In a series of relatively independent papers, I argue that mental strength is a phenomenal magnitude shared by all conscious experiences that determines their degrees of felt intensity. Mental strength is useful for explaining a number of phenomena. I use it to develop a systematic and neuropsychologically plausible theory of introspection and its limitations. I also appeal to mental strength to illuminate philosophical discussions related to attention and representational contents, cognitive phenomenology, and the structure of our stream of consciousness.

In Chapter 1, “Mental Strength,” I introduce the notion of ‘mental strength’, a phenomenal magnitude of conscious experiences that determines their felt intensity. We report this quantitative dimension of our phenomenology when we describe the brightness of visual experiences, the vivacity of mental images, the intensity of pains, or the intensity of desires. Historical precedents of mental strength are found in Hume and Kant, as well as in contemporary notions such as mental primer (Beck & Schneider 2017) and phenomenal salience (Wu 2011). Mental strength, however, is distinct from attention, saliency, representational contents, and other phenomenal properties, as shown in the central cases of visual perception and mental imagery, pains, and desires. The view that emerges is that mental strength is a domain-general phenomenal property. I use its domain-generality to explain important facts about the foreground/background structure of the stream of consciousness, cognitive phenomenology, and non-attentional selection.

In Chapter 2, “Introspection and Mental Strength,” I offer a novel theory of introspection. By ‘introspection’ I understand the process of attentively focusing on one’s current conscious mental states to form judgments about them. We can introspect sensory experiences, pains, emotions, desires, and thoughts, among other mental events. Current theories fail to explain why introspecting our experiences is sometimes easy and sometimes hard. For example, they fail to explain why it is typically easy to introspect the location of an intense pain and hard to introspect the location of a dull pain.

This calls into question their adequacy. The theory I advance builds on a widespread scientific approach to how we perceive external stimuli: Signal Detection Theory. According to (SDT), the reliability of our perceptions is a function of the strength of the perceptual signal that external stimuli generate in us, so that our perceptions are more reliable when the signal is strong. For example, we perceive a person in an alley more reliably when the alley is well-lit because the perceptual signal is stronger. Similarly, according to the theory I advance, the reliability of an introspective judgment is a function of the strength of the introspective signal that our experiences generate in ourselves, so that introspective judgments are more reliable when the signal is strong. Accordingly, I call this Introspective Signal Detection Theory (iSDT). It provides a systematic and neuropsychologically plausible explanation of introspection and its limitations. It also provides insight into philosophical discussions related to cognitive phenomenology, representationalism and the transparency of experiences. In an appendix, I discuss potential neural substrates of iSDT and I propose a way of empirically testing it.

Finally, in Chapter 3, “Mental Weakness and the Fate of Unattended Stimuli,” I use inattentive blindness as a case study of deficient metacognition driven by weak mental strength. Inattentive blindness is a phenomenon in which distracted subjects fail to report objects that are directly in front of them. Importantly, when the unreported object is pointed out, subjects are normally surprised. Their surprise arises, presumably, due to overconfidence that if an object is directly in front of them they will notice it. Some common explanations of this phenomenon appeal to lack of cognitive access to the experiences (Block, 2007) or to perceptual illusions (Kouider et al. 2010). In contrast, I argue that a combination of poor introspection and poor metacognition explain it better. Metacognition is the capacity to monitor, control, and evaluate one’s performance in a cognitive task. For making a well-calibrated metacognitive judgment subjects need to incorporate appropriately the conditions in which a perceptual experience takes place. This includes knowing the degree and extent to which attention is deployed. According to the theory of introspection advanced in Chapter 2, these complex aspects of our experiences tend to be weak and, therefore, poorly introspected. By failing to integrate these conditions into their metacognitive assessment of the situation, subjects underestimate how distracted they are, which explains their overconfidence. Finally, I show that this situation extends to a wide variety of situations beyond inattentive blindness scenarios.