

Consciousness has less control than believed, according to new theory

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Consciousness—the internal dialogue that seems to govern one's thoughts and actions—is far less powerful than people believe, serving as a passive conduit rather than an active force that exerts control, according to a new theory proposed by an SF State researcher.

Associate Professor of Psychology Ezequiel Morsella's "Passive Frame

Theory" suggests that the [conscious mind](#) is like an interpreter helping speakers of different languages communicate.

"The interpreter presents the information but is not the one making any arguments or acting upon the knowledge that is shared," Morsella said. "Similarly, the information we perceive in our consciousness is not created by conscious processes, nor is it reacted to by conscious processes. Consciousness is the middle-man, and it doesn't do as much work as you think."

Morsella and his coauthors' groundbreaking theory, published online on June 22 by the journal *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, contradicts intuitive beliefs about human consciousness and the notion of self.

Consciousness, per Morsella's theory, is more reflexive and less purposeful than conventional wisdom would dictate. Because the human mind experiences its own consciousness as sifting through urges, thoughts, feelings and physical actions, people understand their consciousness to be in control of these myriad impulses. But in reality, Morsella argues, consciousness does the same simple task over and over, giving the impression that it is doing more than it actually is.

"We have long thought consciousness solved problems and had many moving parts, but it's much more basic and static," Morsella said. "This theory is very counterintuitive. It goes against our everyday way of thinking."

According to Morsella's framework, the "free will" that people typically attribute to their conscious mind—the idea that our consciousness, as a "decider," guides us to a course of action—does not exist. Instead, consciousness only relays information to control "voluntary" action, or goal-oriented movement involving the skeletal muscle system.

Compare consciousness to the Internet, Morsella suggested. The Internet can be used to buy books, reserve a hotel room and complete thousands of other tasks. Taken at face value, it would seem incredibly powerful. But, in actuality, a person in front of a laptop or clicking away on a smartphone is running the show—the Internet is just being made to perform the same basic process, without any free will of its own.

The Passive Frame Theory also defies the intuitive belief that one conscious thought leads to another. "One thought doesn't know about the other, they just often have access to and are acting upon the same, unconscious information," Morsella said. "You have one thought and then another, and you think that one thought leads to the next, but this doesn't seem to be the way the process actually works."

The theory, which took Morsella and his team more than 10 years to develop, can be difficult to accept at first, he said.

"The number one reason it's taken so long to reach this conclusion is because people confuse what consciousness is for with what they think they use it for," Morsella said. "Also, most approaches to consciousness focus on perception rather than action."

The theory has major implications for the study of mental disorders, Morsella said. "Why do you have an urge or thought that you shouldn't be having? Because, in a sense, the consciousness system doesn't know that you shouldn't be thinking about something," Morsella said. "An urge generator doesn't know that an urge is irrelevant to other thoughts or ongoing action."

The study of [consciousness](#) is complicated, Morsella added, because of the inherent difficulty of applying the conscious mind to study itself.

"For the vast majority of human history, we were hunting and gathering

and had more pressing concerns that required rapidly executed voluntary actions," Morsella said. "Consciousness seems to have evolved for these types of actions rather than to understand itself."

More information: "Homing in on consciousness in the nervous system: an action-based synthesis" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 2015.

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