



PŘEDNÁŠKOVÁ SÉRIE LECTURE SERIES

Krys Dolega (Université Libre de Bruxelles)

Unknown Pleasures: On the Possibility of Unconscious Hedonic States

The distinction between the neuropsychological processes of incentive salience (wanting) and hedonic reward (liking) is a cornerstone of affective neuroscience. While there are numerous demonstrations of a possible dissociation between these processes, their relationship to conscious experience remains unclear, as the bulk of relevant research has been conducted on animal models. In this paper, we ask whether we have sufficient evidence to assert that hedonic responses (i.e. unconscious “liking”) can exist in the absence of conscious experience (liking) in humans. We review the available psychological research supporting the existence of such responses in the absence of subjective awareness and argue that current evidence is not only very sparse, but is also severely limited by a possible conflation between “wanting” and “liking” responses, as well as by the absence of independent measures of subjective hedonic awareness. By drawing an analogy with state-of-the-art methods used in research in the study of conscious perception, we point to several problems with the existing evidence supporting the idea that positively valenced hedonic states can remain unconscious, and suggest possible improvements. Analysed against our criteria, we conclude that we presently do not possess enough evidence to accept the existence of unconscious “liking”.

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