

Why the idea of solving problems with unconscious thought is ‘fanciful’

The great French mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré (1854–1912) took a particular interest in the origins of his own astonishing creativity.

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Poincaré found that he would often struggle unsuccessfully with some mathematical problem, perhaps over days or weeks (to be fair, the problems he got stuck on were difficult, to say the least). Then, while not actually working on the problem at all, a possible solution would pop into his mind. And when he later checked carefully, the solution would almost always turn out to be correct.

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Poincaré believed that this “unconscious thought” process was carried out by what might almost be a second self, prepared and energized by periods of conscious work, yet able to work away on the problem in hand entirely below the level of conscious awareness.

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Solving difficult problems, whether mathematical, musical, or of any other kind, is the very antithesis of a routine, specialized problem with a dedicated brain network: On the contrary, thinking about such problems will need to engage most of the brain. So the idea that profound unconscious thought can be “running in the background” as we go about our everyday lives is fanciful indeed. Routine and highly practiced activities aside, the cycle of thought can attend to, and make sense of, only one set of information at a time.

Read full, original post: [There Is No Such Thing as Unconscious Thought](#)