

**SOMETIMES YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER
UNTIL SOMEONE ASKS -**

What Taylor Swift Reveals About the Philosophy of Tinnitus

Ahead of the 2027 World Tinnitus Congress, Dr. Hashir Aazh is busy building the philosophical framework for fruitful debate on the latest research in tinnitus. To set the right tone for investigation, this leading investigator finds unlikely inspirations.

Scientific articles rarely begin with a pop lyric. Yet occasionally a line from outside science captures an idea with unusual precision. In the song *Champagne Problems*, Taylor Swift writes:

**"Sometimes you just don't know
the answer 'til someone's on their
knees and asks you."**

The lyric describes a common human experience. We often assume that knowledge already exists inside us waiting to be expressed. In reality, some forms of knowledge emerge only when a question is asked. The act of questioning does not merely retrieve an answer. It can bring an answer into awareness.

This observation has an unexpected relevance to tinnitus.

Tinnitus is usually defined as the perception of sound in the absence of an external acoustic source. For most people, tinnitus is known only through what they report hearing. Except in a relatively small group of cases where internal acoustic sources can



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be identified, such as vascular sounds or middle ear muscle activity, tinnitus cannot currently be confirmed through objective measurement. Researchers may observe neural activity, behavioural responses,



or physiological changes associated with tinnitus, but none of these measures can reliably identify tinnitus itself without the person describing the experience. This reliance on self-report raises a deeper question:

■ **Does reporting tinnitus simply reveal an experience that already exists, or can the act of questioning itself bring tinnitus into awareness as tinnitus?**

To explore this question, it is helpful to begin with the nature of the tinnitus experience itself. When tinnitus occurs, a person encounters a sound or sound-like sensation that appears in consciousness. People often describe it as ringing, buzzing, humming, or hissing. These descriptions are approximations rather than literal representations. The perceptual experience occurs first. Only afterwards do other processes unfold. Attention may become drawn to the sound. The individual may interpret it as strange or concerning. Emotional reactions may arise. Behaviour may change in response to the sound.

PERCEPTION AND REACTION - A CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION

These later reactions are important, especially when tinnitus becomes distressing, but they are conceptually distinct from the perceptual event itself. The sound-like sensation appears first. Meaning, emotion, and behavioural responses follow.

For this reason, it is useful to distinguish tinnitus itself from the psychological processes that surround it. In philosophical terms, tinnitus *per se* refers to the direct appearance of a sound-like phenomenon in awareness before it becomes elaborated through attention, interpretation, or emotional response.

Yet even this simple description raises an intriguing question. What happens if such an experience exists but is never consciously recognised?

If tinnitus is known primarily through self-report, several unresolved questions follow:



- Can an individual have tinnitus without noticing it?
- Could a sound-like sensation exist in the background of perception without ever becoming sufficiently salient to be recognised?
- Is there a difference between privately recognising tinnitus and communicating it to someone else?
- Is there a difference between spontaneously mentioning tinnitus and acknowledging it only when asked in a survey or medical consultation?

These questions point toward a broader philosophical issue concerning the relationship between experience and report. In psychophysiology it is well known that perception can occur without awareness. Sounds that we do not consciously notice can still influence mood, attention, and behaviour. By analogy, one might imagine internally generated auditory activity that never reaches the level of conscious recognition as tinnitus.

Such a state would be extremely difficult to study. If a sound-like experience never becomes consciously recognised, it cannot be reported and therefore remains invisible to clinical observation and scientific research.

Two lines of evidence offer indirect clues about whether unnoticed tinnitus-like experiences might exist.

One comes from studies examining auditory perception in near silence. In a classic experiment conducted by **Heller and Bergman** in 1953, adults with normal hearing and no reported tinnitus were asked to sit in a sound-treated booth for

several minutes and describe any sounds they perceived^[1]. Participants were not told that the sounds might originate from their own auditory system. Despite this, approximately ninety five percent reported hearing sounds such as ringing, humming, or buzzing. Later work by Tucker and colleagues produced similar findings, with many participants describing tinnitus-like sensations after only a few minutes of silence^[2].

A second line of evidence comes from studies of deafness. Individuals who are born deaf rarely report tinnitus, whereas tinnitus is commonly reported among people who lose hearing later in life. One possible explanation is that individuals who have never experienced external sound lack the perceptual framework needed to interpret internal neural activity as sound. If similar internal activity were present from birth, it might remain phenomenologically unformed and never be recognised as tinnitus.

"Could asking about tinnitus sometimes crystallise awareness of a previously vague sensation?"

Taken together, these observations suggest that conscious recognition may play an important role in transforming internal auditory activity into an experience that can be identified as tinnitus.

If this is the case, then the way tinnitus becomes recognised and reported deserves closer attention. Not everyone who experiences tinnitus reports it in the same way. Some people never mention it at all. Others acknowledge it only when asked. Some bring it up spontaneously. Others seek explanations or treatment.

These differences can be understood as degrees of report^[3]. At the lowest level, R0, tinnitus is not reported. Tinnitus may be absent, or a sound-like experience may be present but remain below stable conscious recognition. An individual may notice a faint sound yet not interpret it as tinnitus,

may lack the language to describe it, or may regard it as irrelevant. In some cases, people may recognise tinnitus but choose not to disclose it.

At the next level, R1, tinnitus is recognised only when attention is directed toward it, such as during surveys or consultations. A subtle epistemological question arises. Does questioning simply reveal an already recognised experience, or can it bring tinnitus into awareness?

In some cases, individuals may have had a vague sensation that was never clearly identified. When asked about ringing or noise in the ears, they may recognise and name the experience. In other cases, the experience may have been recognised but regarded as insignificant. The distinction cannot be determined from self-report alone.

This is precisely the situation captured in Taylor Swift's lyric. "Sometimes you just don't know the answer 'til someone's on their knees and asks you." The act of questioning does not merely retrieve knowledge that already exists in a fully formed state. Sometimes the question itself helps crystallise awareness.

At R2, tinnitus is reported spontaneously. At R3, individuals seek understanding through clinicians or information sources. At R4, they seek intervention aimed at reducing tinnitus or managing its impact. These levels describe increasing engagement rather than severity.

Thinking in terms of reportability highlights a limitation in tinnitus science. Without a biomarker, knowledge depends on self-report. Surveys capture those who

acknowledge tinnitus when asked but may miss those who have not recognised it. Clinical populations represent only a subset.

Tinnitus occupies a distinctive position among medical phenomena. It begins as a private sensory event that may exist unnoticed or unnamed. Only when recognised and communicated does it enter clinical knowledge.

This observation raises an important question. Could asking about tinnitus sometimes crystallise awareness of a previously vague sensation? If so, questioning may influence when and how tinnitus becomes recognised, with potential implications for research and clinical practice.

References

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WORLD TINNITUS CONGRESS

XVth International Tinnitus Congress
4th World Tinnitus Congress
LONDON 2027

From Mechanism to Meaning — The ABC of Tinnitus

World Tinnitus Congress 2027

London has been officially chosen to host the **4th World Tinnitus Congress (WTC)** and the **15th International Tinnitus Seminar (ITS)** from June 30 to July 2, 2027. The congress will be organised by the Hashir International Institute, with the central London venue to be announced later in 2026. This is the first time the WTC is to be held in the UK.