

## Consciousness

After several decades of neglect, consciousness has found its way back to the center of philosophical and scientific analyses of mind. Much recent theoretical and empirical work on consciousness reinvigorates themes and concerns treated at length by some of the main figures of classical American philosophy. For instance, James and Dewey both developed rich embodied models of consciousness that are today recognized as important antecedents to contemporary accounts. Similarly, Mead's conception of mind as a socially-constituted phenomenon can be seen as anticipating the spirit of contemporary distributed or extended accounts of mind, according to which consciousness is (at least partially) constituted by factors external to the subject. Reflecting a methodological orientation advocated by figures like James and Dewey, contemporary consciousness studies has become a highly pluralistic affair. Important contributions from disciplines such as philosophical and experimental psychology, neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, cultural anthropology, and comparative philosophical and religious studies, among others, are being woven together within the narratives and debates emerging from this energetic field of inquiry.

To suggest that there is a single unified view rightly termed *the American Philosophical View of Consciousness* is of course misleading. For instance, James's mature view of consciousness as developed in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912) bears little resemblance to Royce's idealistic conception of Absolute Mind. Like any substantive philosophical tradition, one finds a host of views admirably represented. However, a broad overview of the tradition can discern some shared points of emphasis.

James and Dewey are the classical American thinkers who offer the most extensive analyses of the problem of consciousness. Generally speaking, they developed what might be termed *ecological* conceptions of consciousness. Ecological conceptions of consciousness grow out of a rejection of the sharp ontological distinction between organism and environment. Both James and Dewey insist on the mutuality and reciprocity of conscious subject and world. Simply put, their ecological conceptions of consciousness stress the integrated and interactive nature of the mind-world relation. Constitutively speaking, then, conscious phenomena are not realized solely within some sort of nonphysical substance, neural substrate or collection of intracranial representations. Rather, consciousness emerges within the situated dynamics of embodied activity and is thus an emergent property of the body's participatory interaction with the world. In this way, consciousness under an ecological rendering is seen as an irreducibly embodied, embedded, and distributed phenomenon. Consciousness is *embodied* within a neurobiological system, which is always *embedded* in continually-shifting environments, and is thus *distributed* across the real-time interplay of brain, body, and world.

Metaphysically, both James and Dewey dispute mind body-dualism: the claim that mental phenomena are distinct from physical phenomena. (Dewey formulates this view as artificially bifurcating "experience" and "nature"). Their respective ecological conceptions of consciousness reflect this rejection, and attempt to offer conceptual resources for overcoming the Cartesian privileging of the mental parasitic on this dualism. Methodologically, James and Dewey call for an analysis of consciousness concerned with its everyday concrete transactions with the world. Accordingly, the form of the biological body's embeddedness in changing environmental contexts—both natural

and cultural—is seen as crucial for discerning the structure and content of consciousness. To understand consciousness, one must look to everyday examples of consciousness *in action*. Consciousness thus always arises in what James terms real world “activity-situations”.

### **James on Consciousness**

James’s most extended treatment of consciousness is found in his seminal *Principles of Psychology* (1890), still a treasure trove of observational insights into mind and experience. In it, James proposes a “double-barreled” methodology for investigating consciousness. Psychology, as James here defines it, is the study of “the Science of Mental Life”. For James, psychological analysis of consciousness entails both a third-person empirical analysis of the neurobiological “conditions” of consciousness as well as a first-person phenomenological investigation of the “phenomenal facts” of consciousness, or its experiential content. Moreover, the body’s central role in shaping consciousness must be conceded. This is because “Mental phenomena are not only conditioned *a parte ante* by bodily processes; but they lead to them *a parte post*”. Consciousness for James is therefore not a static process or fixed substance but rather a world-directed activity of the whole creature. Embodied consciousness is not something that we simply *have* but rather something that we *do*. This strong emphasis on the embodied and agential basis of consciousness—also shared by Dewey—leads James to declare that consciousness is “at all times primarily a *selecting agency*”. What this means for James is that embodied consciousness, as a world-directed activity, is structured in and through the various sensorimotor forms of our environmental engagements or activity-situations. Consciousness emerges through

our attentive interaction with the world. And consciousness is thus not a fixed entity substantially distinct from worldly activities of which it is a part. Rather, consciousness is enacted *within* the various kinds of brain-body-world couplings that specify the form and content of each activity-situation. This strongly relational characterization of consciousness will lead James to famously deny that consciousness exists—insofar as consciousness is thought to be some autonomous “thing” localized in the head of the subject. Instead, for James consciousness is a function of the body’s attentional, sensorimotor engagement with the world. And this coupled system of brain-body-world, taken together, *is* consciousness. James’s experiential monism in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912) is in part an attempt to articulate this view.

### **Dewey on Consciousness**

The topic of consciousness proper is not as central to Dewey’s work as it is James’s. However, Dewey writes extensively on various aspects of the mind and its relation to the world and other people. His classic essay “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology” (1896) develops an early embodied approach to consciousness and experience refined in later works such as *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and, especially, *Experience and Nature* (1929). Dewey affirms a body-based relational view of consciousness. In *Experience and Nature* (1929), he uses the term “body-mind” to emphasize the extent to which the two are inextricably linked within our prereflective experience of and navigation throughout the world. However, if James’s analysis of consciousness is most concerned with discerning the physiological and phenomenological significance of its bodily rootedness—consciousness as embodied sensorimotor activity—Dewey’s analysis marks a subtle shift, in that it centers on the environmentally *embedded* and *distributed*

nature of consciousness. Specifically, Dewey urges that consciousness is ultimately a function of social interactions. Broadly construed, social interactions encompass the entire range of possible ways of engaging with and experiencing a value-laden, meaningful world organized with respect to human interests and ends. In this sense, all conscious experience of the human world is a kind of social interaction for Dewey. Consciousness is precisely “that phase of a system of meanings which at a given time is undergoing re-direction, transitive transformation”, a continual converting of stimuli into world-directed responses by a situated agent.

In *Experience and Nature* (1929), Dewey distinguishes between mind and consciousness. Mind is the broader category. It is always “contextual and persistent”, situated within “the whole system of meanings as they are embodied in the workings of organic life”: the complex nexus of linguistic, social, political and institutional structures that largely determine how and what we think. However, consciousness is more “focal and transitive”. It is activated in a local “awareness or perception of meanings” of certain parts of these larger structures. Consciousness for Dewey therefore emerges within the organism’s adaptive functioning as it navigates meaningful environments. More precisely, “consciousness” refers to the various practices that enable an organism to maintain “equilibrium” or “coordination”, as Dewey terms it, between itself and its world—whether through perception, linguistic practices, observing cultural norms, etc. The conscious subject’s transactional encounters with meaningful environments—its ways of establishing “equilibrium”—are phases of mental activity that transform both subject and environment. Like James, Dewey in this way develops a relational model of consciousness. Unlike James, who argues for the primacy of the body and its

sensorimotor capacities in shaping consciousness, Dewey seems to think that environmental embeddedness is the most significant formative agent. Thus, the term “consciousness” for Dewey seems to refer to a slightly different level of description for Dewey than it does for James. While consciousness for Dewey is clearly underwritten by a neurobiological substrate, the term is more rightly understood to refer to the level of organization at which an organism is able to incorporate the shared meanings of its environment into a successfully coordinated navigation of a human world. Consciousness is thus not simply a neurobiological phenomenon. It is a socially embedded collection of practices and habits, both novel and inherited, that collectively enable the organism to interact with and transform its environment. Consciousness is therefore distributed *across* this organism-environment interaction, and arises equally from factors internal to the subject as well as features of the world that the subject creates.

### **Consciousness and Other American Thinkers**

Though James and Dewey arguably remain most relevant to contemporary discussions of consciousness, other classical American thinkers have a place in the dialogue. As mentioned earlier, Mead’s social conception of mind might be fruitfully engaged with ongoing discussions of the various ways that social “scaffoldings” like language and technology, for example, augment cognitive processes such that mind is externalized and thus most aptly characterized as a public, extended phenomenon. Peirce and Royce have something to say about this as well. In another vein, Royce’s work has recently enjoyed a mini-renaissance and has been used within certain theological circles to explore aspects of religious consciousness. Santayana’s work on aesthetic experience harbors insights into the under-explored relationship between art and consciousness.

## **References and Further Reading**

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