

Consciousness as a Topic of Investigation in Western Thought¹

ABSTRACT

Terms for consciousness, used with a cognitive meaning, emerged as count nouns in the 17th century. This transformation repeats an evolution that had taken place in late antiquity, when related vocabulary, used in the sense of conscience, went from being mass nouns designating states to count nouns designating faculties possessed by every individual. The reified concept of consciousness resulted from the rejection of the Scholastic-Aristotelian theory of mind according to which the mind is not a countable thing, but a pure potentiality capable of receiving anything undistorted. This rejection was motivated by an acute sense of the mind's fallible subjectivity. While conditioned by recent historical events, the 17th century's pervasive sense of subjectivity also reveals a heavy debt to Hellenistic philosophy, which had been recently rediscovered. But whereas Hellenistic thought, mistrustful of *theoria*, only reifies conscience, early modern thinking, more mistrustful of praxis and seeking its grounding in *theoria*, goes a step further and reifies consciousness. Partly modeled on theological ideas, the resulting concept of consciousness is plagued by paradoxes that have become notorious for their intractability. But essentially the same model of consciousness underwrites contemporary theory, embroiling contemporary debates in the same controversies that dominated the 17th century. Sidestepping these difficulties by returning to the Scholastic-Aristotelian theory of mind would be a tall order, but it is not impossible. Alfred North Whitehead's theory of consciousness offers an example. His novel theory of time enables Whitehead to rehabilitate the Aristotelian concept of passive mind in a wholly naturalistic way.

This paper has the following sections:

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Excerpted below is Section 4. I subjoin to the excerpt the relevant endnotes, the bibliography, and a section-by-section summary of the whole paper.

¹ From: *Process Approaches to Consciousness in Psychology, Neuroscience, and Philosophy of Mind*, edited by Michel Weber and Anderson Weekes, 2009 (Albany: SUNY Press), pp. 73–135.

This is Section 4 (pp. 102-111),
with Endnotes and References.

Consciousness: An Agent of Cognition Renouncing its Agency

We argued above that the first philosopher to use the word *consciousness* as an obvious count noun was John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).⁵⁷ As a mass noun, *consciousness* names the state (quality, condition, attribute) of *being conscious*. It can designate the state of being conscious absolutely, as in modern English when we speak of consciousness as something one can lose or regain (“he only partially regained consciousness”),⁵⁸ or it can designate it under the limitation of an objective genitive, as when we speak of consciousness as a state of specific cognizance that we may lack (“consciousness of wrongdoing”). In the latter example, consciousness is no more countable than its possible contraries: ignorance or innocence. In the former example we recognize one of the hallmarks of the mass noun: continuous rather than discrete quantification (i.e., more *vs.* less rather than many *vs.* few). While the nominalization of conscious into *consciousness* is attested before Locke (in Massinger and Cudworth), it is clear that in these earlier uses consciousness normally functions as some kind of mass noun. To take the earliest attested use of consciousness in English as an example, Massinger writes in 1632 “the consciousness of mine own wants.”⁵⁹ While

this seventeenth century naming of consciousness is peculiar insofar as it is historically unprecedented, it is a grammatical possibility whose realization, while consistent with and even suggestive of a metaphysical innovation, does not directly imply one. But Locke's use of consciousness as a *count noun* is different. It makes the nominalization of *conscious* into consciousness extremely odd, for now it no longer names a quality, but rather something so qualified. This could be a thing or an event. The usage would still not be so odd if what it designated was an event (a cognitive episode) qualified by consciousness, as in, for example, "he came to a consciousness of his sin" or "He never again came to a consciousness of his identity." Conceivably, this could have been what Massinger had in mind in "Maid of Honour:" an event (or a moment) in which "the consciousness of mine own wants" is realized. But Locke evidently does not use consciousness in this way either. Rather, in Locke's usage, consciousness clearly designates a thing that finds itself in the state of being conscious. Many things could be said to be in such a state without arousing controversy—a human being, a divine being, a living being, a person, the person's soul, and so on. Such attributions are extremely frequent in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System*. But if consciousness itself names a thing, not just a thing's attribute, then it is a unique sort of thing, quite unlike all the others that one could possibly talk about. This is not too hard to demonstrate. Consciousness would have to name the very thing that is *by definition* conscious. But then consciousness would seem to be the only thing that is strictly and properly speaking conscious, and the relationship between consciousness and all the things one was accustomed to calling conscious—persons, souls, human beings—becomes an unprecedented problem. Naming consciousness as a thing destines these other things to take their place sooner or later as objects of consciousness, as consciousness itself looms up as the only proper subject of consciousness, and the problem of idealism is born. But if consciousness (the thing) is the only true subject of consciousness (the state), then it is a truly singular phenomenon: the only thing that is, in effect, subject to itself. This would appear to be the conceptual genesis of the modern idea of "self."⁶⁰

That such a strange thing had never been named or even noticed before in the history of Western thought was alleged by the anonymous author of the 1735 treatise, *An Essay on Consciousness*: "*Consciousness* denominates *Self* [...] concerning *Self* [...] there is something extraordinary in the Notion of it, as not being reducible to any kind of Being or Existence yet taken Notice of" (Psuedo-Mayne 1983, 12 and 20). Actually, we must allow that Descartes, without calling it consciousness or self, had taken notice of it. His *res cogitans* is *by definition* conscious, and it is emphatically a *thing* (*res*), subject to its own consciousness (and nothing else). Descartes also recognized the singularity of such a thing. Noticing that it had gone unnoticed,

he created a new ontological niche for it: a thing the thinghood of which is essentially and exclusively thinking. A precedent for the idea of a “*thing* that thinks” can be found in materialist theories of the mind such as the Stoics and Epicureans proposed, but in their case the thing that was supposed to think and in which thought or consciousness inheres was the *body*. Bodies were the only *things* in their ontology. The idea that thinking should be its own subject of inherence, in short, that it should be a thing, was truly unprecedented. In fact, Scholastic psychology was founded on a metaphysical principle handed down from Aristotle: that *to which* things appear (the mind) is itself necessarily not a thing (Weekes 2004, 259–262). Aristotle had wanted to correct what he saw as the mistakes of his predecessors that led to the unappealing conclusions that *the mind is nothing more than the organically embodied soul* and hence that *truth is nothing more than whatever appears to sense-perception to be the case*.⁶¹ In order to touch the being of objects, to receive it unadulterated into itself, the mind must become one with them. But the mind, he declared, in order to be capable of becoming one with its object, cannot be anything *in itself* (*De Anima* 429a18). It must be “nothing before it thinks (*all’ entelecheiai ouden, prin an noēi*)” (429b30). The mind, in short, is *not a thing* (429a23: “not one of the beings”—*outhen tōn ontōn*). It is hard to believe that Descartes was not deliberately contradicting this principle with his declaration that the mind was a kind of thing (Weekes 2004, 259–262) and that the mind *must* be a kind of thing because “that which thinks is not nothing” (1964–1976, 7:175; 1984, 2:123). Critics of the new way of ideas certainly made this connection right away and responded by reiterating the Scholastic-Aristotelian notion that thought is not really anything “in itself”—certainly not the *mode* of a *special kind of thing* (a thing that thinks).⁶² Rather, it is an “extrinsic denomination” of an ordinary worldly thing—its happening to be thought about.⁶³ “Thought” simply means that *something-or-other is being thought (about)*, and this “being thought” is not a real predicate of the something-or-other or of anything else in the world—certainly not of the mind. For these traditionalists, the dative of manifestation is itself a declension of the thing manifesting itself. It is not a subject of experience, indeed, not a subject at all. It should not surprise us, then, that before Descartes the phenomenon of consciousness was typically not designated by a noun functioning absolutely in the nominative case, but that after Descartes the need for a word that could play this grammatical role was felt acutely. Before consciousness was a thing, it didn’t need a proper name.

Whitehead seems to have put his finger on this very issue in *Adventures of Ideas* when he surprisingly exploits the characterization of the Receptacle in Plato’s *Timaeus* epistemologically (AI 187–188, see also 134–135). For this, in fact, is just what Aristotle had done! Aristotle’s characterization of passive

mind (*De Anima* 3.4) is taken almost verbatim from Plato's characterization of the Receptacle (*Timaeus* 48e2–51b6), which cannot, says Plato, have any nature of its own or it would not be fully receptive to the nature it is meant to receive. The rejection of the epistemology modeled on this doctrine is as central to the formation of modern sensibility as its rehabilitation is to Whitehead's breakaway from the modern tradition. Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (1580), for example, is a sustained polemic against the Scholastic-Aristotelian concept of "passive mind,"⁶⁴ of which Bacon's catalogue of Idols in his *Novum Organum* (1620) is a judicious compendium (Bacon 1960, 47–66). Bacon attributes the urgent need for a new, *remedial* organon of knowledge to the very fact that the mind is *not* a kind of Platonic Receptacle, but something with a positive nature of its own, always somewhat refractory to whatever it might receive: "And the human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it."⁶⁵

Whitehead is surely right to describe this fateful innovation of modern philosophy as the transfer of the Aristotelian concept of subject (*hypokeimenon*) to that which experiences, bestowing upon the mind a substantial nature of its own (PR 157–160; also 30, 50, 137–138). This transference appears already underway in Montaigne and Bacon, and it becomes explicit in Hobbes' surprising use of the word "subject" to designate the mind.⁶⁶ Just as no one called the mind a "thing" before Descartes, it appears that no one called the experient a "subject" prior to Hobbes. For Hobbes, the experient is quite evidently a quasi-Aristotelian substance, a subject in which experience inheres as an accident. This is, of course, the very analysis that Descartes gives, albeit without ever using the term subject in this novel way.⁶⁷ For the early modern philosophers, subjectivity is simply the thinghood of the mind—and the practical-theoretical problem it creates.

Since its unworlly thinghood seals and cements the separation of the mind from the world and alienates the individual from both community and truth, we should not be too surprised to find that the remedy is equally extreme. Bacon's eloquence leads him to describe his method in terms that suggest the administration of violent purgatives,⁶⁸ religious purification and spiritual rebirth,⁶⁹ and, not least, the heroism of self-sacrifice with intimations of religious ecstasy: his method is the "true and legitimate humiliation of the human spirit" (Bacon 1960, 13). An old doctrine of mystical theology gets an epistemological interpretation: transcendence (*excessus mentis*) is possible only through self-denial. In this case, the transcendent beyond is simply that which is actually true and *a posteriori*. The theme of ascetic self-discipline as the only possible remedy for the otherwise refractory thingliness of the mind reaches an extreme in Descartes. Just like Bacon's experimental method, Descartes' method of radical doubt is also a purgative intended to expel all

the impurities from the mind—to annihilate its thinghood, as it were—and reconstitute it as something functionally equivalent to Aristotle’s passive mind. Also like Bacon’s method, Descartes’ achieves its goal by forcibly actualizing the latent real distinctions in things (see below). What distinguishes Descartes’ method from Bacon’s is its transposed application from the world into the subject: Descartes experiments on the mind, not on nature. If we may borrow Bacon’s language, it is *ideas* that are to be “constrained and vexed, forced out of their natural state, squeezed and molded” (Bacon 1960, 25). A crucial element in this process, which the secondary literature tends to ignore despite the enormous stress that Descartes himself lays upon it,⁷⁰ is the utter quietism he imposes upon himself. Here Descartes has clearly learned from Montaigne, who saw in radical skepticism and its issue in resigned quietism the only way to “humiliate” the human spirit.⁷¹ But Montaigne’s goal is the (suspiciously Protestant-sounding) acquiescence of the individual to the will of God, while Descartes’ is the acquisition of truth. Descartes’ journey therefore has a different goal, but the means of conveyance is similar. We see this in a remarkably telling aside where we learn what consciousness purified of subjectivity becomes: “I did nothing but roam about in the world, trying to be a spectator rather than an actor in all the comedies that are played out there” (Descartes 1964–1976, 6:28; 1984, 1:125). It seems that the closest a *thing* can get to being *tabula rasa*—an Aristotelian passive mind—is to resign its agency in the world altogether. Aristotle’s passive mind becomes the world, and it can become the world because it is not a thing (and so *a fortiori* not an agent); Descartes’ consciousness, being a thing, cannot become the world, but it can become passive by renouncing its agency. It thus becomes a pure spectator whose relation to the world is something theoretical.

Whitehead does not entirely disagree with the modern position. He accepts with enthusiasm what he calls the “subjectivist bias” of modern philosophy, according to which the point of departure for philosophy can never be—as it was for Classical Greek⁷² and Scholastic philosophy alike—impersonal facts about the world or nature or the individual beings they disclose (PR 166–167). That is to say, philosophy cannot justify itself if it begins with facts having the form *S is P*. Like the early modern philosophers, Whitehead accepts experiential subjectivity as a phenomenological fact and an epistemological problem. Philosophy must therefore begin with facts of the form *my experience of S being P* (PR 157–159). Whitehead calls this the Subjectivist Principle,⁷³ the discovery of which by Descartes he considers the most important advance in philosophy since the time of Plato and Aristotle.⁷⁴ But Whitehead thinks the discovery was no sooner made than obscured by a perverse interpretation: “like Columbus, who never visited America, Descartes missed the full sweep of his own discovery, and he and his successors, Locke and Hume, continued to construe the functionings of the subjective

enjoyment of experience according to the substance-quality categories” (PR 159).⁷⁵ In a sequence of subtle and acute critical analyses, Whitehead shows how the distinctive character of modern philosophy results, like a system of repercussions from a single blow, from the misguided attempt to construe *my experience of S being P* as a fact having the form *S is P* (PR 157–160). This leads to the idea that the mind is a substance, and experience an accident qualifying that substance (PR 48–50 and 137–139).

This is the point at which Whitehead objects to the modern interpretation of experience as subjectivity. He objects to the explicit or implicit use of the Aristotelian concept of subject (*hypokeimenon*) to define this subjectivity. Inevitably, the Aristotelian concept of subject implies the substantiality, independence, and self-sufficiency of the subject of experience and hence a monadic construal of experience based on the logic of quality inherence rather than a polyadic construal based on the logic of relations (both internal and external). Whitehead’s attitude toward modern philosophy is therefore ambivalent. We could say, in short, that Whitehead accepts subjectivity but squarely rejects its thinghood.⁷⁶

Aristotle himself had insisted that in perception the perceiving mind and the thing perceived share a common actuality.⁷⁷ But this community of the mind with the world presupposes his doctrine of passive (purely potential) mind. Such community vanishes as soon as the Aristotelian concept of subject is applied where Aristotle himself insisted it should not be applied: to the mind. The rupture of this community is formalized in early modern philosophy with its unique employment of the Scholastic *distinctio realis*. An invigorated real distinction is used to cut the world up in phenomenologically untenable ways. Descartes argues that the mind depends on neither the body nor the world in which it finds itself nor even its own past history and that through a process of methodical doubt he can prove the “reality” of these distinctions. He thus finds that he is metaphysically separate from and independent of everything from which he can distinguish himself. Remarkably, Hobbes, the avowed materialist, proceeds in a very similar way. He begins his *Human Nature* of 1640 with an equivalent separation of the objects of experience from the subject experiencing them: the subjective representation of the world (which he refers to as “imagination,” obviously rendering the Stoic *phantasia*), would remain *unchanged in content* even if the world itself were suddenly annihilated.⁷⁸ Neither making nor being able to make a distinction in kind between sense and imagination, Hobbes’ annihilation of the world—a likely inspiration for Husserl’s use of the same language to explain his phenomenological reduction almost three centuries later—isolates the subject of experience in very much the same way Descartes does in his *Meditations* published a year later.⁷⁹ This isolated subject of experience, which is an entirely unworldly thing, is what modern philosophy knows as consciousness.

The reification of consciousness as a being characterized by the loss of something it never had (certainty) has a flip side. Because subjectivity now takes all the blame for error and uncertainty, the object emerges as flawless and perfectly knowable. The ancient idea that some things are intrinsically less knowable than others—things that change, for example, or otherwise inhabit time—began its erosion with the Hellenization of Judeo-Christian theology by Philo and Augustine.⁸⁰ God knows the whole world, and God's knowledge is perfect, so everything must be perfectly knowable. The idea that no knowledge—including human knowledge when it is attainable—is qualitatively different from this sort of divine knowledge is fundamental to the modern outlook (Weekes 2007, 64–80). It was expressly argued by Galileo in his *Dialogues* and played a decisive role in his condemnation.⁸¹

There is an interesting biographical parallel between Galileo and Descartes that comes to light here. We know that Descartes had completed his book on cosmology, *The World*, by 1633, but hearing of the condemnation of Galileo, refused to let it be published. In this book Descartes was careful to hedge his new physics as being the physics not of our world, but of an entirely imaginary one he was making up as he went along. His strongest claims on behalf of this mechanistic universe were that it could be clearly imagined by anyone, that it was possible for God to create such a world because He can create anything we can clearly imagine, and that it would in no way differ in appearance from the world we know. In other words, it fully satisfied the requirement of saving the appearances without recourse to “occult” qualities. Despite having qualified his cosmology as a sort of fantasy with interesting modal and phenomenological properties, Descartes was nonetheless wary of publication and not until 1637, at the age of 41, did he finally publish his first book, the *Discourse and Essays*. What had changed in the intervening four years?

Like Galileo, Descartes was unwilling to take his stand until he could do it on the very ground of his adversaries. He waited till, like Galileo, he was sure he had an unanswerable argument. Galileo's views were condemned on the august theological grounds that his claims to scientific certainty implied that God was not omnipotent, that, given the appearances and the dictates of human reason, He could have created the world *only* in the way Galileo claims to have explained it (Cassirer 1969, 119–120). Descartes' ingenuity consists in having found an argument that makes the cognitive certainty of the new science of the seventeenth century a consequence rather than an implied limitation of the omnipotence of God. For if God is not a deceiver (because that would imply some degree of impotence), then clarity and distinctness become hallmarks of knowledge and knowability the hallmark of everything God has created. This was the triumph of a new ontology in which there were no intrinsically shabby objects. There was only one shabby

thing, and that was the subject trying to know. Shabbiness was a symptom of deficient knowing, not of deficient being (Weekes 2007, 64–80).

The careful reader may have noticed that we culled from our reading of Whitehead not one, but two explanations for the appearance of consciousness as a focal thematic in the seventeenth century, one having to do with the individual's newly acquired need for justification and the other with a continued preoccupation with predicative logic and acceptance of the substance-quality metaphysics it implies. Whitehead himself does not elaborate on the relation between the two etiologies of modern thinking that he advances. We have tried to tie them together. We now summarize our results.

What was true and right in the Middle Ages possessed a public reality that—at least when compared with the turmoil of early modern Europe—seems monolithic in solidity, stature, and coherence. The lack of emphasis on the individual in the Middle Ages is closely related to this phenomenon. The individual was able to absorb in good conscience the publicly available standards of conduct and belief, effacing to some extent its individuality and individual responsibility. We could say, in effect, that the human being of the Middle Ages enjoyed the possession of something like Aristotelian passive mind, with its capacity for unresisting assimilation to external standards.

The social, religious, and political upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth century both expressed and exacerbated a crisis of justification, denying individuals the luxury of reliance on external authority in a situation where all rights were contested and even theoretical commitments had practical consequences (as the case of Giordano Bruno shows paradigmatically). The impossibility of distinguishing commitment from risk created an acute and almost total need for justification. This historical disruption of passive mind created a hospitable environment for the appropriation and development of the Hellenistic psychology recovered in the sixteenth century, which recognized the insinuation of practical agency into speculative cognition. In one sense this development was not unwelcome. It takes the burden and blame for falsehood and uncertainty off of the world as an object of potential knowledge and puts it entirely on the subject seeking knowledge. This is a recognizably Augustinian theme, and we see here part of the reason for the kinship felt by many Reformers with Augustine. But if this development solves some problems, it creates others. It solves an obvious theological problem (imperfection exists only as a consequence of human will), and also an epistemological one (it guarantees, the skeptics notwithstanding, that knowledge is not, as they claimed, impossible on purely theoretical grounds). But if it guarantees that everything is in principle fully knowable, it does so by creating a theoretical subjectivity in which it has both concentrated and amplified the problem of justification. Whatever it is that executes judgment and decides action and belief is now isolated as a cognitive agent *with no worldly collateral*. We

noted in our discussion of the origin of conscience as an individual faculty how agency (or the implicit agency of complicity) turns ethical consciousness into a countable entity that assumes (or becomes subject to) the qualities that previously characterized its object (consciousness of guilt or innocence becomes a guilty/innocent conscience). Similarly, we now suggest that agency in the theoretical domain turns speculative consciousness into an entity that takes on (becomes subject to) the essential qualities characterizing its object, which are certainty and uncertainty (primarily the latter, of course). Being without worldly collateral means that this agent must execute its judgments unsecured by any external guarantees and that it is, moreover, a thing defined by this predicament.

While this development reflects a recurrence of Hellenistic attitudes, the extreme to which it tended reflects the severity of the crises defining the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But it is especially in the remedy sought that we see the critical differences between the Hellenistic and modern sensibility. Having conceded that dire practical risks attach to theoretical commitment, they both stress the bright side—that the insinuation of the will into cognition empowers the subject (at least in principle) to avoid defective cognition. But from here out the Hellenistic and early modern philosophers take very different paths. This becomes clear if we compare the skepticism of the ancients with the skepticism of Montaigne, which seems at first indistinguishable from the former, borrowed as it is almost entirely from the ancient sources. But in Montaigne's rehabilitation of skepticism there is a strange new twist. For Montaigne the fatal problem with knowledge is not so much that it cannot be *theoretically* justified as that it cannot be *practically* justified. Here is where Montaigne's modernity appears, and it appears as an unacknowledged debt to modernity's first great firebrand, Martin Luther. Luther claimed that man is justified only by faith, not by works. Montaigne's (supposedly counter-reformatory) insight is that the attempt to know, indeed, any judgment at all, is really just a *covert work*. Just like action, theoretical judgment is an effort of the individual towards self-responsible accomplishment. It presumes the possibility of the individual accomplishing something apart from God. For Montaigne, therefore, humanly attained knowledge is just another gesture of individual pride, and for *this* reason unjustifiable. In effect, Montaigne agrees that it is works that cannot be justified. If knowledge that is not a work could be found, it would be justifiable, and this is the very definition of faith: knowledge that is not an achievement of the human subject. Thus, while ancient skepticism is designed to lead to the renunciation of all *knowledge*, leaving a purified agency, Montaigne's skepticism is designed to lead to the renunciation of all *agency*, leaving a purified knowledge, in other words, faith. Descartes' theoretical attitude has in common with Montaigne's faith the desire to neutralize the subject's individuality through the disciplined renunciation of all agency, thus undoing its separation from Truth.

Practical agency, insinuated into the execution of all cognition, has the desirable consequence that it exonerates God and the knowable universe from any imperfection, but by the same token it has the undesirable consequence of alienating consciousness from God or the world it sought to know. In this context it is possible to understand why the systematic *renunciation of agency* and the cultivation of an objectifying neutrality should appear to be a mechanism of reconciliation with a world now assumed to be completely and perfectly knowable—and so, too, why even practical matters should now be approached as abstract theoretical problems. A practical solution to practical problems would require agency to come first, before or without theoretical (i.e., nonagentive) justification. But that would be presumption. Agency unjustified by theory implies subjectivity, fallibility, uncertainty, and error. This would explain why the project of foundationalism emerged in the peculiar form characteristic of modern philosophy. Descartes and his posterity took the *personal fact of my experience of S being P*, which the subject can know about only by participating in it, and tried to turn it into an impersonal fact (of the form *S is P*) that can (and, to be justified, *must*) be recovered and objectified by myself as a purely theoretical spectator. By the end of the seventeenth century the proper name of this spectator was *consciousness*.

just as light reveals itself and the other things that it encloses in itself, so presentation reveals both itself and what has caused it" (SVF 1986, vol. 2, fr. 54, [p. 21, ln. 28–p. 22, ln. 2]; Long and Sedley 1987, 1:237).

57. Locke 1959, 1:130, 138, 448–451, 458–459, 456.

58. This is the sense of consciousness that the French denote with *connaissance*, rather than *conscience*.

59. See note 10 of this chapter.

60. In Locke's definition of *consciousness* as "the perception of what passes in a man's own mind" (1959, 1:138), it is the *own* we must pay special attention to because this implies self-consciousness, which implies self. It therefore leads, via self-consciousness, to the idea of the *self* as an entity: "*Self* is that conscious thinking thing [. . .]" (1959, 1:458). Compare Samuel Clarke, "Consciousness [. . .] signifies [. . .] the Reflex Act by which I know that I think, and that my Thoughts and Actions are my own and not Others" (1707, 4), or David Hartley, "Mad persons [. . .] lose, in great measure, that connecting Consciousness which accompanies our Thoughts and Actions, and by which we connect ourselves with ourselves from time to time" (1976/1749, 390). Hartley attributes the "Erroneousness of the Judgment in Children and Idiots" to the imperfection of "the connecting Consciousness," which lacks in their case the "usual Permanency" (391).

61. "For indeed the latter [Democritus] taught that the soul [conceived as the totality of *organic* functions] and the mind are simply identical. For he thought truth to be appearance. [. . .] He thus does not use [the term] 'mind' as [denoting] some kind of faculty concerned with truth, but rather he says soul and mind are the same" (*De Anima* 404a27–28). "The Ancients said that thinking and perceiving are the same thing. [. . .] All these [Empedocles and Homer] take intellection to be something corporeal, like perceiving [. . .] so it follows of necessity that, as some say, all appearances are true, or error is [some kind of physical process]" (*De Anima* 427a22–427b5). Thus, Aristotle asks rhetorically "whether the concern of physics is with the whole of the soul [inclusive of mind] or part of it [everything but mind]. For if [its concern is] with the whole of it, nothing will be left of philosophy apart from physical science. For mind is [the faculty] of the intelligible objects. So physical knowledge would be of all things. For consider [that knowledge] about mind and the intelligible objects belongs to the same [science], if indeed [they are] correlatives, and all correlatives are objects of the same study" (*De Partibus Animalium* 641a34–6). Aristotle's answer is clear: "Not all of the soul is nature" (*ibid.*). "If there were no other substance apart from the ones formed by nature, then physics would be the primary science" (*Metaphysica* 1026a27–29), and truth would be appearance, just as Protagoras claimed (interpreting the *homo-mensura* dictum, as did Plato and Aristotle, to mean: what *seems to me now* is the measure of all things). Cast in their logical order, the steps of Aristotle's argument are as follows: (1) A faculty is correlative with its objects. (2) The intellect is a faculty, so from (1) it follows that it is correlative with the intelligible objects it knows. (3) If A is correlative with B, then the same science that knows the nature of A knows the nature of B. (4) If the intellect is simply (a part of) the organically embodied soul, it will belong to a physical science to know its nature. (5) From (2), (3), and (4) we can infer that intelligible objects will be known by a physical science, which is the same as saying that there are no

objects besides corporeal ones. (6) From (5) Aristotle infers that cognition would not be the manifestation of an objective truth (because this presupposes the unresisting accommodation of the faculty to its object), but only a relative manifestation resulting from a physical interaction. In short, the identification of intellect with (a part of) the soul implies the reductive identification of truth with subjective appearances. While the terms in which Aristotle's argument is couched seem quaint, in essence it is valid and remains the focus of discussions of consciousness. Reductive materialism is the doctrine that "physics is the primary science" and hence concerned with "the whole of the soul" with the implication that "soul and the mind are the same thing" and "thinking is just [like] perceiving," namely, an organic process with a physical cause as its only objective correlative. Aristotle's claim that this leads directly to the problem of relativism, that is, the problem of accounting for knowledge of truths that are necessary, universal, or normative, is borne out by the history of philosophy in the twentieth century and its many attempts to make peace with the consequences of positivism. As David Griffin argues below, allowing for the possibility of nonsensory knowledge (a truth that is more than the shifting relativity of "appearances") is a main selling point of dualist theories of mind.

62. Catusus, author of the "First Set of Objections" to the *Meditations*, in response to Descartes (Descartes 1964–1976, 7:92–94; 1984, 2:66–68), Sergeant, author of the polemic *Solid Philosophy asserted, against the fancies of the Ideists*, in response to Locke (Sergeant 1697, 24, 27); see also Locke's reference to Sergeant's critique in his correspondence with Stillingfleet (Locke 1963, 4:390–391).

63. This position is rehabilitated by Bergson and James and embraced by Whitehead (see Weekes 2004, 254–262).

64. "Things do not lodge in us with their form and their essence; they do not come in by the force of their own authority. [...] [I]f [...] we could receive anything without changing it [...] then truth could be passed on from hand to hand [...]. Nobody claims that the essence of anything relates only to its effect on Man [...]. [S]ince our state makes things correspond to itself and transforms them in conformity with itself, we can no longer claim to know what anything truly is: nothing reaches us except as altered and falsified by our senses. [...] [W]ho will be a proper judge [...] ? [...] We would need a man exempt from all [...] qualities, so that, without preconception, he could judge [...] propositions as matters indifferent to him" (Montaigne 1987, 141, 184–185). The reference to *absence of intrinsic qualities* as a precondition of adequation betrays familiarity with the logic if not also the language of *Timaeus* and *De Anima*. Compare PR 31: "Creativity is without character of its own [...]."

65. Book 1, Aphorism 41; (Bacon 1960, 48; see also 22). A similar passage appears in the *Advancement of Learning*: "For the mind of man is far from the nature of a clear and equal glass, wherein the beams of things should reflect according to their true incidence; nay, it is, rather like an enchanted glass, full of superstition and imposture, if it be not delivered and reduced" (Bacon 1973, 132).

66. "That as in *vision*, so also in conceptions that arise from the *other senses*, the subject of their *inherence* is not the *object*, but the *sentient*" (Hobbes 1994, 4; emphasis in original).

67. “Meditation 2” (Descartes 1964–1976, 7:26–29; 1984, 2:18–19). In fact, it can be demonstrated that the designation of the experient as “subject” originates with Hobbes and finds its way into Cartesian philosophy through Descartes’ interchange with Hobbes in the *Objections and Replies*. The *res cogitans* is never designated “*subjectum*” in the *Meditations*. On the contrary, the “*subjectum meae cogitationis*” (1964–1976, 7:37) is the *subject-matter* of my thought and rightly rendered by Cottingham et al. as “object of my thought” (1984, 2:26). And yet, strangely enough, the inevitability of calling the *res cogitans* a subject is only a syllogism away from Descartes’ own definitions in the “Arguments [...] arranged in geometrical fashion” appended to the “Second Set of Replies.” To wit, Definition 5: “*Substance* [...] applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject [...]” and Definition 6: “The substance in which thought immediately resides is called *mind*” (Descartes 1964–1976, 7:161; 1984, 2:114). It is not clear why Descartes doesn’t just say “substance is the *subject* in which whatever we perceive inheres” unless he wants to circumlocute his way around having to call the mind a subject when he gets to Definition 6. But whether he likes it or not, the mind as “subject” is forced on him by Hobbes, author of the “Third Set of Objections”: “How do we know the proposition ‘I am thinking’? It can only be from our inability to conceive an act without its subject” (1964–1976, 7:173; 1984, 2:122). Hobbes’ objection contains a critical element that Descartes allows to go unchallenged: thinking is not, as it was for Aristotle and Scholasticism, an action of the thing known that the mind under appropriate circumstances suffers, but an act of the mind. This implies that “I know . . .” is no longer an abbreviation of “it manifests itself to me.” We should not be surprised, then, that Descartes’ “Reply” to Hobbes contains his first real concessions to this usage: “He is quite right saying that ‘we cannot conceive of an act without its subject’. We cannot conceive of thought without a thinking thing, since that which thinks is not nothing. But he then goes on to say, quite without any reason, and in violation of all usage and all logic: ‘It seems to follow from this that a thinking thing is something corporeal.’ *It may be that the subject of any act can be understood only in terms of a substance* [...] but it does not follow that it must be understood in terms of a body” (1964–1976, 7:175–176; 1984, 2:123–124; emphasis added). Hobbes identifies subject of action and subject of inherence; Descartes feels compelled to accept their identity, but not their materiality. Thus we have the incorporeal subject of experience.

68. “the expurgation of the intellect” (Bacon 1960, 23).

69. “and the understanding thoroughly freed and cleansed; the entrance into the kingdom of man, founded on the sciences, being not much other than the entrance into the kingdom of heaven, whereinto none may enter except as a little child” (Bacon 1960, 66).

70. Descartes devotes the whole of Part III of his *Discourse on Method* to this important prerequisite (Descartes 1964–1976, 6:22–31; 1984, 1:122–126).

71. Montaigne even alludes to the old image of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, which has its source in Aristotle’s description of passive mind (*De Anima* 430a1–2): “No system discovered by Man has greater usefulness nor a greater appearance of truth [than Pyrrhonism] which shows us Man naked, empty, aware of his natural weakness, fit to accept outside help from on high: Man, stripped of all human learning

and so all the more able to lodge the divine within him, annihilating his intellect to make room for faith; [...] he holds no doctrine contrary to established custom; he is humble, obedient, teachable, keen to learn [...] a sworn enemy of heresy. [...] He is a blank writing-tablet, made ready for the finger of God to carve such letters on him as he pleases." (1987, 74)

72. "Now philosophy has always proceeded on the sound principle that its generalizations must be based upon the primary elements in actual experience as starting-points. Greek philosophy had recourse to the common forms of language to suggest its generalizations. It found the typical statement, "That stone is grey," and it evolved the generalization that the actual world can be conceived as a collection of primary substances qualified by universal qualities" (PR 158). The generalization made by the Greeks was erroneous because it neglected the important fact that this stone is gray only *for* a subject perceiving it. Put forth as an example of a primary metaphysical fact with the universal form *S is P*, it thus constitutes what Whitehead calls the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. *This stone is gray* is really an abstraction that can be got only by mentally detaching from the wholeness of concrete experience a part that is not actually separable. It is as though the stone's being gray has been artificially treated with a fixative agent and chipped out of its natural organic context. It is then misleadingly offered as a self-sustaining piece of reality that could and does exist independently of experience.

73. Whitehead likes to give names to ideas, both the ones he likes and the ones he dislikes. Unfortunately he fails to use his own labels consistently. The result is a disorienting swirl of nomenclature. Besides the (version of the) Subjectivist Principle that Whitehead accepts, for example, there is also a (version of the) Subjectivist Principle he rejects. Whether the former is the same as or different from his Reformed Subjectivist Principle and how it relates to the Subjectivist Doctrine and the Subjectivist Bias are questions that we happily do not have to answer. See Lindsey 1976 and Griffin 1977.

74. "[Descartes] laid down the principle, that those substances which are the subjects of enjoying conscious experiences provide the primary data for philosophy, namely, themselves as in the enjoyment of such experience. This is the famous subjectivist bias which entered into modern philosophy through Descartes. In this doctrine Descartes undoubtedly made the greatest philosophical discovery since the age of Plato and Aristotle. For his doctrine directly traversed the notion that the proposition, 'This stone is grey,' expresses a primary form of known fact from which metaphysics can start its generalizations. If we are to go back to the subjective enjoyment of experience, the type of primary starting-point is 'my perception of the stone as grey'" (PR 159).

75. "The difficulties of all schools of modern philosophy lie in the fact that, having accepted the subjectivist principle, they continue to use philosophical categories derived from another point of view" (PR 167).

76. The conservative cast of Whitehead's thought comes to light here. On Whitehead's interpretation, the fundamental mistake of the early modern philosophers was their relinquishment of the Aristotelian concept of passive mind (although it is not clear to what extent he realized this concept was Aristotle's). A different interpretation—one more agreeable to contemporary sensibilities—is obviously possible:

the problem is not so much that early modern philosophers gave up the concept of passive mind by recognizing the mind to be a thing, but rather that they *refused* to give up the concept of passive mind *despite* recognizing the mind to be a thing. As a normative model, passive mind obviously remains intact, so philosophy becomes a remedial or therapeutic practice the purpose of which is to super-induce pure passivity on the mind despite its being a thing. Giving up passive mind entirely, even as a normative model, is what Richard Rorty has been agitating for. Whitehead, unwilling to accept such apparent consequences as relativism, solipsism, or positivism, wants to explore ways that it might, conceivably, still be possible to trade thinghood for passivity. What makes Whitehead's philosophy exciting and novel despite its conservative orientation is the radical proposal that thinghood may not be at the heart of anything—neither mind nor being is made of things.

77. For discussion, see Verley's contribution to this volume. The Aristotelian principle is: "The actuality of what is sensed and of sensation are one and the same [numerically], but [what it is] to be each of these is not the same" (*De Anima*, 425b27). The example is sound and hearing: an actual sound is a heard sound, and actual hearing is a sound heard. Let it be noted that sound and hearing are *distinct sorts of things* but *actually inseparable*, so that their unity is synthetic, but necessary. A description of the causal nexus occurring in the act of perception therefore constitutes a *necessary synthetic proposition* (and thus *a priori* in the Kantian sense). "I hear a sound" means, *pace* Husserl, "I am one with (but not indistinguishable from) a transcendent entity" or "A transcendent entity is one with (but not indistinguishable from) me." In his contribution to this volume, Gregg Rosenberg gives a similar analysis of the relationship between the act of experiencing and the object experienced: "phenomenal qualities could not exist unless some subject was experiencing them, and experiences could not exist unless they were experiences of phenomenal qualities. Yet, despite this mutual participation in one another's natures, they are distinct essences. A phenomenal quality is an *object* of experience, and should not be identified with the experiencing of it. And an individual experiencer is a subject of qualitative experience, and should not be identified with its objects." This becomes the basis for his argument for panexperientialism. Causation is possible only if there exist "carriers" that do in fact satisfy the seemingly perverse logical requirements of a causal nexus: "each of the receptive and effective carriers must have a nature that is dependent on the nature of something distinct from it in the compositionally circular way that effective and receptive properties are dependent on one another." The logical structure of a true causal nexus is notoriously difficult to make sense of precisely because it involves the necessary connection (interdependence) of distinct things. Panexperientialism is thus uniquely qualified to meet the classical Humean objections to the possibility of causation as a real physical operation involving some kind of nontautological necessity. The relation between act and object of experience meets the criteria for being a "carrier" of causation and provides a perspicuous paradigm of how distinct things can be interdependent. Therefore, after examining a number of arresting homologies between experience and causation, he concludes that causation is most plausibly explained as a kind of experience. "The ontological relation between phenomenal qualities and their participation in the experiencings of subjects matches this crucial logical structure of the relationship between effective properties and their shared receptivity. . . . [J]ust

like effective and receptive properties, the experiencer and the experienced qualities are distinct yet interdependent properties of the total individual.” See as well Weekes’ contribution to Part V of this volume.

78. “[W]e must remember and acknowledge that there be in our minds continually certain *images* or conceptions of the things without us, insomuch that if a man could be alive, and all the rest of the world annihilated, he should nevertheless retain the *image* thereof, and all those things which he had before seen or perceived in it; every one by his own experience knowing, that the *absence* or *destruction* of things once imagined doth not cause the *absence* or *destruction* of the imagination itself. This *imagery* and *representations* of the qualities of the thing without, is that we call our *conception*, *imagination*, *ideas*, *notice* or *knowledge* of them; and the *faculty* or power by which we are capable of such knowledge, is that I here call *cognitive power*, or *conceptive*, the power of knowing or conceiving” (Hobbes 1994, 2–3).

79. Whitehead notes that neither Descartes (SMW 73–74; PR 49, 76, 122, 158) nor Locke (PR 51–60, 113, 122–123, 138, 146–147, 149, 152, 157) are entirely of one mind on the question of the reality or ideality of the subject’s relation to things in the world. On the one hand, their sometime emphasis on judgment as what *gives* existential import to ideas implies that this is something ideas lack intrinsically and acquire only as a sort of extrinsic denomination if they pass mental inspection. This suggests the disconnection of the subject from reality and its ontological isolation due to the ideality of the world it actually experiences. On the other hand, their sometime emphasis on some version of the Scholastic doctrine of objective reality, according to which real things “object” themselves into the mind, suggests the connectedness of the subject and the reality of the world it actually experiences. As with Descartes and Locke, so too with Hobbes. Contrast the passage quoted in the previous footnote, which suggests isolation and ideality, with Hobbes’ comments on perception in *On Body*, which seem to be a materialistic take on the doctrine of objective reality and thus sound particularly Whiteheadian: “The subject of sense is the sentient itself, namely, some living creature; and we speak more correctly, when we say a living creature seeth, than when we say the eye seeth. *The object is the thing received*; and it is more accurately said, that we see the sun, than that we see the light” (Hobbes 1989, 117, emphasis added).

80. The necessity that God’s *Logos* be at once eternal and a blueprint for the temporal unfolding of things led to the idea that everything temporal has its perfect, adequate representation in eternity. This *Logos* is wholly unlike Plato’s eternal forms, because it leaves out no features of the imaging reality. Plato’s forms represent the ideal (static) states that changing things are trying to be, leaving out the specific temporality of things, which is, as in Aristotle, an effect of the imperfect medium in which the forms are being realized. The *Logos*, by contrast, is a timeless encoding of the temporal process itself. This would appear to be the origin of our concept of a “law of nature.” It seems to be original to Philo, but Augustine takes it an important step further, arguing that the *Ratio*, in addition to its godly form as Uncreated Light, gets naturalized at creation as a timelessly immanent order of nature. See Philo, *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses (De Opificio Mundi)* §§ 13, 24, 26, 27, 67; Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesi ad litteram)* bk. 1 §§ 4, 9, 15; bk. 4 §§ 1, 22–23, 43–56, bk. 6 §§ 17–19, 25–29, bk. 8 § 48, bk. 9 § 32 (Philo

2001, 49, 51–52, 63; Augustine 2002, 169, 171–172, 174, 241, 253–254, 266–275, 310–312, 315–317, 373–374, 394–395).

81. Galilei 1967, 102–105; see Cassirer 1942/1969, 115–131; Blumenberg 1981, 489–502.

82. We should remember at this juncture the bold and formidable attempt made early in the twentieth century by the German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl to develop a subjective methodology that was rigorous and every bit as scientific as the experimental method, which he called Phenomenology. Needless to say, for this perspective, consciousness not only did not become taboo, but also continued to be the principle object of investigation. However, the European and Anglo-American intellectual communities remained almost completely isolated from one another until the last few decades of the century, and each evolved with little interference from the other.

83. “Really distinct” is Scholastic for “externally related.”

84. Similarly for Aristotle, appearing does not testify to the weakness of a subject that cannot swallow the object itself, but to the eminence of things and their power to disseminate themselves.

85. Only because inter-subjectivity is always also intercorporeity does the interlocking of perspectives find itself subtended by a formal system of extensive relationships. In this way, the applicability of mathematics in a formal ontology of nature receives its due. But the unit and ground of being is not such a formal fact. Rather, it is the subjective experience shaped by such facts.

86. *De Rerum Natura* 1, lns. 958–983 (Mantiband 1972, 28–29).

87. How creativity can be “literally” present and past at the same time is the topic of chapter 15 below.

88. It bears repeating, however, that for Whitehead this is not the whole of the story. For just as there is no subjectivity that does not have objectivity as its foundational ingredient (no present that does not contain the past), which preserves a classical meaning of truth, there is no objectivity that is not already ingredient in subjectivity (no past that is not already part of a novel present), which preserves appearance and perspective as means rather than obstacles to knowledge. It is not subjectivity, but its alienating potentiation as consciousness that needs to be overcome.

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SUMMARY*

0. *Introduction.* The Introduction establishes that consciousness was not a focal theme in Western literature before the early Modern period.
1. *Consciousness: Some Words and the Concept.* This section looks at the words in Western literary languages (Greek, Latin, German, French, English) that seem at some point in the history of their use to designate what we mean by consciousness: *syneidēsis*, *conscientia*, *Gewissen*, *Bewusstsein*, *conscience* (Fr.), *conscience* (Eng.), and *consciousness*. The history of their shifts in meaning and corresponding grammatical roles reveals a complex pattern that recurs, in whole or in part, in each language studied. The parameters of the recurrent pattern are: 1) an evolution in meaning from something public or intersubjective (“knowing along with”) to something wholly private, 2) after a period of indifferent fusion, gradual bifurcation in the sense of older terms into ethical and purely cognitive (or “psychological”) meanings that are eventually distributed over different terms (e.g., *Gewissen* vs. *Bewusstsein*, *conscience* vs. *consciousness*) and, most importantly, 3) an evolution from mass nouns (designating states) to count nouns (designating individuated entities).

The evidence allows a firm dating for the earliest occurrences of the concept of consciousness familiar to us today. What our concept denotes—consciousness understood as something private, as something cognitive or psychological (as opposed to strictly ethical), and as a countable entity inwardly possessed by every individual—was not named by any word in Western writing until the 17th century.

2. *Subjectivity: Old and New.* Noting that discussion of consciousness in Modern philosophy is everywhere bound up with the specific project of overcoming the problem of subjectivity (even if the language of “subjectivity” was not used before Kant), this section begins the process, continued in the next two sections, of determining what is so unique about the Modern understanding of the problem of subjectivity that it forces philosophers not only to name a previously unnamed entity, but even to organize the whole discipline of philosophy around it.

First, this section distinguishes the “problem of subjectivity” from the Classical Greek “problem of appearances.” The Classical problem of appearances is the unreliability of appearances insofar as this unreliability is blamed on the ontological shabbiness of the kind of objects one seeks to know (e.g., material things, or things that change in time). The problem of subjectivity, on the other hand, is the unreliability of appearances insofar as this unreliability is blamed on the imperfections and limitations of the subject seeking to know. Importantly, however, this distinction fails to differentiate Modern philosophy from Hellenistic philosophy, which, in sharp contrast to Classical Greek philosophy, was focused on precisely this subjectivist version of the problem of appearances. This section therefore delineates the remarkable extent to which Modern philosophy is a Hellenistic

* The summary was prepared June 2016.

atism, made possible by a submerged tradition of skepticism (stretching from antiquity through the Asharite theology of Islam and into the Scholasticism of the 14th century) and acutely activated by the Renaissance rediscovery of Hellenistic philosophy and ancient Skepticism in particular.

Nevertheless, consciousness is a concept original to Modern philosophy and not something recovered from Hellenistic antiquity. To prepare the ground for isolating why Modern philosophy, unlike Hellenistic philosophy, could not do without such a radical novelty as the concept of consciousness, this section concludes by reviewing the specific ways pivotal early Modern thinkers understand the imperfections and limitations of the subject as contributing to the unreliability of appearances. From Montaigne, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, and Locke we learn specific reasons why the instruments of knowledge most respected in the past—perception, intellect, tradition, language, and a natural science based on description—are all defective. In their natural and spontaneous operation they are, in fact, dangerous sources of deception. Human beings thus face a fundamental predicament: while it’s natural for them to seek authority outside themselves—in the manifest nature of things given to perception and in the beliefs sanctioned by society and tradition—there are no guarantees that any of these external standards are reliable. This failure of all forms of immediate reliance on external standards is what I am calling the problem of subjectivity, and I give it that name because that is what it came to be called by philosophers still struggling with the problem in the 18th century.

3. *Consciousness and the Problem of Justification.* Expanding on Whitehead’s insight that Modern thinking in all domains—religious, political, philosophical—is preeminently concerned with the problem of justification, this section shows how such a universal need for justification came about and how this creates the thing called consciousness.

Returning to Classical Greek philosophy, this section notes that Aristotle’s clean separation between the practical and theoretical spheres meant that theoretical questions were affectively neutral and decided in ways that involved no deliberation and no possibility of apprehension or remorse: for Aristotle there could be no anxieties about the practical consequences of theoretical commitments because there were no practical consequences to theoretical commitments. The existence of God, the nature of the soul, the reliability of perception or memory—in Aristotle’s view, these were not things one could anguish about. The collective achievement of Hellenistic philosophy was to prove this insulation of theory from anxious deliberation false, bringing theoretical truth claims within the purview of conscience. This development exacerbated the more fundamental problem that exercised Hellenistic philosophy: the famous problem of the wholly or partly lacking “criterion of truth.” Thus, not only were many theoretical questions impossible to answer, but many of them were acutely disturbing because, theoretical or not, they carried a risk of dire consequences if one assumed the wrong answer.

For Hellenistic philosophers, then, the fundamental crisis that concerned them was *theoretical*: the irresolvability theoretical questions (whether some or all of them), which was exacerbated when some of them were also practically consequential. What remained as the only possible solution was a *practical* one: cultivating equanimity in the face of uncertainty. (These undecidable questions were, for the Stoics, questions about facts

beyond our control or certain cognizance, for the Epicureans, about things beyond sensation, and for the Skeptics, about *all* matters theoretical.)

By contrast, the fundamental crisis for early Modern philosophers was *practical*, and the impossibility of a practical solution called for a *theoretical* solution as the only possible one. We can see this in the fact that, throughout early Modern Europe, the Skeptic precept *One side is not more right than another* had been acted out in violence on a scale so massive and encompassing that no tradition, no public authority, no institution could still claim unquestionable legitimacy. To do so, they would have to offer a justification for themselves that did not rely on any tradition, public authority, or institution—that is, a justification presupposing nothing that could not be drawn entirely from the private, theoretical reflection of the individuals whose credence they sought. But no one could provide such a justification other than the individual herself. And, simply put, without such justification the individual could not “in good conscience” commit to becoming involved in the world in any of the usual ways: endorsing traditions, obeying authorities, or respecting institutions.

Moreover, since religious dogma encompassed no little theory about man and world, violent conflict over religion made the practical consequences of theoretical commitments especially severe. Deciding even the most theoretical questions (such as: *in what ways the physical world is or is not “as it seems” in perception*) carried risks and therefore required radical justification. This was clearest in the case of those philosophers proposing heterodox physical and psychological theories. Neither the controversies about their spiritual salvation nor the political conflicts marking their troubled and sometimes tragic careers could possibly find resolution anywhere but in the conscience of each individual. Thus, even the common man, denied the possibility of relying on standards the world seemed to offer him, was reduced to an experience of self as alienated conscience, as something jeopardized, cut off from the world, and desperately needing justification. This individuated thing in need of radical justification before it could join the world—before it could perceive a world as real and take action in it based on practical and theoretical commitments held in good conscience—is what early Modern philosophers assigned the name of *consciousness*.

4. *Consciousness: An Agent of Cognition Renouncing its Agency*. This section draws together all the themes of this paper. I recap the argument so far to highlight its structure:

- The Introduction established that the term consciousness, at least since the 17th century (when consciousness became the principal topic of philosophical investigation), has meant something like what it means now: the totality of an individual’s self-disclosed awareness.
- The 1st section proceeded to demonstrate that no term in the principal literary languages of Europe meant anything like “the totality of an individual’s self-disclosed awareness” *until* the 17th century, when philosophers, forcing the issue, created neologisms (*Bewusstsein*, *consciosité*, *apperceptio* in German, French, and Latin) or, by fiat, stipulated a new meaning for existing terms (e.g., “consciousness” in English). While this suggests there was a new kind of thing in the world needing a name, it is possible that the only novelty was a new interpretation of an old friend, or a novel need to talk about something long familiar, but previously unnamed.

- The 2nd section circumscribes the early Modern version of the problem of appearances as a failure of all forms of immediate reliance, whether cognitive or practical, on standards external to the individual’s own questioning mind. This dire view, advanced by early Modern philosophers, suggest that each human being is a thing needing radical, self-supplied justification in order to connect with anything beyond his or her own questioning mind (to connect, that is, with the social world, the physical world, or traditions of the past). If this dire predicament is not just an ugly fantasy of philosophers, but the way individuals in the Modern period actually came to experience their relationship to the world, then we can indeed say that the new concept of consciousness came about because a new kind of entity came into existence, demanding a name and an appropriate conceptual identification.
- The 3rd section shows that historical events had indeed conspired to turn the ordinary individual into a “consciousness”—something desperately in need of radical justification before it could, in good conscience, connect with or play any part in the world.

This 4th section shows how early Modern philosophers provided an epochally original interpretation of human existence that matched the Modern experience of radical uncertainty. Deliberately rejecting the Aristotelian principle that the mind “before it thinks” is “nothing in itself,” early Modern philosophers postulated that the human mind was just another kind of thing—an entirely unique kind of thing perhaps (one dispossessed of the whole world), but nevertheless a thing, which means that it is not “nothing in itself,” but something with a distinct nature of its own. At the same time, however, they embraced the Aristotelian logic that a thing with a nature of its own could not assimilate another thing without adulterating the outcome. For early Modern philosophers, therefore, the mind is not a *tabula rasa*, and its normal experience of the world is nothing but a distortion resulting from the interference of its own recalcitrant nature, disrupting and preventing any pristine manifestation of things as they really are in themselves. (In the case of Locke, it is the instruments the mind necessarily makes use of, such as complex ideas and language, that create the distortions.) The innate recalcitrance of the mind thus explains its alienation from external standards and its need to become sufficient unto itself.

Consequently, in the early Modern era, philosophy becomes therapeutic: it seeks to remedy the natural predicament that alienates the mind from anything but its own illusions. Bacon’s “new organon,” for example, is an expressly *remedial* technique. Embracing what was anathema to Aristotle (who conceived natural science as a synchronic morphology based purely on description), Bacon’s method employs the violence of experimentation to forcibly actualize the latent real distinctions in things, thereby purging from the mind illusions to which its own nature would abandon it. Similarly, Descartes’ method of radical doubt is a transposition into the mind of Bacon’s technique. Through the violence of radical doubt, Descartes forcibly separates ideas that are naturally, but not necessarily, conjoined, actualizing real distinctions that would otherwise have remained latent. Without such artificial intervention we would be deceived by the natural incapacity of our minds about which connections among our ideas are truly necessary and which only seem to be necessary because, in the spontaneous ordering of ideas, the connections are never severed. Only through the forceful intervention of the philosopher’s method (whether Bacon’s or Descartes’) do we see that *naturally* connected does not mean *necessarily* connected.

But the most peculiar and influential feature of this new view of the human being concerns the role of *agency*. In early Modern philosophy, agency is understood mainly in contrast to

what was presumed to be the passivity of properly purified theoretical reflection and observation. In one of Bacon’s most famous aphorisms, for example, theory appears in the guise of *obedience*, the polar opposite of agency, which appears in the guise of *command*: “nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.” This contrast was critical for the new method, the goal of which was to remedy the unfortunate cognitive effects of the mind’s thinghood. If the problem was the mind’s own nature covertly asserting itself in the constitution of experience, then it was really a problem of the mind’s covert *agency*. The solution should lie in neutralizing this covert agency, thereby reconstituting the human mind as something functionally (not actually) equivalent to Aristotle’s passive mind. Thus we find in Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*—which recalls in some ways the extreme quietism of Montaigne’s *Apology for Raymond Sebond*—that the absolute precondition of the new method was the renunciation of all agency: both the covert agency of unjustified theoretical assertion and the overt agency of practical involvement in the world. Both kinds of agency result in a natural view of the world that seems valid, but is vain and illusory.

Having accepted an Aristotelian logic about the corrupting effect of thinghood on the power to assimilate, early Modern philosophy then trumps it with an Augustinian logic about humility and redemption: the method, with its relished violence to the mind’s natural state, is conceived as an ascetic discipline that induces self-transcendence through self-denial. By proscribing all self-assertion in favor of the presumed neutrality and passivity of the purely theoretical spectator, the new method seeks to “humiliate” (Bacon’s term) the individual mind in order that it may, despite its thinghood, be receptive to unadulterated truth. It is evident that unadulterated truth is now conceived on loose analogy with Augustinian grace. It can be received only by an individual that has first mortified itself, overcoming, through the appropriate ascetic practice, the detrimental cognitive effects of its own refractory nature (a congenital defect reminiscent of Augustinian “pride”). The ascetic practice consists in a rigidly-pursued objectifying attitude because this alone has the power to suppress the mind’s otherwise unnoticed, residual agency. Just as this covert agency results in the experience of a factitious world, suppressing it means making the mind receptive to an experience of the world not distorted (or “relativized”) by its own intrinsic nature. As a result, Aristotle’s pure, affectively neutral *theoria* is reinstated as a quasi-ecstatic state of self-transcendence. The *vanitas* of our normal understanding of things can finally be overcome. We should notice both the similarities and the subtle differences here. Aristotle thought of *theoria* as something quasi divine that transcends human nature. As it turns out, the early Modern philosophers were avid to draw this same conclusion. But whereas Aristotle saw *theoria* as the painless activation of a divinely predisposed faculty (the passive mind), the early Moderns thought it could be achieved only as the outcome of a methodical discipline of violence the mind inflicts upon itself.

5. *Consciousness: Beyond the Seventeenth Century*. This final section briefly reviews how the study of consciousness has evolved since the 17th century, but notes that our concept of the thing studied has not, since the 17th century, significantly changed. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that the problems exercising contemporary philosophy of mind are the same as those that occupied 17th and 18th century philosophers: reductionism, epiphenomenalism, dualism, parallelism, interactionism, and so on. Despite all the increased sophistication of our methods and resources, it seems we have, in the course of three centuries, made little progress in understanding consciousness.

Whitehead is one philosopher who thinks the problem is with the model adopted in the 17th century, which we continue to endorse. He believes that a very different and much more promising theoretical approach is possible if we return to what is, in effect, the Aristotelian model. The great obstacle standing in the way of any return to an Aristotelian theory of mind is, of course, the difficulty of making sense of what no one has ever made sense of: the idea—first explicitly advanced in Plato’s account of the Receptacle and then borrowed by Aristotle for his account of passive mind—of a faculty that can accommodate some foreign object without distortion or resistance because the faculty is “nothing in itself.” How could there be anything that was absolutely “nothing in itself”? The very idea seems like nonsense. But Whitehead believes he has solved this problem with his “epochal” theory of time, which I believe is coherent even if it is quite difficult to explain. The crucial idea is that, at any moment in time, the future moment, which is yet to be, is indeed *nothing in itself*. According to Whitehead, the world continues to be only because that future moment, in a sequence that is not itself manifest in time, recreates the world that “just” was and immediately proceeds, marginally, to modify it into the “new” moment that does manifest in the public time in which perception finds its objects. Thus, the dynamic by which the “atoms” of time replace one another encapsulates, albeit not in a way that is externally manifest, the very process Aristotle envisioned as the passive mind internally realizing an object without distorting it.

Of course Whitehead agrees with Modern philosophers that Aristotelian realism is false, but the reason is not that the mind, being a thing, obstructs the process of assimilation. The reason is that each moment—and the mind, too, when it is what occupies the local moment in question—doesn’t stop its inner process of becoming at the point where it reproduces what came just before, but continues its process of becoming precisely in order to obtain a kind of individuality, a kind of novelty and thinghood that makes it both concrete and different from what went before. The mind, in other words, does not start out being a thing: it ends up being one. If the mind starts out being a thing, then, as it seeks objective knowledge, it drags its refractory thinghood along like an original sin, which, just as early Modern philosophers thought, could be overcome only through some kind of ontological self-suppression and something weirdly analogous to the miracle of grace. But if the mind ends up being a thing, then “objective” knowledge is already the beginning, the lowest stratum of each moment of experience, even though it is obscured and normally forgotten as each moment of experience embellishes itself, seeking some modicum of novelty through self-assertion. Whitehead argues that such a teleology operates in experience because it operates in every event throughout the natural world. We may be skeptical that such a teleology operates in nature, but, because this theory doesn’t have to postulate two radically different kinds of things—the one somehow effacing its individuality and transmuting into the other in the act of knowledge—it does provide the basis for a more coherent model of consciousness than the early Modern one. For that reason alone it merits scholarly attention and may teach us something about important constraints in the modeling of consciousness.