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Consciousness in Early Modern Philosophy and Science



Vili Lähteenmäki
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Related Topics

Thinking · Reflection · Mind · Self · Self-Consciousness · Self-Knowledge · Mind-Body Dualism · Intentionality · Representation · Sensation

Introduction and Background

English “consciousness” and “conscience” are both translations of the Latin *conscientia*. Both of the English terms denote to an individual’s psychological relation to itself, but “conscience” involves additionally an element of moral evaluation. In the early modern period, some philosophers started using *conscientia* as well as the French “conscience” in a new meaning by dropping the moral connotation and retaining only the feature of relating to oneself or one’s thoughts. The English “consciousness” and the German “Bewusstsein” were introduced to capture the psychological sense in particular, and the Latin and French terms continued in use but with a double meaning (Glyn Davies 1990; Thiel 2011, 5–18; see also my ▶ “Self-

Consciousness: Early Modern Theories” in Knuuttila and Sihvola 2014), 447–459 on which this entry draws and which includes a collection of excerpts from early modern literature on the topic of consciousness with explanatory notes.).

It is plausible to think that before the emergence of terms like “consciousness” and “Bewusstsein,” philosophers and scientists relied on intuitions about phenomena of subjective experience that we would now classify as “conscious.” In other words, pre-modern thinkers availed themselves of one or another concept of consciousness as they developed their theories of mind, perception, representation, the self, etc., but they did not attend to consciousness in its own right (Heinämaa & al. 2007). In the early modern period, terminology of consciousness emerges to pick out concept(s) of consciousness. This brings with it an occasion for philosophical disagreements concerning consciousness among contemporaries, on the one hand, and an occasion for us as interpreters of historical authors to better assess their views on consciousness, on the other.

Despite the terminological development, consciousness has relatively little stability in the early modern period as a philosophical concept. A more restrictive characterization than that consciousness stands for a psychological self-relation would likely leave out some early modern concepts of consciousness. Having simultaneously several concepts on the philosophical scene is not however much different from

the situation in our day. In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophy of mind, subjective psychological phenomena have come under unprecedented philosophical attention, and there are a number of notions of consciousness that actively figure in the ongoing debates (see, e.g., the entry on consciousness in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

Given the lack of explicit pre-modern discussion, it is more helpful to use our contemporary understanding of consciousness as the broad backdrop for the early modern views. While it is safe to say on a general level that the early modern view of consciousness as a relation to one's mental states has carried over to our contemporary concepts, there are also some markedly stark contrasts. Somewhat surprisingly, even when reference is made to the early modern background, in the contemporary literature, these differences commonly go unnoticed. Being explicit about them helps to appreciate some specific interpretative challenges we have to be aware of with the early modern literature.

One contrast is that today consciousness is presented as an *explanandum*. Most notably, it is taken to pose an ontological problem by resisting reductive explanation in terms of objectively describable physical processes. For the early moderns, consciousness figures most often as an *explanans*. It is supposed to aid in disentangling, clarifying, and understanding other phenomena and problems. This difference illuminates why there are few explicit discussions of the nature of consciousness in the early modern period and why it is usually not clear at the outset what kind of thing, phenomenon, or, indeed, set of phenomena consciousness is taken to be. This has an effect on our interpretive starting points: deciphering the nature, structure, and functions of consciousness is an emphatically context-dependent matter.

Another contrast is that early modern philosophers understood consciousness as a relatively robust phenomenon, admitting, for instance, acquaintance with the essence of our own minds. As noted though, there is notable variation in the views of the period, and it is not true of each early modern concept of

consciousness. But treating consciousness as merely a qualitative aspect of the mental, a "something-it-is-like" or "qualia" of subjective experience, as much of today's analytic philosophy of mind does, is virtually absent in the early modern period.

Against the background of these common characteristics, this entry provides an overview of how early modern philosophers and scientists put their concepts of consciousness to use. The next section, "[Conspicuity and Flexibility of Consciousness](#)" serves two purposes. It highlights the idea that consciousness was not thought of as a problem to be solved, and it highlights that the concept is markedly flexible. (The second feature is at least partly due to the first.) The broadest context is the relationship between consciousness and thinking as the activity of the mind, which is the topic of the section "[Consciousness and Thinking](#)." "[Consciousness, Reflexivity, and the Self](#)" discusses how consciousness relates to different forms of reflexivity and whether consciousness amounts to self-consciousness. "[Consciousness and Certainty](#)" surveys epistemic achievements attributed to consciousness, and "[Consciousness and Materialism](#)" considers how consciousness relates to mechanical explanations of human behavior.

Conspicuity and Flexibility of Consciousness

Some early modern thinkers suggest, a few of them explicitly, that consciousness is peculiar in that it is a self-evident phenomenon. Since every conscious being already knows or at least has direct access to consciousness simply by virtue of being conscious herself, they hesitate describing it in detail. For example, John Locke explains that "every one will know better by reflecting on what he does himself, when he sees, hears, feels, *etc.* or thinks, than by any discourse of mine. Whoever reflects on what passes in his own Mind, cannot miss it: And if he does not reflect, all the Words in the World, cannot make him have any notion of it" (Locke 1690/1975, 2.9.2). A few decades later, Samuel Clarke echoes Locke's

observation as he responds to Anthony Collins' invitation to define what he means by consciousness, "Every Man feels and knows by Experience what Consciousness is, better than any Man can explain it: Which is the case of all simple ideas" (Clarke 2011, 101). By doubting the possibility of an informative description, Locke and Clarke are in fact describing our knowledge of *what* consciousness is as being knowledge by acquaintance and suggesting that this way of knowing accords with the nature of the phenomenon. We may take these statements to indicate acknowledgment of the subjective nature of consciousness while, at the same time, they reveal that there is certain struggle with distinguishing between what has come to be called first- and third-person perspective phenomena. However, even if acquaintance is the best way in which we can hope to capture what consciousness is, few early modern thinkers would maintain that on top of acquaintance, nothing helpful can be said.

Charles Mein published (anonymously) an *Essay on Consciousness* in 1728. Mein's text is interesting not so much due to its philosophical merit but by being written in the early eighteenth century when explicit appeals to consciousness in different contexts had been around for several decades and being the first and very rich work devoted to the topic. Let us highlight two things about Mein's *Essay* that help to provide a perspective into the landscape in which the early modern discussions navigate.

First, the *Essay* seems to bring together the whole range of functions and objects of consciousness that authors before Mein had identified (or perhaps more). The following excerpt is just one possible example of many about the significance and versatility of consciousness from the *Essay*, "the Mind, in its several Acts of *Thinking* and *Perceiving*, of *Imagining*, *Remembering*, *Willing*, or *Affecting*, is *Conscious* of them as its *own* Acts, or knows that it is *it self* (i.e. its own actual Being) which *thinks*, *Perceives*, etc. And at the same time is sensible that they proceed from it self, as the Principle of them; or knows that it is endued with such and such Powers, as a Power of *Imagining*, a Power of *Remembring*, etc. the Senses or Knowledge of having a Power

belonging to it self, not being to be separated or disjoined from That of its Act or Operation, in a rational and intelligent Being. And, it being *conscious* of its own Acts, the Mind perceives their several Natures. . . It knows the precise and exact Manner of its own Acting and Operating. . ." (Mein 1728, 145). Mein's list of what consciousness pertains to and affords us with reflects the considerable flexibility of the concept, not just in Mein's hands but also in the early modern period more broadly. It is not known who have inspired Mein's discussion, but it is plausible to read his *Essay* as partly echoing earlier authors' usages of consciousness.

Second, related to Locke's and Clarke's observations above, Mein opens the essay by saying that consciousness is a questionable topic for a study. In the first pages, he writes that "either there is nothing considerable and extraordinary in it [i.e. consciousness]; or else so very little, and withal so obvious to the meanest Capacity at first sight, that it needs not to be particularly declared, or it does not admit of any sort of Explication. And how it should come to pass I know not, but so we find it is, that every one imagines, he discovers as much of his *Consciousness*, immediately, or at one single View, (which lies within a very narrow Compass) as he shall ever be able to do; and that 'tis in vain to search and enquire, or use any Thought or reflection about it" (Mein 1728, 142). Given that Mein nevertheless writes the 90-page essay, it is not clear whether this is genuine hesitation from his part or whether he is describing what he takes to be a common view at the time and is offering it as an explanation of why he is the first to investigate into consciousness *per se*.

It is tempting to translate the self-evidence of consciousness that Locke, Clark, and Mein refer to as picking out what has later been called "subjective character" of consciousness. "Subjective character" refers to a *for-a-subject* mode of being of conscious states, which is often distinguished from "qualitative character" by which is meant that there is a *something-it-is-like* for one to be in a conscious state. This distinction is useful for our understanding of early modern discussions, because while the late twentieth-century

philosophy of mind has been preoccupied with the latter aspect, early modern authors show extremely little philosophical interest in it. It has been an item of some scholarly dispute whether the early moderns even recognized that aspect (Baker and Morris 1996, 165; Morris 2000, 403; Kaukua and Lähteenmäki 2010). While it is implausible that they would have been completely ignorant of it, we should bear in mind that it surely does not stand out as a problem to be dealt with or a specific explanatory tool.

Consciousness and Thinking

Descartes denies that vegetative and sensitive souls – which are central ontological entities and explanatory principles in the Aristotelian tradition – can account for such functions of organisms as nutrition, locomotion, and sensation. He argues that their nature is mechanical and they should be explained on principles which appeal to systematic behavior of pieces of matter. Sensations however are neither fully mechanical nor fully mental. They stand out as having a double nature. Descartes includes sensations within the realm of the mind only insofar as they are appearances to the mind and within the realm of matter only insofar as they are mechanical bodily events. As appearances to the mind, sensations count as thoughts. As thoughts, they have something in common with all other kinds of thoughts and nothing in common with matter, which is mere extension and subject to mechanical analysis.

One way in which Descartes then designates what makes something belong to the mind and exclude from belonging to matter is that it involves consciousness, “I take the term thought to encompass everything within us of which we are immediately conscious. Therefore, all operations of the will, intellect, imagination, and sense are thoughts” (Descartes, *Second Replies*, AT VII, 160); “I understand by ‘thought’ everything that happens within us when we are conscious, in so far as there is consciousness of it in us. For that reason, not only understanding, willing and imagining but also sensing count as thinking” (Descartes, *Principles* I.9, AT VIIIA, 7–8).

It is the essence of the mind to think, and hence it will cease to exist as soon as it ceases to think. This means that even in sleep the mind entertains some representational content. Since thinking requires consciousness, consciousness must be somehow indispensable to the mind. It is useful to distinguish between being the essence of something and being necessary for something. There is a relatively recent influential interpretative tradition according to which for Descartes the mental *consists* of consciousness (Ryle 1949, 13), but also some seventeenth-century followers of Descartes promoted it as the Cartesian position. For example, Luis de la Forge writes, “I can define the *nature* of thought as that consciousness, awareness and inner feeling by which the mind is aware of everything it does or suffers and, in general, of everything which takes place immediately in itself at the same time as it acts or is acted on” (de la Forge 1664, 57; added emphasis).

Views that inflate consciousness by reducing thinking and mind to consciousness are largely rejected in the recent scholarship as correct descriptions of Descartes’ own view (see Alanen 2003; Carriero 2009 among many others). But the exact place and function Descartes assigns to consciousness is an issue of ongoing debate. Textually, a good starting point for a more precise understanding is Descartes’ concept of idea, which he defines as “the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me conscious of this thought” (*Second Replies* AT VII 160, CSM II 113). There are a few candidates for what perceiving a form of thought might mean. First, it has been interpreted to mean that for a thought to be conscious, it has to be an object of another thought (see Thiel 2011, 43–54 for a discussion). A forceful objection to what are called second-order or higher-order accounts of consciousness is that if consciousness is a matter of perceiving a thought by means of another thought, Descartes is led into a vicious regress. Since for him all thoughts are conscious, the second thought that renders the first thought conscious would need to be an object of a third thought for it to be a conscious thought and so forth *ad infinitum*.

Another way is to interpret the “immediate perception” as a same-order intrinsic element of

all thoughts. If this is the case, the question of what exactly we perceive about a thought when we are conscious of it arises more noticeably than on second-order interpretations. In Descartes' own terminology, thoughts are modes of mind, which means that they are particular ways of being of thinking substances. Modes of mind consist of two aspects. They always have content, that is, they are *about* things by being representations of them in the mind. All thoughts are also something the mind *does*. As Descartes says in the passage just quoted, they are *operations* of the will, intellect, imagination, and sense. We cannot see, want, or understand without seeing, wanting, or understanding something; and our thought cannot be about something without being about it in some particular way. There are hence at least three candidates for what consciousness is perception *of*: the content of thought, the act of thought, or both. Descartes is not explicit on this and it is not obvious what his answer would be (for discussion, see Lähteenmäki 2007; Barth 2011a; Simmons 2012). Locke is more explicit than Descartes, and by considering Locke's view, we can shed some comparative light on Descartes also.

In expressing his own account in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke takes the Cartesian view as a starting point. He disagrees with Descartes as he maintains that it is not necessary for a thinking substance to constantly think in order to stay in existence, "I do not say there is no Soul in a Man, because he is not sensible of it in his sleep" (Locke 1690/1975, 2.1.10). But he agrees that we cannot have thoughts of which we are not conscious, "I do say, [we] cannot think at any time waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. Our being sensible of it is not necessary to anything, but to our thoughts" (Ibid.). For Locke, consciousness is hence essentially linked to the concept of thinking and not to the concept of mind or soul. It is a remarkable difference, because for Locke consciousness plays no role in defining the mind as a substance, only in defining the activity of the mind.

Otherwise Locke describes consciousness similarly to Descartes, "consciousness is the perception of what passes in a Man's own mind"

(Locke 1690/1975, 2.1.19). Again, as with Descartes, achieving more precision about the notion of consciousness will require more clarity about what exactly is perceived. One might think that for Locke consciousness is the same as reflection and that Locke has a second-order account of consciousness. Namely, he defines reflection as "the Perception of the Operations of our own Minds within us" (Locke 1690/1975, 2.1.4). But reflection occupies a special role in Locke's philosophy. It is part of the mind's overall sensory capacity as the internal counterpart of the external senses. Through external senses we acquire ideas of the external world, and through reflection we acquire ideas of the functioning of our own minds. Locke is emphatic that these two are the only origins of ideas. So, consciousness does not bring about ideas and is not identical with reflection, but like reflection it has thought somehow as its object. Scholars are largely in agreement that Locke understands consciousness as an integral same-order element of thought (see Thiel 2011 and Weinberg 2016 for discussion and further secondary literature). Operations of the mind are included in what pass in the mind, but insofar as "operation" signifies what the mind *does*, there must be also something else passing in the mind, namely, representations of things.

Again, as with Descartes, there are several candidates of what consciousness is about. In comparison to Descartes, Locke is significantly less sparing both in granting consciousness a robust status in the ontology of thought and concerning the range of objects it covers (see Weinberg 2016 for a thorough account). For Locke, "thinking *consists* in being conscious that one thinks" (Locke 1690/1975, 2.1.19; added emphasis) – which is something Descartes does not say. Concerning what consciousness covers, in addition to representations, we are conscious of our mental operations as the kind of operations they are (Locke 1690/1975, 2.27.9) and, remarkably, in "every Act of Sensation, Reasoning, or Thinking, we are conscious to our selves of our own Being" (Locke 1690/1975, 4.9.3). Consciousness delivers not only presentation of acts and contents of thought but also of one's own

existence. Moreover, the consciousness of oneself is certain to “the highest degree” (Ibid.).

The last thing sounds very much like what is usually said of Descartes. However, the certainty delivering Cartesian *Cogito* can be expressed as an inference, “I think, therefore I am.” Substances cannot be known directly, but only through their modes. In a strict sense, the mind is never immediately conscious of itself as an entity, but rather infers its own existence from the fact that it is modified in this or that way, just as you would infer from a particular shape that there must exist a *thing* that is so shaped. In another sense though, being conscious of a mode of mind (i.e., of a thought) is just being conscious of the mind, because there is no other manner or form for the mind to exist than by being modified in particular ways. At the very least, Descartes, unlike Locke, never claims that certainty of one’s own existence follows from simply being conscious of one’s thinking.

Note that same-order and higher-order accounts of consciousness address the question of how a mental state becomes conscious. Although thinking about consciousness in this way surely helps us examine and categorize views of early modern authors, it is important to be aware that they themselves lack explicit motivation to consider consciousness in such terms. The reason is that most of them do not have a notion of nonconscious thought as a category from which to distinguish conscious thoughts. Namely, it is the contrast between these two categories that creates a need to explain how some thoughts come to be conscious while others are not.

Leibniz forms an important exception in this respect. Leibniz could agree with Descartes that the mind has a constant flux of perceptions without accepting that we are conscious of all of them while also not having to concede with Locke that the mind could exist without any mental goings-on. He distinguishes between perceptions that represent external things and consciousness of the state of representing. He calls consciousness *reflective* knowledge and notes that “because of lacking this distinction [between perception and consciousness as reflective knowledge] the

Cartesians went wrong, counting perceptions of which we are not conscious as nothing” (Leibniz, *Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison* 4, 600). Distinguishing consciousness in this way from perception strongly suggests that consciousness is a higher-order phenomenon: we become conscious of perceptions by means of a distinct act that may or may not take the perception as its object (Jorgensen 2011). Scholars are however divided on whether Leibniz is a higher-order theorist. Arguably, Leibniz’s account of consciousness as reflective knowledge is not exhaustive of his concept of consciousness, for he attributes sensory consciousness to animals as well as discusses phenomenal awareness as a form of instant attention, rather than explicit reflection, on the content of perception (Barth 2011b, 2014).

Consciousness, Reflexivity, and the Self

At the heart of the concept of consciousness is that it effects a psychological self-relation. This section considers the variety of ways the mind is taken to be capable of turning towards itself in its acts of thinking. Reflexivity is either an intrinsic feature of acts of thought, or it may require a separate act (which is typically a *voluntary* act). The distinction between same-order and higher-order accounts of consciousness drawn in the previous section is based on these two forms of reflexivity. One might however subscribe to a same-order account of consciousness while arguing that *self-consciousness* requires voluntary reflection. But for many thinkers, consciousness is in fact self-consciousness precisely due to its intrinsic reflexivity. In other words, consciousness not only makes representations and the mental operations present to the thinker but also the thinker present to herself.

Ralph Cudworth, who introduces the term “consciousness” in the English language philosophical discussion, defines consciousness with the help of the idea of reflexivity. He explains that a “[d]uplication [. . .] is included in the Nature of *sunæsthêsis*, Con-sense and Consciousness, which makes a Being to be Present with it self, Attentive to its own Actions, or Animadversive of

them, to perceive it self to Do or Suffer, and to have a Fruition or Enjoyment of it self” (Cudworth 1789, 159). Antoine Arnauld likewise explicitly appeals to reflexivity in defining consciousness, and he expresses the difference between the two forms of reflexivity remarkably clearly, “*Thought* or *perception* is essentially reflexive on itself, or, as it is said better in Latin, *est sui conscia*. For I do not think without knowing that I think [. . .]. Sometime afterwards I may not remember having known this or that thing, but at the moment when I know it I know that I know it. [. . .] In addition to a type of reflection that may be called *virtual*, one that is present with all our perceptions, there is another one, which is more *express*, whereby we examine our perception by means of another perception” (Arnauld 1683/1990, 71; see Schmal 2019 for a thoughtful discussion). Reflecting in the sense of thinking of one’s thinking adds another layer of reflexivity, but already the integrated “virtual” reflection delivers consciousness not only of representations and of acts of thought but also of the subject of thought.

Cudworth has a similar view. Consciousness is reflexive by its nature and allows the subject of thought and action to be present to herself in such a way that reflecting upon will on her thoughts and actions becomes possible. Furthermore, Cudworth points out that free and responsible agency requires that a subject is conscious of herself as the doer of things and has the ability to reflect on her actions (Cudworth 1996, 201). Locke, as noted in the previous section, also thinks that consciousness covers the self, but he differs from Cudworth and Arnauld in denying that consciousness affords knowledge about the essence of the subject. Nevertheless, Locke takes on Cudworth’s idea of associating consciousness with moral agency. Locke’s discussion of the conditions of accountability and temporal continuity of selves becomes the liveliest context in which consciousness receives attention in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Locke argues that personal identity is grounded on the capacity to consider oneself as oneself, rather than in possession of a mind or soul. It is consciousness that provides us with this capacity, “[a]nd as far as

this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*” (Locke 1690/1975, 2.27.9).

Thomas Reid’s discussion of consciousness in the latter half of the eighteenth century reflects the fact that consciousness is no more a novel topic. Reid singles out features that in many of the earlier thinkers remain implicit. First, he explicitly distinguishes between consciousness and reflection, “All men are conscious of the operations of their own minds, at all times, while they are awake; but there are few who reflect upon them, or make them objects of thought” (Reid 1785, I.5). Reid’s distinction is not quite the same as Arnauld’s, since he does not describe consciousness with the help of reflexivity but treats only higher-order acts as reflection. He observes however that we are under normal conditions conscious of the representational content, but acts of thought and the subject of thought can also become objects of consciousness. Namely, consciousness can be directed at one or the other of its proper objects. Moving from one object to another is a function of *attention*, “[A]lthough the mind is conscious of its operations, it does not attend to them; its attention is turned solely to the external objects, about which these operations are employed. [There is a] difference between consciousness of the operations of our minds, and reflection upon them; [. . .] we may have the former without any degree of the latter. [. . .] Attention is a voluntary act; it requires an active exertion to begin and to continue it, and it may be continued as long as we will; but consciousness is involuntary and of no continuance, changing with every thought” (Ibid.). Consciousness is transient, because it pertains to singular thoughts and comes and goes as different thoughts come and go, but with voluntary attention, we can choose the objects of consciousness. So, for Reid, two temporally distinct thoughts are not related to one another in any interesting way due to the fact that they are conscious thoughts, even if they are *your* thoughts. What brings thoughts together as a given individual’s thoughts is a continuing awareness of the subject of thought, “The thoughts and feelings of which we are conscious

are continually changing [...]; but something which I call myself, remains under this change of thought. This self has the same relation to all the successive thoughts I am conscious of—they are all my thoughts” (Reid 1785, VI.5.2). Reid’s attribution of consciousness exclusively to singular thoughts means that the awareness the self has of itself as the subject of thought does not fall under his concept of consciousness (for discussion, see Copenhaver 2006; Jaffro 2011).

Consciousness and Certainty

While it is not uncommon that the mind’s knowledge of itself – either of its existence or its essence – is seen as enjoying a special status as certain knowledge, there are in fact few that take that certainty to follow from consciousness in particular. As noted above in the section “Consciousness and Thinking,” Descartes is often credited with ascribing remarkable epistemic achievements to consciousness, but he forwards no explicit argument that they are due to consciousness specifically (it is rather his method of systematic doubt that is designed to lead us to clear and distinct ideas; see Paul 2018). In contrast, Arnauld, a self-proclaimed Cartesian, explicitly attributes certainty to conscious mental states, “I do not think without knowing that I think; I do not know a square without knowing that I know it; I do not see the sun, or, to express this so that it is beyond doubt, I do not imagine seeing the sun without being certain that I imagine seeing it” (Arnauld 1683/1990, 71). Locke maintains that we are conscious of our own existence “so plainly, and so certainly, that it never needs, nor is capable of any proof” (Locke 1690/1975, 4.9.3), and Reid says that although consciousness is transient, “by consciousness we know certainly the existence of our present thoughts” (Reid, EIP I.2.2). These three thinkers are subject to further analysis in terms of whether they stop at observing certainty as an affordance of consciousness or whether certainty by consciousness serves particular functions for them. (Locke, for instance, builds on it considerable confidence in the temporal continuity of the self, although

consciousness can only provide momentary assurance of one’s own existence.)

Malebranche presents the most notable early modern rejection that consciousness delivers certainty about the nature of the mind. He is one of the many interpreting Descartes’ claim that mind is better known than matter as grounded on an immediate consciousness of oneself. Targeting that idea, he argues that matter is in fact better known than the mind, “We are able to say that we have a clear idea of the body because in order to know the modifications it can have, it suffices to consult the idea representing it,” whereas consciousness is a mere “inner *sentiment*” about the mind and “surely we have no idea of our mind which is such that, by consulting it, we can discover the modifications of which the mind is capable” (Malebranche 1997, 633–634). Malebranche’s position is distinctive in that he takes consciousness under scrutiny as an epistemic notion but, regardless of the alleged immediacy of consciousness, for him consciousness is not related to ideas. In other words, consciousness is not awareness of representations at all, but awareness of the activity of the mind only. And as such it is a mere sentiment that lacks the kind of distinctness which the mind can achieve through pure intellectual contemplation. There are two better ways than consciousness through which to achieve knowledge: by knowing things by themselves and knowing them through ideas, respectively (Malebranche 1997, 236).

Consciousness and Materialism

In the early modern period, the idea that human activity is fully explainable in terms of shapes and motions of matter arose most notably from Hobbes’s materialism in the mid-seventeenth century. It is useful to note that Hobbes’ commitment to materialism is thoroughgoing and not centered around human psychology, although he of course assesses the mental capacities. When doing so he does not use the term consciousness, but comes rather close. Namely, he talks of “seeming or fancy” associated with sensible qualities (colors, sounds, odors, heat, softness, etc.). Various

motions of matter in the objects affect our sense organs and cause in us the seeming or fancy of those objects, but those very affections, just as their causes, are for Hobbes nothing but “divers motions; (for motion produceth nothing but motion)” (Hobbes, *Leviathan* I.1). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate to help his readers to conceive of seeming as a form of mechanical motion.

In the Cartesian metaphysics, the question of thinking matter is a nonstarter because the mental is entirely distinct from the bodily and hence one cannot be grounded on the other, neither ontologically nor explanatorily (Descartes, *Third Replies*, AT VII, 176). Leibniz’s position is similar to Descartes’. He argues that regardless of the level of perfection of our knowledge of mechanics, the existence and nature of mental phenomena are inexplicable mechanically. The nature of matter and material motions effectively exclude the possibility of a real explanation (Leibniz, *Monadologie* 17 (609); for discussion, see Rozemond 2014; Lodge 2014).

Locke too explicitly addresses the issue and acknowledges that we may have reasons for preferring the materialist or immaterialist thesis. Eventually he rests the question however, because our limited epistemic capacities do not allow for a conclusive answer (Locke 1690/1975, 4.3.6), but his core observation stimulates a good deal of the later discussion. He argues that we do not conceive how activity of thinking arises from the substance on which it depends. From the nature of the activity of thinking, we know neither directly nor through inference the nature of the thinking substance, that is, whether it is material or immaterial. Locke’s observation provides a background for the most extensive single debate in which consciousness becomes the centerpiece regarding the possibility of thinking emerging from material composites. The debate took place in an exchange of letters between Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins in the first decade of the eighteenth century.

Clarke argues that consciousness provides evidence about the nature of the thinking substance, “That the Soul cannot possibly be Material, is...demonstrable from the single

consideration, even of bare Sense or Consciousness it self. For, matter being a divisible substance...it is plain, unless it were essentially conscious—in which case every particle of matter must consist of innumerable separate and distinct consciousnesses—[that] no system of it in any possible composition or division can be an individual conscious being” (Clarke 2011, 53). Collins accepts Clarke’s point that consciousness is unified or simple in a way that matter is not, but he challenges Clarke’s position, “Let us suppose with Mr. Clarke, that a Material Substance in any manner disposed, is not an Individual Being; yet I cannot see but that an Individual Power may reside in a Material System, which consists of actually separate and distinct Parts; and consequently, that an Individual Being is not indispensably necessary to be the subject of an Individual” (Collins 2011, 48). It is clear that Collins argues for the possibility that thinking and consciousness could inhere in or result from a material composite, but it is a matter of interpretation of what exactly is Collins’ argument for how it could happen. Collins is openly favorable to Locke, and he is relying on Locke’s distinction between activity of thinking and substance of thinking, although Collins casts the dichotomy in terms of power of thinking and activity of thinking. We have direct access to our activity of thinking, because to think entails consciousness of it, but our access to thinking insofar as it is a power in us is limited. Collins’ strategy is to argue that material composites can have unified powers.

He does not attempt to account for how consciousness is by its nature a material property or an emergent material property, but to make acceptable the idea that a sufficiently unified power – such as the power to think – can result from joint contribution of powers of parts of a material composite. He points out that “man cannot turn his Eye but he will meet with Material Systems, wherein there are Individual Powers, which are not in every one, nor in any one of the Particles that compose them when taken apart, and considered singly... Let us instance for example in a Rose. That consists of several Particles, which separately and singly want a Power to produce that agreeable Sensation we experience in them

when united... [E]ach of the Particles in that Union contributes to the Individual Power, which is the external Cause of our Sensation” (Collins 2011, 48–49). In a similar way, as the particles in the rose team up to constitute a single unified power, particles in the brain can jointly produce a single unified power. The power of thinking inheres in a material composite, but insofar as Clarke’s anti-materialist thesis rests on the heterogeneity between divisibility (of matter) and unity (of consciousness), Collins argues, Clarke has failed to establish that it is impossible that material composites are conscious (Lähteenmäki 2014a; see also Uzgalis 2009).

The Clarke–Collins debate notwithstanding the success of materialism was not commonly pitted against consciousness. There is however an intriguing remark Cudworth makes to Hobbes about the prospect of explaining thinking in terms of motions of matter, “a Modern Atheistick Pretender to Wit, hath publickly owned this same Conclusion, That *Mind is Nothing else but Local Motion in the Organick parts of Mans Body*. These men [materialists] have been sometimes indeed a little Troubled, with the *Phancy, Apparition, or Seeming of Cogitation*, that is The *Consciousness* of it, as knowing not well what to make thereof; but then they put it off again, and satisfie themselves worshipfully with this, that *Phancy* is but *Phancy*, but the *Reality of Cogitation*, nothing but *Local Motion*; as if there were not as much *Reality* in *Phancy* and *Consciousness*, as there is in *Local Motion*” (Cudworth 1789, 846). Cudworth does not elaborate why consciousness is a problem for the materialist, but it is plausible to read him as referring to the qualitative and subjective aspects of consciousness: the *seeming* of thinking implies that there is something it is like for the thinker to think it. An account of thinking will have to address that feature, because it has reality in itself and cannot be bypassed as fiction or an empty byproduct. If this is Cudworth’s message, he is probably the first philosopher to put his finger on that particular aspect of consciousness and propose that it falls outside the scope of materialist explanation.

Cross-References

- ▶ Clarke, Samuel
- ▶ Collins, Anthony
- ▶ Descartes
- ▶ Dreams and Dreaming
- ▶ Intentionality
- ▶ Life, Mechanization of
- ▶ Malebranche, Nicolas
- ▶ Materialism
- ▶ Mind and Cognition, Early Modern Theories
- ▶ Mind/Body Problems
- ▶ Personal Identity
- ▶ Sensation and Perception
- ▶ Soul, The

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