

Beyond the Modern Monolith of Consciousness

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Part 1

Thinking does not necessarily imply a first person perspective. This is the presumptive perspective that Descartes and others bring to philosophy. It has led to the view of modernism including science that thinking is a purely subjective phenomenon of the finite spirit. However, there is no ontological necessity connecting thinking with the finite subject as Descartes merely presumed. He did not prove that.

Again, as previously explained, Aristotle did not presume that thinking was the activity of a finite subject. He conceived thinking as the pure self-activity of the Absolute, *noesis noeseous noesis*, thought thinking thought. The modern dogmatic presumption that a finite subjective thinker is needed for the activity of thinking is not the basis for the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, although that is missed by most modern interpreters of ancient philosophy because of the inherent finite subjective perspective that is characteristic of the modern period.

In order to rise above that perspective presumption to the absolute platform requires a completely revolutionary shift. As it is sometimes said of Plato, "Philosophy is learning to die." One has to transcend their present first person conception of the finite self as a starting point, and understand it is something to be arrived at or derived from the absolute perspective. This means that philosophy acknowledges that there is a First Person or absolute thinking that is not oneself. In the Vedic tradition this is called *Adi Purusha*. Religion understands this as God. Aristotle also called it *theos*.

The First proposition is that thinking can think itself, without need of a finite spirit. After all, we do not know how we think. What bodily part in the brain or otherwise produces thought? Does the sunset produce thought of the sunset? It seems strange to think that something like the sun setting below the horizon can cause thought. Nothing of the non-thought world of existence can cause thought. This has been called the hard problem of philosophy. This problem can be traced back to Descartes which will be briefly outlined in what follows

Next we have to understand how pure thought or the absolute thinking that thinks itself, that has its own initiative within itself without the need of a finite subject? This difficult problem is addressed by Hegel in his *Science of Logic*. It involves the dialectical relation of concepts to their opposed conceptions. That is a subject in and of itself which I will not address here.

Hegel shows that starting from the most basic thought, Being, all the other categories or concepts such as the finite subjective thinker and consciousness or mind can be understood. Even if we start from Descartes *cogito ergo sum*, we can

understand that his identity of thinking-being as the first principle divides itself into two sides: thinking and being, where thinking is abstracted from its identity with being and identified with consciousness [*res cogitans*] and being with the material world [*res extensus*], or content of that consciousness. This creates the hard problem mentioned before.

What this says is that the first principle thinking-being is not the object of consciousness but the source or origin of it. If we call thinking-being the self, then the self is before consciousness, so it can not be an object of consciousness. It is the self as thinking-being that divides itself into a subjective consciousness opposed to an objective world. Kant realized the necessity of this self and called it the unity of apperception. It has a necessary existence before we can specify what we call consciousness.

So ontologically, according to this scheme, thinking produces consciousness, not the other way around by those of the modern period who have been conditioned to conceive thinking in terms of a finite first person subjective perspective.

While Kant did not properly understand the unity of apperception in the way explained here, Hegel did. For Hegel the self was self-consciousness. What this means and why it is referred to in this way requires understanding the self in a social context, an ontology which no other philosopher has articulated as clearly as Hegel, although it is referenced in the ideas of Kant and the Scottish philosophers of common sense.

Part 2

The right question is: which came first, consciousness or the thought/concept of consciousness?

As explained in **Part 1**, consciousness is a derived subordinate concept to the self-thinking Idea or Absolute.

Consciousness is a concept and concepts are formed by thinking. We could not refer to the word "consciousness" and what it means or represents unless we had first formulated the idea by thinking it. But what must be a surprising fact for the modern thinker, is that the idea of consciousness does not come from within us - solipsistically as it were. The idea of consciousness comes to us from experience of others who exhibit whom we theorize to have consciousness.

This is explained in a very simple but extraordinary way by three prominent child psychologists, Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl who argue that children are not simply passive vessels to be filled with knowledge, but act in a way that is similar to scientific investigators who make and test theories.

[Alison Gopnik, Andrew N. Meltzoff, and Patricia K. Kuhl, *The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains and How Children Learn* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1999).]

They explain that for a child -

"All that really reaches us from the outside world is a play of colours and shapes, light and sound. . . what we really see are bags of skin stuffed into pieces of cloth and draped over chairs. There are small restless black spots that move at the top of the bags of skin, and a hole underneath that irregularly makes noises. The bags move in unpredictable ways, and sometimes one of them will touch us. The holes change shape, and occasionally salty liquid pours from the two spots.

This is, of course, a madman's view of other people, a nightmare. The problem of Other Minds is how we somehow get from this mad view to our ordinary experience of people."

Perception only gives us bags of skin, and other minds are something more than bags of skin. To encounter other minds we need something more than perception. Gopnik argues that the something more is a theory. The infant is a theoretician who comprehends her world, and other minds appear in that world as the explanation of phenomena.

In other words, to understand other persons as having consciousness we need something more than perception. Gopnik explains that 'something more' as a theory. The infant must be a theoretician in order to make sense of its phenomenal experiences.

In this way we come to understand ourselves as having consciousness by recognizing that others consist of a consciousness that is aware of myself as having consciousness. This is how we come to understand that I must have a consciousness. In other words it is a socially constructed and shared concept. This explains why the word consciousness is derived from the Latin root *con-scio*, or knowing with others.

Reason is beyond consciousness

We misunderstand reason as being experienced within consciousness when it is reason [theory] that produces the idea of consciousness. Most of us generally accept that the Earth is rotating around its axis producing the phenomenon that we experience as day and night. The phenomenon of day and night is an experience within consciousness, but the spinning of the Earth is not. What consciousness experiences is the movement of the Sun across the sky from East to West. The

rotation of the Earth is a product of reason, not consciousness. When the Sun disappears below the Western horizon in the evening and appears rising from the Eastern horizon in the morning, for consciousness it is just the disappearance and appearance of the Sun. For the ancients who experienced this, they thought the Sun dies and is born each day because that is what consciousness experiences. However, modern reason with its Copernican theory posits the Sun as a star that seems relatively stationary with respect to the rotating Earth. But that whole conception is for reason, not for consciousness.

The same is true for electrons, atoms and molecules. These objects are not objects of consciousness but products of reason whose observable properties are objects of consciousness but whose essence do not belong to phenomenal consciousness being noumenal products of reason.

The question arises: why do we think reason/reasoning is experienced within consciousness?

The answer lies in understanding the epistemological difference between the way we come to know things empirically (*ordo cognicendi*) and the logical or ontological order (*ordo essendi*) by which we come to know things. These two epistemological paths can be understood by comparing the way we empirically understand the construction of a book as printing alphabetical letters on papers that are bound together, compared to rationally understanding that a book is first composed in the mind of an author before it appears as an object of empirical consciousness.

Thus reason is experienced by consciousness before we logically realize that it is reason that ontologically produces what we call consciousness or a theory of consciousness. Those who think merely on the basis of empirical experience cannot realize the epistemological distinction between the empirical and rational comprehension of things.

Historical shift in the meaning of consciousness in the 16th - 17th Century

The English word "conscious" originally derived from the Latin *consciūs* (*con-* "together" and *scio* "to know"), which meant "having joint or common knowledge with another".

[C. S. Lewis (1990). "Ch. 8: Conscience and conscious". *Studies in words*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-39831-2.]

In the literal sense, "*conscientia*" means knowledge-with, that is, shared knowledge. The word first appears in Latin juridical texts by writers such as Cicero.

[G. Molenaar (1969). "Seneca's Use of the Term Conscientia". *Mnemosyne*. 22: 170–180. doi:10.1163/156852569x00670.]

Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* wrote: "Where two, or more men, know of one and the same fact, they are said to be Conscious of it one to another."

[Thomas Hobbes (1904). *Leviathan: or, The Matter, Forme & Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. University Press. p. 39]

But then, especially during the seventeenth century, a shift occurred toward the more psychological meaning of consciousness we use today, as in the writings of Archbishop Ussher who in 1613 spoke of "being so conscious unto myself of my great weakness".

[James Ussher, Charles Richard Elrington (1613). *The whole works, Volume 2*. Hodges and Smith. p. 417.]

Locke's definition from 1690 illustrates this gradual shift in meaning had already taken place when he explains in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,

"[A person] is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for any one to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive." (*Essay* 2.27.9)

René Descartes (1596–1650) is considered to be the first philosopher to use *conscientia* in a way that does not fit its original meaning. He used *conscientia* in the modern sense as - "conscience or internal testimony" (*conscientiâ, vel interno testimonio*).

[Boris Hennig (2007). "Cartesian Conscientia". *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. 15: 455–484. doi:10.1080/09608780701444915.]

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) Descartes defines thought in this way:

"Thought. I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware [*conscii*] of it. Thus all the operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. I say 'immediately' so as to exclude the consequences of thoughts; a voluntary movement, for example, originates in a thought." (CSM II 113 / AT VII 160; cf. *Principles of Philosophy* Part I, §9 / AT VIIIA 7–8)

Thus Descartes defines thought as something “in us” of which we are conscious. This is the origin of subjective thought which is the modern concept that is uncritically accepted today without understanding its original meaning and significance in a more objective sense.

Leibniz was perhaps the first philosopher to make an attempt to formulate a theory of consciousness on the basis of representation. He writes:

"[I]t is good to distinguish between perception, which is the internal state of the monad [i.e., simple substance] representing external things, and apperception, which is consciousness, or the reflective knowledge of this internal state, something not given to all souls, nor at all times to a given soul. Moreover, it is because they lack this distinction that the Cartesians have failed, disregarding the perceptions that we do not apperceive, in the same way that people disregard imperceptible bodies. This is also what leads the same Cartesians to believe that only minds are monads, that there are no souls in beasts, still less other principles of life."
(“*Principles of Nature and Grace*” §4, AG 208)

It is, of course, this 'apperception' that Kant takes as a key necessity for comprehending the possibility of knowledge of objects. While Leibniz pointed out the failings of the Cartesian view, Kant tried to correct those of Leibniz. Hegel developed his system of philosophy by showing how the various philosophies of history display abstract or specific moments of the science of philosophy as a whole.

Another important point that is regularly overlooked by the megalithic consciousness camp is the difference between the self, ego or self-consciousness and consciousness. In the 1989 version of the *Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology* it is explained:

"Many fall into the trap of equating consciousness with self-consciousness—to be conscious it is only necessary to be aware of the external world."

There is no consciousness without a unifying Self or self=consciousness. The individual self does exist but not as an isolated solipsistic individual. The individual is rather the moment of individuality conceived in the totality of its relation to the universal and particular moments of the self-thinking or self-developing Idea or Absolute. This may be understood in its moral or ethical nature as the Good, or as Love in Religion, Beauty in Art, and Truth in Philosophy.

