



# CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

EDITED BY  
STEPHEN LEACH AND  
JAMES TARTAGLIA

# Consciousness and the Great Philosophers

*Consciousness and the Great Philosophers* addresses the question of how the great philosophers of the past might have reacted to the contemporary problem of consciousness. Each of the thirty-two chapters within this edited collection focuses on a major philosophical figure from the history of philosophy, from Anscombe to Xuanzang, and imaginatively engages with the problem from their perspective.

Written by leading experts in the field, this exciting and engaging book explores the relevance of the history of philosophy to contemporary debates and therefore is essential reading for students and scholars studying the history of philosophy, contemporary philosophy of mind and consciousness, or both.

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# Consciousness and the Great Philosophers

What would they have said about our mind–body problem?

Edited by Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia

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# Preface

The ‘hard problem of consciousness’, as David Chalmers has definitively dubbed it, is that of trying to explain how consciousness fits into an exclusively physical world. Conscious experiences are subjective, in that they exist only from the subjective perspective of the person (or animal) having them. When you feel a pain, smell gin or marvel at an optical illusion, the sensations are somehow there for you alone. And, of course, nobody can see what you are thinking; otherwise lying would not work. In all these cases, there is something it is like to have the experiences, apparently transpiring within an inner, private theatre. But the physical world described by contemporary science is not like that at all: it is objective. Look at another person. You know they are having experiences, just like you, but when you try to superimpose those experiences on to what is objectively there – their body – you will be at a loss. If you had x-ray glasses which allowed you to see their brain, you would not see their experiences, just brain tissue.

Like it or not, and however much you find the above exposition objectionable, that is *our* problem of consciousness, the one that dominates contemporary discussion. All those familiar debates about whether you could physically duplicate somebody without duplicating their consciousness, or whether somebody who knew everything about the physical world would thereby know about consciousness, are simply variations on a theme.

And here is something else which is true whether you like it or not: philosophy is not like science in at least one obvious respect, namely that the history of philosophy is a major part of the contemporary discipline (the history of science is not really a part of contemporary science at all). Working on the assumption that there is a good reason for this, and hence a good reason for continuing to discuss all those dead philosophers, our idea for this volume was simple: to put the history of philosophy into direct action by trying to find out whether the Great Philosophers can help us with our problem of consciousness. So we gathered together experts on major figures from throughout the history of philosophy and gave them this brief. We hope you will both profit from and enjoy the result.



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# I **Plato and the problem of consciousness**

*David Skrbina*

When it comes to theories of consciousness, Plato is something of an enigma. If treatment by contemporary philosophers is any clue, he seems to have almost nothing to say on the topic. Leading reference works have scarcely a mention of him.<sup>1</sup> Cooper's recent set of his complete works (used in this chapter) has only scattered reference to consciousness or its cognates. Searches of philosophical academic databases produce little of substance. Unlike Aristotle, who has at least had some focused treatment,<sup>2</sup> one finds scant philosophical discussion of Plato's psychology, let alone his analysis of mind. Plato, it would seem, has little to add to our understanding of consciousness.

Part of the problem, no doubt, is terminological. Discussions of psyche, or soul, are generally seen as unhelpful in a contemporary philosophical context. The theological connection is also detrimental, at least to most secular philosophers, as is talk of reincarnation. But there are more fundamental issues. The realm of the Forms is not taken seriously. The extensive use of mythology and allegory are not useful approaches for serious analytical thinking. Even his dualism is an impediment, given that most current philosophers are monists of some sort. In running counter to several contemporary veins of philosophical thinking, we can see why Plato is widely neglected on these matters.

But perhaps something has been overlooked. I think we do ourselves a disservice in bypassing him, and not only with respect to consciousness. If Whitehead's observation was correct, then present-day philosophy of mind, along with all the rest, may be productively viewed as "footnotes to Plato" (Whitehead 1929: 39)—in which case we would be well-served by reconsidering his ideas.

Another problem here is that we, ourselves, do not have a clear and concise notion of consciousness. Dictionary definitions that relate to awareness, sensation, emotion, feeling, volition, thought, or even mind in general are hopelessly broad. Philosophers are somewhat more focused. We tend to think of consciousness as either: (a) awareness, (b) self-awareness, or (c) qualia. In the last case, consciousness is often

contrasted with intentionality. Finding a consensus on these issues is difficult, however.

With this short background in place, let me proceed to examine some aspects of Plato's thinking that bear directly on the problem of consciousness.

## Sensation, perception, consciousness

There is no word in ancient Greek that directly corresponds to our "consciousness," but there are a number of related concepts. In Plato, the most relevant term is *aisthêsis*—typically translated as either "sensation," "sense," or "perception." It is a complex term, and the plurality of uses adds to the difficulty of our task. *Aisthêsis* has an English equivalent—*aesthesia* (or *esthesia*)—which is typically defined as a kind of primitive or rudimentary sensation. It appears, in negated form, in our "anaesthetic" (*an-aisthêsis*, or non-awareness).<sup>3</sup> And it is the source of the word "aesthetic," though this term has now become narrowly defined as the perception of art and visual beauty.<sup>4</sup>

Plato defines and examines *aisthêsis* in several dialogues, giving us a good indication of his intended meaning. A rare early occurrence is found in *Charmides* amidst a larger discussion of *sôphrosunê*, or temperance. "If temperance is present in you," says Plato, "you have some opinion (*doxa*) about it" (159a). Temperance provides a "sense" (*aisthêsis*) of its presence, and it is by this sense that one's *doxa* is formed. Importantly, we see here that *aisthêsis* is a kind of feeling or sensation produced by the relatively abstract state of temperance, as opposed to the more direct physical senses that are emphasized later. It is therefore broader and more comprehensive than mere sense experience.

The closest that we find to a definition of *aisthêsis* appears early in *Theaetetus*. The term is important because Plato spends the larger portion of the dialogue examining the truth value of the claim that "knowledge is perception" (*estin epistêmê ê aisthêsis*: cf. 151e). A definition follows shortly:

For *aisthêseis* we have such names as sight, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling hot; also what are called pleasures and pains, desires and fears; and there are others besides, a great number which have names, [and] an infinite number which have not.

(156b)

An important passage: *aisthêsis* includes not only the traditional physical senses but also an endless list of mental states and conditions—including, notably, such intentional states as desire and fear. In all these

cases, something is impressed upon the mind, a feeling or sensation that corresponds to each condition. This suggests something like a qualitative feeling or quale as the basis of *aisthêsis*. The emphasis here seems to be on the experiential feeling rather than on the more abstract notion of perception. One *feels* or *senses* pain, rather than “perceives” it. The same with fear—fear is directly and qualitatively felt, not merely perceived. It is the qualitative feelings that matter most: that is, the qualia. Such feelings arise both from the sense organs and myriad other causes, and via many other mental states. For this reason, I generally favor “sensation” over “perception” when translating *aisthêsis*.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, *aisthêsis* assumes an important role in Plato’s meta-physical system. It is the “first innate capacity” in created humans (*Timaeus* 42a). Consequently, in examining our own origins, we must “at every step in our discourse appeal to the existence of *aisthêsis*” (61c). Though not limited to sensory impulses, such perceptions are obviously central to our physiology. When external matter impinges upon our body, it generates a “disturbance,” leading to motions that are then conducted through the body to the soul, striking against it. Such motions, as a group, are called *aisthêsis* (43c).

In what follows, I will briefly examine three aspects of Plato’s treatment of *aisthêsis* and consciousness. First is his fascinating approach to the mechanics of sensory interaction, particularly vision. The second relates to current discussions on higher-order thought as a basis for consciousness. Finally, I will look at Plato’s extensive attribution of consciousness in the natural world.

## The mechanism of sensation

The physical world, the realm of the senses, was always of concern to Plato. Nature is characterized by a perpetual dynamism. It is movement and change—in a word, Becoming. *Aisthêsis* is the means by which we interact with and understand this world: “By our bodies and through *aisthêsis* we have dealings with coming-to-be” (*Sophist* 248a). This stands in contrast to the eternal and unchanging truths of the Forms, the realm of Being. The mind—*psychê*, or soul—lies somewhere in the middle; it is linked to body and hence a substantial thing and yet via its rational part can participate in the unchanging Forms.

The sensory aspect of *aisthêsis* deals with changeable nature, and it appears to represent a kind of truth about it. But because the senses are not rational, they cannot grasp the Forms; they have no access to ultimate truth. Therefore they are, to a significant degree, deceptive.



Thus does Plato speak of “unreasoning perception,” or “irrational sense perception” (*alogo aisthêsis*; cf. *Timaeus* 28a, 69d). We know this by our experiences with illusions, dreams, and hallucinations (*Theaetetus* 158a). We know it because the same stimulus appears to one man one way and differently to another—see the discussion in *Theaetetus* 152b, where the same wind feels cool to one and warm to another. And we ourselves are constantly changing, such that the same stimulus can produce different sensations—as when the same wine tastes now bitter, now sweet, depending on our physiological state.

Despite these shortcomings, our physical senses are our means of grasping the natural world. They are the channels through which the outside world reaches the mind. The senses pass along external stimuli, in a “chain reaction” (*Timaeus* 64b), until they “report to the soul” (*Republic* 524a).<sup>6</sup> Thus described, Plato’s model of sensory *aisthêsis* appears fairly modern and relatively passive. The world acts, the mind receives.

But this view, as plausible as it seems, is incorrect. The mind, for Plato, is an active participant in the world of becoming. Even the senses themselves are dynamic and interactive. Sensory *aisthêsis* is a co-participatory event, and conscious awareness thus takes on an entirely new meaning.

Plato’s theory has its origins in the work of Empedocles, who held that all things give off emanations or effluences (“from all created things there are effluences [*aporrhoiai*]” (fr. 89)). These emanations in turn enter the body via corresponding sensory channels (*poroi*), where they prompt awareness. Plato recalls this view favorably: “Do you . . . say there are effluvia of things, as Empedocles does? Certainly. And that there are [bodily] channels through which the effluvia make their way? Definitely” (*Meno* 76c).

Empedocles furthermore believed that the body, for its part, was also emissive. On the one hand, this is obvious; the body, as a physical object, is subject to the same principle of effluvia as all physical things. But when fully spelled out, we get a striking picture. Consider vision. The eyes, as organs of light, not only receive light, they also *produce* it. Eyes contain a kind of internal fire, hidden inside, which streams outward in the process of seeing. Empedocles thus likens the eye to a lantern encased in glass. The glass keeps out the wind and rain, but allows the light to flow out. So too the pupils, which “let the fire within flow outwards” (fr. 84), illuminating the object of sight.<sup>7</sup>

In *Timaeus*, Plato extends this theory. The light from the object meets and joins with the light from the eye, forming a continuous physical link between object and eye. Objects are emissive only in the presence of daylight, an “external fire” (*pyr ektos*), but the eye has an “internal fire”

(*pyr entos*) of its own. The external fire of objects takes the form of color: “Color is a flame (*phloga*) which flows forth from bodies of all sorts” (67c). These two fires, which are “cousins,” merge and combine, allowing visual *aisthêsis* to take place:

Now the pure fire inside us, cousin to that [external] fire, [the gods] made to flow through the eyes . . . Now whenever daylight surrounds the visual stream (*to tês opseôs rheuma*), like makes contact with like, and coalesces with it to make up a single homogenous body (*hen sôma*) aligned with the direction of the eyes.

(45c)

When this occurs, the inner fire “strikes and presses against an external object.” A single body of light thus unites subject and object, allowing the object to transmit its stimuli through the eye and brain to the soul. “This,” says Plato, “brings about the sensation (*aisthêsin*) we call ‘seeing.’”

He reiterates the view later, recalling his notion of “the ray of sight” as a material body linking subject and object and functioning as “an extension of ourselves” (64d). Once established, the ray or beam of fire allows the object to reach the eye: “when a more penetrating motion of a different type of fire [i.e. external] pounces on the ray of sight and dilates it right up to the eyes,” then visual sensation results. “The penetrating motion itself consists of fire, and as it encounters fire from the opposite direction . . . fire leaps out of the eyes like a lightning flash” (68a). Vision, in other words, is a process by which fire meets fire. It is a striking conception, this beam or ray of sight—something that Nakhnikian memorably calls “a pencil of energy” (1955: 142).

This account may be criticized as unduly metaphorical, especially given that it appears in the highly imaginative *Timaeus*. But Plato offers a more rigorous treatment of the same ideas in *Theaetetus*. Here he addresses the issue of qualia directly. A color perception, such as of white, has a curious metaphysical status: it exists in neither object nor eye. “In the sphere of vision . . . a white color is not itself a distinct entity, either outside your eyes or in your eyes. You must not assign it any particular place” (153e).

But if in neither subject nor object, where does color perception exist? Plato’s surprising answer: “between the two.” He writes, “what we naturally call a particular color is neither that which impinges (*prosballon*) nor that which is impinged upon (*prosballomenon*), but something which has come into being between the two” (154a). The resulting sensation is consequently “private to the individual percipient.” Somewhat later he speaks of perception occurring due to motions “in the

intervening space.” He describes the process in the case of viewing a white object, such as a white stone or stick:

Thus the eye and some other thing [i.e. the object of perception] generate both whiteness and the perception (*aisthêsin*) which is by nature united with it . . . In this event, motions arise in the intervening space, sight from the side of the eye and whiteness from the side of [the object].

(156d–e)

This is a remarkable anticipation of what we today call “extended” mind (cf. Clark 2008)—the idea that mental states can occur outside the physical body.

For Plato, the roles of subject and object are of particular interest here. He accepts the Heraclitean idea that all is motion (156a). Motion has two forms, distinguished by their modes of power (*dynamis*):<sup>8</sup> *paskhon* and *poioun*. These, again, are difficult terms, translated variously as “subject and object,” “patient and agent,” and, problematically, “passive and active.”<sup>9</sup> The latter designation is misleading because *paskhon* is not in any meaningful sense passive: it is as emissive and interactive as the *poioun*. Both entities, in their own complementary ways, are dynamic and active. Their parallel and even interchangeable nature is further emphasized by the fact that both come into being together; neither is self-standing:

In the case of *poioun* and *paskhon*, it is impossible . . . to take them singly, to pin them down to being anything. There is no *paskhon* till it meets *poioun*, no *poioun* except in conjunction with *paskhon*; and what, in conjunction with one thing, is *poioun*, reveals itself as *paskhon* when it falls in with something else.

(157a)

In perception, then, the two dynamic, emissive parties join together and create a “single body” between them. Thus a causal link is established, allowing *aisthêsis* to occur “in the intervening space.” Plato, indeed, describes the coming together of *paskhon* and *poioun* as a kind of “intercourse.” This union gives birth to a pair of “twins”: *aisthêsis* and *aisthêton*, or the sensation and the perceptible quality. The latter refers to the quality itself, such as whiteness, and the former is the qualitative experience of it—the qualia. Qualitative consciousness occurs in the space between subject and object.

Plato gives this detailed discussion of vision but he takes pains to emphasize that all other senses function in the same way. After describing the twin birth, he cites examples of such pairs: “for all kinds of vision [there are] all kinds of colors, for all kinds of hearings all kinds

of sounds, and so on, for the other perceptions (*aisthêsesi*) the other things perceived (*aisthêta*)” (156c). He then adds, “We must understand this account as applying in the same way to hard and hot and everything else” (157a). In discussing the sensory quality of wine, and “going by what we earlier agreed,” we find again reference to the *paskhon* and *poioun*, “moving simultaneously, generating both sweetness and a perception” (159d). And, again, at 182a: “As we were saying . . . the genesis of things such as warmth and whiteness occurs when each of them is moving, together with a perception, in the space between *poioun* and *paskhon*.”<sup>10</sup> All this is consistent with his statement in *Timaeus*, where upon completing the description of the visual ray, he adds that “the same account goes for sound and hearing” (47c)—and, by inference, all other sensory modalities.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, each sensory organ is an active participant in the act of sensing, on equal metaphysical standing with the object perceived. Depending on the perspective, one becomes *paskhon*, the other *poioun*. They spring into being together, fuse together, and form a single material connection (“one body”) linking subject and object. In the process of this intercourse, *paskhon* and *poioun* produce the twin offspring of the sensed quality and the qualitative experience or qualia—which reside in the intervening space. Conscious experience is thus extended beyond brain and body. The whole picture is graphically described in the case of vision and the “ray of sight” or “pencil of energy,” though something comparable evidently occurs for all senses.

## Higher-order thought?

Further anticipations of modern approaches to consciousness occur with the idea that it somehow involves “perceiving that one perceives”—a kind of self-awareness, or higher-order thinking.

Though an issue of contemporary importance, the concept of self-reflexive knowledge is ancient. It is at least as old as the Delphic inscription *gnothi seauton*, “Know thyself.” The self is typically identified with soul or mind, and thus the maxim amounts to “knowing the knower.” For the Greeks, the phrase was both paradoxical and insightful.

Plato references this maxim on a number of occasions, using it to make forays into the notion of reflexive perception. In the early *Alcibiades*, he compares self-knowledge to an eye seeing itself; this, of course, is impossible, except indirectly via a mirror (132–3). Analogously, for the soul to know itself, it must look at soul—an equally challenging task.

*Charmides* recalls the same analogy. We cannot see that we see, given that “seeing” is not a color, and sight only works with colors. We cannot hear that we hear, for “hearing” is not a sound. In general, Plato denies

that there can be a “sense of the senses” (*einai aisthêseôn men aisthêsis*: 167d). Self-reflexive perception, it seems, is impossible.

Self-reflexive thinking, however, is a different matter. In *Theaetetus* he concludes that perception (*aisthêsis*) is not knowledge because it cannot grasp the imperceptible Forms. Rather, knowledge seems to be related to thinking (*dianoia*), which is defined reflexively. It is “a talk which the soul has with itself” (189e). When the soul thinks, “it is simply carrying on a discussion in which it asks itself questions, and answers them itself, affirms and denies.” When it thereby reaches a decision, it can be said to have formed a judgment (*doxa*).<sup>12</sup> This conception is repeated in *Sophist* (263e), where *dianoia* is defined as “logos without the voice,” or, in other words, as “the soul in conversation with itself.”

But this seems to be the extent of Plato’s analysis of self-reflection. I think we have to conclude that he did not place great stock on the idea. Higher-order thought is not intrinsic to *aisthêsis*, and thus not essential to consciousness. It is more relevant to thinking and to the soul’s contemplation of its own nature.

## Universal attribution of mind

A final question of importance is this: which entities, of those in the cosmos, are capable of *aisthêsis* and hence consciousness? Humans, of course, but many other types of thing as well. In fact, taking *psychê* in the broadest sense, Plato’s list is impressively long. It resides in animals (*Phaedrus* 248d, 249b), plants (*Timaeus* 77b), and individual bones (*Timaeus* 74e). Stars are individually ensouled (*Laws* 898d, *Epinomis* 983a), as are the sun and the moon (*Laws* 898d)—indeed, the entire cosmos has a soul (*Timaeus* 30, 34b, 36e). The four elements, individually (“alone”), have souls (*Laws* 895c), by virtue of their dynamism and self-motion. The polis, as a whole, has soul—one deriving from the citizens themselves (*Republic* 435).<sup>13</sup> Finally, even reality itself, in total, is endowed with “intelligence, life, and soul” (*Sophist* 249a).<sup>14</sup>

*Psychê*, or soul, as we know, takes on a wide variety of meanings for Plato, including self-motion, life, and mentality in general. It includes the famous tri-partition components of rationality, desire, and “spirit.” And it has a role in immortality and reincarnation. Needless to say, this expansive conception makes it difficult to formulate a consistent interpretation.

For example, the discussion in *Phaedrus* suggests that all souls have a tripartite structure, and thus likely also consciousness. In some cases, Plato is explicit. *Timaeus* (77b3) explains that plants have souls “of the third type,” i.e. appetitive or desirous. This type of soul “is devoid of

opinion (*doxa*), reasoning (*logos*), and understanding (*nous*), though it does share in sensation (*aisthêseôs*), pleasant and painful, and desires.” Thus even the “lowest” aspect of soul includes *aisthêsis*.<sup>15</sup>

This suggests that all the objects cited above do, in fact, experience some level of consciousness. What precisely this means is a matter of speculation, one that I cannot investigate here. But it does raise the question of the extent of consciousness. The implication is that it covers all extant things, individually and as a whole. In other words, the evidence suggests that Plato was a panpsychist.<sup>16</sup>

This issue seems to be almost universally ignored by Plato scholars—not denied, simply ignored. One exception is Crombie, who hostilely notes that “we find Plato apparently maintaining . . . something almost indistinguishable from the animism of primitive savages” (Crombie 1962: 325). At the end of a lengthy discussion, he suggests that perhaps Plato’s animism is merely “figurative”—but then concludes that “this interpretation is really untenable” (ibid.: 339). In other words, we are left with the literal meaning: true “animism” or panpsychism. Crombie is forced to this conclusion, but is evidently at a loss to explain it. The true meaning of Plato’s panpsychism “is a question I should not like to answer” (ibid.: 341).

To those who might challenge this idea, I would ask: what consistent theory of mind could include all the above entities and yet *not* include everything? I suggest there is no such theory, and thus that the panpsychist interpretation must hold. In fact, Plato himself seems to admit as much. In Book X of *Laws*, at the conclusion of his discussion of star souls, he says:

Now consider all the stars and the moon and the years and the months and all the seasons: what can we do except repeat the same story? A soul or souls . . . have been shown to be the cause of all these phenomena, and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods. Can anybody admit all this and still put up with people who deny that “everything is full of gods”?

(899b)

The closing phrase is a nod to the famous line by Thales, a noted panpsychist.<sup>17</sup>

Plato, then, offers us some highly unconventional, if not to say radical, thoughts on consciousness. It is active and co-participatory. It is perhaps “extended,” existing in the space between subject and object. It likely does not involve issues of higher-order thought or self-reflection. But it does seem to be very widespread, even universal, in scope. All these are thoughts worth considering, from a contemporary standpoint.

## Notes

- 1 See Zelazo et al. 2007, Velmans and Schneider 2007, and Bayne et al. 2009.
- 2 See, for example, Kahn 1966, Hardie 1976, or Caston 2002.
- 3 This usage is specifically cited in, for example, *Philebus* 34a.
- 4 Interestingly, there is a passage in *Phaedrus* (250d) in which Plato states that *aisthêsis* can correctly sense only beauty, whereas it is often mistaken about other aspects of the natural world.
- 5 But not “sense perception,” which implies only the physical senses.
- 6 Not all stimuli pass through all the way: “some of the various affections of the body are extinguished within the body before they reach the soul . . . Others penetrate through both body and soul” (*Philebus* 33d).
- 7 This account of vision is explained, and criticized, by Aristotle; see his *Sense and Sensibilia* (437b).
- 8 This view is reiterated in *Sophist*: “I’ll take it as a definition that [being] (*onta*) amounts to nothing other than *dynamis*” (247e).
- 9 The Levett and Burnyeat translation in Cooper’s edition unfortunately employs the active/passive terminology.
- 10 It is in this same passage that Plato coins the term *poiôtês*, meaning “quality,” in reference to *aisthêton*.
- 11 Compare with 61d–67c, in which touch, taste, smell, and sound are all treated as on par with vision.
- 12 Also translated as “belief” or “opinion.”
- 13 Both the polis and the individual soul have the same three parts: rationality (*logistikon*), spiritedness (*thumoeides*), and desire (*epithumetikon*).
- 14 “That which wholly is” includes both the changing (physical realm) and the unchanging (Forms).
- 15 Notably, it also includes desire, which is an intentional attribute. On Plato’s view, then, the base level of mind includes both qualia and intentionality—just as many modern theories would have it.
- 16 For a more detailed treatment of panpsychism in Plato, Aristotle, and many others, see Skrbina 2005, 2009.
- 17 The phrase is also cited by Aristotle in *De anima* (411a).



## 2 Aristotle and the problem of consciousness

Lenn E. Goodman

It's so good to be back, even if only for a day—I can't quite say among the living, since I've spent most of the day in the library. But I'm especially grateful for the restoration of my sense of sight, and I marvel at the skills of the translators, who have given me access to the thoughts of so many who came after me. What marvelous machinery, to display vast treasuries of thought almost instantly. My brief, I understand, is to reflect on consciousness—almost, in effect, to reflect on a reflection. I hope I won't be caught in some new infinite regress, as if standing between facing mirrors.

I'm sure you meant to focus on the human case. But I want to admire the ingenuity that allowed a man from Egypt, so long after my death, to weld a kind of peace between my thinking and Plato's about the forms. It's wonderful to read the lectures of Plotinus, edited so poetically by his Syrian student. I wish my lectures had found as fine an editor. But I'm still unsure about his housing Plato's forms in the mind of God. It does help to link God's thought to life on earth, and it's insightful to have *Nous* know all things in a single act of self-knowledge. But can real knowledge stand apart from experience? I can't accept Plato's faith that discovery is won by probing what we know innately. Of course, the knowledge Plato cares most about is not very worldly. But I do worry that packing the divine mind with a universe of worldly forms compromises the simplicity that seems to mean so much to Plotinus.

It was clever of him to answer my critique of the arithmetic of the forms by inverting my point that forms cannot be counted and calling *Nous* a one/many. The divine subject here is clearly its own object—and has no matter to individuate things. But I'm chary when an equivocal unity infects the Intellects. I think minds keep their integrity only if they're discrete—although, I confess I wasn't quite strict about that in speaking of the Active Intellect. Plato, as you know, liked to play with the idea of minds uniting once they've shed their bodies. But I never could see if he envisioned conversation among such minds or just a muddling of selves.



The spheres are gone now. Newton and Kepler brought them down—and, with them, the conscious life of the heavens. But the deeper causality I was seeking was not just there. It's present in the way all things express their natures, each pursuing actuality and paying tribute, in its own way, to divine perfection. The governance of earth and the heavens by the same laws in a way confirms that vision, as Kant saw when he discovered Newton's hold even over nebulae. I stand by my assertion that motion cannot set itself in motion. I never thought prime movers operate like a *deus ex machina* in a bad play. The divine impetus is immanent and telic, not mechanical. So what Newton found may be a truer statement of my thoughts about the springs of motion: if matter were merely passive and inert it would never be as lively as your physicists have found all bodies are. When each thing strives in its own way toward actuality I see a counterpart to our concern today with consciousness. For just as matter cannot move without some (inner) aptitude to do so, thought cannot just think that it should start to think, as I argued in the *Eudemian Ethics*. In both the impetus is divine.

Philoponus was an interesting fellow, despite his fixation with the notion that the world began and is not divine. He takes me to task for making the senses self-aware and seems to prefer reason for that job, or some special faculty of attention, the *prosektikon*. He has a point. But it still seems odd to give reason sensations. Perhaps a few distinctions would help. I'd find it paradoxical to say one had a sharp pain yet was unaware of it. Sensations do seem a part of consciousness, not apart from it. Likewise perceptions.

Perhaps what our Christian friend had in mind was something more reflexive: my awareness *that* I feel a pain or see a friend can be distinguished usefully from the sensation itself. Here it might make sense to think about some sort of oversight monitoring the work on the factory floor. That distinction might help avoid the silliness of saying that reason can see red or green: it can have *thoughts* about red or green. So one needn't worry about reason's knowing what the senses apprehend—and knowing that it knows.

I find it genuinely amusing that so many learned men (and women too!) labor to determine just what I meant by something, as though I were an oracle, my words pored over like sacrificial entrails—and then argued away. Often I meant more things than one. With substances, say, I'm still open to the many ways we use that word—of the matter of a thing, or the particular, or the essence and species, the proper subjects in the sciences. There's nothing wrong with multiple usages, so long as we keep each in its proper place.

Which brings me to all the talk of faculties, rife since my time and ultimately a kind of stalking horse showing only how language can

mislead, letting people take the name of a task or its outcome as if it were an explanation. Used rightly, I think faculty language worked best as a tool of analysis, leaving space for causes and capabilities still unknown. Today I'd rather speak of functions than of faculties.

I don't think we can deny consciousness of our sensations. But things are far more fluid in the mind than talk of discrete faculties suggests. Sensations are readily passed along to other modes of consciousness—to memory and the emotions and, of course, imagination—and transformed in the process. So we relate sensations or perceptions to all sorts of thoughts and feelings, and even use them in framing proper concepts. The slave boy in Plato's *Meno* cannot *perceive* the doubling of the square. But he does need the prompt of figures in the sand. I think what Plato showed is how perceptions are transformed, *by* consciousness, into something genuinely intellectual.

You can get a sense of what I mean from what I said near the end of the *Posterior Analytics*: memory helps turn perceptions into experience, critical in arts like medicine and statecraft. Grounded in experience, reason builds the universals essential to genuine discovery—in general knowledge and the sciences.

I introduced a Homeric simile in that lecture, comparing perceptions to a scattered body of troops that begins to hold its ground and form up into an effective force when one man and then several take a stand. The soul, I said, can build concepts from perceptions, seemingly unpromising material. I still can't say exactly how we do it, but I think your gestalt psychologists have a clue, finding patterns in perceptions. The man who takes a stand might be some salient sensory pattern; those who rally to his standard sketch in details. The mind can stitch all this together, weaving coherence and intelligibility from seeming confusion.

The new formation doesn't just copy a preset pattern. Nor does reason build something wholly arbitrary and contrived. Fit matters. That's what testing means—and what I meant by the effectiveness of a fighting force. Bacon and Mill show me how, more than I suspected, testing matters. Kant made a nice analogy, comparing Plato's innatism to preformation in biology, and sheer empiricism to spontaneous generation (which I see from Pasteur's work I must give up, even for the lower creatures). Kant found a middle ground in my developmental approach to embryology. Elegant! The question is not just where we got the concepts we employ in building other concepts, but how the use of these elemental tools is justified. That was Kant's way of settling the dispute between Locke and Leibniz over innate ideas. I'd say what tests all our ideas is their workability—that might help explain how we get them, too, rather as Darwin proposes that species adapt. That's suggested in what your neuroscientists say: that neurons that

fire together wire together. But I still see room for a managerial function, not just brute impact and passive association but self-conscious work. We can't frame and test hypotheses without some degree of control over our thinking.

What intrigues me about discovery is the moment of insight when we catch the middle term. Intelligence, for me, is a capacity for speedy recognition of that term, linking the extremes of a syllogism. It's gratifying that your psychologists still use that basic definition—although I grant there are different varieties of intelligence. In gauging IQ, as they call it, they still look for alacrity in noticing what different things have in common, and the differences between things that are alike in some way. Often we can't tell where that flash of insight comes from. So we say things just 'occur to' us. For my part, I'd give more credit to the Active Intellect. But I don't stress quite as sharply as you might the distinction between what we see for ourselves and what's given to us. Either way, the work is constructive—and developmental.

This talk about what's active and passive in our thinking brings me to Hume. I think his work, as I studied it today, exposes the deep flaws of a purist empiricism, unable in the end to distinguish coincidence from causality. It seems it was by atomizing time that Hume isolated cause from effect, giving color to his claim that neither reason nor sense can warrant connecting them. Regarding consciousness, I think Hume intentionally canted the table by treating all thoughts as sensations in origin and in essence. Perhaps, the distinction I proposed in answering Philoponus might help untangle things a bit.

Of course we don't perceive the self as an object of sensation. We should be glad we can't. That would mean falling down a bottomless rabbit hole. Our consciousness is probably always directed to objects. Its reflexivity is normally oblique and incidental, an awareness that this is what I'm seeing or doing. In the special case where we regard ourselves focally, I suspect we make the self an object notionally, thinking of ourselves under some description or other. But the elusiveness of the subject as a subject does not prove that there's no such being as I—unless one tilts the table further by insisting that only objects of perception are real. That looks like question-begging. The one piece of advice I have for philosophers, whether or not they see me as an authority, would be to take things as we find them. Don't presume from the outset that we know what a thought (or a substance) must be. Be open to reality as it presents itself. That seems to me the right kind of empiricism.

That is what Descartes tried to do, despite in the end sundering mind from body, the outcome, I think, of a bias similar to the one Hume would use. (I understand it's called the epistemic turn. But I find that name amusing. Wasn't Plato's method epistemic when he argued for

the forms? And didn't I do much the same when arguing from the sciences for the primacy of species?)

Descartes cleared the terrain by setting aside anything he could not be sure of. He saw one thing undeniable, in his consciousness. So he took consciousness to be real—just what Hume's sensory bias labors to obscure. John Searle has a few well-chosen words about such privileging of third-person accounts. I don't see how one can deny that personal experience comes first in many ways—although I'd hardly press to isolate the personal from the social or the material world, as Descartes did. He saw his error in the end, as his correspondence with the Princess showed me, although he couldn't see his way out of his self-made trap.

I see great merit in Spinoza here, the keenest of Descartes' successors. I'll come back to that. But a word first about Avicenna. Next to Descartes, he makes the boldest use of self-awareness. He asks one to imagine floating high above the earth, deprived of all sensation. We could still conceive our consciousness, he says; so positing consciousness does not presuppose sensation, or the existence of any body as its source. *Ergo* the mind does not depend upon the body.

An ingenious argument. It helps me see why Philoponus was so wrought up about self-awareness and so eager to situate it higher than the senses. He was championing the immortal soul, as I did in making the rational soul more than the first entelechy of the natural living body. Intelligence, as I had it, is to the body not just as seaworthiness is to the ship, but as the pilot is. I wish I could embrace Avicenna's inference. It answers to a longing of mine that Plato shared. But I'm not convinced (despite being here today) that our ability to think one thing in abstraction from another proves the one can exist without the other.

Avicenna's imagined floating man anticipates Descartes' epistemic *cogito*. Both philosophers follow Parmenides in assuming that the way we think must be the way things are. But that's an error. Self-awareness is real, of course, but we can't prove consciousness substantial just because it can be thought of on its own. I wish we could. But wishes don't make philosophy.

Well, I see it's getting on toward afternoon, and it's been a long if thrilling day. I gather that some of your contemporaries call consciousness a mystery. Is that because minds don't sit snugly with the materialism they favor? The funniest thing I've seen today is your man Quine, uncomfortable with modal terms because they seem to presuppose a mind—yet ready to give reality to numbers because the sciences need mathematics.

I meant it when I said that philosophy begins in wonder. So wondering about consciousness should be an opportunity, not a scandal. If our philosophies stumble over consciousness, we should scrutinize not just

consciousness but those philosophies. I like what Wittgenstein said about the fly bottle. If we want to know how the fly gets out, we should learn how it got in.

In a way, the trouble started with Avicenna's clever way of showing we can think of consciousness without presuming anything about a body. Cartesian doubt brought that thought down to earth. Descartes needed no floating man to isolate mind from body. He could illustrate the conceptual independence of consciousness just by noting how one can doubt the one and not the other. But the price he paid was isolation of the two, leaving philosophers to try to put them back together—unless they opted to deny one or the other, as some idealists and materialists chose to do.

If the mystery arose in the inability of materialists to reduce subjectivity to physics, it only deepened when the linguistic turn opened the floodgates to unending debates about qualia and pain with or without C-fibers firing (a question perhaps better left to your drug specialists). It was frustrating to some, I'm sure, to be told of the link of intentionality to subjecthood or to hear Nagel champion the impenetrability of the subjective by alluding to the experience of bats. Rivals exploited the conceptual discreteness of consciousness by invoking fantasies about zombies, humanlike in behavior but *ex hypothesi* unconscious. Philosophers showed off their imaginative fluency in scenarios dramatizing the possibility or impossibility of minds without bodies or bodies without minds. But the critical issue, I think, is not whether one can or cannot imagine human behavior without consciousness (or vice versa), but whether such a thing can be. Imagination is the wrong judge here, as those who love nature and naturalism should admit. For human consciousness arises in a natural body, even if it is not properly described in terms that fit the physical characteristics of that body. What we entail or prescind from in our scenarios depends on what we presume when we posit them. But nature does not pay any regard to our scenarios. It's mistaken too, I think, to make consciousness a by-product of our language when we speak about humans. Language, Professor Dennett notwithstanding, is not much better as an arbiter here than imagination. Both try to reflect reality, but it doesn't go the other way. If language does a better job, that's probably because language aims multiple mirrors at the diverse facets of reality.

Kant's *Refutation of Idealism* offers a striking riposte to Descartes. Just as I argued that bodies in motion must be eternal because time is eternal, Kant showed that Descartes erred in making minds epistemically prior to bodies. At the root of the mistake, as Kant saw it: Avicenna erred in thinking consciousness conceivable without presupposing bodies. The floating man's awareness, Kant reasoned, still made reference

to the physical world: being temporal it made implicit reference to bodies. There had to be a clock. That was insightful. Still, I'm not convinced that consciousness cannot reach beyond temporality. Why else was mathematics so critical to Plato—as concepts are to me: these objects are not temporal, even if we reach them by temporal processes.

I think it's undeniable that souls, *qua* first entelechy, are real. Denying that erases the distinctiveness of living beings. One needn't imagine souls as wisps of smoke or Homeric puffs of breath to respect the difference between animals and rocks. The real question is whether souls are substances. That can't mean trying to catch them in a net or sight them flitting through the air. What matters is what souls can do—or souled creatures, since separability is not the issue here, as it was with rational souls as pilots. Causal agency is the real test of substantiality, and it seems pretty clear that it's worth calling soul a substance if soul is what makes the difference in what living beings can do—just as I would call a substance the essence that is distinctive in any being. It's only the mechanistic bias that confounds explanation by parsing things down to their least material parts, and ignoring the functions and actions of the integrated whole, that makes it seem otherwise.

Consciousness, I'd argue, is distinctive to some living beings. I'm pretty sure, despite some boasting I've read from cyberneticists, that consciousness won't be active in machines. I love your washing machines and how many slaves they replace. But Searle was right to say that simulating washing won't do the laundry—and simulated thinking is not consciousness.

I've seen the arguments of eliminativists and that kindred tribe who want to assign the work of consciousness to a committee. I found that last especially amusing. It reminded me of the biologists who shift life functions to the genes but anthropomorphize the genes! The memes or modules given causal primacy by Dawkins, Dennett, and their ilk seem even to have intentions. Striking in philosophers dismissive of spectator imagery! These thinkers shun an infinite regress but don't see the comparable slip as regards their own unguided atoms of awareness. Either they've pushed back their question about consciousness and multiplied it manyfold or they're trying to get consciousness from non-conscious precursors. That still won't bridge the gap between objects and subjects.

Well, a final word about Spinoza, and then I'll need some sleep. I hope there will be more chance for some thinking. My day in the library gave me much to think about. But even if that can't work out, I deeply appreciate the remarkable privilege I've enjoyed today. I'm not sure how it was done, but it gives me hope that better arguments will be found for some of the thoughts I hold most dear. It was a joy to see how astronomy and biology have flourished—but curious to see the new materialists

seizing one side of Descartes' program and denying or degrading consciousness altogether. Spinoza did not make that mistake, and neither did Descartes.

If explanation is assumed to mean reduction to mechanism, it's clear why consciousness will remain a mystery. Minds won't reduce to bodies any more than bodies will reduce to minds. Ryle cleverly used my thoughts about the categories to speak of "category errors." I'd say calling consciousness a physical process would be a prime example of that sort of confusion. We can correlate consciousness with brain states (and I admit that Plato, Hippocrates, and later Galen were right in naming the brain the organ of thinking)—but we still can't transmute subjectivity into something physical.

That's where Spinoza makes a real contribution, calling the mind the awareness of the body—the body the first object of our thinking. Bodies are not all we think about. But minds are bodies made conscious. As the first entelechy of the body, the soul's work is not confined to breathing or digestion. Consciousness comes to life in or as the mind. It reaches toward reasoning and reflection. So it can make decisions. That gives it the kind of agency that warrants calling the self it helps to constitute a special sort of substance, grounded in the body, but able in some degree to govern it.

Obviously I don't mean "substance" in the absolute way Spinoza favors. Self-sufficiency, to me, in a statement or a state, won't imply that a *polis* never engages in trade or that a sentence has no context in a conversation or a language. I see the role the body plays in thinking—clearest, perhaps, in discursive thinking, but also in memory and aging, concentration and distraction. What I find wholesome in Spinoza is his refusal to make consciousness a body part. Consciousness won't answer to the kind of descriptions bodies do. It's a function of a very special kind of body, bringing together what one undergoes and undertakes to weave a fabric of experience.

Consciousness is labile, reflexive in its highest phases, and in some measure self-directed. Reflexivity makes consciousness the foundation of conscience; and because consciousness is active as well as reflexive we humans can make rational choices. It's probably because we see ourselves as subjects of thought and action that selves are rightly thought of as in some measure self-sufficient. I remain convinced that the active work of consciousness is the best ground for belief in the reality of a distinctively human soul.



### 3 Plotinus and the problem of consciousness

Suzanne Stern-Gillet

Once I, Porphyry, went on asking Plotinus for three days about the soul's connection with the body, and he kept on explaining to me.

(Porphyry c.301–5 CE: 13.10–12)

Plotinus (204–70 CE) has been described as ‘the father of the mind–body problem’ and ‘the first Cartesian.’<sup>1</sup> How apt are the descriptions? To bring elements of answer to the question I here turn to his views on sense-perception and consciousness.

Two provisos need to be registered at the start. First, Plotinus’ style is notoriously obscure: he wrote for a live audience of disciples and associates, did not rework what he had first written, relied on metaphors to express what discursive language cannot express and favoured a dialectical manner of exposition that reflected his close engagement with the views of his predecessors.<sup>2</sup> The large body of work that he left at his death was edited by his disciple Porphyry, who organised it thematically into six sets of nine (*ennea*) tractates, the *Enneads*, and gave them the individual titles under which we know them today.<sup>3</sup> The highly complex metaphysical system developed in that work constitutes the framework outside which no aspect of Plotinus’ philosophy can be understood. The outline of the system given below, although minimal, will, it is hoped, provide sufficient information to make sense of his diversified concept of consciousness. Second, Plotinus’ self-perception as a Platonist, whose task was to expound as faithfully as he could the philosophy of the master, is so modest as to be inaccurate. Not only had the six centuries elapsed since Plato’s death seen very considerable philosophical activity, all of which is reflected in the *Enneads*, but Plotinus was also a highly original philosopher who, by re-thinking and systematising the views expounded in the dialogues, transformed Platonism and prepared it for revival at the Renaissance.

In so far as ancient Greek thought was, to a large extent, driven by the search for a singular principle that could explain the ever-changing diversity of the world of sense, it viewed unity as a condition of intelligibility and, in some cases, of reality. In this, it found its last and purest