

Consciousness: what is it? Descartes, Locke, Cudworth and Leibniz

We will not look at all these texts in detail. I have indicated particularly important bits in bold, and also put between parentheses texts that you can skip in the interest of time.

Descartes: central texts on consciousness

(1) But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions. This is a considerable list, if everything on it belongs to me. But does it? Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer. But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I'. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (*Meditations* AT VII 28-29)

(2) *Thought*. I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately conscious [*consciis*] 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 but is not itself a thought. (Second Replies, AT VII 160/CSM II 113)

(3) By the word 'thought' I understand all those things which we are conscious [*consciis*] of happening in us insofar as the consciousness [*conscientia*] of them is in us. And so not only understanding, willing, imagining, but also sensing is here the same as thinking. For if I say I see or I walk, therefore I am; and I understand this about the seeing or walking as bodily activities, the conclusion is not absolutely certain. For, as often happens in dreams, I can think that I see or walk, although I do not open my eyes and do not move, and also, perhaps, although I have no body. But if I understand it

about the sensation or consciousness itself of seeing or walking [*de ipso sensu sive conscientiâ videndi aut ambulandi*], it is clearly certain because they are referred to the mind, which alone senses or thinks that it sees or walks. (*Principles I, 9*)

Descartes rejects an argument for dualism from reflexivity that was actually common in the period:

(4) My critic says that to enable a substance to be superior to matter and wholly spiritual (and he insists on using the term 'mind' only in this restricted sense), it is not sufficient for it to think: it is further required that it should think that it is thinking, by means of a reflexive act, or that it should have consciousness [*conscientia*] of its own thought. [This is as deluded as our bricklayer's saying that a person who is skilled in architecture must employ a reflexive act to ponder on the fact that he has this skill before he can be an architect. It may in fact be that all architects frequently reflect on the fact that they have this skill, or at least are capable of so reflecting. But it is obvious that an architect does not need to perform this reflexive act in order to be an architect.] And equally, this kind of pondering or reflecting is not required in order for a thinking substance to be superior to matter. The initial thought by means of which we notice [*advertimus*] something does not differ from the second thought by means of which we notice that we had noticed it, any more than this second thought differs from the third thought by means of which notice that we noticed that we noticed. And if it is conceded that a corporeal thing has the first kind of thought, then there is not the slightest reason to deny that it can have the second. Accordingly, it must be stressed that my critic commits a much more dangerous error in this respect than does the poor bricklayer. He removes the true and most clearly intelligible feature which differentiates corporeal things from incorporeal ones, *viz.* that the latter think, but not the former; and in its place he substitutes a feature which cannot in any way be regarded as essential, namely that incorporeal things reflect on their thinking, but corporeal ones do not. Hence he does everything he can to hinder our understanding of the real distinction between the human mind and the body. (AT VII 559-60/CSM II 382)

Passages about what is in the mind besides actual thoughts:

Faculties in the mind:

(5) I must ask myself now whether I have some power by which I can make it the case that I who now exist, will also exist afterwards; for, since I am nothing other than a thinking thing, or at least since I only deal now with that part of me which is a thinking thing, **if some such power were in me, I would no doubt be conscious of it.** But I experience no such power, and consequently I know very evidently that I depend on some being different from me (*Meditations, AT VII 49*)

It must be noted that we are always actually conscious of the acts or operations of our mind; of its faculties or powers we are not always conscious except potentially; so that, when we set out to use some faculty, if that faculty is in the mind, we are immediately

actually conscious of it; and therefore we can deny that it is in the mind if we cannot become conscious of it. (Fourth Replies, AT VII 246-7)

(6) Innate ideas: You imagine here that the reasons which I use for proving the existence of God have no force except for those who already know that he exists, because they only depend on notions innate in us. But it must be noted that all those things of which the knowledge is said to be naturally innate in us [*nobis esse a natura indita*], **are not therefore expressly known by us**. They are only such that we can know them from the powers of the mind itself without any sensory experience. Of this kind are all truths of geometry, not only the most obvious ones, but also the other ones, however abstruse they may seem. (Letter to Voetius, AT VIII-B 166-167)

(Descartes: we do make mistakes about our own mental states:

(7) Experience shows that those who are the most strongly agitated by their passions are not those who know them best, and that the passions are among those perceptions that are rendered obscure and confused by the close union of mind and body. (*Passions* I.28)

(8) In order to know what were really the opinions [of the most sensible among us] I should pay attention to their actions rather than to what they say. Not only because given our moral corruption there are few people who want to say everything they believe, but also because many don't know themselves [what they believe]. For the act of thought by which one believes something being different from the act by which one knows that one believes it, they often occur without one another. (*Discourse on Method*, AT VI 23)

(9) What is this wax, which can only be perceived by the mind? It is the same as what I see, touch, imagine, the same which I judged to be there from the beginning. But it must be noticed that its perception is not vision, nor touch, nor imagination, *and it never was*, although it seemed to be such before. It is an inspection of the mind alone, which can be imperfect and confused as it was before, or clear and distinct, as it is now, as I attend more or less to those things of which it consists. (*Meditations* AT VII 31. Emphasis mine)

(Relevant to the issue in Meditation II: what is the force of the skeptical arguments?

(10) I have already denied that I have any senses and any body. I wonder, however, what follows from this? Am I so tied to the body and senses that I cannot be without them? But I have persuaded myself that there is clearly nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies; does it follow that I also am not? (*Meditations*, AT VII 24-25))

Cudworth

(11) ... that Duplication, that is included in the Nature of synaesthesia, 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 and Enjoyment of it self (*True Intellectual System of the Universe* 159)

(12) [Descartes and others are wrong in denying] that there should be an *Action* distinct from *Local Motion* besides *Expressly Conscious Cogitation*. For they making the first General Heads of all Entity, to be *Extension* and *Cogitation*, or *Extended Being* and *Cogitative*, and then supposing that the Essence of Cogitations consists in *Express Consciousness*, must needs by this means exclude such a *Plastick Life* of Nature, as we speak of, that is supposed to act without *Animal Fancie* or *Express Consciousness*. (TIS 159)

(13) **Cudworth divideds the world into:** Resisting or Antitypous Extension, and Life, (i.e. Internal Energy and Self-Activity) and then again that Life or Internal Self-activity, is to be subdivided into such as either acts with express Consciousness and Synaesthesia, or such as is without it; The Latter which is this *Plastick Life* of Nature (TIS 159)

Locke: all thought is conscious

Against soul always thinks:

(14). But men in love with their opinions may not only suppose what is in question, but allege wrong matter of fact. How else could any one make it an inference of mine, that a thing is not, because we are not sensible of it in our sleep? I do not say there is no soul in a man, because he is not sensible of it in his sleep: But I do say, he cannot think at any time, waking or sleeping, without being sensible of it. **Our being sensible of it is not necessary to any thing but to our thoughts; and to them it is, and to them it always will be necessary, till we can think without being conscious of it.**

(15) I grant that the soul in a waking man is never without thought, because it is the condition of being awake: But whether sleeping without dreaming be not an affection of the whole man, mind as well as body, may be worth a waking man's consideration; **it being hard to conceive, that any thing should think and not be conscious of it.** If the soul doth think in a sleeping man without being conscious of it, I ask, whether during such thinking it has any pleasure or pain, or be capable of happiness or misery? I am sure the man is not, no more than the bed or earth he lies on. **For to be happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible.** Or if it be possible that the soul can, whilst the body is sleeping, have its thinking, enjoyments and concerns, its pleasures or pain, apart, which the man is not conscious of nor partakes in; it is certain that Socrates asleep and Socrates awake is not the same person: But his soul when he sleeps, and Socrates the man, consisting of body

and soul when he is waking, are two persons; since waking Socrates has no knowledge of, or concernment for that happiness or misery of his soul which it enjoys alone by itself whilst he sleeps, without perceiving any thing of it; no more than he has for the happiness or misery of a man in the Indies, whom he knows not. For if we take wholly away all consciousness of our actions and sensations, especially of pleasure and pain, and the concernment that accompanies it, it will be hard to know wherein to place personal identity. (*Essay* II.I.10-11)

Issue in Locke: what is the relationship between consciousness and reflection? *Essay* II.3-4, 8.

(16) First, Our senses, conversant about particular sensible objects, do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things, according to those various ways wherein those objects do affect them: And thus we come by those ideas we have of Yellow, White, Heat, Cold, Soft, Hard, Bitter, Sweet, and all those which we call sensible qualities; which when I say the senses convey into the mind, I mean, they from external objects convey into the mind what produces there those perceptions. This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to the understanding, I call SENSATION.

(17) Secondly, The other fountain from which experience furnisheth the understanding with ideas, is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got; which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without. And such are Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing, and all the different actings of our own minds; which we being conscious of and observing in ourselves, do from these receive into our understandings as distinct ideas, as we do from bodies affecting our senses. This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself; and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might properly enough be called internal sense. But as I call the other sensation, so I call this REFLECTION, the ideas it affords being such only as the mind gets by reflecting on its own operations within itself. **By reflection then, in the following part of this discourse, I would be understood to mean that notice which the mind takes of its own operations, and the manner of them; by reason whereof there come to be ideas of these operations in the understanding.** These two, I say, viz. external material things, as the objects of sensation; and the operations of our own minds within, as the objects of reflection; are to me the only originals from whence all our ideas take their beginnings. The term operations here I use in a large sense, as comprehending not barely the actions of the mind about its ideas, but some sort of passions arising sometimes from them, such as is the satisfaction or uneasiness arising from any thought.

((18) And hence we see the reason why it is pretty late before most children get ideas of the operations of their own minds; and some have not any very clear or perfect ideas of the greatest part of them all their lives: Because, though they pass there continually, yet,

like floating visions, they make not deep impressions enough to leave in their mind clear, distinct, lasting ideas, till the understanding turns inward upon itself, reflects on its own operations, and makes them the objects of its own contemplation. Children when they come first into it, are surrounded with a world of new things, which, by a constant solicitation of their senses, draw the mind constantly to them, forward to take notice of new, and apt to be delighted with the variety of changing objects. Thus the first years are usually employed and diverted in looking abroad. Men's business in them is to acquaint themselves with what is to be found without: And so growing up in a constant attention to outward sensation, seldom make any considerable reflection on what passes within them till they come to be of riper years; and some scarce ever at all.)

(19) To suppose the soul to think, and the man not to perceive it, is, as has been said, to make two persons in one man: And if one considers well these men's way of speaking, one should be led into a suspicion that they do so. For they who tell us that the soul always thinks, do never, that I remember, say that a man always thinks. Can the soul think, and not the man? Or a man think, and not be conscious of it? This perhaps would be suspected of jargon in others. If they say, the man thinks always, but is not always conscious of it; they may as well say, his body is extended without having parts. For it is altogether as intelligible to say, that a body is extended without parts, as that any thing thinks without being conscious of it, or perceiving that it does so. They who talk thus may, with as much reason, if it be necessary to their hypothesis, say, that a man is always hungry, but that he does not always feel it: **Whereas hunger consists in that very sensation, as thinking consists in being conscious that one thinks.** If they say, that a man is always conscious to himself of thinking, I ask, how they know it.

Consciousness is the perception of what passes in a man's own mind. Can another man perceive that I am conscious of any thing, when I perceive it not myself? No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience. Wake a man out of a sound sleep, and ask him, what he was that moment thinking of. If he himself be conscious of nothing he then thought on, he must be a notable diviner of thoughts that can assure him that he was thinking: May he not with more reason assure him he was not asleep? This is some thing beyond philosophy; and it cannot be less than revelation, that discovers to another thoughts in my mind, when I can find none there myself; and they must needs have a penetrating sight, who can certainly see that I think, when I cannot perceive it myself, and when I declare that I do not; and yet can see that dogs or elephants do not think, when they give all the demonstration of it imaginable, except only telling us that they do so. This some may suspect to be a step beyond the Rosicrucians; it seeming easier to make one's self invisible to others, than to make another's thoughts visible to me, which are not visible to himself. But it is but defining the soul to be "a substance that always thinks," and the business is done. If such definition be of any authority, I know not what it can serve for, but to make many men suspect, that they have no souls at all, since they find a good part of their lives pass away without thinking. For no definitions, that I know, no suppositions of any sect, are of force enough to destroy

constant experience; and perhaps it is the affectation of knowing beyond what we perceive, that makes so much useless dispute and noise in the world.

((20) Texts from various authors about consciousness:

Laforge: "thought consists in that consciousness (*conscience*) and that inner sentiment [*sentiment intérieur*] by which the mind is directed to everything that happens immediately in it (*Traité* 54/57)

Malebranche: "by *thought* ... I generally understand all those things that cannot be in the soul without the soul being aware of them (*les apperçoive*) through the inner sentiment (*sentiment intérieur*) it has of itself (RV 3-2.1: 415-418)

Arnauld: "our thought or perception is essentially reflexive (*réfléchissante*) on itself; or, as it is better put in Latin, is conscious of itself (*est sui conscia*) (VFI 46)

Samuel Clarke in a letter to Anthony Collins: *Consciousness*, in the most strict and exact Sense of the Word, signifies neither a *Capacity of Thinking*, nor yet *Actual Thinking*, but the *Reflex Act by which I know that I think, and that my Thoughts and Actions are my own and not Another's*. But in the present Question, the Reader needs not trouble himself with this Nicety of Distinction; but may understand it indifferently in all or any of these Significations; because the Argument proves universally, that Matter is neither capable of this *Reflex Act*, nor of the first *Direct Act*, nor of the *Capacity of Thinking* at all. (W III 784.))

Leibniz: not all mental states, perceptions, are conscious.

(21) The passing state which involves and represents a multitude in the unity or in the simple substance is nothing other than what one calls *perception*, which should be distinguished from apperception, or consciousness, as will be evident in what follows. **This is where the Cartesians have failed badly, since they took no account of the perceptions that we do not apperceive.** This is also what made them believe that minds alone are monads and that there are no animal souls or other entelechies. With the common people, they have confused a long stupor with death, properly speaking, which made them fall again into the Scholastic prejudice of completely separated souls, and they have even confirmed unsound minds in the belief in the mortality of souls (*Monadology* 14)

(22) One might, I believe, replace 'thought' by a more general term, 'perception', attributing thought only to minds whereas perception belongs to all entelechies. But still I would not challenge anyone's right to use 'thought' with that same generality, and I may sometimes have carelessly done so myself. (*New Essays* II.21. 72)

(23) If we wish to call *soul* everything that has *perceptions* and *appetites* in the general sense I have just explained, then all simple substances or created monads can be called

souls. But, since sensation is something more than a simple perception, I think that the general name of monad and entelechy is sufficient for simple substances which only have perceptions, and that we should only call those substances *souls* where perception is more distinct and accompanied by memory. (*Monadology* 19)

(24) For we experience within ourselves a state in which we remember nothing and have no distinct perception; this is similar to when we faint or when we are overwhelmed by a deep, dreamless sleep. In this state the soul does not differ sensibly from a simple monad; but since this state does not last, and since the soul emerges from it, our soul is something more (*Monadology* 20).

(25) And it does not at all follow that in such a state the simple substance is without any perception. This is not possible for the previous reasons; for it cannot perish, and it also cannot subsist without some property [*affection*], which is nothing other than its perception. But when there is a great multitude of small perceptions in which nothing is distinct, we are stupefied. This is similar to when we continually spin in the same direction several times in succession, from which arises a dizziness that can make us faint and does not allow us to distinguish anything. Death can impart this state to animals for a time. (*Monadology* 21)

((26) More details about the distinctions among types of perceptions:

Each monad, together with a particular body, makes up a living substance. Thus, there is not only life everywhere, joined to limbs or organs, but there are also infinite degrees of life in the monads, some dominating more or less over others. But when a monad has organs that are adjusted in such a way that, through them, there is contrast and distinction among the impressions they receive, and consequently contrast and distinction in the perceptions that represent them [in the monad] (as, for example, when the rays of light are concentrated and act with greater force because of the shape of the eye's humors), then this may amount to *sensation*, that is, to a perception accompanied by *memory*—a perception of which there remains an echo long enough to make itself heard on occasion. Such a living thing is called an *animal*, as its monad is called a *soul*. And when this soul is raised to the level of *reason*, it is something more sublime, and it is counted among the minds, as I will soon explain.

It is true that animals are sometimes in the condition of simple living things, and their souls in the condition of simple monads, namely when their perceptions are not sufficiently distinct to be remembered, as happens in a deep, dreamless sleep or in a fainting spell. But perceptions which have become entirely confused must be unravelled again in animals, for reasons I shall give shortly (cf. section 12). Thus it is good to distinguish between *perception*, which is the internal state of the monad 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*. And after having shocked common opinion too much by refusing sensation to beasts, they have, in the opposite direction, accommodated themselves too much to the prejudice of the masses by confusing a *long stupor*, which arises from a great confusion of perceptions, with *death strictly speaking*, in which all perception ceases. This has confirmed the ill-founded belief in the destruction of some souls, and the evil opinion of some so-called freethinkers who have denied the immortality of our soul. (*Principles of Nature and Grace* 4))

((27) Argument that there are unconscious perceptions): Moreover, there are a thousand indications that allow us to judge that at every moment there is an infinity of perceptions in us, but without apperception and without reflection—that is, changes in the soul itself, which we do not consciously perceive [*appercevons*], because these impressions are either too small or too numerous, or too homogeneous, in the sense that they have nothing sufficiently distinct in themselves; but combined with others, they do have their effect and make themselves felt in the assemblage, at least confusedly. It is in this way that custom makes us ignore the motion of a mill or of a waterfall, after we have lived nearby for some time. It is not that this motion ceases to strike our organs and that there is nothing corresponding to it in the soul, on account of the harmony of the soul and the body, but that the impressions in the soul and in the body, lacking the appeal of novelty, are not sufficiently strong to attract our attention and memory, which are applied only to more demanding objects. All attention requires memory, and when we are not alerted, so to speak, to pay heed to some of our own present perceptions, we let them pass without reflection and without even noticing them. But if someone alerts us to them right away and makes us take note, for example, of some noise we have just heard, we remember it, and we consciously perceive that we just had some sensation of it. Thus there were perceptions that we did not consciously perceive right away, the apperception in this case arising only after an interval, however brief. In order better to recognize [*juger*] these tiny perceptions [*petites perceptions*] that cannot be distinguished in a crowd, I usually make use of the example of the roar or noise of the sea that strikes us when we are at the shore. In order to hear this noise as we do, we must hear the parts that make up this whole, that is, we must hear the noise of each wave, even though each of these small noises is known only in the confused assemblage of all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave making it were the only one. For we must be slightly affected by the motion of this wave, and we must have some perception of each of these noises, however small they may be, otherwise we would not have the noise of a hundred thousand waves, since a hundred thousand nothings cannot make something. Moreover, we never sleep so soundly that we do not have some weak and confused sensation, and we would never be awakened by the greatest noise in the

world if we did not have some perception of its beginning, small as it might be, just as we could never break a rope by the greatest effort in the world, unless it were stretched and strained slightly by the least efforts, even though the slight extension they produce is not apparent. (*New Essays* Preface, G V 46-47/AG 295.)