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Consciousness in Early Modern Philosophy

Remarks on Udo Thiel's Account

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Abstract: This commentary on Udo Thiel's rich and inspiring book *The Early Modern Subject* consists of three parts. The first part expresses agreement with Thiel's claim that the early modern philosophers use terms such as "conscientia", "conscience", "consciousness", and "Bewusstsein" in order to refer to forms of "relating to one's own self". However, Thiel's additional claim that the early modern philosophers were not much concerned with object consciousness is found wanting. The second part takes issue with Thiel's understanding of the way in which René Descartes's psychological usage of the term "conscientia" is innovative. It is argued that Descartes does not arrive at the psychological meaning of the term by abstraction from its moral meaning. Instead, Descartes only widens the application of the term in one of its established ancient meanings. The third part presents objections to Thiel's higher-order reading of Cartesian *conscientia*.

Keywords: René Descartes, consciousness

This commentary addresses the topic of consciousness, which is one of the two main strands of Udo Thiel's rich and inspiring book *The Early Modern Subject*. The other main topic, personal identity, is one that I will have to leave aside. The same holds true for most of the tremendous number of authors Thiel discusses. Instead of making scattered remarks on several authors, I will focus on one author, namely René Descartes, and his role in the development of early modern conceptions of consciousness. But before I turn to Descartes, I will begin with a remark on the subject matter of Thiel's book and on a more general claim Thiel puts forward about the early modern debate on consciousness.

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What are early modern debates concerned with? – (Self-)Consciousness vs. Object Consciousness

What exactly is the subject matter of Udo Thiel's analysis of early modern conceptions of consciousness? Thiel's book suggests two answers. On the one hand, Thiel aims to determine the *mental phenomenon* early modern thinkers refer to by using terms such as the Latin "conscientia", the French "conscience", the English "consciousness", and the German "Bewusstsein". These terms and their cognates constitute a set of *canonical terms* used by early modern thinkers to refer to a set of related mental phenomena. On the other hand, Thiel also provides analyses of early modern *explanations* of consciousness; he asks, for instance, whether they hold a first-order or a higher-order account (11).¹ Let me call the first project the "linguistic project" and the second one the "explanatory project".

The linguistic project is well motivated because the canonical terms do undergo a change in usage in the early modern period: With René Descartes, the Latin term "conscientia" begins to be used in a psychological sense in the philosophy of mind, whereas previously its philosophical use was mainly restricted to moral contexts where it denoted conscience.² And while the translators of Descartes's Latin writings into French had not yet rendered Descartes's psychological use of "conscientia" into French by using the term "conscience", this changed with Descartes's French followers. With the works of Louis de la Forge, Nicolas Malebranche, and others, the psychological use of the French term "conscience" begins to spread in French philosophical writings.³ Across the channel, with the works of Ralph Cudworth and John Locke, the English term "consciousness" starts to be used frequently in the philosophy of mind.⁴ And in Germany, where the infinitive "bewusst zu sein" was already in use as a translation of "conscium sibi esse" in the seventeenth century,⁵ Christian Wolff introduces the noun "Bewusstsein" into philosophy at the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁶ Yet, while these linguistic changes take place in early modern times, early modern authors often do not comment on them. It is thus not obvious what mental phenomenon or phenomena the authors intend to refer to when employing the canonical terms whose use had changed, or which had been newly introduced. Thiel is well aware

1 Numbers in parentheses refer to pages of Thiel's book.

2 See Davies 1990, 7–9.

3 See Davies 1990, 13–21.

4 See Davies 1990, 2.

5 See Faber 1612, 521 and Faber 1696, 2024. Vgl. HWPh Bd. 1, 888.

6 Vgl. HWPh Bd. 1, 888.

of these linguistic developments and the resulting questions (7–11). The linguistic project is dedicated to settling them.

The explanatory project, in turn, is needed in order to understand the respective positions in the early modern philosophy of mind. It can be understood as a sequel to the linguistic project, but it can also be conceived independently of it. In order to see this, let us consider both projects in slightly more detail:

(1) The *linguistic project* requires one, first, to determine passages in which the canonical terms are used in the psychological sense, e. g. as referring to some mental phenomenon, *whatever this phenomenon might be*. The second step, then, consists in analysing the respective passages in order to get a better grasp of the mental phenomenon referred to.⁷

(2) The *explanatory project*, by contrast, requires a different procedure. First, one needs to fix the target phenomenon. This might be the mental phenomenon that early modern authors refer to by the canonical terms. But one might also be interested in one of the many types of consciousness distinguished in the contemporary debate, such as access consciousness, phenomenal consciousness, object consciousness, or self-consciousness. In this case, the target phenomenon may differ from the phenomenon early moderns refer to by using the canonical terms. Second, at least if the target phenomenon is identified in contemporary terms, one has to determine the expressions early modern authors use to denote it. Note that it might turn out that the authors do not use the canonical terms for denoting the target phenomenon. Hence, an explanatory project of the second variant might direct attention to different passages than those highlighted by the linguistic project. Third, having determined the relevant terms, one can then begin to analyse the explanatory model the respective authors present by analysing the passages in which the authors refer to the target phenomenon.⁸

In his book, Thiel is concerned with the linguistic as well as the explanatory project. Within each project, he puts forward far-reaching claims: With regard to the *linguistic project*, Thiel observes that early modern authors in general – Christian Wolff is an exception, in that his use of “Bewusstsein” also captures consciousness of objects (305) – used the canonical terms to refer to the mental phenomenon of *relating to one’s own self* (6–7). Thiel distinguishes between two

⁷ The distinction between both steps marks a logical, not a temporal order. Determining the passages and determining the mental phenomenon are usually two aspects of one interpretative process.

⁸ Again, the distinction between the second and third steps is logical, not temporal.

forms of relating to one's own self: First, the relating can concern mental states; second, it can concern the self as the bearer of these states. Thiel reserves the term "consciousness" for referring to the first form and the term "self-consciousness" for referring to the second form of relating to one's own self (6n18). In sum, Thiel claims that early moderns applied the canonical terms in general to refer to the mental phenomenon of relating to one's own self, where this phenomenon comes in two forms, namely as relating to one's own mental states (consciousness) and as relating to one's own self as such (self-consciousness). I think that Thiel's general linguistic claim is right, and that his observation is an important one. Concerning the *explanatory* project, Thiel puts forward a similarly far-reaching claim. It occurs at the end of a longer passage, in which Thiel cites John Maxwell's distinction between different senses of the term "consciousness". He employs this passage in order to support his general linguistic claim:

In some contexts, consciousness was thought of as being concerned with external objects, but this was not how the notion was generally understood. In 1727, John Maxwell distinguished between three meanings of the term 'consciousness': (a) 'the reflex act, by which a Man knows his Thoughts to be his own Thoughts', (b) 'the Direct Act of Thinking; or (which is of the same Import;) simple sensation', or (c) 'the Power of self-motion, or of beginning of Motion by the Will'. Maxwell insists that (a) – consciousness understood as a 'reflex act' on our own thoughts – is 'the strict and properest Sense of the Word'. (6)

In the subsequent two sentences, Thiel tacitly switches from the linguistic to the explanatory project:

Consciousness, then, is understood here as a way of relating to one's own mental states. This inner-directed sense of consciousness dominated the eighteenth-century discussions, not only in Britain, but also in France and Germany. (6)

Of course, the eighteenth-century discussions Thiel refers to concern *explanations* of the mental phenomenon in question, rather than the *linguistic issue* of how to use the canonical terms. Hence, the last claim is obviously related to the explanatory rather than the linguistic project. However, this move from a linguistic claim to a claim within the explanatory project seems unwarranted. Whereas Thiel is right to say that the early moderns applied the canonical terms generally to refer to forms of "relating to one's own self", it does not follow from this that early moderns were mainly concerned with giving accounts of the same phenomenon of "relating to one's own self" in their explanatory endeavours. The way the early moderns used the canonical terms leaves the question whether they tried to explain how we "relate to our own self" or whether they also attempted to explain what Thiel describes as *consciousness concerning external objects*

(6) fully untouched. It just might be that they used terms that differ from the canonical ones to refer to the latter phenomenon. And, indeed, this is the case. The Cartesians' use of the Latin term "perceptio", Locke's use of the term "perception", and Leibniz's use of the expression "apperception"⁹ are proper candidates in this regard. The infamous theory of ideas is an attempt to come to terms with our intentional directedness to and our consciousness of objects. It is important to stress this fact because it guards against overemphasising the extent to which early modern authors were concerned with self-related ("the inner realm") rather than object-related consciousness ("the external realm").

To sum up, in his book Udo Thiel pursues both the linguistic and the explanatory project concerning consciousness. Thiel's linguistic observation that the early moderns predominantly use the canonical terms to denote forms of "relating to one's own self" strikes me as fully correct and highly important. However, I am not convinced by Thiel's further claim that object consciousness did not play much of a role in early modern discussions.

In what sense are early modern discussions about consciousness innovative? – The case of Descartes

It is widely agreed that there is something new going on in the early modern debate on consciousness. The degree to which the early moderns were innovative, however, has often been exaggerated, and Thiel is absolutely right to emphasise the continuities between early modern and pre-modern thinking on this score (2). The list of potential pre-modern sources Thiel presents is striking and includes Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, as Plotinus, and Augustine. One might add to this list the extensive debate on self-knowledge in medieval thought – Thiel only mentions Aquinas and Avicenna (15–16) – where one finds many positions that resurface in the early modern debate.¹⁰

Nevertheless, despite these continuities, early modern thinking about consciousness also differs from pre-modern accounts in significant ways. This is evidenced by significant terminological changes that took place in the early modern period. As noted above, with Descartes and his followers the Latin term

⁹ For this interpretation of apperception see Barth 2011.

¹⁰ See Perler/Schierbaum 2014.

“conscientia” and the French equivalent “conscience” become key expressions in the philosophy of mind, whereas before, in philosophical contexts they were merely part of the vocabulary of moral philosophy. But what exactly does this terminological change consist in? There are several options, and I will focus on the Latin term “conscientia” in presenting them. For instance, one might claim that the term was used to express a known concept that it had not previously been used to express. Or one might think that it was newly used to express a genuinely new concept. I think that both answers are inadequate. We can see this by investigating a puzzle raised by the new use Descartes makes of “conscientia”. Although Descartes is the first to apply this term systematically in the philosophy of mind (mainly from 1641 onwards), there is no single passage in which he indicates to the reader that he uses it in some new way. There is no passage where he says something like: “Beware of the fact that I do not use “conscientia” in the established moral sense. I use it in a new, psychological sense to refer to the mental phenomenon XYZ.” This is puzzling. Would Descartes not have to expect that, in the absence of some explanation, his readers would easily misunderstand his use of “conscientia”? This puzzle requires a solution. One option is to assume that Descartes in fact uses the term “conscientia” in its well-established moral sense and believes that conscience is central not only to moral philosophy, but also to the philosophy of mind. This reading was suggested and elaborated by Boris Hennig. I agree with Udo Thiel that this reading is unconvincing (9n28, 44n51). But this result does not release us from the task of solving the puzzle. Thiel seems to think that Descartes arrives at his new use of “conscientia” by abstracting from the established moral use of the term. “Conscientia” in the moral sense refers to moral evaluations of one’s own deeds, thoughts, or feelings in light of moral principles. But *conscientia* in this moral sense presupposes that one knows one’s own deeds, thoughts, or feelings, and thus requires a kind of self-knowledge that is not evaluative in itself. Descartes’s non-evaluative, psychological use of “conscientia”, Thiel suggests, takes up this non-evaluative component of conscience (9, 43).

However, I think that this suggestion is not persuasive because it does not solve the puzzle just raised, i. e. it does not explain why Descartes neglects to point out his new use of the term “conscientia” to the reader. If Descartes derived the new psychological sense of “conscientia” by abstraction from its moral sense, one would expect him to explain this to the reader, who otherwise might easily misunderstand Descartes’s use of the term in the context of his philosophy of mind. A solution to the puzzle comes into reach if one looks back to the ancient meanings of the term. As Thiel is well aware, in Roman times “conscientia” (if the term was not simply used as an equivalent of “scientia” or “cognitio”) denoted a kind of clandestine knowledge which one exclusively shares with a small group

of persons and which concerns this group, or knowledge one exclusively shares with oneself about something that concerns oneself (8).¹¹ Since the latter exclusive knowledge in many cases concerns one's own thoughts, feelings, or intentions, "conscientia" was used to refer to self-knowledge in the sense of knowledge of one's own mental states. Although of ancient origin, this use of the term was common knowledge among Descartes's learned early modern readers, who were generally educated in classical Latin.¹² Descartes's psychological use takes up this ancient yet live meaning of the term "conscientia". Accordingly, Descartes is less innovative in semantic and conceptual matters than he is often considered to be. He takes up an established term with a well-known ancient meaning and, retaining this meaning, applies this term in a new context, namely in the context of the philosophy of mind. Thus, Descartes's innovation merely consists in employing an established term with a well-known meaning *in a new context*. This explains why he does not spill any ink on explaining his new use of the term. There is no explanation necessary because Descartes can assume that the learned reader knows the meaning of the term he employs. Furthermore, Descartes can reasonably assume that the learned reader will easily disambiguate the term properly because the context makes it clear that he uses it not with its moral meaning in the sense of "conscience", but with its psychological meaning in the sense of "self-knowledge of one's own mental states".

This understanding of Descartes's terminological innovation coheres with Udo Thiel's claim that the early moderns use "conscientia" (and the other canonical terms) in order to refer to, as he says, "relating to one's own self". This description comes close to the ancient meaning of "conscientia" as, broadly, knowing one's own mental life, which Descartes alludes to. But Descartes's innovation merely consists in widening the scope in which "conscientia" (in one of its established meanings) finds application. The innovation is not the result of an abstraction from the usage of "conscientia" in its moral sense.

What is Cartesian *Conscientia*? – Doubts about Thiel's higher-order reading

Thiel engages in the debate about whether Descartes holds a first-order or second-order account of consciousness. He thinks that "it may not be possible to

¹¹ See TLL IV, 364–368 and TRE I.13, 192pp.

¹² This is witnessed by Hobbes (see Hobbes 1994, I.vii.4).

give a definite answer” to this question, since “[t]here is no explicit discussion of this question in Descartes” (45). Yet, due to the fact that “[t]here are some passages which would suggest a higher-order account of consciousness”, eventually Thiel opts for attributing a higher-order account to Descartes (45). He builds his case on a well-known passage from the *Conversation with Burman*¹³ (45–46) and defends himself well against critics who appeal to Descartes’s replies to Bourdin¹⁴ in order to defend a first-order reading (46–47). Yet, I think four considerations speak against Thiel’s interpretation:

First, the textual evidence on which Thiel rests his case is shaky, since Descartes did not compose the *Conversation with Burman* himself. Instead, Burman composed it, possibly with the help of Johann Clauberg.¹⁵ In view of the fact that we do not find any similarly clear-cut evidence for a higher-order account of *conscientia* in Descartes’s works, it seems doubtful that the passage from the *Conversation with Burman* is a faithful presentation of Descartes’s own view.

Second, as Thiel knows well (48), a higher-order account leads to a vicious regress, since Descartes claims that minds have *conscientia* of all their thoughts, including higher-order thoughts. But this vicious regress is so obvious a problem that it is hard to believe that Descartes would not have noticed and avoided it. Hence, the principle of charity speaks against attributing a higher-order account to Descartes.

Third, in reply to Burman, Descartes explains that the mind “has the power to reflect on its thoughts as often as it likes”.¹⁶ The phrase “as often as it likes” indicates that Descartes refers to deliberate reflection here, rather than to a kind of reflection that accompanies thoughts non-deliberately and automatically, as Thiel would have it.¹⁷ Hence, even if one considers the *Conversation with Burman* to be a reliable report of Descartes’s views, it seems that Descartes does not here present the kind of higher-order account Thiel would like to attribute to him. In fact, in taking Descartes at his word one is led to attribute a conception to him according to which *conscientia* of thoughts consists in deliberate reflections on

¹³ See AT V 146–179.

¹⁴ See AT VII 559. I think Thiel is right that this passage does not speak in favour of a first-order account of Cartesian *conscientia*.

¹⁵ See Cottingham 1976, xi–xii.

¹⁶ AT V 149; CSM III 335.

¹⁷ See Simmons 2012, 15.

them. But this would mean attributing a crazy position to Descartes, since we surely do not permanently engage in deliberate reflection on our thoughts.

Fourth, there is textual evidence against the higher-order account that Thiel does not address. Descartes's remarks on infant thinking do not sit well with Thiel's interpretation. For instance, Descartes writes in a letter to Hyperaspistes:

I had reason to assert that the human soul, wherever it be, even in the mother's womb is always thinking. [...] This does not mean, however, that I believe that the mind of an infant meditates on metaphysics in its mother's womb; not at all. We know by experience that our minds are so closely joined to our bodies as to be almost always acted upon by them; and although when thriving in an adult and healthy body the mind enjoys some liberty to think of other things than those presented by the senses, we know there is not the same liberty on those who are sick or asleep or very young; and the younger they are, the less liberty they have. So if one may conjecture on such an unexplored topic, it seems more reasonable to think that a mind newly united to an infant's body is wholly occupied in perceiving in a confused way or feeling the ideas of pain, pleasure, heat, cold and other similar ideas which arise from its union and, as it were, intermingling with the body. (AT III 423f; CSM III 189–190)

An infant, as Descartes explains, is “*wholly* occupied in perceiving in a confused way or feeling ideas of pain, pleasure, heat etc.”, i. e., it is wholly occupied with sensory thinking. Similarly, in the *Conversation with Burman* Descartes claims that “in infancy the mind is so swamped inside the body that the *only* thoughts it has are those which result from the way the body is affected”.¹⁸ Purely intellectual thinking does not occur at this early stage at all. However, the idea of thought is not a sensory but a purely intellectual idea, and reflection is not sensation but purely intellectual thinking.¹⁹ Hence, Descartes's position regarding infant thinking seems to rule out an interpretation that attributes to Descartes a higher-order, i. e. reflective, account of *conscientia*. Infants think (sensorily) and are conscious of their (sensory) thoughts. But like all purely intellectual acts, acts of reflection do not occur in their minds. In reply, Thiel might point out that Descartes is merely concerned with deliberate reflection in these passages, whereas the form of reflection in which *conscientia* of thoughts consists is automatic and not deliberate. And, indeed, Descartes's reference to the mind's “liberty to think of other things” in the letter to Hyperaspistes might support this reply. Yet, in light of two late letters to Antoine Arnauld, this response turns out to be unsuccessful.²⁰ In

¹⁸ AT V 149–150; CSM III 336; italics mine.

¹⁹ See AT V 220–221.

²⁰ See AT V 192–193 and 220–221.

these two letters, Descartes points out that acts of remembering a sensory impression S presuppose an act of recognizing that S is new when S occurs. This act of recognizing, Descartes claims, is a purely intellectual thought; it is, he says, a reflective thought of pure intellect. But since such reflective thoughts generally do not occur in infants, adults cannot remember the sensory impressions they received as infants. The crucial point is that these reflective thoughts of pure intellect are *not* deliberate reflections. This is clear from the fact that, for Descartes, these reflective thoughts are “so linked to sensation that the two occur together and appear to be indistinguishable from each other”.²¹ This means that the distinction between the sensory impression and the reflective act of recognizing it as a new one are phenomenally indistinguishable; from the first-person perspective, they appear as one act. The distinction between both acts is a theoretical issue. In contrast, deliberate reflections appear to the mind as acts separate from the first-order acts it reflects on. Hence, the type of reflections that Descartes thinks infants are incapable of is not restricted to deliberate reflections, but comprises deliberate as well as automatic, non-deliberate reflective acts.

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²¹ AT V 221; CSM III 357.

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