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Editors

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY OF MIND 4

Consciousness

*From Perception to Reflection
in the History of Philosophy*

 Springer

CONSCIOUSNESS

From Perception to Reflection
in the History of Philosophy

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Volume 4

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CONSCIOUSNESS

From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

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This book is about consciousness. It illuminates the concept in its complexity and richness, capturing its theoretical and philosophical significance as well as its problematic aspects. By taking a new look into the history of concepts, the collection questions several deep-seated assumptions about consciousness – assumptions both thematic and methodological. It argues that, even though our predecessors did not formulate their philosophical queries in terms of consciousness, they have much to offer to our current disputes concerning its central features, such as reflexivity, subjectivity and aboutness, as well as related themes, from selfhood to attention and embodiment. At the same time, the collection demonstrates that consciousness is not just an issue in the philosophy of mind, but is bound to ontology, epistemology and moral theory. We can find premodern and early modern concepts and arguments that are interesting and even crucial to our own philosophical concerns, but we should not assume that these belong or contribute to any theory of mind isolated from metaphysical and ethical discussions: an argument that for us provides insightful descriptions of perception or self-awareness might to its writer have meant not just a theoretization of the soul or the mind, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a contribution to ethics or ontology. The study of the past shows that our contemporary notion of consciousness has long and complex roots; some of these roots go back to medieval and ancient discussions, but some branch off closer to our era and relate to other historical disputes.

HISTORICAL SENSITIVITIES

A common strategy in the history of philosophy today is to argue that our predecessors did not have the concepts with which we operate. This approach was developed as a critical reaction to early twentieth-century universalism, which claimed that we can find seeds of all our philosophical

problems and concepts in works as early as those of Plato and Aristotle. The universalists believed that the best service that a philosopher could do his ancient predecessors was to provide a rational reconstruction of their thoughts and arguments. Contemporary historical sensitivity problematizes such attempts as anachronistic, and argues that we cannot simply assume that the philosophical tools which we have developed to solve our own problems capture, without any difficulties, the core content or sense of past discussions. Instead of a rational or intellectual reconstruction, the task is to provide a historical reconstruction that takes into account the philosophical context, conceptual framework and cultural environment in which the discussion developed.¹ Such studies have shown that many contemporary concepts have no clear counterparts in ancient, medieval or even early modern discussions. The concept of consciousness is a good example: our modern ancestors Descartes and Locke, for example, defined this concept in a way that was partially similar to ours, but the use that they had for it differed significantly. Their primary interest was not in contributing to any philosophy of mind or in developing a theory of the mental, but in reforming metaphysics and moral theory.

Today, this historical sensitivity is shared equally by analytical philosophers and continental thinkers. Through different routes, both have come to realize that philosophy is not a set of eternal and unchanging problems, nor a cumulative science, but includes the continual task of interpretation and reinterpretation. The task of interpretation is understood in different ways by these two schools or traditions. In the analytical tradition, interpretation is primarily understood as semantic work with linguistic and logical units, such as propositions, arguments and theories. Thus, the analytical history of philosophy can be said to share the general analytical tendency for understanding philosophical problems – in this case the problems of historicity and traditionality – in semantic terms. The aim is to explicate the philosophical concepts and theories of our predecessors, and to learn from their analyses and reasoning.² In the continental movement, interpretation is

¹ Skinner, Quentin, “Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas”, *History and Theory* 8 (1969), 3–53; Rorty, Richard, “The historiography of philosophy: Four genres”, in R. Rorty, J. Schneewind and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 49–75.

² Simo Knuuttila characterizes this approach generally by the term ‘philosophical-historical semantics’, and tracks it back to Richard McKeon’s early article on the methods used in history of philosophy. See Knuuttila, Simo, “Kadonneet merkitykset – filosofinen historiallinen semantiikka”, in S. Heinämaa, M. Reuter and

understood as an existential task which, in addition to conceptual work, includes the challenge of change and becoming. The ancient text is not just an object of investigation, but also an active expression, which imposes its categories on the interpreter and forces him to question his own philosophical habits and prejudices. The reading of the text does not aim at any sort of reconstruction – rational or historical – but rather works to destroy the naiveté with which we use our contemporary concepts.³

Contemporary historians of philosophy are not interested in obvious cases of conceptual history: it is hardly surprising to learn that the concepts of sense datum, qualia, neural network and unconsciousness are relatively novel. Rather, the historian tries to tackle concepts which are more central to our theoretical disputes and which structure larger areas of phenomena and facts. Consciousness and related concepts, such as selfhood and subjectivity, are excellent targets for such critiques. These terms have multiple usages in current theorizing, they structure whole fields of investigation, from psychology to cognitive science, and they have several functions even in everyday discussions. The radical historical claim is that these concepts are modern or pre-modern innovations, arising from the writings of Augustine and Descartes, and missing from the works of Plato and Aristotle. Some researchers argue that the concept of consciousness emerged because of extra-philosophical social, political or economical changes: certain non-philosophical practices and interests developed and affected philosophical

M. Yrjönsuuri (eds.), *Spiritus Animalis: kirjoituksia filosofian historiasta* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2003), 19–28; Knuuttila, Simo, “Hintikka’s view of the history of philosophy”, in R.E. Auxier and L.E. Hahn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Jaakko Hintikka* (Chicago, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2006), 87–105; cf. McKeon, Richard, “Historical semantics and philosophical semantics”, in *Freedom and History: The Semantics of Philosophical Controversy and Ideological Conflict* (New York: Noonday Press Inc., 1952), 19–42. For the historical roots of analytical philosophy, see Michael Dummett’s influential work *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1993).

³ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), original *Sein und Zeit* (1927); Gadamer, Hans Georg, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), original *Wahrheit und Methode* (1975); Foucault, Michel, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history”, trans. J. Harari, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 76–100, original “Nietzsche, la généalogie et l’histoire” (1971).