

ARTICLE

CARTESIAN *CONSCIENTIA*

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INTRODUCTION

According to a common account, Descartes gave the Latin word '*conscientia*' a new sense, which was later expressed by technical terms such as 'consciousness', '*Bewusstsein*' or '*conscience psychologique*'.¹ Whereas '*conscientia*' in classical and medieval Latin meant something like 'moral conscience', Descartes is said to be the first to use it in the nonmoral and 'psychological' sense. This seems to be true at least to the extent that thinkers before Descartes did not have a single word, notion or concept for what we call 'consciousness'.² But did Descartes introduce such a notion? It might seem surprising that, on a closer look, we discover that Descartes did not use the word '*conscientia*' at all in his psychological writings. One obvious reason for this is that he wrote the *Passions of the Soul* in French, and '*conscientia*' is a Latin word. The French '*conscience*', in the *Passions*, definitely means 'moral conscience' (3, 117, XI 464). But Descartes did not even use the Latin '*conscientia*' in the main text of his *Meditations*. This is a strange finding in itself. How could it be the case that Descartes invented the modern concept of consciousness when he hardly used it?

To be sure, Descartes did use '*conscientia*', most prominently in the *Replies* and the *Principia Philosophiae*. In the following section I will try to discern the meaning of this word exclusively on the basis of such evidence; for if

¹These terms seem to have been coined by John Locke, Christian Wolff, and the French translator of Locke, Pierre Coste. Throughout this essay, Latin capital numbers refer to volumes of Adam, Tannery, eds., *René Descartes, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Vrin, 1996). Other editions are referred to by the following labels. 'CM' is the *Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis* (Turnhout: Brepols). 'CSEL' refers to the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (Vienna). 'PL' means *Patrologia cursus completus, Series Latina* (Paris: Garnier). 'SL' denotes the *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (Turnhout: Brepols).

²Cf. Kathleen V. Wilkes – Yishi, Duh, Um and Consciousness, in *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, edited by A. J. Marcel and E. Briisach (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), and Toshihiko Hamanaka, *The Concept of Consciousness in the History of Psychology, History of Psychiatry* 8 (1997) 361–373.

Descartes really was the first to use it according to the new meaning, one should think that it is possible to extract this meaning by a sufficiently careful examination of his writings. It turns out, however, that this is not the case. This result motivates the second and main part of the present work.

That the meaning of '*conscientia*' is not sufficiently clarified by consulting Descartes's writings is not problematic as such. One should not expect a philosopher explicitly to define the basic notions of his metaphysics. One should, however, expect that at least the more knowledgeable contemporary readers of Descartes were able to understand his words. This should be even more so since Descartes uses '*conscientia*' in the definition of one of his most basic terms: '*cogitatio*'. One should not use words in definitions unless their meaning is sufficiently clear by itself. Descartes, however, does not even make sufficiently clear what he means by '*conscientia*'. This implies that Descartes did *not* introduce an altogether new concept when he used '*conscientia*'. What did the word then mean?

On the face of it, there are three possible cases. First, Descartes could have been innovative, but imprecise and unclear in his use of '*conscientia*'. This is unlikely, and assuming it to be so would not lead us anywhere. Second, it may be the case that at least his more competent readers already understood '*conscientia*' in the new, 'psychological' sense. Unfortunately, we do not have much evidence for this. This will emerge as a result of the second part of this paper, in which I will examine the use of '*conscientia*' in those texts with which the readers of Descartes must have been familiar.

The third possibility is that Descartes might have used '*conscientia*' in its traditional sense. This last possibility might appear to be the most unlikely one. I argue for it in the third section of this paper. However, I will modify it to the extent that '*conscientia*' did not mean what Protestants and nineteenth-century scholars used to call 'moral conscience', '*conscience morale*' or '*Gewissen*'.

I will show that the Cartesian texts do not become unintelligible when we insert 'conscience' in its traditional meaning. On the contrary: when we read Descartes this way, we will get a grasp of exactly the notion of consciousness in which we should still be interested. One of the central claims of this paper is that by '*conscientia*', Descartes does not mean 'consciousness', nor does he mean 'conscience'. There is no single modern expression of this notion. For this reason, I will leave '*conscientia*' and '*consciūs*' untranslated in most cases.

DESCARTES

What *Conscientia* is About

Descartes always uses '*conscientia*' as an attribute of the one who is *consciūs* of something. Thoughts are not called '*conscii*', and they are not said to be

'*in conscientiam*'. Further, he is consistent in that *conscientia* always has an object. Every *conscientia* is *conscientia* of something. What is the object of *conscientia*?

Chronologically, we find the first appearance of the word '*consci*' in the *Regulae*. Being *consci* of his defectiveness, Descartes writes in his Rule IV, he developed the custom of following a strict method (X 378). Thus, one's own defectiveness can be the object of *conscientia*. However, the phrase '*consci tenuitatis meae*', which Descartes uses in the Fourth Rule, seems to be a rather common expression.³ This indicates that we need not take it too literally. Yet in the Third Meditation, Descartes uses '*consci*' in a similar sense. He writes that if he, *qua res cogitans*, were able to maintain himself in existence, he would certainly 'be *consci*' of this ability (VII 49). This time, *conscientia* is not about one's inability, but about a certain positive capacity.

The passage from the Third Meditation has received some discussion in the *Objections* and *Replies*. In the *Replies* to Caterus, Descartes opens the debate by strengthening his claim. Whereas in the Third Meditation, he had written that the very capacity to maintain oneself must be known to the one who has it, he now puts forward a much stronger claim: 'there can be nothing in me of which I am in no way *consci*' (VII 107). Since the *Replies* to Caterus were attached to the version of the *Meditations* that Mersenne sent to the authors of the remaining objections, this formulation became a stumbling block for them. Arnauld, for example, objects that it is not at all obvious that we are *consci* of everything in us (VII 214). For instance, he writes, a child in its mother's womb is capable of thought and speech, but certainly does not know this. This objection, of course, is not very serious. Obviously, a child *in utero* need not know that it is capable of speech since it is not currently able to talk. It will develop this ability only later. Descartes, however, does not take this easy line of defence. Instead, he alters his formulation from the Third Meditation once again. He claims that capacities (*potentiae*) generally are *not* the object of *conscientia*. Rather, 'we are only *consci* of particular acts, and only while they take place' (VII 232)⁴; and since children have immortal souls, he continues, they must constantly think and be *consci* of their thoughts.

Thus we are *consci* of our abilities only in a derived sense: as long as we execute them, we are *consci* of these executions. As long as we do not actualize a capacity, we are not *consci* of their possible executions, but only *possibly consci* of their actual execution (VII 246). Note that this does not affect the claim from the Third Meditation. If my existence is the result of an execution of one of my capacities, then this capacity must be actualized as long as I exist. The formulation from the *Replies* to Caterus,

³Descartes uses it in some of his letters (II 70, III 223). Arnauld begins his objections to the *Meditations* by professing that, '*tenuitatis consci*,' he might not be a good critic (VII 197).

⁴Cf. Robert McRae, 'Descartes' Definition of Thought,' in *Cartesian Studies*, edited by R. J. Butler (Basil Blackwell, 1972), 55–70, p. 57.

however, becomes even more doubtful: when Descartes claims that we are necessarily *consciuis* of everything in us, this implies that *only* particular actual executions of capacities are ‘in us’. Hence, there are *no continuants* ‘in us’. The Cartesian ‘mind’ does not appear to be a thinking *thing*: it does not have any enduring properties.

Even worse, Descartes does not seem to stick to his claim that we are *consciuis* of everything in us. He writes occasionally that there are many things in us that we do not notice, for instance the ways in which our soul moves our body.⁵ There is an obvious tension between such remarks and the claim that Bernard Williams attributes to Descartes: that ‘mental states are fully available to consciousness’.⁶

A possible way out of these difficulties is not to translate ‘*res cogitans*’ as ‘mind’, and not to confuse *conscientia* with what we call ‘consciousness’. In the *Discourse*, for instance, Descartes seems to claim that we are in the full possession of all our thoughts: one shall get used to the thought that nothing is as much in our power as our own thoughts (VI 25). On a closer view, Descartes does *not* say that there are no ‘unconscious’ thoughts (cf. III 249). He only claims that there can be nothing that is *clearer* to us than our own thoughts. Replying to an objection similar to the one made by Arnauld, Descartes writes that it requires some exercise to *appropriate* our thoughts (II 36). Hence, that nothing is in us of which we are not *consciuis* is *not a brute fact*. This claim is only valid in the context of the Third Meditation, that is, after two days of rigorous and careful meditating. In the course of the first two Meditations, the mind of the meditator becomes ‘purified’: it learns not to count anything as its own without recognizing its truth clearly and distinctly. It should be no surprise that the *res cogitans*, the purified mind, does not contain everything that may be said to be ‘in us’ in other contexts (cf. VII 34). It is not ‘the mind’ in general.

If we now turn back to the stronger claim from the *Replies* to Caterus, we see that it does not hold unconditionally as well. Descartes writes:

Next, inquiring about the cause of my existence, I was asking about myself, not in so far as I am a compound of mind and body, but only in a truncated way, in so far as I am a thinking thing . . . By this, I could free myself from my preconceived opinions much more easily, attend to the light of nature, inquire myself and affirm with certainty that there could be nothing in me of which I am not in some way *consciuis*.

(VII 107)

⁵In his *Replies* to Arnauld, Descartes writes that there are many things within his mind that he did not notice before meditating (VII 219). For the unknown ways in which the soul moves our body, see VIII A 23 and III 665.

⁶Bernard Williams, *Descartes. The Project of Pure Enquiry* (The Harvester Press, 1978), p. 84–5.

This means that not everything in us is *necessarily* subject to our *conscientia*. Descartes only makes clear that, as a result of the first two Meditations, there can be nothing in the meditator of which she is not *consci*us. And then, there is nothing in us that is not an actual, particular act of thinking.

But how can Descartes claim that the thinking thing, the purified mind of the meditator, is a substance? Bourdin seems to be right in objecting that Descartes can only be sure that he exists in the very moment in which he thinks his '*cogito, sum*'. Neither can he know whether he existed before or will continue to exist, nor can anybody else know that he exists. This is not much to build upon (VII 501–2). Without the temporal dimension and without the difference between one thinker and another, the label 'substance' is in danger of becoming meaningless.

The Definition of '*cogitatio*'

However that may be, we have to stick to the point that *conscientia* is always about a particular and actual act of thinking. What does it mean that *conscientia* is *about* such a thing? There are only certain sorts of things that can be 'about' others: stories, sentences, thoughts, worries and the like. Descartes would label all of these '*cogitationes*'. Is *conscientia* a particular *cogitatio*, then? Or are the words '*cogitatio*' and '*conscientia*' equivalent? This is indeed one of the accounts frequently found in the literature.

In his *Replies* to Hobbes, Descartes seems to treat *cogitatio* and *conscientia* as the same. He writes that every physical property can be described as a mode of extension, and that every 'mental event' can be brought under a heading such as '*cogitatio, perceptio* or *conscientia*' (VII 176). Further, in the *Replies* to Gassendi, Descartes writes that one may reason that 'I am running, therefore I exist', in so far as the *conscientia* of running is a *cogitatio* (VII 352). However, a closer view reveals that '*conscientia*' cannot always be a kind of, let alone be identical to *cogitatio*.

In order to see this, we have to ask what a *cogitatio* is. In the second *Replies* and the *Principia*, Descartes gives the following two definitions:

I use the term '*cogitatio*' to include everything that is within us such that we are immediately *consci*us of it.

(VII 160)

By the term '*cogitatio*', I understand everything happening in us that we are *consci*us of, in so far as there is in us *conscientia* of it.

(VIII A 7)

I take the second definition to be the improved and more reliable one. Both definitions agree in that *cogitationes* are something 'in us', and they are defined as that 'in us' which is the object of our *conscientia*. Whereas the first one identifies *cogitationes* with the immediate objects of our *conscientia*, the

second has us call an event in us ‘*cogitatio*’ *in so far* as they are objects of our *conscientia*. This gives rise to two questions.

First, are there things in us that are not immediate, but *mediate* objects of our *conscientia*? What does it mean for something to be immediate object of our *conscientia*? In general, a transitive relation *R* is said to obtain immediately between two items *a* and *b* if *a* stands in relation *R* to *b*, but not only because of *R*’s transitivity. I suggest that the immediate object of our *conscientia* is something that (1) is the object of our *conscientia*, but (2) is so not only because something else is the object of our *conscientia*. Two plausible candidates for *mediate* objects would then be defectiveness and ability. I know that I am able to do something only to the extent that I know that I actually do it or actually remember that I once did it. Descartes himself remarks that he added ‘immediate’ to exclude bodily events that happen in us only as a consequence of our thoughts. Thus in general, the results and preconditions of our thoughts are mediate objects of our *conscientia*.

Second, if it is possible to call an event in us ‘*cogitatio*’ *in so far* as it is the object of our *conscientia*, is there an aspect of the events in us that is not the object of our *conscientia*? The answer seems to be that there is: there are aspects of the events in us of which we are not *consci*us. For instance, we are not *consci*us of the process by which our soul moves our body. The bodily aspect of our actions and imaginations are ‘unconscious’. Descartes writes that we always know *that* our soul moves our body if it does so, but not how. The notion of mind – body interaction is, especially for Descartes, helplessly obscure. He does not regard this as a shortcoming of his metaphysics. On the contrary, he claims that such notions *must* be obscure and confused. This is because they are about mixed, that is, ‘confused’ things; for we are asking how mind and body are united, that is, how two utterly different things are ‘fused’ (cf. III 666). The ‘in so far’ serves to cut through this ‘confusion’. What happens in us is a *cogitatio* only in so far as it is the object of our *conscientia*, not in so far as it is related to, or even constituted by a bodily state or event. In a letter to Arnauld, Descartes writes accordingly that ‘we are *consci*us of every act by which the mind moves the nerves, in so far as this act belongs to our mind’ (V 222).

But what is an ‘event in us in so far as it is the object of our *conscientia*’? Which aspect of it shall we consider? What is an aspect, anyway? We can only understand the definition from the *Principia* when we understand such phrases as ‘in so far as’ (*quatenus*) and ‘*qua*’. By the time of Descartes, there was an elaborate theory of such clauses, which was called *De Reduplicaciones*. In general, ‘in so far as’ can be defined as a qualification of a proposition which indicates a precondition for its being true.⁷ This precondition is specified by a second, embedded proposition: ‘in so far as *p*: *q*’.

⁷Rodolph Goclenius, *Lexicon Philosophicum* (Frankfurt, 1613), s.v. reduplicatio. Cf. Allan Bäck, *On Reduplication* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996).

Which precondition is indicated in the definition of ‘*cogitatio*’? It might well be the conditions specified by the first two Meditations. In the definition from the *Principia*, Descartes accordingly would say that an event in us is a thought provided we have learned not to locate anything in us of which we are not absolutely certain. The phrase ‘... in so far as this event is the object of our *conscientia*’ then might just translate thus: ‘... in so far as we have learned to admit of nothing uncertain among our thoughts’.⁸ There are some passages that fit into this picture. In the Sixth Replies, Descartes writes that if we are *consci*us of something, then we must also have a clear idea of it (VII 443). We are also *consci*us of the degree of clearness and distinctness that our ideas possess (V 160). Further, the question of whether something belongs to us or proceeds from us is one of the (mediate) objects of our *conscientia*. Now and then, Descartes writes that we are *consci*us that an idea comes from somewhere outside our mind (III 429, VIIIA 41). Above all, our freedom and will themselves are objects of our *conscientia* (VIIIA 20 and 54).

Three Accounts of *conscientia*

While the discussion of the definitions of ‘*cogitatio*’ may have shed some light on the meaning of ‘*conscientia*’, it also poses a serious problem. The definitions render any identification of *conscientia* and *cogitatio* nonsensical. For Descartes would then define ‘*cogitatio*’ as ‘everything that happens in us, in so far as it is the object of *cogitatio*’.⁹ This would constitute an obvious circle. Hobbes already objected along such lines: ‘then there would be an infinite question: how do you know that you know that you know that you know?’ (VII 173). Descartes, however, does not seem to recognize this point. His reply is simply that there is nothing wrong with one thought being about another one. Why does Descartes not see any problem? There are three possible ways of explaining this.

First, our *conscientia* could be a *cogitatio* that refers immediately to itself. Then every thought would be the object of a reflective thought.¹⁰ This reflective thought would be a thought about the first thought and, immediately, about itself. But for one thing, the claim that this is the case

⁸Cf. the account of Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* (Paris: Aubier, 1953), vol. 1. Gueroult, however, identifies *cogitatio* and *conscientia*, such that every thought is identical to the reflective movement of counting it explicitly as one’s own thought.

⁹Norman Malcolm, ‘Descartes’ Proof that his Essence is Thinking’, *The Philosophical Review* 47 (1965) 315–338, seems to assume that this is what Descartes meant. Cf. Gueroult, p. 99 and Alquié in his edition of the *Oeuvres Philosophiques* of Descartes (Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1967), vol. 2, p. 586.

¹⁰Cottingham speaks of ‘reflective awareness’, cf. John Cottingham, ‘Descartes on ‘Thought’’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1978) 208–14. Cf. also Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 24, p. 177.

just sounds fantastical and unnecessary. For another, Descartes explicitly denies that every thought involves reflectivity.¹¹

As a second possibility, '*conscientia*' may not refer to an actual thought, but rather to a disposition. Then every thought would be accompanied by the disposition to make it the object of a second-order thought. This is one of the two common solutions among Descartes scholars.¹²

The other one is that, thirdly, '*conscientia*' may denote an attribute of every thought. Semantically, '*consciens*' would be an adverb, referring to a way of thinking.¹³ It is not obvious, however, how such an adverbial attribute can be said to be 'about' the thought it modifies. I will discuss these accounts in the following three sections.

Reflective Thought: If something 'in us' were a *cogitatio* only if another *cogitatio* has it as its object, it would seem that we have to distinguish between simple and reflected contents of our mind. We could dub the first 'proto-*cogitationes*'. Then every *cogitatio* would involve two proto-*cogitationes*: one about something, the other one about the first. But isolated proto-*cogitationes*, on this account, would not be '*consciens*'. It seems that they could as well occur elsewhere, outside the *res cogitans*. We do not know anything about the nature of proto-*cogitationes* except that they happen 'in us'; so why should not our digestion or respiration be a proto-*cogitatio*? But obviously, our digestion does not turn into a *cogitatio* as soon as we think about it. Of course, our digestion is not *about* anything. But if it is possible that without *conscientia*, a proto-*cogitatio* is *about* something, the mere combination of proto-*cogitationes* does not seem to introduce anything new. 'Aboutness' is the really distinctive feature of thoughts, whereas being the object of another thought seems to be an additional and completely contingent feature.

Anyway, in his Replies to Bourdin, Descartes makes sufficiently clear that we can have thoughts without thinking that we have these thoughts (VII 559). He also occasionally writes that we believe something without knowing that we believe it (VI 23), that we doubt without reflecting on our doubt (X 524), and that in order to reflect on our thoughts, we already must have unreflected thoughts (VII 422).

Therefore *conscientia* is not identical to, nor is it a kind of, *cogitatio*. But how can Descartes, in the Replies to Hobbes, treat *conscientia* and *cogitatio* in the same way? The answer is that *conscientia* appears in the definition of

¹¹Andreas Kemmerling, *Ideen des Ichs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), p. 179.

¹²McRae, p. 68; Kemmerling, p. 184; Gordon Baker and Katherine Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996), p. 107.

¹³Cf. Daisie Radner, Thought and Consciousness in Descartes, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988) 439–452; Étienne Balibar, ed., *Identité et différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p. 41; and Dominik Perler, *Descartes* (München: Beck 1998), p. 168.

'*cogitatio*'. Therefore, one may replace every occurrence of '*cogitatio*' with an expression containing '*conscientia*', but not vice versa.

Disposition: The second alternative has the curious effect of reconciling Descartes with one of his most fervent critics: Gilbert Ryle.¹⁴ Whereas Ryle wanted to replace the Cartesian talk of inner events with talk about dispositions, we could claim that Descartes already did treat 'consciousness' as a disposition. Further, it does not lead to a circular definition of '*cogitatio*'. An event in us would be a *cogitatio* provided that we are disposed or prepared to think that it happens in us. This interpretation, however, involves a serious extrapolation of the text. Since Descartes does not say that events in us are *cogitationes* in so far as they *can* be objects of our *conscientia*, the 'can' must be implicit in the meaning of *conscientia*. *Conscientia* should then be defined as 'the disposition or capacity to think about one's own thoughts'. But it is not at all clear how to treat the phrases '...events that are immediately objects of our *conscientia*' and 'in so far as they are objects of our *conscientia*' according to such a definition. One could not define thought as something in us that we are 'immediately capable' of thinking about, for we are 'immediately capable' of having thoughts about a lot of events in us that are not thoughts. For instance, I am 'immediately capable' to think about my digestion. And we should not insist that digestion is not mental. While defining the notion of thought, we should not rely on a preconception of the difference between, say, digestion and imagination. Concerning the definition from the *Principia*, it does not make sense that something happening 'in us' should be a *cogitatio* 'in so far' as we are able to think of it. I am able to think about anything happening in me, and then all this will be, to some extent, my *cogitatio* even when I do not think about it. The 'in so far' loses all its force when combined with a dispositional reading of '*conscientia*'.

Moreover, when we try to apply the suggested definition of '*conscientia*' in all cases, we face the following problems. First, what does it mean that a disposition is 'about' a particular thought? Second, how can Descartes insist that only actual and particular thoughts, but not capacities, are the object of this disposition? Of course one might say that every disposition is 'about' its possible executions. My disposition to smoke is 'about' smoking. But then it is about me smoking now and then, not about one particular act of smoking. This, however, runs against the claim cited above that possible events are not objects of an actual *conscientia*, but only of a *possible* one. The actual *conscientia* does not have possible objects. It does not make sense to say anything like this about a disposition. A disposition, if it is said to be 'about' anything, should be about an indefinite set of possible executions,

¹⁴Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1949).

not about one particular and actual event. Dispositions are continuants.¹⁵ *Conscientia* is an occurrent, not a continuant.

Of course, there *is* a capacity that we execute when we reflect on our thoughts. And it might make sense to say that events are thoughts only if we are capable of reflecting on them in this way. But it should be obvious by now that Descartes did not want to call the relevant capacity '*conscientia*'. It should rather be called 'reason', or perhaps simply 'mind'.

Awareness: If *conscientia* is neither an act of the thinking thing, nor one of its capacities or dispositions, we seem to be left with the third approach. Is *conscientia* an adverbial attribute of all our thoughts? What attribute might that be? The most obvious candidate is 'awareness'. In the following, I will only discuss this case.

While thoughts take place, they are accompanied by awareness. That is, we are aware of our thoughts. This yields a plausible version of the definition of '*cogitatio*': a *cogitatio* is everything that happens in us such that we are immediately aware of it, or in so far as we are aware of it. But what is awareness? We do not make any progress by replacing a word that Descartes did not explain with a word that we do not explain. Of course, this is not the place to establish a definition of 'awareness'. In the following, I will only assume that at least one of the following four points holds true.

First, awareness should admit of degrees. One can be more or less aware of something. Second, awareness is receptive. I am aware of something present or given. Third, one can be aware of all kinds of things: a conversation, the wind in the trees, or the political situation. Finally, awareness is an attribute of the one who is aware.

Does Descartes allow for degrees of *conscientia*? If this were the case, there should be degrees of thought, since something is my thought in so far as I am *consciens* of it. But then, thinking things should come in degrees as well. This, however, runs against the Cartesian concept of a 'thinking thing'. To be sure, Cottingham has assumed the contrary: 'transparent conscious awareness ceases to be an 'all-or-nothing' criterion of the mental'.¹⁶ But he claims this to get around the difficulty that Descartes sometimes says that we need not be aware of what happens in us. I have already solved this problem by different means,¹⁷ and thus there is no need to follow Cottingham in this point.

¹⁵Baker and Morris (p. 109) invent a new kind of disposition that they dub 'time-relative cognitive capacity'. This is not more than a label for something that remains unintelligible. Cf. Ryle, p. 116 and 125.

¹⁶John Cottingham, *Philosophy and the good life* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 123.

¹⁷There are things 'in us' that we do not know, since the claim that we are *consciens* of everything 'in us' only holds provided we cleared our minds by executing the first two *Meditations*.

Above all, it is clear that Descartes draws a categorical distinction between humans and animals. Charron and Montaigne had claimed that animals can think, but only less clearly than humans. Descartes however insists that animals lack the capacity to think altogether. They do not have any *conscientia*. The distinction between humans and animals is not a gradual one.

Further, Descartes does speak about awareness in the *Passions*. He calls it '*admiration*', and it does not have anything to do with what he elsewhere calls *conscientia*. *Admiration* is, after all, a bodily phenomenon, caused by a certain movement of the animal spirits (XI 380–2). As such, it admits of degrees. *Cogitatio*, however, need not be accompanied by any bodily movements. Otherwise, Descartes could not identify the thinking thing with the immortal soul.

Second, is *conscientia* a kind of receptive perception? If this were the case, Descartes would be subject to the criticism put forward by Ryle (13). He would advocate the 'Cartesian model of self-knowledge as analogous to observation'.¹⁸ Note, however, that neither Ryle nor Rorty attribute the 'Cartesian picture' directly to Descartes. They are able to point to passages from later authors, but they do not give any concrete evidence from Descartes's own writings. The reason is that Descartes could not have held such a view. For if the *conscientia* were a passive reception of a given thought, then there should be some such thought before it is given to the *conscientia*. However, nothing is a thought *before* it is the object of *conscientia*. In this respect, *conscientia* differs from any kind of perception or awareness: before I am *consciens* of something, there is nothing already there that I could be possibly *consciens* of. The objects of perception and awareness, in contrast, do not come into existence only because I am aware of them (McRae, 70).

The third assumed feature of awareness was that not only thoughts, but also happenings and events in our surroundings may be the object of our awareness. One could define *conscientia* as a special kind of awareness that is restricted to one's own thoughts. But this would render the definition of '*cogitatio*' circular. However, if *conscientia* is not an awareness that is by definition concerned with one's own thoughts, there is no way of distinguishing thoughts from anything else that happens in us. Almost anything can be the object of awareness. If thought is defined as something that happens in us in so far as we are aware of it, then our digestion should be a thought as long as we are aware of it.¹⁹

Regarding the final point, '*consciens*' is simply not an adverb. Descartes does not use any word like '*consciens*'. Daisie Radner writes that 'there is only one act, the act of thinking of x, which has x as its primary object and

¹⁸Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 110.

¹⁹Don't say that we are not *immediately* aware of our digestion. For one thing, I doubt that this is true. For another, Descartes does not make immediacy a defining condition in the *Principia*.

itself as its secondary object' (446). On such an account, *conscientia* is a constitutive part, moment or aspect of every *cogitatio*. But anyway, what would it mean that a thought is *consciuis*? Does it have 'consciousness'? Descartes never says so.²⁰ '*consciuis*' is always said of the thinker herself. That is, we appear to have two different relations between the thinker and her thought. First, she thinks her thought. Second, she is *consciuis* of this thought. Moreover, she thinks a thought *in so far* as she is *consciuis* of it. But when both the thinking itself and the *conscientia* are relations of a thinker to her thought, then what is the difference between them? Is the definition of '*cogitatio*' just tautological?

Open Questions: Unfortunately, our textual evidence has come to an end. The fact is that when restricting ourselves to Cartesian texts, we are not able to establish the meaning of '*conscientia*'. We are left with a concept that refers neither to a kind of thought, nor to a disposition or a state of awareness. Nevertheless, *conscientia* is said to accompany every *cogitatio*, and it is said to be about this *cogitatio*. What is *conscientia*, then? At least four questions remain puzzling.

- 1 What is the *conscientia*, if it is neither an act nor a disposition of the mind to which it belongs?
- 2 What is it about the *conscientia* that turns its objects into thoughts? How can anything be said to be a thought because it is the object of *conscientia*?
- 3 Since everything that belongs to the *res cogitans* is the immediate object of *conscientia* and the *conscientia* has only occurrents as its immediate objects, how can Descartes say that the mind is a substance?
- 4 Since *conscientia* is not a *cogitatio*, it does not seem to belong to the *res cogitans*. For the *res cogitans* is defined as a thing to which only *cogitationes* belong. Hence the question is: who is the subject of *conscientia*?

These questions cannot be answered on the basis of Descartes's own writings.

HISTORY

Introductory Remarks

We have seen that Descartes did not make sufficiently clear what he meant by '*conscientia*'. Of course, no writer can define or even explain every

²⁰Arnauld does. Cf. Antoine Arnauld, *Des Vrayes et des fausses Idées, contre ce qu'enseigne l'auteur de la Recherche de la verité* (Cologne: Nicolaus Schouten, 1683), p. 46.

concept he uses. But equally, no author should try to introduce a new concept without indicating what's new about it (cf. X 369, IV 116). Interestingly, Descartes himself remarks that unless he defines a term explicitly, he will stick to the traditional meaning of the word. He does this immediately after the most important occurrence of the word '*conscientia*': the definition of '*cogitatio*' that he gives in the *Principia* (VIII A 8). This is strong evidence for the assumption that our questions about the meaning of '*conscientia*' can be answered by considering the traditional use of this word.

Hence, the next places to look for help are historical sources; for the word '*conscientia*' was in use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, perhaps more prominently than at any other time. '*conscientia*', meaning more or less 'moral conscience', was one of Luther's most important catchwords, and on the other side of the denominational divide, Jesuits compiled huge folios about 'cases of conscience'; that is, there was a highly elaborate theory of '*conscientia*'. The task of this part of the present essay will be to pin down the meaning that '*conscientia*' acquired in this discourse. Since it is neither possible nor necessary to review the complete history of the notion here, I will stick to authors that relate to Descartes in obvious ways. These are mainly Augustine and Aquinas.²¹ I will also refer to a book written by a contemporary of Descartes, the *De Conscientia* of Martin Bresser.²²

Baker and Morris on 'conscientia': Baker and Morris²³ have claimed that Descartes's use of '*conscientia*' was 'in most respects very close to the scholastic one' (101). Since I will take a similar line, I have to say something about their approach. Unfortunately, although Baker and Morris claim to give textual evidence (118), they do not refer to more than two well-known passages from Aquinas (103). The other evidence is drawn from such scholastic authorities as Arnauld, Locke and Malebranche. Further, a closer investigation reveals that they give a completely wrong picture of the 'scholastic' sense of the term *conscientia*.

First, they situate '*conscientia*' within the context of *Aristotelian* psychology. Nothing could be more misleading. Aristotle did not use any equivalent concept, and the Latin translations use '*conscientia*' and '*consciens*' only in marginal contexts. The later improvements on Aristotelian psychology by Avicenna, Roger Bacon and Albert the Great focus on the *sensus communis*, which is a bodily phenomenon and should rather be

²¹See Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) for Descartes' relation to Augustine and Roger Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Cornell University Press, 1998) for his relation to the scholastic tradition.

²²Martin Bresser, *De Conscientia libri VI* (Antwerp, 1638).

²³Gordon Baker and Katherine Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (Routledge, 1996).

considered the forerunner of the Cartesian pineal gland.²⁴ The term ‘*conscientia*’, in contrast, is clearly of Augustinian origin. When Albert and Aquinas tried to reconcile the Augustinian philosophy of mind with Aristotelian psychology, they had to find a place for this notion. They restricted it to an ethical and action-theoretical meaning.

Second, the alleged traditional definition of man as ‘*animal concium*’ that Baker and Morris present seems to be a product of their own imagination (105). Not even Arnauld, to whom they relate it, knows about any such definition.

Finally, Baker and Morris claim that Aquinas defined the ‘general power’ or ‘ability’ that he called ‘*conscientia*’ as an ‘application of knowledge to acts’ (103). This does not even make sense. How can a *power* be defined as an *act* of applying knowledge? Of course, Baker and Morris are free to advocate the position rejected above, that *conscientia* is ‘a disposition or capacity, not a performance or action’ (107). Aquinas, however, explicitly denies such a claim in *De Veritate* 17,1. Thus, while Baker and Morris seem to be right in their main thesis, that Descartes used ‘*conscientia*’ in the traditional meaning of this term, they fail to justify it.

A brief overview: In the remainder of this part, I will sketch the relevant historical data about the use of ‘*conscientia*’ before Descartes. I apologize for the length and density of the text. There is much to be said, and besides an older monograph by Lindemann,²⁵ I do not know of any single book to which I could refer the reader *salva conscientiae*.²⁶

First, what does ‘*conscientia*’ or ‘*consci*’ mean in classical Latin? The earliest extant evidence for the noun ‘*conscientia*’ is found in juridical texts. It seems to be an already common expression known from colloquial language, since it is used in passing and without further explanation. ‘*conscientia*’ is most probably *not* a translation of the Greek substantive *suneidesis*, since the latter does not seem to be common before the time of St Paul.²⁷

Since most modern languages possess two words by which ‘*conscientia*’ may be translated, ‘consciousness’ and ‘(moral) conscience’, it has often been asked whether *conscientia* and *suneidesis* meant the one *or* the other, and whether the Greek or early Christian writers had a notion of moral conscience at all. This question is obviously anachronistic. If anything, *conscientia* expressed some aspects of *both* modern concepts. Anyway, this is not the question to pursue here. In order to avoid anachronisms I will start with as neutral an understanding as possible.

²⁴Ruth E. Harvey, *The Inward Wits* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1975).

²⁵Ruth Lindemann, *Der Begriff der conscience im französischen Denken* (Jena, 1938).

²⁶There are so many books and articles about the history of ‘*conscientia*’ that I decided not to try to list them here. Most of them leave any evidence for a possible ‘psychological’ meaning of ‘*conscientia*’ aside, and only few consider late medieval and early modern usage.

²⁷Peter Schönlein, *Zur Entstehung eines Gewissensbegriffs bei Griechen und Römern, Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, N.F. 112 (1969).

Etymologically, '*conscientia*' is composed of '*con-*' and '*-scientia*'. This suggests the literal translation with 'knowledge-with' or 'shared knowledge'. Indeed, this seems to be the original meaning of the term: in early Latin texts, a person is called *consci*us if she shares knowledge with someone else. This meaning, however, soon became marginal, until Hobbes revived it in modern times (*Leviathan* 1, 7). In between, the '*con-*' was interpreted as indicating a connection to further knowledge, to feelings, particular actions, or to one's moral record.

Shared Knowledge

If '*conscientia*' still would have meant 'shared knowledge' in early modern times, it might be possible to answer one of the questions that emerged in the discussion of Descartes: who is the subject of *conscientia*? The subject of *conscientia*, this answer might go, will not be the *res cogitans*, but rather a *plural subject*. The mind is *consci*us of something 'in it' if it shares knowledge about it. However, there still would remain much to be clarified. With whom should the *res cogitans* share this knowledge? With another mind? Is it not clear from the *Meditations* that the *res cogitans* can have *cogitationes* in the absence of everything else, and therefore in the absence of other minds? Anyway, '*conscientia*' did not literally mean 'shared knowledge' in Descartes's times. This is only one of the original meanings of the word, and if anything, there were only some distant traces of it.

But at least in some early pagan and Christian texts, *conscientia* still means *common or public knowledge*. Livy tells us about a council that took place *seducta a plurimum conscientia*, that is, behind closed doors (2, 54, 7). Augustine must have been familiar with this usage, since it also appears several times in the protocols of a council that he attended (Carthage 411, SL 149A 146–78).

According to Martin Kähler,²⁸ the original meaning of '*suneidesis*' and '*conscientia*' is not this public knowledge but 'knowledge shared with (few) others on the basis of direct testimony' (48). The Latin '*consci*us', taken as a noun, literally means 'witness'. '*consci*us' seems to have a more specific meaning than the Latin '*testis*', indicating that someone knows about a crime or state of affairs because she was involved in it herself. Even the later use of '*consci*us' can always be understood in this sense. Where Descartes says that there could be nothing in our purified mind of which we are not *consci*us, he might just mean: '... of which we are no witness'.

At least since Seneca, the personified *conscientia* is often literally said to be the witness of our acts and thoughts, along the lines of the well-known

²⁸Martin Kähler, *Das Gewissen Ethische Untersuchung. Die Entwicklung seiner Namen und seines Begriffes* (Halle Fricke, 1878).

proverb *conscientia mille testes* (Quintilian, *Institutio* 5, 11, 41). A fragment of Seneca influenced the Christian concept of *conscientia*: ‘What does it help to have no witness when you have your own *conscientia*?’ (fr. 14). The *De Paenitate*, ascribed to Ambrose, elaborates on this. The *conscientia* appears as a witness in the final judgement, since it is incorruptible and its content is completely known to the judge (PL 17, 975B – C). In his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine distinguishes between the inner and the outer court, adding that ‘where God is the judge, there will be no other witness than your *conscientia*’ (37, 2, 1, SL 38, 394).

This, again, can be directly related to Descartes. Since the Cartesian *conscientia* accompanies all our thoughts and is not separable from the purified mind, that is, the immortal soul, it may still function as a witness in the Day of Judgment.²⁹

A third important sense in which *conscientia* meant shared knowledge is derived from the witness-meaning. It is often assumed that a witness, especially when she is herself involved in the deed, openly or tacitly supports it. In medieval law texts, *conscientia* frequently means ‘tacit agreement’ or ‘approval’, for instance in the sense that it was prohibited to leave a monastery ‘without the *conscientia* of the superiors’ (Lindemann, 26).

Augustine

In his genealogy of privacy, Raymond Geuss devotes a chapter to Augustine.³⁰ Indeed, the church father literally seems to have privatized the *conscientia*. Thus, in the history of the concept, Augustine is one of the most important writers. Nowhere, however, does he associate the *conscientia* with his famous ‘Augustinian *cogito*’.³¹ In fact, Augustine’s *conscientia* is strictly limited to moral matters.

The shift from public to private *conscientia* can be directly observed in Augustine’s *Contra Cresconium*. Cresconius had advocated the Donatist opinion that no impure priest can spend any sacraments, since it is the *conscientia* of the priest that purifies the receiver of the sacrament (2, 17–18, CSEL 52, 379). Augustine argues against this view by pointing out that no human can ever know whether or not another’s *conscientia* is pure. This is, partly, a quarrel about words. The very meaning of ‘*conscientia*’ is at issue. Cresconius does admit that the contents of one’s *conscientia* may be hidden, but he also believes that it may become manifest in *publica conscientia*; that is, in public knowledge. Augustine, however, insists on a sharp distinction

²⁹This is even clearer regarding Locke’s ‘consciousness’ (*Essay* 2,27,22).

³⁰Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

³¹This has escaped Moisés M. Campelo, *Conciencia Agostiniana, Religión y cultura* 8 (1963) 211–227, to the extent that he even invents a passage that fits his view: ‘*intima conscientia est, quae nos vivere scimus*’ (p. 214). Augustine has ‘*intima scientia*. . .’ (*De Trinitate*, SL 50A, 491).

between public fame and private *conscientia*. The *conscientia* is never public (380).³² It may become manifest, but then there will still be no means of knowing whether the manifestation is faithful. Therefore, Augustine advocates the view that the state of *conscientia* of a priest cannot affect his ability to spend sacraments at all.

Does Augustine thereby place the *conscientia* in a private, inner realm? This is an extremely difficult question, since the notion of interiority is generally not well understood. The answer to this question will have important consequences, since Augustine and Descartes are often considered the inventors of private, subjective interiority.³³ It will turn out that at least the Augustinian *conscientia* is not located 'in' a human subject.

The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* quotes a passage from the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* that seems to indicate that Augustine identified the *conscientia* with 'inner space'. At a first glance, it reads: 'if the inside of man, which is called *conscientia*, is healthy' (*sanum sit intus hominis quod conscientia vocatur*, 45, 3, SL 38, 519).³⁴ The correct translation, however, is: 'if that within man which is called *conscientia* is intact'. *Conscientia* is not itself the inner realm, but at least it is located 'inside man'. Augustine also refers to it as *id quod interius est* (ibid.).

In the *Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium*, Augustine is more specific, but also more allegorical. He identifies the *conscientia cordis* with the 'stomach of the inner man' (*venter interioris hominis*, 32, 4, SL 36, 301–2). For this reason and in order to shed some more light on Augustine's use of the 'inner/outer' opposition, we should briefly consider the concept of 'inner man'.³⁵

Interiority: The notion of the 'inner man' seems to be of Gnostic origin, and it entered Christian doctrine with Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (4, 16). The 'inner man' is the 'new man' that comes into being when Christians are baptized. As it appears in this context, interiority is not a spatial location at all, neither literally nor metaphorically. The Augustinian inner realm is not inside of anything; since if this were the case, it would also be outside something. For what is inside of a boundary is always outside of the other side of this boundary. It is not purely interior. The material world is marked by extension, as Descartes would have it. This means that in the outer world, everything is outside of everything else. The term 'interiority' should be taken to refer to the opposite of this opposition, that is, to the

³²Cf. *Sermo* 355, where Augustine writes that '*duae res sunt fama et conscientia*', *Stromata Patristica et Mediaevalia*, vol. 1 (Bruxelles: Spectrum, 1950), p. 124.

³³Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

³⁴Many writers, including Jung and Bosman (p. 17), have relied on the *Thesaurus* in this respect. Only Lindemann (p. 38–9) seems to have read the passage twice.

³⁵Cf. Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 391–8; Hans Dieter Betz, 'The Concept of the 'Inner Human Being' (*ho eso anthropos*) in the Anthropology of Paul', *New Testament Studies* 46 (2000) 315–341.

opposite of mutual externality. The interior realm transcends this region of differentness (*regio dissimilitudinis*, *Confessions* 7, 10, 16, SL 27, 103). It is not at the inside of anything external, but beyond all externality. The interior is the unextended and immaterial. It is marked by the lack of any spatial oppositeness. There should not even be an opposition or boundary between ‘my’ inner realm and ‘your’ inner realm. This is at least what we should expect. Rather astonishingly, however, Augustine *does* draw distinctions within the inner realm. Otherwise, it could not be private.

In his early *Soliloquia*, Augustine puts forward the following proof of the immortality of the soul: since truth is eternal and is located in the inner realm, this inner realm must be eternal as well. That is, he seems to assume that the soul, *qua* inner realm, is as objective as truth.³⁶ Of course, this is not what a church father should have said. God himself is the truth, and God cannot be located in our soul such that his existence depends on our existence. In the course of withdrawing his earlier views Augustine develops a view that must have seemed rather paradoxical. He draws a distinction between the immaterial God and particular immaterial souls. The Augustinian inner realm thereby ceased to be free from divisions and oppositions. By the same move, it became private. But how can there be *two different immaterial things*? The very notion of difference was associated with the notion of spatial extension.

Augustine has a name for the difference within the realm of the immaterial. In the *Confessions*, he calls it ‘sin’, which is the *deliberate dissociation from truth*.³⁷ The philosophical move by which Augustine distinguishes between the public truth and one’s private mind is thus mirrored in the original sin. As a result of the fall, we are separated from truth, and to this extent we are separated from the public and objective interior realm. Whereas Augustine stresses against Cresconius that we do not have access to another person’s *conscientia*, he does not think that this is good or even natural. In *De Civitate Dei*, he remarks with regret that in this world, people are judged by others who do not know their *conscientia* (19,6, SL 48, 670). He adds, however, that on the last day our *conscientiae* will be rendered public again: *publicabuntur conscientiae* (*Sermo* 252, 7, 7, PL 38, 1176; *De Civitate Dei* 20, 26, SL 48, 750). Thus the Augustinian *conscientia* may be hidden as a matter of fact. But it is not necessarily so. Before the fall, the interior realm was public and the same for everyone. And ‘in the Great Day, wherein the secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open’ it will be public again (cf. Locke, *Essay*, 2, 27, 22).

Hidden conscientia: What does it mean, then, that the *conscientia cordis* is the ‘stomach of the inner man’? The inner man is not inside man, but he is a precursor of the ideal citizen of the City of God. Under the current

³⁶Philip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self* (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 77.

³⁷Cary, p. 108; Menn, p. 182–4.

conditions of the fallen world, including privacy of conscience, it cannot develop beyond certain limits. It is rather an imperfect allusion at what is to come. The *conscientia* is then a part of a citizen of the ideal society that will exist in paradise. It is not inside man, but partly outside this world.

This explains why Augustine does not assume that one knows the content of one's own *conscientia*. The Augustinian *conscientia* is not *our* knowledge about ourselves. There is something in our own mind, he likes to say, that is not even known by the human mind that is within us (*Confessiones* 10, 5, 7, SL 27, 158). There is no first person authority; or rather it only applies to God. Only God really knows our *conscientia*.

This piece of Christian anthropology can be seen as a solution to the problem posed by Cresconius. Augustine knows that the church, having become a mass movement, must be able to deal with black sheep. The main task is no longer the mission to the pagans, but the enforcement of internal discipline. There are, as a matter of fact, priests and bishops who commit sins. Whereas the Donatist would exclude all these 'impure' Christians from church, Augustine realized that as a consequence, there might not be many members left; for even the most honest Christian could be subject to false accusations, and excluded on such grounds. In order to keep the church on track, one must not rely on public opinion about the integrity of its members. Precisely because of the fall, man is dissociated with truth, and this means that each of us can be led astray. To judge ourselves is nothing but the sin of pride. Therefore, we shall not judge ourselves, according to our own imperfect knowledge and standards, nor shall we rely on public opinion. We have to view all such judgements as preliminary, for the only true and just evaluation will be performed by God, when he will 'publish' our *conscientia*.

In this sense, the *conscientia* becomes opposed *both* to public opinion and to private self-knowledge about the deeds, the intentions and the moral record of a human. The *conscientia* stands for the knowledge of an ideal observer, a knowledge that can be shared by humans only under ideal circumstances.³⁸ If this held true for the Cartesian term, we would be one

³⁸Some authors have indeed interpreted the *con-* as indicating that the knowledge is shared with God. In the *De Paenitentia*, God is the witness of our *conscientia* (PL 17, 975B–C). Clemens of Alexandria speaks of 'knowledge shared between ourselves and God' (*Stromata* 7,8,51,7); cf. Johannes Stelzenberger, Über Syneidesis bei Klemens von Alexandrien, in *Studien zur Historischen Theologie*, edited by W. Düring and B. Panzram (München: Karl Zink Verlag, 1953), 27–33, p. 30. Most prominently, St. Peter writes that we should obey the authorities of the state for the sake of the '*conscientia Dei*' (1 Pt 2,19). However, the interpretation of this passage and the related Rm 13,5 is controversial; cf. C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 71; M. Thrall, The Pauline use of *suneidesis*. *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967) 118–125; and Bosman, p. 261. I follow the interpretations of the anonymous *Expositiones Pauli epistularum ad Romanos* (CM 151, 126) and of Martin Bresser's *De Conscientia*, 1,22,218, p. 102b. Bresser argues that knowing is a perfection, and therefore God has *conscientia* (2,2,10, p. 134a). As a consequence, our actions are guided by two different rules: their *regula remota* is the *conscientia divina*, their *regula proxima* is our own reason (2,2,12, p. 135a). The only modern author who does not hesitate to speak of a divine *conscientia* appears

step further in answering the question about the subject of *conscientia*. It would not be the thinker herself, but rather an ideal observer or evaluator or her thoughts. However, Descartes never attributes the *conscientia* to such an observer. The only possible assumption is that *conscientia* means the knowledge that a thinker has of her thoughts *in the presence of God (coram deo)*. This would indicate that *conscientia* does not wholly belong to the *res cogitans*, but is a knowledge that it shares with the divine observer of its thoughts. Still, the problem remains that Descartes also seems to ascribe *cogitationes* to a completely isolated thinker.

To conclude this section, it should be kept in mind that Augustine is a rich and versatile author. The general picture that I sketched here in order to situate his use of ‘*conscientia*’ is not all there is to say. It is not even an exhaustive account of his doctrine of ‘*conscientia*’. In *De Civitate Dei*, to mention only one counterexample, Augustine writes that we can only judge from hearsay – and the words he uses for ‘hearsay’ are *per aurem conscientia* (1, 26, SL 47, 27). Obviously, the *conscientia* is not always God’s knowledge about us. Sometimes, it is simply our own shared, but unreliable knowledge.

Moral Conscience

Personal Conscience: So far, it transpires that our *conscientia* need not always be our own knowledge. It can be the knowledge of an ideal observer, not revealed until the final judgment. The adjective ‘*consci*’, however, will always refer to my own knowledge. In this sense, St Paul writes that he is himself ‘*consci* of nothing’, but that this does not make him justified (1 Cor 4, 4). His being *consci* is not reliable. Note that the objects of *conscientia*, in this context, seem to be exclusively vices and sins. That Paul is not *consci* of anything indicates that he did not do anything wrong. This may be the reason why Paul chooses the adjective rather than the noun, since the noun *conscientia* is usually *not* restricted to the knowledge of wrongdoings (Bosman, 197).

At any rate, in the course of history the noun *conscientia* became associated with one’s own knowledge about one’s own wrongdoings. Bernard of Clairvaux does not hesitate to use the noun when he writes that God knows everything about us, even that which escapes our own *conscientia* (Letter 42, 22).³⁹ Hughes of St Victor is even more to the point: ‘no one should trust his *conscientia*’ (*De archa noe* 2,4, CM 176, 40). Clearly,

to be Chollet in his contribution to the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (s. v. *conscience* 2,4). The opposition to this terminology and the associated claims seems to come from the false assumption that *conscientia* either means a private *consciousness* or a possibly *guilty* moral conscience.

³⁹Bernard of Clairvaux, *Opera* (Rom: Editiones Cistercienses, 1963), vol. 7, p. 118.

the *conscientia* has ceased to be the knowledge of an ideal observer, but there is still no first-person authority.

Confession: The terminological shift from the divine but unknown *conscientia* to the personal and unreliable one is certainly connected to an increasing importance of regular confession. When the Fourth Lateran Council (in 1215) decreed that every Christian must confess at least once a year, confession became routine, but it also changed its nature;⁴⁰ for it was now common for people to go to confession without knowing what to confess. The confessor had to examine a Christian like a psychoanalyst, until his *conscientia* lay open. ‘The *conscientia* must be examined’, Antonius of Asti comments, ‘like a physician examines a wound, or a judge examines a case’ (*Summa Astesana* 5, 17). Since the number of confessions had increased, priests had to be trained for this job. This was the task of the *summae confessorum* or *summae de casibus conscientiae*.⁴¹ The first of these manuals was composed in the way of theological sums or collections of canonical law. They soon became to look more like dictionaries, with articles arranged in a lexical order, such that the confessor could look up standard cases quite quickly.

Aquinas

Erring Conscience: In Romans 14, 23, Paul writes that ‘everything that does not come from faith is sin’, and most commentators take ‘faith’ to mean ‘*conscientia*’. ‘*conscientia*’ is here used in the sense of ‘firm conviction’.⁴² It is a sin to act against one’s *conscientia*, regardless of whether it is clear, guilty, pure or impure. However, every medieval commentator knew that the *conscientia* may err, since ‘the hour will come, that whosoever kills you shall think that he offers service unto God’ (Ioh 16,2). But on the other hand, Augustine had defined sin as ‘a deed or a saying against the eternal law’ (*Contra Faustum* 22, 27, PL 42, 418). Therefore, in the event that the *conscientia* commanded to commit a sin, it would be forbidden either to act according to it or to act against it. This was the most prominent dilemma that medieval treatises on the *conscientia* had to solve.

In his account, Aquinas assumes that there can be no obligation that cannot be known in usual circumstances. Hence there can be no divine precept that necessarily escapes our knowledge, provided we possess all the knowledge we should acquire. There is an obligation to know certain things.

⁴⁰Martin Ohst, *Pflichtbeichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995).

⁴¹Pierre Michaud-Quantin, *Sommes de casuistique et manuels de confession au moyen âge* (Louvain: Edition Nauwelaerts, 1962).

⁴²Cf. my paper, *Schuld und Gewissen bei Abelard, Dialektik* (1/2003) 129–143, p. 133.

Now the answer is straightforward: if someone does not know that she acts against eternal law, then there must be a duty that she already has failed to fulfil, which presumably is the duty to learn about eternal law. By acting according to her erring *conscientia* alone, she does not commit a sin; but necessarily, she has already acted against divine law by making it possible for her *conscientia* to err in important matters, e.g. by ignoring the revelation (*De Veritate* 17, 4 ad 3). Therefore, it holds true that the *conscientia* must never be put aside. The only way to deal with an erring *conscientia* is to improve the *conscientia* itself. The *conscientia* does not always ‘speak the truth’, but it always has to be regarded as true and rendered as true as possible. This, however, can only happen when one commandment of our *conscientia* is confronted with another commandment of our very same *conscientia*. There is no possible replacement, no higher authority that could simply outrule our *conscientia*. Such is our first-person authority. At first sight, this seems to indicate that Aquinas did not use ‘*conscientia*’ in a sense that we can attribute to Descartes. For Descartes seems to claim that we cannot err about the contents of our *conscientia*. On the other hand, this alleged Cartesian claim has its problems. It may be worthwhile trying to understand it in the sense that although our *conscientia* can err, we have nothing better to replace it.

Conscientia as an Application of Knowledge: Since Aquinas’s account of conscience set the stage for the centuries to follow, we should recall some general features of his theory. Following Albert the Great, he defines *conscientia* as the act of applying knowledge to actions (In II Sent 24, 2, 4, c.a.). Thus he interprets the ‘*con-*’ as indicating a relation between knowledge and a particular action. Since it is neither a state nor a disposition, the *conscientia* is itself not a kind of knowledge at all, but depends completely on other sources of knowledge. Besides the fact that it is applied to an action, this knowledge need not concern moral or practical matters. Rather, it can be any kind of knowledge that may be expressed by the premises of a practical syllogism, e.g. ‘dry food suits someone like me, this is dry food’. The sources of this knowledge are prudence and the so-called *synderesis*, which is the innate knowledge of the golden rule and the most basic practical principles.

There are several ways of applying knowledge to a particular action. First, one may ask whether an action is or was executed, and then draw upon knowledge in order to answer such questions. Second, one may ask whether a particular action is good or bad. Both cases are called ‘*conscientia*’ (*Summa Theologiae* Ia 79, 13 c.a.). Another obvious way to apply knowledge to an action, namely to deliberate about what to do, is not called ‘*conscientia*’, but ‘prudence’ or ‘election’. Prudence differs from *conscientia* in that it is a habit. Election is an act by which knowledge is applied to the affective powers, thus leading to an action. *Conscientia* differs from election

in that it does not immediately lead to any action. Therefore, the *conscientia* is less prone to error, since it is not in direct contact with the affective part of the soul. This is the only difference between the election of a particular action and the ‘*conscientia* of it’. In a second step, the very same knowledge that led to the action is applied once again, but this time without disturbance from the affective powers. Therefore, election and *conscientia* may differ. If they do, we have a *mala conscientia* (*De Veritate* 17, 1 ad 4).

Beyond Aquinas

Habitual Conscientia: When confession became more and more important, theologians became less satisfied with Aquinas’s account. They became accustomed to thinking of the *conscientia* as something that may be examined and corrected from outside. Both features are difficult to reconcile with the Thomistic picture; for an act can only be examined while it takes place, and correcting or training the *conscientia* is only possible if there is a respective associated *habit*. Aquinas, however, did not know of any such habit. There was only prudence, which was not exclusively concerned with morals, and the *synderesis*, which was innate and could not be improved. Hence, there were strong reasons to allow for a habit called *conscientia*; that is, for a set of moral convictions that could be examined, corrected and improved. This habit was usually placed alongside the Thomistic *act-conscientia*. Gabriel Biel, for example, defines *conscientia* as ‘habitual or actual acquaintance connected to an action’ (*Collectorium in II Sent* 39, 1, 1, 2). The first to reintroduce this Franciscan element into the definition of *conscientia* appears to be Walter of Bruges. Walter’s main argument against Aquinas is that *conscientia* must be the application of specifically *moral* knowledge. There is a difference between knowing about a law and acknowledging it. Therefore, *conscientia* cannot be the application of any arbitrary kind of knowledge. It must be the application of *practical knowledge*. By this move, however, *conscientia* is likened to the ‘election’ of Aquinas: it becomes as strongly connected to the affective powers (*Quaestiones disputatae* 10, c.a.).⁴³

Practical Knowledge: By the end of the medieval age, *conscientia* was understood to be an actual or habitual application of practical knowledge to a particular action. This will be the last historical question we shall consider: What did ‘practical knowledge’ mean? The most prominent answer was, and still seems to be, that practical knowledge is in some way ‘the cause of what

⁴³Walter of Bruges, *Quaestiones Disputatae* (Louvain, 1928). Cf. Rudolf Hofmann, *Die Gewissenslehre des Walter von Brügge* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1941).

it understands'.⁴⁴ Hence, if the *conscientia* is the act by which we apply practical knowledge to a particular action, it should be the act by which we cause this action. However, Aquinas explicitly denies that the *conscientia* causes the action it is about (*De Veritate* 17, 1 ad 4).

This problem has received the most extensive treatment in Martin Bresser's *De Conscientia libri IV* (Antwerp, 1638). Since Bresser was a Jesuit and lived, spatially and temporally, rather close to Descartes, his work is of some interest anyway.⁴⁵ In his account of *conscientia* as the application of practical knowledge, Bresser uses one of the later inventions of medieval scholasticism: the distinction between physical and moral being.⁴⁶ This distinction is not easy to handle. An action, in Bresser's terminology, is a moral being *in so far* as it is subject to any kind of 'moral' evaluation. The attribute 'moral', however, does not mean 'ethical' in a narrow sense. In his treatise *De Bonitate*, Suárez declares that everything is 'moral' which depends on deliberation (1, 1, 2, p. 277b).⁴⁷ Nothing can be 'moral' if it does not depend, in some way, on someone's will. Thus the moral being of an action is 'constituted' by our will (1, 2, 15, p. 284a). This does not mean that we constitute its moral being deliberately. Rather, we act freely, and as a consequence, our actions have moral being.

On the other hand, every action is also a *physical* being, in so far as it occurs in space and time. Thus the distinction is not one between different things, but rather between different aspects of one thing. Bresser writes that moral beings are nothing but real things, in so far as they are free and subject to evaluation; and that their moral being corresponds to the description under which they are morally relevant (*De Conscientia* 1, 16, 139, p. 65b).

Moral actions or omissions and their morality are nothing but these physical and free actions or omissions considered from a moral point of view or related to the *conscientia* (*De Conscientia* 1, 16, 144, p. 67b).

Suárez had distinguished between essentially moral beings that do not have a physical being, and others that are 'denominatively' moral (*De Bonitate* 1, 3, 3, p. 287a). The obligation that arises from a promise, for example, is an essentially moral being. It exists regardless of whether it is acknowledged, fulfilled or ignored. Once it has come into being, its existence no longer depends on physical items. Actions, according to Bresser, are not

⁴⁴Elisabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1957), p. 87.

⁴⁵Bresser was born 1587 in Brabant and worked in Antwerp and Bruges, where he died 1635. There is no evidence that either Descartes or Bresser knew of the other. But it is probable enough that they learned from the same sources.

⁴⁶Descartes knows of this distinction, cf. the Sixth *Replies*, VII 436. Cf. Theo Kobusch, *Die Entdeckung der Person* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), p. 55–66.

⁴⁷Elisabeth Gemmecke, *Metaphysik des sittlich Guten bei Franz Suarez* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1965), p. 184.

essentially moral, but only ‘denominatively’ so. But even though the moral being of an action depends on physical movements or properties, it is not reducible to these physical movements and properties. Suárez uses a simple example to demonstrate this: if someone is deliberately drawing a monster, he might make the very same movements as another one who is trying to draw a man. Nonetheless, we *evaluate* the first painting as ‘good’, the second as ‘bad’ (1,2,17, p. 284b).

On this basis, Bresser explains that the *conscientia* is the cause only of the moral being of an action. That is, it causes the respective action *in so far* as it is subject to evaluation, and *in so far* as it depends on deliberation. It does not cause it *in so far* as it is a physical event. The *conscientia* is exclusively concerned with the morality of an action, and it causes exactly this morality that it is about. Actions are turned into moral beings by being the object of our *conscientia*. Bresser writes:

The judgment or command of the *conscientia* is not only practical by virtue of being about praxis or about an action which it directs and corrects, but also with respect to its object or the objective perfect goodness, which it causes and accomplishes by itself, in the way of a rule, and as a formal cause.

(2, 6, 42, p. 157a)

The *conscientia* causes the moral being of our actions; that is, it causes our actions in so far as they are morally good or bad. The morality of an action, Bresser writes, is this action in so far as it is considered from a moral point of view. This, in turn, is what ‘being the object of *conscientia*’ means. By subjecting our actions to a moral evaluation, our *conscientia* turns them into ‘moral beings’.

... The moral actions essentially depend on the *conscientia*, namely as (they depend on) their constitutive form.

(1, 16, 145, p. 68a)⁴⁸

This is very close to the role that the *conscientia* plays in Descartes’s definition of ‘*cogitatio*’:

By the term ‘*cogitatio*’, I understand everything that we witness happening in us, in so far as there is in us *conscientia* of it.

(VIII A 7)

⁴⁸Annette C. Baier, The Intentionality of Intentions, *The Review of Metaphysics* 30 (1977) 389–414, gives a similar account of human agency, when she describes it as a cooperation between a human and a divine agent. The divine agent is responsible for the physical movement; the human agent makes it an intentional one.

According to Descartes, everything that happens ‘in us’ is a *cogitatio* if we are *consci*us of it and *in so far as* we are *consci*us of it. According to Bresser, everything we do is a moral action if we do it deliberately, and only *in so far* as it is the object of our *conscientia*. In both cases, the *conscientia* constitutes one aspect of its object, namely the aspect with which it deals. The Cartesian *conscientia* turns something that happens in us into a thought, by virtue of being about this happening. Like practical knowledge, it is ‘the cause of what it understands’. Bresser, however, makes rather clear that moral actions are always also physical movements. As such, they are not caused by the *conscientia*, which is only the formal cause of their moral being, i.e. of their being subject to evaluation. Descartes, in contrast, does not assume that *cogitationes* are always also physical beings. Indeed, he sets out to prove that they need not be so. Cartesian *cogitationes* are, in this respect, like essentially moral beings. Their existence does not depend on physical beings. There is no need, however, to deny that there could be a physical aspect of some thoughts. Descartes knows that, for example, imagination depends on brain processes. There are in fact only few thoughts that do not depend at all on anything physical – most famously, of course, the ‘*cogito, sum*’.

Bresser’s account might help to solve another of the problems that was raised concerning the Cartesian *conscientia*. He writes that the *conscientia* causes the *moral being* of an *action*, where Descartes only has it turn something happening in us into a *cogitatio*. Clearly, the objects of the Cartesian *conscientia* are not always actions, let alone moral actions; but they are thoughts, and there are values that attach specifically to thoughts, as for instance truth and falsity. This should mean that in so far as something happening ‘in us’ is the object of our *conscientia*, it has some such value specifically attached to thoughts. Clearly, such values need not be moral values. But the basics seem to be rather similar: where moral conscience turns our physical movements into moral actions, the Cartesian *conscientia* turns happenings in us into meaningful thoughts. It does so by subjecting them to an evaluation as thoughts.

Putting It Together

According to Bresser, the *conscientia* constitutes the moral being of the action that is its object. The action has this moral being in so far as it depends, in some way, on the will, and in so far as it is subject to an evaluation as good, bad, honest or shameful. Bresser agrees with Aquinas that the *conscientia* does not cause the physical being of the action, but he calls it the formal cause of its moral being.

Whenever an action is truly subject to evaluation, it must be evaluated according to public criteria. No action is good only because the agent thinks so. The reason is that every self-evaluation is again a particular thought,

which might be wrong. However, 'evaluation by public criteria' cannot just mean 'evaluation according to the public opinion'. Public opinion can be as wrong as any old opinion. The 'public criteria' are not always the criteria that 'the public' applies.

This is where we have to revert to the earlier writers. Augustine solved the problem of objectivity by assuming that our *conscientia* is hidden from other humans, but also not fully accessible to ourselves. Rather, it is the knowledge of an *ideal observer*. The *conscientia* can cause the objective moral being of our actions, and similarly the meaningfulness of our thoughts, because it is an ideal evaluation by an ideal observer.

Something like this is still inherent in Aquinas's account. Some of the knowledge that is applied in practical reasoning is of direct divine origin: the innate knowledge of practical principles, called '*synderesis*'.⁴⁹ This knowledge is often associated with the golden rule. Actions are subject to standards *qua moral beings*, that is, under a general description. Therefore, we have to judge ourselves by the same criteria according to which we judge anyone else.

Hence, Christian philosophers more or less agree that the judgement of our *conscientia* is not a private or subjective opinion. The moral being of an action does not depend on one's private opinion, but on objective principles and standards. The subject of the *conscientia* is not the subject of the thoughts that are its objects. On the other hand, the evaluation of someone's actions must also be accessible to the agent, such that she can be obliged to share it. In general, one might say that *conscientia* is the objective evaluation of a particular action or omission by public criteria that is shared by the agent. This evaluation makes it an action or omission; otherwise, it would be a mere physical movement or lack of movement.

BACK TO DESCARTES

Thoughts

Where has all this brought us in our attempt to clarify the early modern meaning of '*conscientia*'? What happens to the Cartesian doctrine if we simply insert the traditional explanation of '*conscientia*'? If we do this, the Cartesian *conscientia* will become an application of practical knowledge to particular events, by which these events become moral actions. This is not far from what we need. Descartes is not concerned with actions, but at the very least with something that *happens in us*. These happenings or occurrences, by being the object of our *conscientia*, become *cogitationes*. Further, he is not interested in the moral value of thought; but still there

⁴⁹See Timothy C. Potts, Conscience, in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, edited by N. Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 5–10.

are values that apply to thoughts as such: truth, validity, coherence and so on. I will call this the specific value of thoughts as thoughts. Thus we might say that the Cartesian *conscientia* is the application of standards to something that happens in a human, such that this application turns these happenings into meaningful thoughts that can be true, valid, coherent, etc. The physical realizations of thoughts, including events in brains and written sentences, are only ‘denominatively’ meaningful; and to the extent that the obligation of a promise does not depend on anything that happens to such a physical substrate, the specific value of a thought does not either. Before applying such standards, there is no thought. Thoughts have their specific value not by virtue of their physical substrate, but by virtue of an evaluation as thoughts according to objective standards. Such standards cannot simply be applied by the thinker herself. Any application would just be another thought, and as such, it would have to be subject to further evaluation; but in fact, every thought *is* already subject to the relevant standards, whether or not someone explicitly applies them.

This fits well with the more basic features of the Cartesian *conscientia*: it is about particular thoughts, and it is an occurrent. The problem was that the Cartesian *conscientia* is not itself a *cogitatio*. It is not an explicit second-order thought about some first-order thought. Further, it is not the disposition to have such second-order thoughts, since it is not a disposition at all; and it may be an attribute or necessary accompaniment of every thought, but it is certainly not what we call ‘awareness’. Both the act of thinking and the *conscientia* seem to constitute a relation of a thinker to her thought. In what respect, then, do they differ? The answer is that by thinking her thought, the thinker causes this thought in every of its aspects. By being *consciens* of the thought, however, she only causes its *meaningfulness*; more broadly, its having its specific value. The *conscientia* is, at best, the *formal* cause of the ‘moral being’ of a thought, where the ‘moral being’ of a thought is not its honesty or shamefulness, but its specific value as thought.⁵⁰ In this sense, the *conscientia* turns a mere happening into a thought: it amounts to subjecting it to the relevant standards. But that something is subject to evaluation does not mean that it is ever actually evaluated. An action can be subject to condemnation even if the agent is not at all disposed to condemn it. Likewise, a thought is subject to evaluation regardless of whether the thinker is ready or willing to evaluate it herself.

Of course, we *can* have second-order thoughts by which we evaluate other thoughts. We may think: ‘What I thought yesterday is not coherent’. Such second-order thoughts, however, are themselves subject to evaluation. They might be false. Since the content of our *conscientia* may eventually be

⁵⁰One might object that Descartes excludes final and formal causes from physics. However, he does *not* exclude such notions from metaphysics and rational psychology. Cf. Paul Hoffman, ‘The Unity of Descartes’ Man’, *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986) 338–70, p. 350.

expressed in an explicit second-order thought, Descartes can write that ‘we may not reason that ‘I am running, therefore I exist’, unless the *conscientia* of running is a *cogitatio*’ (VII 352). Provided that the evaluation of my running, which presumably happens ‘in me’, is made explicit by thinking that I am running, the conclusion is valid. ‘I think, therefore I am’ is valid, but ‘I am *consciens*, therefore I am’ is *not*. In so far as my running happens ‘in me’, my *conscientia* of it turns it into a *cogitatio* by definition. I am then running *conscienter*, that is, thinking, which again makes the conclusion valid.

Hence, to be *consciens* of something is not to think about it, and not to be disposed to evaluate it as a thought, but to provoke such evaluations or to make evaluation legitimate. *Conscientia* is not a possible act of evaluating a thought, but an actual and *ideal* one. It is the actual (not possible) evaluation of a thought by an ideal (not a particular human) observer. Put differently, being *consciens* of a thought amounts to subjecting it to evaluation by objective criteria. Moreover, only by being subjected to such evaluation does the object of *conscientia* become a thought. Before this ‘event of appropriation’, it was, presumably, a mere happening in us.

As a consequence, thoughts cannot simply be events in brains. Events in brains are not thoughts unless they are evaluated according to the relevant standards. This evaluation is not a further event in a brain, since such an event would itself be subject to further evaluation regarding its adequacy. In the end, the objective evaluation of a thought must be the evaluation of an ideal evaluator, that is, of God. This is so because God is the only possible evaluator who cannot, by definition, be wrong. God, but only God may even judge himself; only the ideal evaluation is not subject to further evaluation.

Answers

To answer the questions that emerged in the first part of this paper.

(1 and 2) What is the *conscientia*, if it is neither an act nor a disposition of the mind to which it belongs? It is an actual, but ideal evaluation of something in us as a thought; that is, it is the evaluation of a thought that makes it a thought; but every actual human evaluation can only be an imperfect instance of this ideal evaluation. Thoughts have their specific value before we know which one it is. They have it, Descartes claims, because they are subject to our *conscientia*. If this is true, however, the *conscientia* cannot itself be a particular human thought.

(3) How can Descartes say that the mind is a substance? The answer to this question is that the mind must be treated as an enduring subject as soon as anything happening in it is evaluated as a thought; for in order to

understand one's thoughts as having a thought-specific value, one has to recognize them as one's own thoughts. Since thoughts occur in time, this presupposes the ability to recognize something as one's own that happened in the past. As thoughts, the otherwise merely temporal happenings acquire a value as a thought. This value is not an occurrent. There is much more to be said about the substantiality of the Cartesian mind, to be sure; but judging from the present discussion, it seems to follow from its relation to an ideal evaluator. In order to be a bearer of thoughts, the mind *must* endure through time. This is not a mere fact, but a logical precondition for having meaningful thoughts.

(4) Who is the subject of *conscientia*? It seems to be a plural subject. First, the *conscientia* cannot be identical to something that a single, isolated *res cogitans* does. For the *res cogitans* is only known for its having *cogitationes*, but the *conscientia* is not a *cogitatio*. Hence, the *conscientia* appears to be something that an ideal observer does; but it cannot simply be the thought of an ideal observer, since nothing could be a thought of mine if I did not even implicitly acknowledge its conditions for having its specific value (e.g. its truth conditions). Therefore, the *conscientia* is *shared knowledge*. The mind always and necessarily knows *that* its thoughts are subject to an evaluation by objective criteria. It does not necessarily know *how* they are evaluated objectively. That Descartes starts his Meditations with an apparently completely isolated subject does not contradict this claim; for he goes on to prove the existence of God, who is the ideal observer and evaluator of our thoughts. Given the traditional concept of *conscientia*, we should only expect the existence of God to follow from the assumption of the existence of a thinking thing.

Once again, the demonstration of God's existence proves central to Cartesian metaphysics. Descartes is able to prove God's existence on the basis of his '*cogito, sum*', because every *cogitatio* already involves an ideal evaluation. The possibility of thought presupposes the possibility of divine knowledge. Hence, the Cartesian scepticism should be read as the attempt at a radical evaluation of our thoughts. In this sense, the *conscientia* enforces the appropriation of one's own thoughts. Regarding the definition of thought from the *Principia*, we have seen that something belongs to the purified mind of the meditator provided that she has learned not to count anything uncertain as her own. To be a thought is to be subject to an evaluation by the most rigorous standards; that is, to be the object of *conscientia*. The Cartesian scepticism can now be seen as a radicalization of *conscientia*. The task that Descartes set himself was to internalize the ideal evaluation of his thoughts. In *this* sense, the notion of 'consciousness' lies at the core of his metaphysics.