

Inventing Consciousness: Literature, Philosophy, Psychology

Spring, 2019

Instructor: Timothy Harrison

Office: Rosenwald 426; Email: harrisont@uchicago.edu

Office hours: Fridays from 1pm to 3pm or by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is consciousness? What is it like to be conscious? What is the relationship between personal identity and consciousness? How do historically determined and culturally specific ways of knowing impact human self-understanding? This course attempts to answer these questions by examining the historical emergence and development of *consciousness* as a concept. We will begin with a hypothesis: consciousness is an historical achievement. As a phenomenon, consciousness probably came into being somewhere deep in evolutionary time. Yet as a *concept* consciousness is relatively new: the Western European notion of consciousness emerges only in the late seventeenth century. This course draws on the resources of literature, history, philosophy, and psychology to examine how the concept of consciousness came to possess the explanatory dominance it currently holds. We will start by acquiring a sense of what consciousness now means in philosophy, psychology, and the neurosciences, paying particular attention to how the Western concept differs from similar ideas in traditions like Buddhism. After examining the pre-history of consciousness by reading such authors as William Shakespeare, we will then turn to two historical moments that were central to the concept's development. First, we will train our attention on the interplay between philosophy and literature in the late seventeenth century, reading texts by René Descartes, John Milton, Thomas Traherne, and John Locke. Second, we will focus on how, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the psychology of William James contributed to the development of "stream of consciousness" techniques in the novels of Henry James and Virginia Woolf. Throughout this course, we will stress the historical contingency of this concept—consciousness has a birthdate—in order to determine the nature of a consequence that follows from this fact: the extent to which current uses of this concept are still shaped and constrained by the historical circumstances that conditioned its appearance and development.

In this course, we will learn to think about consciousness in new ways by combining readings, lectures, discussion sessions, and a set of creative, analytic, and experiential assignments. We will meet twice weekly for lectures. Each lecture will presuppose that you have finished the assigned reading. On Fridays, you will split into discussion sessions: the first group will meet with Upasana Dutta, the second group will meet with Javier Ibanez, and the third group will meet with Michal Zechariah. Over the course of the quarter, we will try to intertwine readings, lectures, discussion sessions, and assignments with an ongoing examination of our own conscious experience organized around weekly attempts to do nothing (see below, Assignment 4).

POLICIES

Late assignments will lose 3% per day to a maximum of 5 days (including weekends). Assignments that are more than 5 days late will not be accepted unless there are extenuating circumstances.

A number of the readings for the course will be available only through the Canvas website. Since printing is prohibitively expensive, I will not ban technology from the classroom. During lecture, you may consult the readings a laptop or other device. But I would like you to please turn the wifi functionality of your device OFF.

I see office hours as an important, rich scene of dialogue. I strongly encourage you to drop by my office.

If you email me with questions, concerns, etc. I will respond to your message within 48 hours.

EVALUATION

| | | |
|------------------------|--------------|-----|
| Assignment 1 | Due April 17 | 15% |
| Assignment 2 | Due May 8 | 15% |
| Assignment 3 | Due May 29 | 15% |
| Assignment 4 | Due June 5 | 10% |
| Assignment 5 | Due June 10 | 25% |
| Informed participation | Ongoing | 20% |

ASSIGNMENTS

1) Assignment 1, “What Is It Like To Be A....?” (Due April 17, 15%): In the work of Thomas Nagel and Peter Godfrey-White, we are asked to imagine “what it’s like” to be a bat or to be an octopus. What might such informed thought experiments teach us about consciousness? To find out, conduct an experiment of your own. Write a **500 word** account of “what it’s like” to be an animal, plant, or object of your choice. If you can, use this account to generate insight into consciousness as such. Points will be awarded for creativity, descriptive acuity, and analytic rigor.

2) Assignment 2, Conscience or Consciousness? (Due May 8, 15%): Hamlet famously claims: “conscience does make cowards of us all.” What does he mean? Some commentators think Hamlet refers to *conscience* in a moral sense here, while others hold that he means something more like *consciousness*. This ambivalence is based on historical reality. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these words possessed a bewildering variety of meanings. Using the massive corpus of searchable English texts available on the Early English Books Online (EEBO) website, find an instance of *conscience* or *consciousness* the meaning of which is particularly difficult to parse. Then try to determine what it means, writing a **500 word** analysis of your example. You may use the Oxford English Dictionary and the Lexicons of Early Modern English as aids. For inspiration, you may want to consult C. S. Lewis’s famous essay on the semantic history of “Conscience” (available for download on Canvas). You will be trained on how to use EEBO in your Discussion Session on May 3rd.

3) Assignment 3, Consciousness and Identity (Due May 29, 15%): Both Locke and James provide analyses of the relationship between consciousness, identity, and the flow of time. Write a **500 word** analysis comparing and contrasting how these thinkers use consciousness to understand identity or time. You may wish to reflect on how the differences between philosophy and psychology (what do you understand these differences to be?) inform the positions at which Locke and James arrive.

4) Assignment 4, Do Nothing (Due June 5, 10%): Every week, I want you to set aside **half an hour** to just **do nothing**. The life of a typical student at the University of Chicago is oversubscribed in every way: too much course work, too many RSOs, too many internship applications, too many commitments, etc., etc.. I have tried my best to make the readings each week as manageable as possible so that you can **take half an hour to just do nothing**. What I mean by the phrase “do nothing” is not meditation per se—although you are welcome to meditate if you want to do so—but rather a space in which your thoughts are free to wander, a time when you are not doing anything intentionally, when nothing is expected and nothing is produced. Each week, try to experiment with different ways of doing nothing: go for a walk, drink a cup of tea, lie in a hammock, watch some squirrels—whatever. After you’ve finished doing nothing, take a few minutes to write up some notes. Where did your mind go? How, if at all, did your thoughts change? Did anything occur to you? How did you feel? What happens to the shape or contours of your conscious mind when you are not focused on a task or social situation? On **June 5**, I want you to submit a **300 word** reflection about the time you’ve spent each week doing nothing.

5) Assignment 5, Final Things (Due June 10, 25%): You have two options for this final assignment. You may write a **1500 word** paper on a topic of your choice. Your paper should reflect on consciousness insofar as it connects with any of the texts we have studied this Quarter. Specific prompts will be provided, but I encourage you to come up with your own topic. Your second option is to write or make a creative response to consciousness and its history. This creative response could be a story, a poem, a painting, a brief play, a sculpture, or produced in some other medium. It must, however, reflect on the themes and questions of this course. And it must be accompanied by a **500 word** discussion of both the final product and the process of discovery that led you to create this work of art.

6) Informed Participation (ongoing, 20%): Perfect attendance is expected, and attendance in the discussion sessions is mandatory. Attendance will be taken both in the lectures and in the discussion sessions. The lecture classes will be interspersed with discussion, so make sure that you read the assigned texts carefully and that you come to class ready with questions, comments, and insights. Participation is measured more in terms of the quality than the quantity of your remarks, and I expect that all of you will be considerate to each other at the same time as you forge new ideas through collaborative discussion and debate. The participation grade is based primarily on your performance in the discussion sessions, but consistent participation in the lectures will increase your final participation grade. Although regular absences from the lectures will decrease your participation grade, you will **not** lose any points if you prefer not to speak up in the lecture hall.

READINGS AND SCHEDULE

All readings are available as PDF files on the course’s Canvas website, with the exception of: Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, John Locke’s *Essay*, James’s *What Maisie Knew*, and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. These texts will be available at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore.

There are three classes each week, two lectures and a discussion session led by a Course Assistant. The following schedule reflects this fact: Week 1a and Week 1b are both lectures and Week 1c is a discussion session.

April 1

| | | |
|----------|--|---|
| Week 1a: | How Can the Humanities Help Us Understand Consciousness? | Assignment 4 and 5 prompts distributed |
|----------|--|---|

Part I: Understanding Consciousness

April 3

| | | |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|
| Week 1b: | What Is It Like To Be Conscious? | Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” (1974) Peter Godfrey-Smith, <i>Other Minds</i> (2016), Chapter 4 Amia Srinivasan, “The Sucker! The Sucker!” (2017) Assignment 1 prompt distributed |
|----------|----------------------------------|---|

April 5

| | | |
|----------|--------------------|--|
| Week 1c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: How might the distinction between human and animal minds inform our understanding of consciousness? |
|----------|--------------------|--|

April 8

| | | |
|----------|------------------------|--|
| Week 2a: | What is Consciousness? | David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness” (1995) Antonio Damasio, <i>Self Comes to Mind</i> (2010), Chapter 7 Susan Greenfield, <i>A Day in the Life of the Brain</i> (2017), Chapters 1 & 2 |
|----------|------------------------|--|

| | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| April 10 Week 2b: | What is <i>Vijñāna</i> ? | <i>The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad</i> (ancient Indian, c.700 BCE) Evan Thompson, <i>Waking, Dreaming, Being</i> (2015), Chapters 1 & 2 |
| April 12 Week 2c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: What is “hard” about what Chalmers calls the “hard problem” of consciousness? What, according to Damasio, is the relationship between the brain and consciousness? What are the most significant differences between the Anglo-American understanding of consciousness and the Buddhist concept of <i>vijñāna</i> ? |
| April 15 Week 3a: | Can Consciousness Be Described? | Edmund Husserl, “Phenomenology” (1927) Sara Ahmed, <i>Queer Phenomenology</i> (2006), Chapter 1 |
| April 17 Week 3b: | Can Consciousness Be Practiced? | Shrinyū Suzuki, <i>Zen Mind, Beginners Mind</i> (1970), selections Marc Wittmann, <i>Altered States of Consciousness</i> (2018), Chapter 2 Assignment 1 due |
| April 17 | Optional Activity | From 8:00 to 9:30pm, please consider joining me for a lesson in and discussion of Zen Meditation led by an expert. |
| April 19 Week 3c: | Discussion Session | Activity: As a group, try to develop your own practice of phenomenological <i>epoché</i> . Choose three intentional objects—a static thing (say, a cup), a temporal thing (say, a song), and an intersubjective dynamic (say, a conversation)—and attend to the <i>how</i> of their appearance. What does the <i>epoché</i> teach us about consciousness? |

Part II: Pre-History

| | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|---|
| April 22 Week 4a: | What Were We? | Aristotle, <i>On the Soul</i> (c. 330 BCE), selections from Book 3. Avicenna, The “Flying Man” Thought Experiment (c. 1027) |
| April 24 Week 4b: | Who Were We? | Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> (c.397), Book 1 & Book 10 (selections) Ibn Tufayl, <i>Hayy Ibn Yaqzan</i> , (early 11 th century), selections |
| April 26 Week 4c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: What is the best way to think of the relationship between philosophical argument and narrative form? Ibn Tufayl narrativizes Avicenna’s thought experiment. What difference does narrative make here? How does Augustine’s autobiography change the sorts of abstractions laid out by Aristotle? |

| | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---|
| April 29 Week 5a: | What is the Who? | William Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> (c. 1599), Acts 1-3 |
| May 1 Week 5b: | Consciousness or Conscience? | Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i> , Acts 4-5 Assignment 2 prompt distributed |
| May 3 Week 5c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: This session will (in part) be dedicated to training on how to use EEBO and how to maximize an analysis of historical semantics based in the linguistic corpus made available through this resource. How might we better understand Hamlet's use "conscience" by grappling with the linguistic contexts within which it was uttered? |

Part III: Early Modernity

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| May 6 Week 6a: | What is <i>Conscientia</i> ? | René Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> (1641), 1 & 2 Descartes, <i>Replies to Second Objections</i> , definition 1. Descartes, <i>Principles of Philosophy</i> , 1.9 |
| May 8 Week 6b: | What Is It Like To Wake Up? | John Milton, <i>Paradise Lost</i> (1667) (Bk. 4.440-91, Bk. 5.772-872, Bk. 8.179-559) Assignment 2 due |
| May 10 Week 6c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: What does Descartes mean by <i>conscientia</i> ? How is his sense of <i>thought</i> changed by his understanding of "consciousness"? In what way might Milton's depictions of waking up in Eden be either describing or militating against the Cartesian definition of thought? |
| May 13 Week 7a: | When Is Consciousness Born? | Thomas Traherne, <i>Centuries of Meditation</i> (c.1670), 3.1-8 Traherne, "Salutation," "Preparative," "My Spirit" |
| May 15 Week 7b: | Does Personal Identity Require Consciousness? | John Locke, <i>Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i> (1690), 2.1-10, 2.27 |
| May 17 Week 7c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: Both Traherne and Locke write about the experience of infancy. Each writer is deeply interested in consciousness. But they have completely different visions of "what it is like" to be an infant. How could we best account for these differences? |

Part IV: Modernity

| | | |
|---------------------|--|---|
| May 20 Week 8a: | What Did Psychology Do To Consciousness? | William James, <i>Principles of Psychology</i> (1890), Chapter 9 Assignment Prompt 3 distributed |
| May 22 Week 8b: | What Did the Novel Do To Consciousness? | Henry James, <i>What Maisie Knew</i> (1897)—you should start reading this novel earlier in the quarter |
| May 24 Week 8c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: How, if at all, does Henry James take up the ideas from his brother William’s psychology? What makes James’s representations of Maisie’s consciousness different from the other discussions of infancy and childhood we have encountered throughout the course (Augustine, Ibn Tufayl, Traherne, Locke)? |
| May 27 Week 9a: | | NO CLASS—MEMORIAL DAY |
| May 29 Week 9b: | Does Consciousness Stream? | Virginia Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i> (1927), part 1 Assignment 3 due |
| May 31 Week 9c: | Discussion Session | Key Questions: How does Woolf’s “stream of consciousness” technique draw on and change the theorizations of the relationship between consciousness and time we encountered earlier in the course (Locke and James, perhaps even Augustine)? What does Woolf’s writing suggest about the unity of consciousness? |
| June 3 Week 10a: | Can Mimesis Capture Consciousness of Time? | Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i> , part 2 |
| June 5 Week 10b: | What Have We Learned? | No readings today—just a lecture. Use your extra time to work on your final paper! Assignment 4 due |
| June 10 | | Assignment 5 due |