

# Etymology of Consciousness

Excerpted from an essay on the word “Unconscious,” from: Williams R. *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) London: Fontana Press, 1988; pp. 320-24.

For an anthology on Consciousness and the difference between Higher and Lower Conscience, see Bartzokas CA. *Compassion the Spirit of Truth*. Gwernymynydd: Philaletheians, 2009; Appendix I.

## Conscious

Conscious came into English in eC17, from fw *consciūs*, L, rw *con*, L — together, *scire*, L — to know.

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|-----|---|---|
| i   | A sense related to a kind of animism in which inanimate things are described as aware of human actions. | “To these conscious stones we two pilgrims were alike known and near.” (Emerson on Stonehenge, 1856)                        |
| ii  | As in the root words, knowing something <i>with</i> another or others.                                  | “Where two, or more men, know of one and the same fact, they are said to be Conscious of it one to another.” (Hobbes, 1651) |
| iii | Self-aware.   | “Being so conscious unto my selfe of my great weakenesse.” (Ussher, 1620)   |
| iv  | Actively aware and reflecting.  | “To be happy or miserable without being conscious of it, seems to me utterly inconsistent and impossible.” (Locke, 1690)    |
| v   | “ <i>Self-conscious</i> ,” with implications of vanity or calculation.                                  | “Too conscious of their face.” (Pope, 1714)   |
| vi  | Active and waking.  | “When at last he was conscious.” (Lytton, 1841)   |
| vii | Distinguished a class of beings, as in <i>thinking</i> or <i>rational</i> .                             | “Thinking or conscious beings.” (Watts, 1725)   |



## Consciousness

- 1 Used from mC17 in senses applied from the senses of *unconscious* ii, iii, iv above; vi from mC19.
- 2 A new sense, with indirect relation to C2, also developed from mC19: *consciousness* as a term for the mutual self-awareness of a group.
- 3 The most general sense is strongly sustained by an increasing awareness (*consciousness*) of motives and preferences of which someone had not previously been conscious (iv) or is still unconscious (negative of iv).

More specific common senses are:

- the waking state of the mind;
- the knowledge which the mind has of anything;
- awareness;
- thought.

“National consciousness,”  
“class consciousness.”

## Unconscious

- 1 Recorded from eC18 in Blackmore’s  
  
In a sense clearly negative of *unconscious* (iv above).
- 2 Seems to imply “not known,” almost in the later sense of “not knowable,” rather than simply “not aware.”
- 3 (a) In *Christabel* unconscious has the general sense of “unaware,” the negative of (C4), but the association with *forced* seems to introduce a dimension which, in including involuntary unawareness, has elements of a later meaning.  
  
(b) Probably the first use of the phrase *the unconscious* — seems to imply two normal categories, *conscious* and *unconscious*, though with a significant priority to the former which, in this instance, is the source.

“unconscious we these motions never heard.”

“A kind of respect perhaps unconsciously paid.” (Johnson, 1779)

“Unconscious causes only still impart Their utmost skill, their utmost power exert.” (Blackmore, 1712).

(a) “With forced unconscious sympathy.” (Coleridge, *Christabel*)

(b) “The conscious is so impressed on the unconscious as to appear in it.” (Coleridge, 1817)



- (a) In C19, physical senses of both *conscious* and *unconscious* developed.
- (b) However, the line between *physical* and *psychological* conditions of *consciousness* was difficult to draw.
- (c) Under hypnosis very different and controversial interpretations of these states have been made, and *conscious* and *unconscious* have become variable keywords within them.
- 4 (d) Many physical actions, within ordinary *consciousness*, were defined as *unconscious* in a new sense — as not requiring conscious initiation or control, or indeed as not capable of either, as in certain fundamental physical processes. This specialised sense was attached to sense iv above of *unconscious* and its negative.
- 5 Freud's *unconscious* has three elements: of processes:
- (a) dynamically repressed from (*conscious*) awareness;
- (b) capable of being made *conscious* (brought to awareness and reflection) only by special techniques — hypnosis, psychoanalysis;
- (c) not under voluntary control, as in the new physical sense noted above, but without a limitation to physical causes.
- 6 The unconscious.  
The unconscious mind.
- (a) "He was knocked unconscious."
- (b) "Sleep, fainting, coma, epilepsy and other 'unconscious' conditions." (William James, 1890).
- The original definitions imply that what has become *unconscious* was once (but too painfully) *conscious*, and that the sense of *unconscious* as "unknowable" is specialised to the individual concerned; the *unconscious* can be made conscious by the application of particular skills.
- Freud's relatively precise senses become difficult when they move from their generalisation as processes to a generalised condition. The dynamic sense of something being made unconscious is often replaced, in these general terms, by the assumption of a primary and autonomous unconscious mind or being.



The collective unconscious.

This is especially true in Jung's hypothesis, which as a common human property precedes (both in time and in importance) the ordinary development of consciousness. But it is also true of more general uses, in which the unconscious (not in the physical sense of fundamental and "involuntary" bodily processes, but in the sense of the generation of basic feelings and ideas) it taken not only as stronger than conscious mental and emotional activity, but as its true (if ordinarily hidden) source.

