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**What is Consciousness Worth?: A Study of the
§§ 11 and 354 of *The Gay Science***

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In the philosophical tradition, consciousness is regarded as the mental faculty that enables us to comprehend subjectively external phenomena (for example, sensations) as well as internal ones (for example, emotive states), as well as, more generally, our existence. This vision of consciousness, culminating in the *ego cogito sum* of Descartes, tends to institute consciousness as the highest form of psychic activity, being a manifestation of the mind. But is this institution apt?

It is principally in the §§ 11 and 354 of *The Gay Science* that Nietzsche discusses the problem of consciousness (*Bewußtsein*)¹. We must note here that the German term, used by Nietzsche, implies a notion of selfhood, or more precisely, *Bewußtsein* means to become aware (to be conscious) for ourselves of something. The German truly insists on this reference to the self (the reflexive) in the process of becoming-conscious. Thus we must understand the problem of consciousness as a kind of questioning of the notion of reflexive consciousness, seen as a second-order awareness.

In both aphorisms, the question broached by Nietzsche is not that of the nature of consciousness (its essence) but rather that of its interest in the development of life. The question that we have to answer, then, is: what is the value of (self-) consciousness for life? This question necessitates an investigation into the origins of this notion, therefore, making it a question of genealogy. Here, Nietzsche does not simply transpose the thesis of the “physiologists of consciousness” (which he may have known about²), but instead raises the philosophical problem of the possible function of consciousness: a problem that is at the same time an epistemological and a biological one and that Leibniz began to come to terms with and that, later, science would further clarify by demonstrating the autonomy of unconscious mental processes.

This question of the genealogy of consciousness is a fundamental one that leads to a complete reversal of the philosophical tradition. Its importance is underscored by the fact that Nietzsche considers this very questioning to be a problem. His employment of the term “problem” is anything but accidental. The fact that consciousness is envisioned as a problem (*als Problem*) shows how much philosophical importance is attached to it. For Nietzsche, philosophy is a question of problems rather than solutions. As he points out in the §1 of “Why I Am So Clever” in *Ecce Homo*, to correctly expose a problem in philosophy, it is necessary to search out the “novelty” of the problem, which ultimately means the creation of the philosopher's own problem. Rigorousness in

philosophy is no longer in solutions, but rather in the creation of problems. A good problem must always be derived from a personal, and singular, experience. Like Nietzsche's "nutrition question," a problem implies both the body and life, or in other words, the will to power.

In the question of the value of consciousness for life, I will attempt to demonstrate that, especially in these two texts, Nietzsche presents us with a two-part thesis on the relation of the will to power and consciousness. Firstly, that consciousness is not essential to the will to power; secondly, that it is precisely through the lens of the notion of the will to power that Nietzsche will criticize the proponents of the preeminence and absolutization of consciousness.

I. The Hierarchy of the Mental Processes

For Nietzsche, consciousness appears to have been "absurdly overestimated" by most previous philosophers. He does not deny that there are any events or processes to which the notion is applicable, but he supposes it to be an error to consider consciousness as the "*kernel* of man, what is abiding, eternal, ultimate, most original in him! One takes consciousness to be a given determinate magnitude! One denies it's growth and intermittences! Sees it as the "unity of the organism"! ³ Nietzsche demonstrates to his readers that the notion of the mental state of "being conscious" (more precisely self-conscious, which the metaphor of the mirror reflects) is extremely misleading, and that no "being" underlies this state. On one hand, he supposes it to be an error to think of consciousness as the supreme point of human existence, even emphasizing that "consciousness is present only to the extent that consciousness is useful"⁴. On the other hand, he does take it to be "useful" in a certain way, which allows for its presence. As Robert Schacht notes, although he argues that we have no right to consider consciousness to be the aim of life, Nietzsche does recognize, and indeed insists upon, the fact that consciousness cannot be left out in characterizing the nature of human reality⁵.

The question here for Nietzsche is not to deny any form of reality to consciousness, but to consider its real place within human reality in order to determine its true value. The criticism he puts forth hinges not upon its existence, but rather upon its overestimation (its absolutization). As he cynically remarks, this problem comes into focus "only when we begin to comprehend how we could dispense with it"⁶. What Nietzsche is really signalling is that consciousness might not be the whole the mental life. In reference to Leibniz, he goes on to say that

we could think feel, will, and remember, and we could also "act" in every sense of that word, and yet none of all this would have to "enter our consciousness" (as one says metaphorically). The whole of life would be possible without, as it were, seeing itself in a mirror. Even now, for that matter, by far the greatest portion of our life actually takes place without this mirror effect: and this is true even of our thinking, feeling, and willing life.⁷

From this perspective, consciousness appears in Nietzsche's philosophy only as an epiphenomenon of mental life, which also includes instincts, impulses, affects, and

so on. His point is that one can “think,” “feel,” “will,” etc., without at the same time having a second-order awareness of doing so that serves as counterpoint to these various first-order mental processes. In other words, consciousness is the tip of the iceberg, the iceberg being the whole of the mental world, constituted by a wide range of unconscious or subconscious events. Thus consciousness is an unnecessary and non-universal predicate of life and action. And so, it is superfluous to main matter (*Hauptsache*).

Even though there is not, as it were, a Nietzschean concept of unconsciousness (at least for this period), we can see that there is at least a very strong intuition. Unlike in Hartmann, there no substantialization of the unconsciousness. In other words, unconsciousness is everywhere in the natural human reality. We do not encounter it alone, or anywhere in particular, for that matter. This pseudo-concept serves a double function for Nietzsche: on one hand, it allows him to denounce the illusion of the pure knowledge of the conscious act, while on the other hand, it promotes the image of the Dionysian background of reality.

Nietzsche insists that we cannot consider consciousness as a stable or original faculty. We must see it instead as developing and intermittent. Consciousness, therefore, along with unconsciousness, for that matter, are evaluated in light of their relationship to the organism. “Consciousness is the latest development of the organic, and hence, its most unfinished and unrobust feature.”⁸ Yet if the direction of a developing organic system is one of a continued adaptation that goes hand in hand with a relaxing of its morphological structure, the later life of the organism will be increasingly imperfect. This idea will be developed later by Nietzsche with his anti-Darwinian criticism.

Here we touch upon the very heart of Nietzschean psychophysiology. We must imagine the organism as a hierarchic organization to which the center (the core) acts as “the preserving alliance of the instincts.” This is where we must locate the unconsciousness, to employ Freud’s language. It is only on the periphery, subordinated to the center, that we can find consciousness. It is a question, then, of hierarchy. Consciousness is not opposed to the instincts (unconscious or subconscious), but is rather the product of these⁹. The preeminence of the instincts allows him to assert that there is no such thing as pure consciousness, given that consciousness is always being acted upon by competing instincts and impulses. Any disturbance to this structure of struggle between the forces of instinct and impulse generates pathology. In other words, if unconsciousness, as “regulator,” were not “so much more powerful” than consciousness itself, humanity would in fact perish at even the most minor sin: even the most insignificant idea could become deadly. Thus consciousness appears to be an extreme danger for the organism, which is why it must be “properly tyrannized!” The Nietzschean “unconscious” must be seen in these terms, as a powerful, and providential, tyrant to the organism as a whole.

Nietzsche proceeds here to a genealogy of consciousness in which consciousness originates as a certain organization of the instincts in the development of the organic. The Nietzschean hierarchy of the psychic process is therefore established in relation to the organic system (which is to be understood as a certain instinctual structure of). The notion of consciousness is thus brought back to its impulsive dimension, which underscores the physicality of consciousness. Nietzsche stays fairly close here to his former master, Schopenhauer, for whom the “intellect is the secondary

phenomenon, the organic the primary one.”¹⁰ It is through this lens that the intellect can be construed as a sickness. Consciousness thus appears as a superficial development (chronologically as well as in its place in psychic life) and as but a sickly representation of the will to power.

II. The Moral Origin of Consciousness

What the relation between consciousness and unconsciousness shows us is that it is through and from the notion of the will to power that we can comprehend the various phenomena that constitute consciousness. This idea that the notion of will to power is essential to understand the problem of consciousness is underscored by the vocabulary and expressions used by Nietzsche. “Thinking,” “feeling,” “willing,” “acting,” etc., all phenomena that penetrate consciousness, are in fact expressions of the will to power. Furthermore, consciousness falls fully within the purview of the will to power, unfolding, as it does, in relations of commanding and obeying.

Although Nietzsche reveals the organic dimension of consciousness, the question of the where—of the origins of consciousness—still remains.. For what *reasons* did consciousness develop in the history of men? Nietzsche place the origin of consciousness under the rubric of the need for communication. More precisely, it is born under the pressure (*Druck*) of the need to communicate to survive:

It seems to me as if the subtlety and strength of consciousness always were proportionate to a man’s *capacity for communication*, and as if this capacity in turn were proportionate to the *need for communication*... [at least] when we consider whole races and chains of generations...

Supposing that this observation is correct, I may now proceed to the surmise that *consciousness has developed only under the need for communication*; that from the start it was needed and useful only between human beings...; and that it also developed only in proportion to the degree of this utility. Consciousness is really only a net of communication between human beings; it is only as such that it had to develop; a solitary human being who lived like a beast of prey would not have needed it. That our actions, thoughts, feelings, and movements enter our own consciousness – at least a part of them – that is the result of a “must” that for a terribly long time lorded it over man. As the most endangered animal, he *needed* help and protection, he needed his peers, he had to learn to express his distress and to make himself understood; and for all this needed “consciousness” first of all, he needed to “know” what he thought.... only this conscious thinking *takes the form of words*, which is to say signs of communication, and this fact uncovers the origin of consciousness.

In brief, the development of language and the development of consciousness (not of reason but merely of the way reason enters consciousness) go hand in hand... The emergence of our sense impressions into our own consciousness, the ability to fix them and, as it were, exhibit them externally, increased proportionately with the need to communicate them to *others* by means and signs. The human being inventing signs is at the same time the human being who become ever more keenly conscious of himself.¹¹

There can be no doubt that Nietzsche is right to stress the role of language in the development of our ability not only to express ourselves, but also perceive reflexively what we feel, desire, want, and so forth. He is certainly also right to insist upon the fundamentally social, rather than “private,” character of language here, as a means of communication that responds to the need for survival and to general practical needs. Nietzsche’s point is that we owe this possibility of “self-consciousness” to our acquisition of a body of language that responds to the requirements and purpose of social communication.

Because the essence of the will to power commands, consciousness is relational in nature. The development of consciousness and language goes hand in hand. This co-origin is of crucial importance. We have to remember here that since language participates in the subject/object distinction, it is a subversion of the hierarchy of impulses peculiar to a strong and affirmative will to power. This is particularly explicit in following excerpt from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

There are still harmless self-observers who believe that there are “immediate certainties”; for instance, “I think”, or as the superstition of Schopenhauer puts it, “I will”; as though cognition here got hold of his object purely and simply as “the thing itself”, without any falsification taking place either on the part of the subject or the object. I would repeat it, however, a hundred times, that “immediate certainty”, as well as “absolute knowledge”, and the “thing itself”, involve a *contradictio in adjecto*; we really ought to free ourselves from the misleading significance of words! ¹²

Language is thus infiltrated by moral content. The moral aspect of language, and therefore consciousness, is reinforced by the conditions of imputation, the “must” (*du sollst*), underscored by Nietzsche, at its origin. Language, then, takes part in the remorse of the “bad conscience.” Consciousness and language both share this moral dimension. The moral dimension of consciousness leads Nietzsche to liken it to sickness. Consciousness, as a condition and instrument of linguistic subversion over a hierarchy of impulses, is not only superficial but sick, as well, as when, for example, in the second book of the *Genealogy of Morals*, § 7, consciousness, as a sickness, increases sensitivity to pain and suffering, or in *The Gay Science* § 11, when it is envisioned as a danger to human existence.

In aphorism 354 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche not only attempts to explain the moralization of man by language, but also to establish that this process curbs and restrains the development of a form of individual human existence. Once translated by consciousness, the thought loses its personal and individual reality and is reduced to an approximation that irreversibly distorts it :consciousness “does not really belong to man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature ; [...] as follows from this, it has developed subtlety only insofar as this is acquired by social or herd utility.” ¹³ As he points it out, consciousness wouldn’t be needed by a solitary human being who lived like a beast of prey. It is the helplessness of the human being as an animal in danger that made the development of consciousness necessary. Thus it curbs the development of a solitary and individual existence. In a Schopenhauerian formulation (which is also the title of the aphorism), it is the power and triumph of the “genius of the species” over the “genius of the individual.” By restoring consciousness to the rubric of

the need for communication, Nietzsche makes it no longer the expression of individual subjectivity, but rather the expression of collective social utility. It is to this collective social utility, then, that the moral origins of consciousness can and must also be traced.

III. A New Task: The Incorporation of Knowledge

There remains one thing to be noted. As we have seen through the genealogy of consciousness performed by Nietzsche, there is an essential interweaving between consciousness, language, and the notion of knowledge. The denunciation of the overestimation of consciousness makes it possible for Nietzsche to tackle the fallacious idea that we would have at our disposal “an organ, proper to knowledge and thus truth” (an idea developed in particular by Kant), an organ that would have effectively render everything else merely supplementary. As he later demonstrates, in the §355 of *The Gay Science*, the overdetermination of consciousness tends to reduce everything to the “already-known.” More precisely, reflexive knowledge lies only in the reference of the “well-known;” knowledge is therefore no longer cognition, but recognition: repression of the unknown, the strange, and so forth. Thus the knowledge of the philosopher of consciousness is actually misreading and taking for granted. It is this absence of astonishment that constitutes the death of knowledge. In this analysis, Nietzsche does not deny the possibility of knowledge, but rather makes reflexive knowledge secondary. The will to power (thinking, feeling, willing, etc.) does not need to be reflected in the mirror that is consciousness. It is not an attack on reason and should not be opposed to passion as has been the case throughout the philosophical tradition. Instead it is an attack on reflexive knowledge. In other words: Leibniz against Descartes. This is what Nietzsche means when he says that “so far we have only incorporated our errors and that all our consciousness refers to errors!”¹⁴

Tied to the “passion of knowledge,” the problem of individualization now takes on its full significance, particularly in the period of *The Gay Science*. The problem can be formulated in the following question: under what conditions is the individual possible? In other words, in what way might it be promoted by the progressive “dehumanisation of nature” (*Entmenschung der Natur*) put forth by science? The question is far more complex than it initially appears, since for Nietzsche science constitutes—in the field of knowledge—the utmost expression of the “mass instinct,” which leads us to wonder if, even still, science could serve the development of its contrary, which is “individuality.”

We will not continue further in this line of inquiry, but what we can say, with regard to consciousness, is that after demonstrating the effects of the overdetermination of consciousness in the field of knowledge as the accumulation of errors, the new task for Nietzsche is the one of assimilating (incorporating) knowledge. This task is part of the project of naturalizing man—which is to say, the project of making knowledge instinctive to him. This project should not be seen as a return to a certain form of “animality,” like in Rousseau’s philosophy, which would be a total misunderstanding of the hierarchy of mental life, placing consciousness at

the forefront, but should be seen rather as a real process of incorporation, of interpreting life through the lens of the will to power.

Conclusion

What is consciousness worth? What is its value to life? The shortest answer to this question is that according to Nietzsche, consciousness does have a value, which had been consistently overestimated by the philosophical tradition. Its value resides in the fact that it is a part of the natural human reality, as a tool for survival. But this value is of comparatively little importance because it appears to be a sick form of the will to power, undermined by its moral and social origins.

By inverting the hierarchy of mental processes, Nietzsche demonstrates the superficial and sick character of consciousness. Without however denying its existence, which is as a tool in the preservation of the species, he calls for an overcoming of reflexivity by the incorporation of knowledge. From there, the question is no more the one of the value of consciousness for life, but rather its value in the selection and development of a certain type of man. This new task that Nietzsche signals, is a part of his global cultural project of naturalizing man, and it finds perhaps its clearest expression in the posthumous fragments of the period of *The Gay Science*, in the idea of a “philosophy of indifference.”

Edited by Jennifer Croft

Notes

¹ At the beginning of the § 354, Nietzsche uses the term *Des Sich-Bewusst-werdens* to specify *das Problem des Bewusstseins*.

² For example, the books of Alexander Herzen Jr., *On brain and the the cerebral activity for a psychophysiological point of view*, 1887

³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* § 524 (New York: Vintage, 1967)

⁵ Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 1983) p. 282

⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 354

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 11

⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* I § 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). He thus makes consciousness nothing more than a narrow sliver of the whole of mental life. Cf. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II § 18

¹⁰ Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, supp. Chap 19 “On the Primacy of the Will in Self-Consciousness,” London, Keagan Paul Trench Trübner & co., 1910, p.411

¹¹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 354

¹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* I § 16

¹³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 354

As Robert Schacht shows, Nietzsche also points out that our self-consciousness and the various forms, thoughts, and expressions associated with it are not only limited by the performance of functions dictated by utility. On the contrary, he also discerns here a kind of “surplus” at the disposal of the “late born” (heirs to this surplus over an extended period of time) that transcends these social-utilitarian limitations and involves the transformation of the character of this consciousness. These heirs (artists, writers, poets, etc.) are however regarded only as exceptions to the general rule.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* § 11

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