

# Inventing Consciousness: Literature, Philosophy, Psychology

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Office Hours: Wednesdays from 3pm to 4:00pm,

Drop-in Discussion: Thursdays from 3:30pm to 4:30pm

CAs: Ryan Campagna, Christopher Gortmaker, and Charlotte Saul

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## 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, literary criticism, 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 means today across a range of discourses—including narrative fiction, literary criticism, philosophy, the neurosciences, and evolutionary biology. After learning about methods practiced in the history of ideas and concepts, we will then turn to two historical moments that were central to the development of consciousness as a concept. 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 and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl were related to the development of “stream of consciousness” techniques in the novels of Virginia Woolf. Exploring Vedantic texts, we will also consider the extent to which the historical and cultural specificity of the concept of consciousness enables comparison with analogous concepts in other cultures. 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.

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## COURSE LOGISTICS

Since this course will be taking place during an unfolding pandemic and will be mediated through technologies like Zoom, its Spring 2021 version will differ from usual models for conducting lecture classes on campus. Class time will be divided into three components:

- (1) Two pre-recorded lectures on a given week’s readings will be posted on Friday afternoon of the previous week.
- (2) These pre-recorded lectures and readings will form the basis for one seminar per week. Students in the class will be divided into three groups. Each student will sign up for one session, which will be their weekly session. The first will meet during the regularly scheduled class time on Mondays from 4:10 to 5:30pm. The second will meet during the regularly scheduled class time on Wednesdays from 4:10 to 5:30pm. The third will meet on a to-be-determined weekday evening from 8:00 to 9:20pm. **Note:** No one will be forced to take the evening class. The evening class exists as an aid to those students who might be taking the class while in far-away time zones—it ensures that no one has to get up at, say, 4am—and it might suit some local students’ schedules. I am hoping that the students will be more or less equally distributed across seminars. Each Seminar will begin as a conversation with me (about 40 minutes) and then transition into a conversation with the assigned CA (about 40 minutes). Each session, that is, will be co-run by me and by Charlotte, Christopher, or Ryan.

- (3) For those who would like to talk in a more informal way about the course materials, I will also be hosting a weekly Drop-In Discussion Session on Thursdays from 3:30 to 4:30pm.

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## POLICIES

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I understand that everyone is probably going through a lot right now. If you have circumstances that prevent you from handing your assignments in on time, please email me for an extension.

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

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

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## EVALUATION

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|------------------------|--------------|-----|
| Assignment 1           | Due April 17 | 20% |
| Assignment 2           | Due May 8    | 25% |
| Assignment 3a or 3b    | Due June 11  | 35% |
| Informed participation | Ongoing      | 20% |

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## ASSIGNMENTS

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**1) Assignment 1, “What Is It Like To Be A....?” (Due April 17, 20%):** The readings for Lecture 2 in Week 1 ask us about whether it is possible 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 creature 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, 25%):** Shakespeare’s 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 or two of *conscience* or *consciousness* the meaning of which is particularly difficult to parse. Then try to determine what it means, writing a **750 word** analysis of your example. You may use the Oxford English Dictionary and the Lexicons of Early Modern English as aids. You will be trained on how to use EEBO in your Discussion Session on April 23<sup>rd</sup>.

**3a) Assignment 3a, Historicizing Consciousness (Due June 11, 35%):** Take the text or texts you adopted for Assignment 2 and continue working on them, developing your interpretation of what they mean, deepening your reading, putting them in dialogue with other contemporaneous texts or debates, or contextualizing them so that you can better understand what they mean by *consciousness*. Write a **1250 word** paper on what consciousness means in your chosen text(s). Keep in mind that you may be the first person to work on your chosen text in any serious way. You may, that is, need to invent an approach proper to determining what and how your chosen text(s) mean. Put otherwise: being a conceptual detective is hard but rewarding work! If you choose Assignment 3a, you should build off of your work in Assignment 2.

**3b) Assignment 3b, Trying On Minds (Due June 11, 35%):** Many of the writers we have read in this course make claims about what it is like to be a minded being. A premise often implicit in these works is that if you checked a given theory or description against your own experience, then that theory or description would be accurate; it would, that is, accurately account for some facet of your own mindedness. In this final assignment, I want you to see if this is true. Consider one or two of the thinkers we have read this quarter and *try them on*. Write a **1250 word** paper about the extent to which you can see your own experience described or explained in these works. You could use any of the applicable materials we have read this quarter: the “subtle” consciousness of dreams in the *Upaniṣads*, Descartes’s *conscientia*, Locke’s account of how consciousness constitutes personal identity, Woolf’s “stream of consciousness,” and so on. Determine if you can find evidence in support of these claims in your own first-personal experience. A strong paper will (1) provide an accurate account of the texts in question (say, relevant sections from James’s *Principles*) and (2) an examination of the extent to which this text speaks to your own experience of yourself. Does, say, Descartes’s *conscientia* or Traherne’s *enjoyment* track your own experience of your perceptual life? Why? Why not? What might be a better way of describing your own experience?

**4) Informed Participation (ongoing, 20%):** In advance of your seminars and discussion-sessions, please 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.

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## READINGS AND SCHEDULE

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All readings are available as PDF files on the course’s Canvas website, with the exception of McEwan’s *Saturday* and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. These texts will be available at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore. If you need to purchase them elsewhere, they are both readily available through online bookstores.

### Part I: Consciousness Now

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#### WEEK 1: Basic Questions

Pre-recorded lecture 1: Introduction: how can the humanities help us understand consciousness?

Pre-recorded lecture 2: What is it like to be conscious?

Readings:

Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” (1974)

Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds* (2016), Chapter 4

Amia Srinivasan, “The Sucker! The Sucker!” (2017)

March 29: Seminar 1 (first third of class), 4:10-5:30pm (led by Professor Harrison and CA, TBD)

March 31: Seminar 2 (second third of class), 4:10-5:30pm (led by Professor Harrison and CA, TBD)

Date TBD: Seminar 3 (final third of class), 8:00-9:20pm (led by Professor Harrison and CA, TBD)

Key Question: How might the distinction between human and animal minds inform our understanding of consciousness?

**April 1: Assignment 1 prompt distributed via Canvas**

## WEEK 2: Contemporary Sciences of Consciousness

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What is consciousness?

Readings:

David Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness” (1995)

Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind* (2010), Chapter 7

Susan Greenfield, *A Day in the Life of the Brain* (2016), Chapter 2

Pre-recorded lecture 2: How did consciousness begin?

Readings:

Simona Ginsburg and Eva Jablonka, *Learning and the Origins of Consciousness* (2019), Chapter 1

Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Metazoa* (2020), Chapters 1 & 10

April 5: Seminar 1

April 7: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: What is “hard” about what Chalmers calls the “hard problem” of consciousness? What are the presuppositions underpinning the neuroscientific and evolutionary accounts of consciousness?

## WEEK 3: Contemporary Literature, Literary Criticism, and Consciousness

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What is the relationship between the sciences of mind and literary representation?

Readings:

Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005)

Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds* (2018), Chapter 6

Pre-recorded lecture 2: What are some ways of understanding how consciousness relates to literary criticism?

Readings:

Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005)

Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation” (2018)

April 12: Seminar 1

April 14: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: What difference does literary representation make to the problem of consciousness? How does (or how should) literary representation or literary criticism relate to the approaches to consciousness undertaken by other disciplines?

**April 17: Assignment #1 due, 11:59pm**

## Part II: Consciousness and its Histories

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### WEEK 4: The History of Consciousness

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What is the history of the consciousness as a *word*?

Readings:

- C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (1967), Chapter 8
- Catherine Glyn Davies, *Conscience as Consciousness* (1990), Chapter 1
- Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject* (2011), Chapter 1

Pre-recorded lecture 2: What is the history of the *concept* of consciousness?

Readings:

- E. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), Chapter 1
- Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality* (2001), Chapter 5
- Timothy Harrison, *Coming To* (2020), Introduction

April 19: Seminar 1

April 21: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

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 some early instances of the term *consciousness* through this resource?

**April 22: Assignment 2 prompt distributed via Canvas**

## Part III: Consciousness in Early Modern Europe

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### WEEK 5: European Philosophies of Consciousness

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What was *conscientia*?

Readings:

- René Descartes, *Meditations* (1641), 1 & 2
- Descartes, *Replies to Second Objections*, definition 1.
- Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.9

Optional Readings:

- Aristotle, *On the Soul* (c. 330 BCE), selections from Book 3
- Augustine, *Confessions* (c.397), Book 1 & Book 10 (selections)

Pre-recorded lecture 2: Does personal identity require consciousness?

Readings:

- John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), 2.1-10, 2.27

April 26: Seminar 1

April 28: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: What does Descartes mean by *conscientia*? How is his sense of *thought* changed by his understanding of “consciousness”? What does Locke do to Descartes’s understanding of *conscientia*? How does the concept change in Locke’s hands?

## **WEEK 6: English Literary Representations of Consciousness**

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What is it like to wake up?

Readings:

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667)  
(Bk. 4.440-91, Bk. 5.772-872, Bk. 8.179-559)

Pre-recorded lecture 2: When is consciousness born?

Readings:

Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation* (c.1670), 3.1-8  
“Salutation,” “Preparative,” “My Spirit”

May 3: Seminar 1

May 5: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: In what way might Milton’s depictions of waking up in Eden or Traherne’s depictions of his own embryonic existence be either describing or militating against the Cartesian definition of thought?

**May 8: Assignment #2 due at 11:59pm**

## **Part IV: Comparative Consciousness: An Interlude**

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## **WEEK 7: Consciousness in Ancient Vedantic Thought?**

Pre-recorded lecture 1: Are we conscious during dreamless sleep?

Readings:

*Upaniṣads* (c.700-200 BCE), selections  
Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* (2015), Chapters 1 & 8

Pre-recorded lecture 2: What are the ethics of conceptual comparison?

Readings:

Bina Gupta, *Cit: Consciousness* (2003), Chapter 1  
Timothy Harrison and Jane Mikkelsen, “Worlds Together Shined”

May 10: Seminar 1

May 12: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: How should we understand the similarities and differences between the ancient Vedantic understanding of *cit*, the early modern European concept of consciousness, and the treatment of the concept in various disciplines today?

**May 13: Assignment #3 prompts distributed via Canvas**

## **Part V: Consciousness in Modern Europe and America**

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### **WEEK 8: Consciousness in Modern Psychology and Philosophy**

Pre-recorded lecture 1: What did psychology do to consciousness?

Readings:

William James, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), Chapter 9

Pre-recorded lecture 2: What did phenomenology do to consciousness?

Readings:

Edmund Husserl, "Phenomenology" (1927)

Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, (2006), Chapter 1

May 17: Seminar 1

May 19: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

Key Questions: In what ways does consciousness change in its modern iterations? What implications do these changes have for our understanding of consciousness itself and for the history of consciousness as a concept?

### **WEEK 9: Consciousness in the Modern Novel**

Pre-recorded lecture 1: Does consciousness stream?

Readings:

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), part 1

Pre-recorded lecture 2: Can mimesis capture the consciousness of time?

Readings:

Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, part 2

May 24: Seminar 1

May 26: Seminar 2

TBD: Seminar 3

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, James, and Husserl, perhaps others)? What does Woolf's writing suggest about the unity of consciousness?

**June 11: Assignment 3a or 3b due at 11:5pm**