

Rosmini and Consciousness

The term consciousness emerged prominently in the philosophical lexicon from the 17th century onward. Yet, despite the abundance of studies devoted to it, consciousness remains an open problem, one that continues to challenge scholars across diverse disciplines. In recent decades, both in Italy and internationally, a wide-ranging debate has ignited, generating multiple theories and interpretive models aimed at addressing the enigmas surrounding consciousness. Increasingly, scientific inquiry is inclined to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, with philosophy at its core. Accordingly, the question of consciousness arises within a broader reflection on the human being and on the layered, complex constitution of human existence. The human being, growing up, gradually attains self-consciousness; the manifestation of the “Self” (or self-awareness) becomes crucial for self-understanding, self-formation, and moral agency. By “consciousness” one thus refers to the lived experiences of the subject of which she or he is immediately aware. This makes consciousness a question of decisive importance, for it places the person and human existence itself, in their singularity, at the center of philosophical reflection. One might say that non-human animals also possess a certain degree of consciousness, though it is primarily instinctual—a capacity for immediate re-sensing that guides them within the dynamics of stimulus and response. What differentiates the human being from all other living entities is precisely the capacity for reflexivity: the ability to turn back upon oneself and to be, properly speaking, conscious of oneself.

This is hardly a novelty; rather, it is the rediscovery of a theme with deep historical roots. While the vocabulary of “consciousness” belongs to modernity, the philosophical reflection on the human capacity for self-knowledge is much older. The problem of consciousness is bound to that of interiority, of the soul, and of subjectivity—motifs that recur, in various forms, throughout the history of philosophy. Consider, for instance, the Christian tradition, and particularly Augustine, for whom the human being, in the inwardness of the soul, possesses knowledge of self (notitia sui) and therefore memory of self (memoria sui). Yet, notwithstanding such awareness, the subject cannot arrive at a definitive account of its own interior constitution. Here the Heraclitean dictum stands as perennial truth: «You would not find the

limits of the soul, even if you traveled every road: so deep is its logos».¹ Thus, it is necessary to make room for questioning and to allow ourselves to be guided by it.

Among the authoritative voices who rekindled the Augustinian magna quaestio stands Antonio Rosmini. He succeeded in reopening an ancient theme while employing the language of his contemporaries. Consciousness occupies a central position in his anthropological reflections. Fully aware of the inquiries of countless predecessors, Rosmini draws upon multiple sources and succeeds in offering a decisive contribution. He engages in particular with major figures of the idealist tradition, such as Hegel and Fichte, whose apparent excess of subjectivism he rejects, while also conversing with French philosophers of perception and embodiment, including Descartes, Condillac, and Maine de Biran. Nor does he neglect the Anglo-Scottish tradition, acknowledging in Thomas Reid the merit of distinguishing sensation from perception. Among his Italian interlocutors, Pasquale Galluppi occupies a special place, particularly regarding the perception of the I. In his analysis of subjectivity, Rosmini consistently employs the term “consciousness” to designate the outcome of a reflective act—an act rendered possible by the horizon of meaning he names ideal being. It is only within this horizon that conscious reflection upon sensation becomes possible. According to Rosmini, every sensible experience is perceived by the subject only when accompanied by intellectual judgment; otherwise, there is no consciousness of it.

Rosmini’s approach is strikingly relevant to contemporary debates, precisely because it attends to that domain of subjective and personal experience which resists quantification and measurement, yet lies at the center of current neuroscientific research. For these reasons, the present issue of Rosmini Studies devotes particular attention to consciousness, both in light of Rosmini’s perspective and in dialogue with cognitive science. Rosmini’s analyses lead back to the very sources of a perennial problem: consciousness entails interiority and personhood, but it also implicates embodiment and identity. The human subject is capable of recognizing its own individuality precisely because it can, in some measure, distance itself from itself. Subjective experience, however, cannot be reduced to the physical-material dimension alone. This does not imply that the body is excluded from the analysis of consciousness; on the contrary, Rosmini speaks of the human capacity to become aware of life through the sentiment of self: «in the first perception of the body we experience a sentiment, which is the

¹ Heraclitus, 45 DK.

pleasure of life, or rather, of the individual union of a body with ourselves».² The body, therefore, is not merely physical (Körper), but lived (Leib), to adopt Husserl's phenomenological terminology.

In its development, the human subject encounters the world, others, and eventually itself—above all through corporeality. Consciousness is thus also bodily consciousness: the I encounters the non-I through the mediation of the body, a theme central not only to early Husserlian phenomenology, but also to subsequent thinkers such as Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. Human beings come to consciousness of others through encounters that are simultaneously physical, psychic, and spiritual, recognizing in them a structural similitude. This is the theme of empathy (Einfühlung), articulated with particular clarity by Edith Stein and later resonating widely throughout twentieth-century philosophy and in contemporary debates, including neuroscientific discoveries such as mirror neurons.

The recognition of the other, and of the world more broadly, precedes action—an action that, insofar as it is human, is always moved by free will. Here emerges another decisive theme: moral consciousness. Human beings are not only conscious of themselves, but also of their desires and their actions. The capacity for discernment and choice belongs uniquely to the human subject. While it can be educated, it is grounded in what Scheler aptly termed emotional intuition (Fühlen): the primordial capacity to apprehend the value of things, which entails a presupposition of correctness and truth that is universal and a priori. This anthropological analysis finds its metaphysical foundation in the human ability to recognize the qualitative value of things, to intuit their objective sense, and to assume it as a criterion of choice. Such capacity refers to a dimension that transcends and surpasses human finitude, opening the subject to the infinite.

Reflection on consciousness, which is also moral consciousness, necessarily points to the relation between the human being and God. The theological datum may thus legitimately be integrated into philosophical inquiry, thereby widening the scope of reflection. The human being is capable of turning inward upon itself, knowing itself both outwardly and inwardly, precisely through relation to the other: in encountering alterity, I recognize myself as different,

² A. ROSMINI, *Nuovo Saggio sull'origine delle idee*, ed. by G. MESSINA, vol. 4 of ENC, Città Nuova, Rome 2004, p. 275.

yet structurally identical. This recognition precedes my action towards the other, an action that may be guided by charitas. The capacity to love the human, however, does not originate in humanity itself, but is rooted in its spiritual dimension. The human being possesses not only the ability to intuit the logos operative in all things, but also the capacity to exercise it and to choose the path of the good. In this sense, the horizon opened by reflection on consciousness encompasses an extraordinarily wide range of perspectives: from the anthropological to the psycho-pedagogical and cognitive, and ultimately to the metaphysical and theological outlook on the human being.