

Darwin, Austin and the Concept of Consciousness

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Darwin changed the thinking about one kind of items believed to be eternal and unchangeable. Making use of Austin's caution against the descriptive fallacy, the talk is meant to probe whether and to what extent also concepts could be understood as being historical and changing items. This step is one towards an attitude for which that which is usually taken to be a mere instrument is understood as something evolved.

The example taken is the concept of consciousness as used in contemporary science and philosophy. This use was neither central in ancient nor is it central in contemporary language. The thesis is that at least some difficulties and perplexities of the concept of consciousness depend on this departing from earlier, more modest uses.

For centuries, natural species counted as eternal and unchangeable. Darwin drew the attention to change. Despite the origin and change of species being far less visible than their constancy, change obtained priority. Admittedly, this holds only for species, not concepts. Concepts are still used and investigated as if they were fixed timeless factors. The investigation of their history is set apart from the analytical project. The step towards a perspective for which concepts are themselves changing items in a meaningful way leads to an attitude for which that which is usually taken to be a mere instrument turns into an evolved entity.

One example is the concept of consciousness as used in contemporary science and philosophy. The concept is pressed into some use neither central in ancient nor in contemporary language. Originally the concept meant “being privy to the councils and designs of another”, as Thomas Reid noted when looking back in 1765. With John Locke the idea of knowledge of opinions and plans had been transferred from the other to the person herself: “[...] consciousness [...] is inseparable from thinking [...] When we see, [...] or will any thing, we know that we do so. [...] And by this every one is to himself, that which he calls self” (2/1694, ii, xxvii, 9). Consciousness is here not the phenomenal consciousness at the center today: “the experience, how something looks, tastes, sounds, feels, etc.” (Pauen, 1999, 29, vgl. Lanz, 1996, 74), but some knowledge of the person about herself. In contemporary non-philosophical usage formulations abound in which the concept refers to a – not only cognitive – readiness to take into account certain features: “She acted very status-conscious” or “At that time, he was not yet aware of the possible consequences of his behavior.”

So the concept of consciousness as used today has been moved away from its origins. This is in itself not an illegitimate thing to happen, but does cut the concept loose from the functions it fulfilled and makes consciousness appear to be epiphenomenal. Left with the descriptive meaning, we fall prey to the “descriptive fallacy” Austin cautioned against in 1946 (1961, 3/1979, 103).