

# Consciousness and Existence

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## Abstract

This paper endeavors to examine the relationship between consciousnesses and existence, or more precisely – the relation and attitude of consciousness towards existence which in other terms is the relation and attitude of cognitive processes towards objective reality. The fundamental question that should be posed in this context can be formulated in the following manner: which one is primary and which is secondary, which is determinant, and how existence is being reflected in consciousness; how existence/existent is reflected in and through language, which is the external manifestation of consciousness. We will begin with an examination of the issue by referring to ancient philosophical reflections comparing them with modern considerations in the Philosophy of Language.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, cognition, existent, non-existent, Semantic Triangle

## Introduction

The first thought that we refer to is Parmenides' famous statement: "there exists only what is, what is not, does not exist" ("Being" is, "Non-Being" is not); "one cannot utter and think of what is not, for what is not, cannot be expressed and grasped with thought". From these profound statements one can draw the fundamental idea that consciousness can only grasp objects and phenomena that are objectively existent. The next fundamental question that has to be posed in relation with the subject matter is formulated in the following manner: if consciousness grasps only that which is existent, it would mean that all perceptions within it are true in themselves, but we know that in the process of perception consciousness has an inclination towards errors. From this stems the statement that not everything that consciousness perceives and expresses by the means of language, is a-priori true in itself, otherwise there would be no errors in the cognitive processes and all thoughts would be originally true.

Let us discuss the dilemma of existent and non-existent objects within the dichotomy of what is and what is not: ~Whether or not there are non-existent objects seems to be one of the more mysterious and speculative issues in ontology. To affirm that there are non-existent objects is to affirm that reality consists of two kinds of things, the existing and the non-existing. The existing contains all of what is in our space-time world, plus all abstract objects, if there are any. Most people, it seems fair to say, would think that this is all there is. For them the only real question in ontology can be what kinds of existing things there are" (Hofweber, 2016, p. 32). However, there are thinkers who claim the existence of

non-existence objects as well. Accordingly, they accept the notion of reality being divided in two – existing and non-existing things.

Based on the reference above we can raise another question: does the objective reality consist of two categories: existing and non-existing things or only of existing ones? Furthermore, apply the following question to the former one: what is that, which consciousness perceives: is it only existent, or does it also apprehend (or make projections of) phenomena that are nonexistent?

We agree with the first statement which affirms that only objectively/physically existing phenomena/facts exist; as for the second type of phenomena – non-existent objects, they are being projected only within consciousness and represent some type of reflection (in some cases - distortion) of real facts. Accordingly, all that is occurring within the consciousness in the form of thoughts, need not always be objectively existent (or in other words: need not always be the reflections of objectively existing phenomena/facts) and be merely fictions.

In opposition to the above assertion of existence of non-existent objects (or the possibility of their existence) we once again refer to Parmenides' statement: "As there are none of the non-existents alongside existents, only one does exist by necessity: existing; and there is simply nothing more than that" (Aristotle's commentary), and therefore: "It is impossible to talk or think about what does not actually exist". If we agree with Parmenides' thesis, it should be considered that in the process of perception of an existent

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(for there is only what exists) consciousness perceives it properly, or in a distorted manner. In other terms: there is only what exists, its conscious perception can be proper or improper. It is consciousness that generates and projects fictional thoughts.

We continue our discussion in the context of interrelation between fact and consciousness. Here we have to ask the following question: what is the relation of consciousness towards a fact? Some of the thinkers equate thought (conscious-cognitive process) with existent/being: "If so, then contemplation should be the same as an object of contemplation, as for consciousness – it would be identical to what the object of its perception is. If this statement is correct, then truth would be unreachable. Consciousness would have only the replica of an existent which is different from what is existent and is not the truth itself. For truth should not represent knowledge on matter that is different from consciousness; that which is transferred to us by its (consciousness') means should be truth-being. Consciousness, object of apprehension and truth – they are all identical with each other; this is the profound mind which possesses truth/beings or, more precisely, is identical with truths" (Plotinus). Here the total unity of mind (thinking, thought) and truth is being emphasized (Timaeus). As for Plato, it is only truth that can be the real object of mind. Moreover, to him, thinking/thought is identical with truth/reality: thinking is the same as that which is thought. Without truth/being a thought cannot be possessed; a thought manifests itself only within the truth" (Hofweber, 2016, p. 36).

Here we are dealing with the dualistic attitude of consciousness towards objective reality where it (consciousness) projects itself as an originator/creator of reality. However, we know that this kind of dualism is of a nominal-fictional character and not an objectively existing one.

Below we bring examples of Ancient thinkers' thoughts on the unity of being and mind:

- Parmenides: ~thought and being are the same~

- Efficacy of mind is contemplating or meditating and its only object is the mind itself

- Aristotle: ~the mind is self-contemplative thought~ (noesis noeseos)

- ~Proclus diadochos: the mind only comprehends itself ~

Analyzing the above references we can conclude that idealizing the thinking process as a mental-cognitive activity and assigning attributes of originator/creator of reality to it leans towards Solipsism which assigns a primary and determinative function to the mind in relation with reality.

We find profound thoughts in discourses of Georgians and Protagoras where they come to the conclusion that: "our every notion, every discourse is equally true. Each thought is originally true~; - but a different line is being developed afterwards – "if that which is imagined/thought about is existent, in such a case all that is imagined/thought about does exist in reality; but no one can state that if, for example I imagine a flying man or a chariot crossing the sea, they exist in reality as well"; "A thing/object, a thought and a word – they are all different from each other".

Below the cognitive-conscious process is shown where the dualism between the perception and the perceiver is seen:

"... yes, but the mind contemplates one of its own parts with the other? In that case we would have the contemplator and the object of contemplation separately from each other; this is not self-contemplation anymore, but if its (mind's) parts are completely identical to each other, that is to say, a part which contemplates is no different from the other part which is an object of contemplation. Therefore, in contemplating the part which is its own one, it contemplates its own self for the contemplator does not differ from the object of its contemplation in any sense" (Plotinus).

The mind is contemplation which apprehends itself. As a thinker, it is consciousness, as an object of thinking – it is a being. It is impossible to distinguish what is real and what is possible within it. Everything is real and objective within the mind (Timaeus).

During the conscious-cognitive process notions of subject-object are being mixed and unified. For better illustration of this thesis we adduce an example of mental alienation within consciousness in the context of relation of mind towards reality – mental separation: "I" and "Myself". This kind of mental separation is seen in ordinary phrases: "I create myself", "It helps me to be in harmony with myself", "I find myself", "I allow myself", and "I control myself"... It is not difficult to see that in these phrases there are two actual subjects in correlation with each other: "I" and "myself". It may seem paradoxical, but in this case "I" and "myself" are two different things, they correspond to the distance between the self and its reflection. This kind of separation of the subject within itself is the main problem in the process of alienation. It amounts to the division of the human mind as a whole into two parts. More precisely, the first element "I" is a subject (contemplator), that which acts towards something other while "Myself" appears as an object – that which is being acted upon. For the most part, the human mind is in contradiction and in conflict within itself as it tries to solve self-created problems. The fundamental question one has to ask in this regard can be formulated in the following manner: is the relation between "I" and "Myself" the real or the fictional one?

## Linguistic analysis: Consciousness/Language

Another fundamental point is the reflection of being in consciousness (mental representation) and its linguistic expression – linguistic sign. We refer to our previous works that elaborate on the mentioned subject. Here, the main emphasis is on the arbitrariness of a linguistic sign. Comparison of the Stoic concept "Lecton" with the modern notion of linguistic sign and its meaning (Semantic Triangle) and finding similarities between these two seems quite interesting. According to Stoics three elements are related with each other – Meaning (Thought), Sounds (word), and the Object itself. A Word is a signifier. The object is signified, something that is expressed by a word. We perceive it as if it was founded in our consciousness. An object itself exists

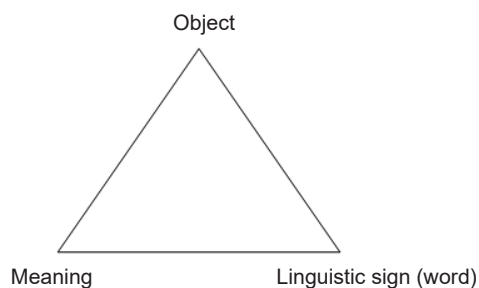
outside our consciousness. According to the Stoics two of the above mentioned elements are corporeal (Sound and Object) and one of them (Meaning/Thought) is incorporeal - "Lekton".

First of all, according to Stoics "Lekton incorporeal. It is an object of conscious utterance which cannot be reduced to a physical object that is expressed nor can it be reduced to the verbal sounds by means of which it is expressed. Primarily, Lekton possesses immanent being, which does not always correspond to the objective reality of corporeal things.

According to Aristotle there are only two elements which are in correlation with each other – the human subject with its consciousness/language by means of which he/she perceives and designates things. As for the Stoics, there are three different components: object, subject (perceiving and designating) and some kind of intermediate element between the object and the subject, more specifically – the object of an expression and perception; It is by means of this intermediate element that things are perceived and designated (Losev, 1982).

Let us continue by defining the nature of Lekton as an intermediate element between the signifier and the signified: Ammonius writes: "Aristotle teaches us what they (names and words) designate and that from one side there are mental representations (Noemata) and from the other side the process of naming and designation that is being realized by means of a designator (subject) and an object and that one should not add any kind of intermediate element between the thought and the object". This is very third element was called "Lekton" by the Stoics. Aristotle did not understand the "signifier" as an independent instance between the designator (subject) and the object, while the Stoics, on the other hand, used to emphasize and acknowledge the third instance and were sharply opposed to both the designating subject and the object (Ibid).

Let us examine the relation between signifier and signified by means of the Semantic Triangle:



Here we have a basic component – an object (1), which acquires its meaning (2) that is expressed by a linguistic sign (word) (3). The same structure and the same three components constitute this Stoic concept: Meaning (Thought), Sounds (word), and Object. Components of the Stoic concept are identical to those of the modern Semantic Triangle. Three elements are linked so as to form one integral system. According to the Stoics two of these elements (Sounds and Object) are of a material form and one of them

is of a non-material (Meaning/Thought). To this last element of a three-component system the Stoics gave the name "Lekton". "The relation of the lekta to the material process has always been, and will remain an outstanding problem" (Mortley, 1986, p. 152).

The relation of the incorporeal intermediate component to two other corporeal components of a Semantic Triangle is explained systematically in the following reference: "If a system of signs (designator) is a corporeal intermediate between two other corporeal material systems, in then the sign will be corporeal itself: though in complex sign systems – languages – the sign itself represents a complex element too. The point here is that the parts of both systems which are in direct correlation with the sign are in correlation with each other at the same time and all these three components constitute a specific type of a connection, a triangle" (Stepanov, 2011, p. 170).

As for the naming process or the interrelation between signifier and signified – according to Aristotle: "there can be no natural connection between the sound of any language and the things signified" (Chandler, 2009, 145).

Again, this is the same point but with Plato's interpretation - in Plato's *Cratylus* Hermogenes urges Socrates to accept that "whatever name you give to a thing is its right name; and if you give up that name and change it for another, the later name is no less correct than the earlier, just as we change the name of our servants; for I think no name belongs to a particular thing by nature" (Ibid, 148)

Every linguistic sign is by its nature of a spontaneous character. What is meant under spontaneity is unintentional involuntariness, arbitrariness and the fact that it does not contain in itself any naturality-regularity in terms of formation. Language and their signs are being formed in this very manner. Nobody has invented linguistic signs and nobody has agreed on the meaning of formed words (Losev, 1982, p. 72).

We will now refer to Augustine's notion of a sign: "things are those that are not mentioned in order to signify something, but rather are ends in themselves, Signs, then, are those things which are used in order to signify something else. Thus every sign is also a thing, because if it is not a thing at all then it is simply nothing" (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*). This begs the question about which component of this correlation constitutes the primary one, thing (object) or sign?

Returning to Aleksei Losev's reflections on linguistic signs, he distinguishes three types of existence of a linguistic sign. First of all, according to him, there is an objective reality itself which is of a corporeal nature and which creates everything within itself. It contains in itself things that exist outside and independently of our consciousness although they can be marked-designated by us within the frame of our own perception. Secondly, there is the same type of existence but reflected-represented in our consciousness.

This is the same reality, i.e. the same things and phenomenon not taken in themselves, but taken in their forms and ideas. Thirdly, there is another type of existence which

exists between objective reality and conscious-semantic existence. This type of existence is of a linguistic character that differs from the conscious-semantic type of existence because of the following feature: it is not a reproduction but is rather a specific kind of transformation of reality in order to understand it and it is not a mechanical and direct reproduction of this very reality but an original way to perceive it (Losev, 1982. p. 89). As part of his notion of a linguistic sign, Losev supposes that the third (Linguistic) type of existence creates its own rules which may not always correspond to logic.

In "De Doctrina Christiana" we read, "When a sign is given to me, it can teach me nothing if it finds me ignorant of the thing of which it is the sign. The sign is not perceived as a sign until the thing which it signifies is known; or in other words, knowledge (experience) of the thing precedes knowledge of the sign (10.34). Therefore, a sign is learned when the thing is known, rather than the thing is being learned when the sign is given" (10.33).

Therefore, we learn that the object is the primary element of the signifier-signified correlation. Firstly, there must be an object and only after this do you name it. If there is no object there can be no word corresponding/describing this very object. But once a corresponding word for a concrete object emerges, it becomes concrete (Losev).

As for the interrelation between language/consciousness and reality we refer to Wittgenstein's thoughts regarding the reflection/representation of objective reality within the mind: "Each natural language constitutes the projection of some part(s) of reality through which it realizes some kind of unity with it (reality). Language limits the boundaries of existence just like eyesight sets limits for horizon scope. Therefore, we cannot comprehend that which is outside the language limits – the internal logic of language, just like we cannot see that which is beyond the scope of our eyesight"

Striking similarity can be seen in Parmenides' and Wittgenstein's following statements: "What can be said, can be said with clarity: What can't be said, must remain unsaid" (Wittgenstein); "one cannot utter and think of what is not, for what is not, cannot be expressed and grasped with thought" (Parmenides). Hence it follows that it is impossible to speak about Non-existent, or, more precisely – to consider the possibility of the existence of the non-existent.

Wittgenstein's statements from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* may be useful for bringing more clarity to the subject matter:

5. 153. An event occurs or does not occur, there is no middle course

2.05 The totality of existent atomic facts also determines which atomic facts do not exist.

2.06 The existence and non-existence of atomic facts is the reality. (The existence of atomic facts we also call a positive fact, their non-existence a negative fact.)

2.062 From the existence of non-existence of an atomic fact we cannot infer the existence or non-existence of another (Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*).

Here Wittgenstein's statements contradict Parmenides' statement regarding the impossibility of the existence of non-existent. According to Parmenides' statement: "The existence and non-existence of atomic facts" cannot be considered "reality". Only existent facts can be regarded as determinant of reality, for the consideration of non-existent facts is already impossible and is a contradiction.

Another important point is representation of reality (facts) within consciousness: "We make for ourselves pictures of facts"(Wittgenstein). A picture (representation) is the model of reality and elements of the picture (representation) correspond to objects in reality; the picture itself is not reality. In the picture and the pictured there must be something identical in order that the one can be a picture of the other at all. What the picture must have in common with reality in order to be able to represent it after its manner—rightly or falsely—is its form of representation.

The logical picture of a fact is called thought (*Gedanke*). A picture (icon) may or may not correspond to the fact and thus be true or false but in both cases picture and fact have common logical structure.

(Wittgenstein): "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either" – (Parmenides): "one cannot utter and think of what is not, for what is not, cannot be expressed and grasped with thought".

## Conclusion

Based on these considerations it can be concluded, that: 1. in the interrelation between existence and consciousness the former is determinant; 2. in the thinking/contemplation process consciousness has an inclination towards errors, i.e. not every thought/idea that occurs within consciousness is a-priori true. 3. in the structure of the Semantic Triangle two components – object (signified) and word/sign (signifier) are in static interrelation with each other, as for the third component – meaning (*Lekton*), it is inclined towards errors and change, i. e. may or may not properly signify an object/fact.

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