

# The Intellectual Powers

*A Study of  
Human Nature*

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P.M.S. Hacker

WILEY Blackwell

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# The Intellectual Powers: a Study of Human Nature



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*For  
Herman Philipse*

# Preface

In 2007 I published a volume entitled *Human Nature: the Categorical Framework*. It belonged to the genre the Germans call 'philosophische Anthropologie' – a broader domain than philosophy of mind. In it, I investigated the nature of substance, causation, power and agency, as well as teleological and rational forms of explanation of behaviour. The book concluded with an examination of the nature of the mind and the body, and an elucidation of the concept of a person. This set the stage for further investigations. I announced in the Preface my intention of continuing the study with a book entitled *Human Nature: the Cognitive and Cogitative Powers*. This is that book, although the title has changed due to the exigencies of computer cataloguing. *The Intellectual Powers: a Study of Human Nature* pays homage to, and deliberately echoes the title of, Thomas Reid's great work. My aim was to map the landscape of cognitive and cogitative concepts, and thereby to illuminate the nature of our cognitive and cogitative powers. I hope that others will find my maps helpful in finding their way around this unruly and intellectually perilous terrain. I have tried to plot not only the safe routes, but also the many inviting pathways that lead to quicksands, chasms and seas of nonsense. Including sensation and perception among the intellectual powers is perhaps eccentric, and would be disapproved by Aristotelians and scholastics. Nevertheless, human sensibility is not only a primary source of knowledge – it is also concept-saturated and thought-ridden. These features of our sensible powers are the warrant for including two chapters on these themes.

This book presupposes the conclusions of the previous investigation, but has been designed to be read independently of it. Consequently, there is occasional overlap between the two books. Sometimes I recapitulate conclusions previously reached. Sometimes I pick up threads left dangling there, and weave them into the larger tapestry. *Human Nature: the Categorical Framework* investigated the most general categories in terms of which we think about ourselves. The present book examines our sensory and perceptual powers, our ability to attain and retain knowledge, our doxastic propensities, the relations of knowledge and belief, our cogitative powers and the gift of imagination with which we are endowed. I hope to complete these studies with a third volume entitled *The Moral Powers: a Study of Human Nature*. Collectively they will constitute a comprehensive essay in philosophical anthropology.

As in *Human Nature: the Categorical Framework*, each chapter is accompanied by tree diagrams, tables and lists. These are often no more than illustrations to the text, sometimes oversimplifying for the sake of surveyability. As I noted in the Preface to that book, they are meant to illuminate the argument as a picture illustrates a story, not to be a substitute for it. I have also introduced marginalia (as in *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*) to facilitate surveyability, to make it easier to follow the argument, and to assist in locating topics.

Writing this volume took longer and was more laborious than I had anticipated. I am grateful to the friends and colleagues who encouraged me in my endeavours, gave me invaluable advice, and saved me from so many errors. Erich Ammereller, George Barton, Jonathan Beale, Terence Cave, Gerhard Ernst, Eugen Fischer, Anthony Kenny, Rick Peels, Dennis Patterson, Dan Robinson and David Wiggins all read and commented upon one or more (and sometimes many more) chapters. I owe a special debt to Hanoch Ben-Yami,

Hans Oberdiek and Herman Philipse, who read the whole draft and gave me detailed comments, powerful criticisms and illuminating suggestions. I am grateful to my college, St John's, for the support and assistance it has given me.

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St John's College, Oxford  
September 2012

For any man with half an eye  
What stands before him may espy;  
But optics sharp it needs I ween,  
To see what is not to be seen.

John Trumball

# Introduction: The Project

We are substances – animate spatio-temporal continuants, consisting of matter, with active and passive causal powers. We are sentient, self-moving agents, with the ability to act or refrain from acting at will. Being language-using creatures with rational capacities, we adopt and pursue goals for reasons. We have projects and interests, we make choices and decisions, act voluntarily and intentionally, and are responsible for what we do. So we are persons. Our deeds are explained teleologically by reference to our goals and purposes, and by the reasons and motives for which we act. We have a mind and a body. The body we *have* consists of the somatic features of the body (the animate material substance) that we *are*. The mind we have is not a substance (a *res cogitans*) or a part of a substance (the brain). To have a mind is to have and exercise an array of first- and second-order intellectual and volitional abilities. The conceptual network that underlies these categorial observations was described in detail in *Human Nature: the Categorial Framework* (2007).

That book provided, as it were, the *mis-en-scène* for the play that will begin to unfold here. But the lighting still had to be put in place. This is the role of the three chapters of the Prolegomena: ‘Consciousness’, ‘Intentionality’ and ‘Mastery of a Language’. Both consciousness and intentionality have been invoked to explain what it is to have a mind, and to characterize the mental. Both concepts are sources of ramifying confusions. Eradicating these confusions is necessary before investigating the nature of our cognitive and cogitative powers. What *is* distinctive of humanity, what above all distinguishes us from other

animals, is that we are language-using creatures. Hence, the nature of language and of linguistic abilities need to be clarified before moving on to the main themes of the investigation.

The subject of consciousness was introduced into philosophy by Descartes, who held (against the Aristotelians) that consciousness is the mark of the mind. Consciousness assumed even greater importance in the writings of Locke, who held it to be the glue binding our past to our present experience, which makes each of us a person. It was assigned supreme importance by Kant, who held it to be the source of the transcendental unity of experience. Over the last decades, consciousness has been variously presented – as the last remaining obstacle to a satisfactory ‘scientific conception of the world’, as a mystery that is beyond the powers of the human mind to resolve, and as the feature (the ‘what-it’s-likeness of experience’) that distinguishes us from automata. I shall show that the early modern discussion of the subject from Descartes to Kant was enmired in confusion. There is no mystery about consciousness, and current debates on the subject are no more than the excited buzzing of flies in a fly-bottle. In place of these misconceptions, I shall advance a comprehensive *connective analysis* of this *multi-focal concept*. Connective analysis (see Appendix) consists in describing the manifold logical connections between a given expression (and its cognates) and other expressions with which it is associated, or with which it is likely to be confounded. A focal concept (exemplified by Aristotle's analysis of health) is one with a focal point (e.g. the health of a being) around which are clustered a variety of logically related extensions of the concept (e.g. healthy exercise, healthy food, healthy environment). A multi-focal concept is a concept with multiple centres of variation. A centre of variation need not have a focal point. It is more commonly a focus of points.



Brentano revived the medieval concept of intentionality and argued that intentionality is the mark of the mental. This too is mistaken. What is true is that the intentionality of *some* mental or psychological concepts that characterize our nature is a source of widespread misunderstanding. Intentionality and *intentional in-existence* require elucidation, and intentional phenomena and their grammar need to be characterized. This I shall try to do. What it is that we believe when we believe falsely is a persistent source of confusion. Do we believe facts, states of affairs, propositions or sentences? How are our beliefs related to what makes them true? And how are they related to what makes them false? How do we know what we believe? The problems of intentionality ramify. How can we believe what is not the case? For if it is not the case, there is nothing to believe. This tangle of problems will be unravelled.

The final chapter of the Prolegomena brings us to the source of all that is distinctive about us and that differentiates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. We are *unique* in nature in being language-using creatures. In *Human Nature: the Categorical Framework* I argued that it is because we have a developed language that we are capable of self-consciousness, that we can reason – and think, feel and act for reasons, that we can apprehend truths of mathematics and logic, that we know good and evil and can have a moral conscience, that we have autobiographies and a socio-historical sense of identity. Our nature is the product of our animality *qua hominidae*, of our mastery of a developed language that endows us with rational powers, and of our histories *qua* social and cultural beings. Much confusion surrounds the ideas of language and linguistic skills, of speaking and understanding language and of meaning something by words and utterances. The debates on these matters over the last century are polarized between two conceptions of language: (i) as a meaning

calculus (e.g. Frege, Russell in *Principia*, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, Carnap, Davidson, Dummett), and (ii) conceptions of language as a form of human behaviour (Wittgenstein in the *Investigations*, Austin, Grice, Strawson). The former conception gives primacy to assertion, truth, truth-conditions of sentences, and to understanding conceived as a computational process or its resultant state. The latter conception gives primacy to the use of words in the stream of life, to the practice of communication conceived intentionally and contextually, and to understanding conceived as akin to an ability rather than to a process or state. We shall investigate the questions that lead to these different conceptions.

With the discussion of these three great themes, the lighting for the stage is prepared, and the play can begin. At stage centre stand *knowledge* and *belief*. Neither is a mental state. They are not brain states either. Nor are they attitudes towards propositions. Knowing-how and knowing-that are two different forms knowledge may take. The former is not in general reducible to the latter. Practical knowledge is an essential and irreducible element of our agential nature. Both forms of knowledge have a kinship with ability – hence with potentiality rather than actuality. Knowing things to be so is distinct from knowing things to be true. In so far as knowledge can be said to aim at anything, it aims at reality – at how things are, and only secondarily at what is true. Received analyses of knowledge in terms of truth, belief and justification (or certainty, or a right to be sure) are defective. What is needed is not such a *definitional analysis* of knowledge, but a *connective analysis* that displays the place of knowledge in the network of epistemic concepts. An examination of the needs met and purposes satisfied by the uses of ‘know’ and ‘believe’ reinforces the connective analysis. Not only is belief not a mental state, it is not a feeling or a disposition either. Once

the doxastic map is drawn, the complex relationship between knowledge and belief falls into place. Although belief is the default position when knowledge fails, knowledge – the possession of information – is not a species or form of belief at all. Since believing is neither an act nor an activity, the question of voluntariness of belief must be addressed and the fact that we are responsible for our beliefs explained. Finally, the epistemology of belief and the nature of self-deception demand clarification.

Without sensibility, there would be no knowledge. With us, but not with other animals, sensation and perception are concept-laden. Concepts (unlike ideas) are creatures of the intellect (or, on Kant's account, of the understanding), and our perceptual experience is unavoidably run through with concepts and judgement. We see the world around us in terms of the concepts we employ in describing it. Both sensation and perception are primary sources of knowledge. Their logical geography needs to be mapped, their relations clarified, their voluntariness investigated and their cognitive potentialities described. The causal theory of perception has long seemed irresistible, or, if resistible, then only at the price of idealism. The familiar flaws of the classical representational causal theory and of its current neuroscientific variants are sketched. The modern Grice/Strawson analytic form of the causal theory is examined and shown to be untenable. That concepts of perception are not causal concepts, and that perceiving something is not an experience caused by what one sensibly seems to perceive, do not imply that scientific investigations into the causal processes that endow us with our perceptual powers and that occur when we perceive things are faulty. The analytic causal theory of perception is a mistaken account of *concepts* of perception; the neuroscientific theory of perception is an empirical theory of the neural processes involved in perceiving. The latter does

not imply the former. However, it is important to avoid the common neuroscientific mistake of reverting to the seventeenth-century representational causal theory of perception, and the equally common neuroscientific incoherence of ascribing perception to the brain. It is the living being as a whole that perceives. It is likewise important to deconstruct the idea of the necessity of a general sense (*sensus communis*) and its modern neuroscientific equivalent, the binding problem.

Memory is knowledge retained. In the absence of the power to retain knowledge, the horizon of possibilities for thought, affection and action would be very near – as it is with non-language-using animals. Without personal memory, human beings would not enjoy the moral status of persons, and would not be responsible for their deeds. Without the ability to recollect our past, we would lack any sense of our own identity over time. We would have no autobiography. Without personal memory, our social bonds, our loves and friendships, would be reduced to the inchoate forms of affection exhibited by other bonding animals. Without memory of the traditions and subjective history of our social group, we should have no sense of social identity.

The final part of the book deals with our cogitative powers. A connective analysis of thinking clarifies this multi-focal concept. We are naturally inclined to conceive of thinking as an activity of the mind – but that conception obliterates important distinctions. We are equally inclined to suppose that we think *in* some medium or other – in images, concepts or words. Representations do indeed require a medium. But thoughts are not representations – they are all message and no medium. A cousin of the misconceived idea that we must think *in* something is the doctrine that there must be a language of thought. That idea, which goes back at least as far as Ockham, was resurrected from its mouldy grave by Chomsky and Fodor. It needs, and will be given,

decent burial. The question of whether non-human animals can think has much preoccupied scientists and philosophers in recent years. We shall give this due scrutiny. Finally, the connection between our cogitative powers and the idea of an 'inner life' must be explored. For human beings, unlike all other animals, have an inner life of thought and reflection, of daydreaming and recollecting, of hoping and fearing, and of deciding, forming intentions and planning.

Imagination too is a cogitative power. Philosophical reflection on the imagination is marred by the assimilation of our ability to think of novel possibilities to our ability to conjure up mental images. The latter is logically inessential to the creative imagination, but is a rich source of confusion. The relationship between images (drawings, paintings, photographs) and mental images must be clarified; otherwise, we shall wrongly suppose that mental images are a species of image. We must note the intelligibility of imagining something rotating and the unintelligibility of rotating something in the imagination; otherwise, we may be gulled into supposing (as psychologists and cognitive scientists do) that there is such a thing as rotating mental images in mental space. We must investigate the relationship between perceiving and imagining, lest we assign to the imagination impossible and unnecessary synthesizing tasks, as Hume and Kant did. Mental images are not faint perceptions. They may or may not be vivid, but they are not distinguishable from perceptions by their relative vivacity. Rather, the vivacity of mental images and the vivacity of perceptions are categorially different. Finally, the relationship between the imaginable, the conceivable and the possible require investigation.

It has in recent years become fashionable to conceive of ourselves as the helpless products of our genes; free will and responsibility are commonly thought an illusion, to be displaced by genetic and neural determinism; and the

theory of evolution is invoked to explain morality and altruism in terms of natural selection. Our affinity with other *hominidae* has become a subject of extensive research, often aimed at cutting us down to size. The prowess of the great apes is exaggerated, often in order to narrow the perceived gap between animals and us. This development in the *Zeitgeist* is sadly understandable, but unwarranted. We are, of course, animals – but the only rational ones. We are, to be sure, *hominidae* – but the only language-using ones. No other creature has eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We are animals, but the only animals who can aspire to live under the rule of law, and who can achieve happiness (as opposed to mere contentment). It is well that we should bear in mind our rational nature and what is distinctive about us – what makes us ‘darkly wise and rudely great’, ‘a pendulum betwixt smile and tear’, ‘the glory and the shame of the universe’. Accordingly, I have paid considerable attention throughout this book to comparisons between man and beast, to the applicability and reasons for the applicability of many cognitive and cogitative concepts to human beings, and to their inapplicability to all other animals that are neither blessed with, nor cursed by possession of, the powers of reason, thought and understanding.

Such is the project of the current book. Its completion prepares the way for a further study – of the affective life of man, of the place of value in human life and of the moral powers with which we are endowed and the exercise of which gives meaning to our lives.

The methodology of these essays on human nature was explained and defended in *Human Nature: the Categorical Framework*, [chapter 1](#). Further detailed explanation of the methods here used and a general defence of the venerable Way of Words is to be found in the Appendix. Those who have qualms about the Way of Words, those who cannot see

that scrutiny of linguistic usage can clarify concepts and those who cannot grasp how conceptual clarification could shed light upon the nature of things are advised to read the Appendix before proceeding further. Others are invited to eat the pudding before investigating the cooking.

# Prolegomena



# 1

## Consciousness as the Mark of the Mental

### 1. Consciousness as a mark of modernity

*The ancients did not characterize the mind in terms of consciousness*

Although the ancients raised questions about our own knowledge of our perceptions and thought, and introduced the idea of an inner sense, they had no word for consciousness and they did not characterize the mind as the domain of consciousness. Aristotelians conceived of the mind as the array of powers that distinguish humanity from the rest of animate nature. The powers of self-movement, of perception and sensation and of appetite are shared with other animals. What is distinctive of humanity, and what characterizes the mind, are the powers of the intellect – of reason and of the rational will. Knowledge of these powers is not obtained by ‘consciousness’ or ‘introspection’, but by observing their exercise in our engagement with the world around us. The medievals followed suit. They too lacked a term for consciousness, but they likewise indulged in reflection upon ‘inner senses’, arguably – in the wake of Avicenna's distinguishing five such senses – to excess.

*Descartes's introduction of the term and redefinition of the mind*

Descartes's innovations with regard to the uses in philosophy of the Latin ‘conscientia’ (which had not hitherto

signified consciousness at all), as well as the French 'la conscience', were of capital importance.<sup>1</sup> For it was he who introduced the novel use of the term into the philosophical vocabulary. He invoked it in order to account for the indubitable and infallible knowledge which he held we have of our Thoughts (*cogitationes*) or Operations of the Mind. His reflections reshaped our conception of the mind and redrew the boundaries of the mental. Thenceforth consciousness, as opposed to intellect and sensitivity to reasons in thought, affection, intention and action, was treated as *the mark of the mental* and *the characteristic of the mind*.

The expressions 'conscius' and the French 'conscient', and the attendant conception of consciousness, caught on among his correspondents and successors (Gassendi, Arnauld, La Forge, Malebranche). So too 'consciousness' and 'conscious' caught on among English philosophers, churchmen and scientists (Stanley, Tillotson, Cumberland, Cudworth and Boyle). But it is to Locke that we must turn to find the most influential, fully fledged, *philosophical* conception of consciousness that, with some variations, was to dominate reflection on the nature of the human mind thenceforth. This conception was to come to its baroque culmination in the writings of Kant. In the Lockean tradition, consciousness is an *inner sense*. Unlike outer sense, it is indubitable and infallible. It is limited in its objects to the operations of the mind. The objects of consciousness are private to each subject of experience and thought. What one is thus conscious of in inner sense constitutes the subjective foundation of empirical knowledge. Because consciousness is thus confined to one's own mental operations, it was conceived to be equivalent to self-consciousness – understood as knowledge of how things are 'subjectively' ('privately', *in foro interno*) with one's self.

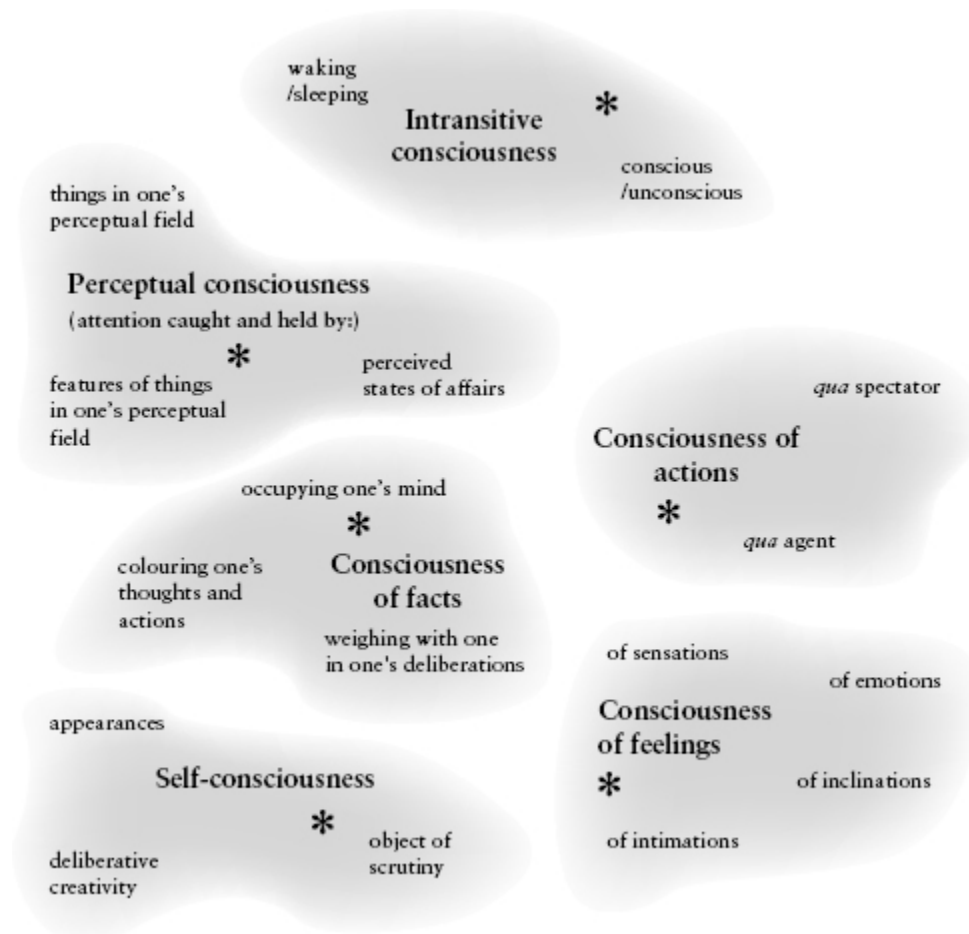
*Development of the ordinary use*

The ordinary use of the English noun ‘consciousness’ and its cognates originates in the early seventeenth century, a mere three or four decades prior to the Cartesian introduction of a novel sense of ‘conscius’ and ‘conscient’ into philosophy in the 1640s. So it evolved side by side with the philosophical use – but, on the whole, in fortunate independence of it. For the ordinary use developed, over the next three centuries, into a valuable if specialized instrument in our toolkit of cognitive concepts. By contrast, as we shall see, philosophical usage sank deeper and deeper into quagmires of confusion and incoherence from which it has not recovered to this day.

*Multiple centres of variation*

The ordinary use of ‘conscious’ evolved a number of related *centres of variation*: being conscious as opposed to unconscious; being perceptually conscious *of* something, or of some aspect of something, in one's environment; being conscious of one's feelings and inclinations; being conscious *that* as well as being conscious *of*; *conscious*, as opposed to *unconscious* mental attributes (such as belief or desire); *consciously doing* something *qua* agent, as well as *being conscious of doing* something *qua* spectator; and being *self-conscious*. These are not related as species to a genus. Nor are they different *senses* of ‘consciousness’, if that suggests that they are mere homonyms. Nor is consciousness an Aristotelian ‘focal concept’ (like *healthy*). Rather, there are multiple centres of variation, with various forms of connection between them (see [fig. 1.1](#)).

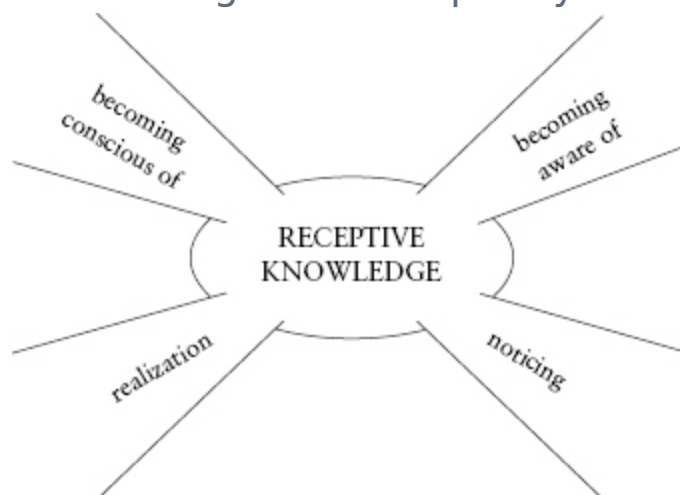
**[Figure 1.1](#)** Centres of variation in the normal use of ‘consciousness’



The most important of these centres of variation are far removed from the early modern philosophical idea of an inner sense that discerns 'operations of the mind'. They are equally far removed from the contemporary philosophical conception of *conscious experience* as possessing a unique qualitative character, of there being 'something that it is like' to enjoy such experience. Being perceptually conscious of something is actually a form of *cognitive receptivity* (see [fig. 1.2](#)). It is not to achieve knowledge, but to receive it (and hence is a cousin of *noticing*). The concept of *being conscious of* something belongs to the same family of concepts as *being aware of*, *noticing* and *realizing*, and is bound up with *taking cognizance* of something known. To become, and then to be, conscious of something or conscious that something is so, is either to *receive*

knowledge as a result of one's attention *being caught and held by something*, or it is for knowledge already possessed to *weigh with one*, or *on one*, in one's deliberations, or for it to *colour one's thought and manner of acting*. It is not to *attain* knowledge by one's endeavours (as are discovering, discerning or detecting), but to be *given* it; or it is for knowledge *already possessed* to colour one's thoughts, enter into one's deliberations and modulate one's manner of acting. *Self-consciousness*, as ordinarily used, is far removed from both *apperception* and *consciousness of one's self*. 'Consciousness' and its cognates, far from signifying the general form, or ubiquitous accompaniment, of the mental, are highly specialized instruments of our language the focus of which is but rarely, and selectively, the operations of the mind.

**Figure 1.2** Forms of cognitive receptivity



*Purpose of this chapter*

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the ordinary concept of consciousness, and to show that consciousness is not the mark of the mind. Further, I shall show that both the early modern philosophical account of consciousness as an inner sense whereby we know what passes in our minds,<sup>2</sup> and the contemporary conception of consciousness

conceived as a property of experience, namely that there is something which it is like for the subject to have it, are equally incoherent. These *philosophical* conceptions of consciousness, far from identifying the defining mark of the mental, are themselves a mark of deep and ramifying conceptual confusions.

## 2. The genealogy of the concept of consciousness

*History of the concept: Greek*

The ancients had no word that can be translated as 'consciousness'. The closest the Greeks came to our abstract noun 'consciousness' is *suneidesis*. The corresponding verb derives from conjoining *oida* (I know) with *sun* or *xun* (with) to yield *sunoida*: 'I know together with', 'I share the knowledge that' or, if the prefix *sun* functions merely as an intensifier, 'I know well', or 'I am well aware'.<sup>3</sup> Of course, this does not mean that they did not struggle with the same philosophical phantasms as the early moderns did and as we do. Whether that implies that they had our *philosophical* concept of consciousness, despite lacking a word for it, depends upon whether, after careful analysis, it can be shown that we do have a coherent philosophical *concept* – or whether it will become clear that we are merely floundering about in incoherent conceptual confusion.

*History of the concept: Latin*

The Greek pattern is also exhibited by Latin, where the combination of *scio* (I know) and *cum* (with) yielded the verb *conscio*, the noun *conscientia*, and the adjective *conscius*. These too could be used in the sense of *shared knowledge*,