

Draft

## Cartesian *conscientia*

### Abstract

Although Descartes is often said to have coined the modern notion of ‘consciousness’, he defines it neither explicitly nor implicitly. This may imply that he was not the first to use ‘*conscientia*’ in its modern, psychological sense, or that he still used it in its *moral* sense. In this paper, I argue for the latter assumption. Descartes used ‘*conscientia*’ according to the meaning we also find in text of St. Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and later scholastics. Thus the cartesian *conscientia* is, technically speaking, the formal cause of our the normative aspect of our thoughts, that is, the cause of their being evaluable as true or false. This means that it is not itself a kind of individual knowledge, awareness, or a particular thought. Rather, ‘*conscientia*’ refers to the evaluative knowledge of an actual, but not a particular human observer.

**Keywords:** Consciousness, Conscience, Mind, History of Ideas, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes.

### Introduction

Descartes, a common story goes, gave the Latin word ‘*conscientia*’ a new sense, which was later expressed by technical terms such as ‘consciousness’, ‘*Bewusstsein*’ or ‘*conscience psychologique*’.<sup>1</sup> Whereas ‘*conscientia*’ in classical and medieval Latin meant something like ‘moral conscience’, Descartes is said to be the first to use it in the nonmoral or even ‘psychological’ sense. This seems to be true at least to the extent that thinkers before Descartes did not have a single word, notion or concept for what we call ‘consciousness’.<sup>2</sup> But not even Descartes’ own terminology seems to fit the needs of a scientific study of the ‘phenomenon of