

Conscious - Etymology, Origin & Meaning

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c. 1600, "knowing, privy to" (poetic), from Latin *consciū* "knowing, aware," from *conscire* "be (mutually) aware," from assimilated form of *com* "with," or "thoroughly" (see [con-](#)) + *scire* "to know" (see [science](#)). The Latin word probably is a loan-translation of Greek *syneidos*.

The sense of "knowing or perceiving within oneself, sensible inwardly, aware" is from 1630s, perhaps a shortening of *conscious to oneself* (1620s). Also compare the Latin sense evolution in [conscience](#). From 1650s as "aware (of a fact)." Sense of "active and awake, endowed with active mental faculties" is from 1837. Related: *Consciously*.

com

Latin

with; thoroughly

scire

Latin

to know

conscire

Latin

be (mutually) aware

conscius

Latin

knowing, aware

conscious

1600

knowing, privy to

conscious (adj.)

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[also from c. 1600](#)

[conscience \(n.\)](#) >

c. 1200, "faculty of knowing what is right," originally especially to Christian ethics, later "awareness that the acts for which one feels responsible do or do not conform to one's ideal of right," later (late 14c.) more generally, "sense of fairness or justice, moral sense."

This is from Old French *conscience* "conscience, innermost thoughts, desires, intentions; feelings" (12c.) and directly from Latin *conscientia* "a joint knowledge of something, a knowing of a thing together with another person; consciousness, knowledge;" particularly, "knowledge within oneself, sense of right and wrong, a moral sense," abstract noun from *conscientem* (nominative *consciens*), present participle of *conscire* "be (mutually) aware; be conscious of wrong," in Late Latin "to know well," from assimilated form of *com* "with," or "thoroughly" (see [con-](#)) + *scire* "to know," probably originally "to separate one thing from another, to distinguish," related to *scindere* "to cut, divide," from PIE root [*skei-](#) "to cut, split" (source also of Greek *skhizein* "to split, rend, cleave").

The Latin word is probably a loan-translation of Greek *syneidesis*, literally "with-knowledge." The sense development is perhaps via "to know along with others" (what is right or wrong) to "to know right or wrong within oneself, know in one's own mind" (*conscire sibi*). Sometimes it was nativized in Old English/early Middle English as [inwit](#). Russian also uses a loan-translation, *so-vest*, "conscience," literally "with-knowledge."

[science \(n.\)](#) >

mid-14c., "state or fact of knowing; what is known, knowledge (of something) acquired by study; information;" also "assurance of knowledge, certitude, certainty," from Old French *science* "knowledge, learning, application; corpus of human knowledge" (12c.), from Latin *scientia* "knowledge, a knowing; expertness," from *sciens* (genitive *scientis*) "intelligent, skilled," present participle of *scire* "to know."

The original notion in the Latin verb probably is "to separate one thing from another, to distinguish," or else "to incise." This is related to *scindere* "to cut, divide" (from PIE root [*skei-](#) "to cut, split;" source also of Greek *skhizein* "to split, rend, cleave," Gothic *skaidan*, Old English *sceadan* "to divide, separate").

OED writes that the oldest English sense of the word now is restricted to theology and philosophy. From late 14c. in English as "book-learning," also "a particular branch of knowledge or of learning, systematized knowledge regarding a particular group of objects;" also "skillfulness, cleverness; craftiness." From c. 1400 as "experiential knowledge;" also "a skill resulting from training, handicraft; a trade."

From late 14c. in the more specific sense of "collective human knowledge," especially that gained by systematic observation, experiment, and reasoning. The modern (restricted) sense of "body of regular or methodical observations or propositions concerning a particular subject or speculation" is attested by 1725; in 17c.-18c. this commonly was *philosophy*.

The sense of "non-arts studies" is attested from 1670s. The distinction is commonly understood as between theoretical truth (Greek *epistemē*) and methods for effecting practical results (*tekhnē*), but *science* sometimes is used for practical applications and *art* for applications of skill.

The predominant modern use, "natural and physical science," generally restricted to study of the phenomena of the material universe and its laws, is by mid-19c.

The men who founded modern science had two merits which are not necessarily found together: Immense patience in observation, and great boldness in framing hypotheses. The second of these merits had belonged to the earliest Greek philosophers; the first existed, to a considerable degree, in the later astronomers of antiquity. But no one among the ancients, except perhaps Aristarchus, possessed both merits, and no one in the Middle Ages possessed either. [Bertrand Russell, "A History of Western Philosophy," 1945]

Science, since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity. It progresses by hunch, vision, and intuition. Much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alteration of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly. Facts are not pure and unsullied bits of information; culture also influences what we see and how we see it. Theories, moreover, are not inexorable inductions from facts. The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural. [Stephen Jay Gould, introduction to "The Mismeasure of Man," 1981]