

CONSCIOUSNESS

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Psychology, Cognitive Science, Neuroscience

1. Core Definition

Consciousness represents the fundamental state or quality of awareness, referring broadly to the subjective experience of being aware of internal and external stimuli. It is often described as the subjective "what it is like" feeling associated with mental states. The complexity of consciousness stems from its inclusive nature, spanning a vast spectrum of cognitive details from basic sensory input to highly abstract conceptualization. The source material highlights that this sensation encompasses **somatic and sensory interpretation**, where the individual processes physical and environmental information, integrating it into a coherent personal reality.

Furthermore, consciousness involves highly sophisticated internal processes, including **cognitive visualizations**, which are the mental creation or recollection of images, and the formulation of **accountable concepts**, enabling rational thought and decision-making. Essential to the definition is the presence of **internal speech** (the inner monologue) and the intent to execute action, which links conscious thought directly to voluntary behavior. Consciousness is not merely a static state but a dynamic phenomenon that includes elements such as **recollections**, the narrative of personal memory; **dreams**, often considered an altered state of awareness containing detailed subjective content; and the functional understanding of **semantics** and meaning.

In a clinical or psychological context, consciousness refers to the capacity to recognize and respond to environmental cues. While most commonly used to reference the **natural waking state**, it is also applied to various independent conditions of awareness, such as the state of **sleep** or other substitute states of awareness (e.g., meditative states, drug-induced states). The core function of consciousness is to provide a unified, integrated field of experience, allowing the subject to coordinate diverse mental and sensory information into a single stream of existence.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "consciousness" derives from the Latin *conscientia*, which means "knowledge with," indicating a shared or internal awareness. Historically, the academic and philosophical study of consciousness began to crystallize in the early modern period. Prior to the 17th century, awareness was often discussed in terms of the soul or the mind's relationship to God. It was René Descartes who, in the 17th century, formalized the concept of the mind as a separate, non-physical substance (*res cogitans*) distinct from the physical body (*res extensa*), establishing the foundation for the mind-body problem. Descartes' famous dictum, "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am), cemented self-awareness as the undeniable starting point of philosophical inquiry.

Following Descartes, **John Locke** further developed the understanding of consciousness in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), defining it as "the perception of what passes in a man's own mind." Locke shifted the focus from substance to function, emphasizing the continuous, reflexive awareness that constitutes personal identity. This foundational work laid the groundwork for modern psychological introspection and the scientific investigation of subjective experience. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, philosophers and early psychologists grappled with whether consciousness was an emergent property of the brain, a fundamental feature of the universe, or a purely epiphenomenal byproduct.

The 20th century saw temporary resistance to the study of consciousness, particularly with the rise of **Behaviorism**, which argued that only observable behavior was a valid subject for scientific study. However, the mid-20th century cognitive revolution brought consciousness back to the forefront, driven by advances in neuroscience, computer science, and the realization that purely behavioral models could not explain complex human cognition. Today, the study of consciousness is deeply interdisciplinary, blending philosophical inquiry with rigorous empirical methods derived from brain imaging and experimental psychology.

3. Key Characteristics and Constituents

The subjective experience of consciousness can be broken down into several key characteristics that contribute to its definition, many of which are hinted at in the broad scope of the original source content (covering sensory input, emotional feelings, and cognitive control).

Subjectivity and Qualia: Consciousness is inherently subjective; it is always experience *for* someone. The unique qualitative feels associated with experiences--such as the pain of a burn, the taste of chocolate, or the sound of a bell--are known as qualia. These are the raw, phenomenal aspects of conscious experience that are difficult to reduce to purely physical properties.

Unity and Integration: Despite receiving inputs from multiple senses and processing numerous cognitive tasks simultaneously, consciousness typically presents as a single, unified field of experience. The brain integrates disparate information (visual, auditory, spatial, emotional) into one cohesive moment of awareness.

Intentionality: A crucial characteristic identified by philosophers like Franz Brentano, intentionality refers to the property of mental states to be directed toward objects or states of affairs in the world. Conscious thoughts and perceptions are always *about* something, linking the subjective mind to external reality.

Control and Agency: The source mentions facets of **motor and mental control**. This characteristic relates to the conscious ability to select actions, inhibit automatic responses, and direct attention. It is closely tied to the concept of free will and personal agency, allowing for goal-directed behavior rather than mere reflex.

Self-Awareness: The capacity to reflect upon oneself as an independent entity, distinct from the

environment. While basic consciousness involves awareness of the world, **self-consciousness** involves awareness of one's own mental states, memories, and identity.

4. The Problem of Consciousness (The Hard Problem)

The most profound challenge in the study of consciousness is often termed the "Hard Problem," a phrase popularized by philosopher David Chalmers. This problem asks: Why does the physical processing of information in the brain give rise to subjective, qualitative experience (qualia)? While neuroscientists have made significant strides in addressing the "Easy Problems"--such as explaining how the brain processes sensory information, integrates data, and controls behavior--the Hard Problem focuses on the irreducible gap between physical processes and phenomenal experience.

Neuroscientific efforts largely focus on identifying the **Neuronal Correlates of Consciousness (NCC)**, which are the minimal neural mechanisms jointly sufficient for any one specific conscious experience. Research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) attempts to pinpoint which patterns of brain activity align precisely with the presence or absence of awareness. Key areas hypothesized to be central to the NCC include the thalamus and the parietal and prefrontal cortices, suggesting that consciousness relies on widespread, recursive processing rather than localized activity in a single brain region.

Two prominent cognitive theories attempt to bridge the explanatory gap by describing how awareness arises from functional architecture: **Global Workspace Theory (GWT)** and **Integrated Information Theory (IIT)**. GWT posits that consciousness is the result of information being broadcasted to a "global workspace" accessible by multiple specialized, unconscious processors throughout the brain, effectively making information available for widespread report and control. Conversely, IIT, proposed by Giulio Tononi, is a mathematical theory arguing that consciousness corresponds to the amount of integrated information (symbolized by the metric Φ , Φ) that a physical system generates. IIT proposes that consciousness is fundamentally linked to a system's capacity for complex causal interactions among its parts.

5. States of Consciousness

The original definition acknowledges that consciousness exists across various states beyond the typical waking condition. These states reflect fundamentally different ways in which sensory, cognitive, and affective information is processed and experienced.

The **Waking State** is characterized by high levels of vigilance, sensory alertness, directed attention, and full self-awareness, enabling complex reasoning and voluntary interaction with the environment. This state is associated with high-frequency, desynchronized neural activity (e.g., gamma and beta waves).

The **Sleep State** is defined by reduced responsiveness and altered brainwave patterns. Within sleep, consciousness shifts dramatically, particularly during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, where the brain is highly active and produces vivid, complex subjective experiences (dreams), demonstrating that consciousness can persist internally even when decoupled from external sensory input and motor control. Non-REM sleep stages, particularly deep sleep, are characterized by slow-wave activity and minimal conscious content.

Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) include conditions induced by meditation, hypnosis, psychedelic substances, or extreme sensory deprivation. These states often involve distorted perceptions of time and space, intense emotional experiences, or profound shifts in self-perception and identity. Clinically, altered states include pathological conditions such as:

Coma: A state of unresponsiveness where the patient cannot be aroused and lacks awareness of self or environment.

Vegetative State (VS): A state where the patient shows rudimentary signs of wakefulness (e.g., open eyes, basic reflexes) but displays no evidence of sustained, purposeful awareness.

Minimally Conscious State (MCS): A state characterized by inconsistent but clearly discernible behavioral evidence of self or environmental awareness, such as following simple commands.

Understanding these various states is crucial for both medical diagnosis and philosophical analysis, as they help delineate the boundaries between mere biological function and genuine, subjective awareness.

6. Significance and Impact

Consciousness is central to human experience and forms the bedrock of ethics, law, medicine, and artificial intelligence research. In **ethics and law**, the determination of consciousness is critical for assessing moral responsibility and legal culpability. Only conscious agents are generally held responsible for their actions, and the presence of consciousness determines the moral status of subjects, particularly in debates regarding animal rights and end-of-life care.

In **medicine and psychiatry**, the understanding of consciousness informs the treatment of neurological disorders, anesthesia protocols, and the diagnosis of traumatic brain injury. The ability to monitor and potentially restore consciousness is a primary goal of critical care neurology. Furthermore, disorders of consciousness, such as schizophrenia or severe depression, are fundamentally characterized by disturbances in the structure and content of subjective experience.

The investigation of consciousness also profoundly impacts the field of **Artificial Intelligence (AI)**. The development of sophisticated AI raises the theoretical question of whether truly conscious machines are possible. While current AI systems achieve high levels of functional intelligence (simulating access consciousness), they arguably lack phenomenal experience (qualia). The

search for a comprehensive theory of consciousness provides critical insights into the necessary computational and structural requirements for awareness, guiding future efforts in machine cognition and robotics.

7. Debates and Criticisms (Philosophical Positions)

The primary debate surrounding consciousness revolves around the mind-body problem--the relationship between mental phenomena and physical phenomena. Major philosophical positions include:

Dualism: This view maintains that the mind (consciousness) and the brain (physical matter) are fundamentally distinct substances. **Substance Dualism**, associated with Descartes, posits two separate entities, while **Property Dualism** holds that while there is only one substance (the brain), it possesses two distinct, irreducible types of properties: physical properties and phenomenal properties.

Materialism (Physicalism): This dominant scientific view holds that consciousness is entirely a product of physical brain processes and that mental states are ultimately reducible to, or identical with, neurobiological states. Prominent materialist theories include:

Identity Theory: States that mental events are literally identical to brain events (e.g., the feeling of pain is nothing more than C-fiber firing).

Functionalism: Argues that mental states are defined by their causal roles and relationships to other mental states, inputs, and outputs, rather than by their physical realization. Consciousness is viewed as the "software" running on the brain's "hardware."

Eliminative Materialism: A radical position that argues that many of our folk psychological concepts of consciousness (like "belief" or "desire") are fundamentally flawed and will eventually be eliminated by a mature neuroscience, similar to how the concept of "phlogiston" was eliminated from chemistry.

The persistence of the Hard Problem ensures that consciousness remains one of the most vigorously debated and least understood phenomena in contemporary science and philosophy, constantly challenging the limits of reductionist explanations.

8. Further Reading

[Consciousness \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Qualia \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[David Chalmers and the Hard Problem](#)

[Mind-Body Problem \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Integrated Information Theory \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)