

CRITERIA OF THE PSYCHIC

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Criteria of the Psychic

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy of Mind, Cognitive Science, Theoretical Psychology

1. Core Definition

The **Criteria of the Psychic** refer to a highly complex and postulated group of observable signs, behavioral markers, or neural signatures whose identification permits an observer to determine with reasonable assurance that a living entity possesses subjective awareness, or that a specific action or response stems from genuine consciousness rather than from purely mechanical, reflexive, or completely physiological resources. This concept serves as a foundational bridge between the objectively measurable world of biology and the intrinsically subjective realm of experience.

Fundamentally, these criteria attempt to resolve the epistemological dilemma inherent in discerning the presence of a mind--a problem often termed the "problem of other minds." Since subjective experience (qualia) is inaccessible to direct external observation, researchers and theorists must rely on indirect evidence. The criteria thus comprise a comprehensive checklist designed to differentiate complex, adaptive, or intentional behaviors rooted in genuine self-awareness and internal mental states (the psychic) from functionally similar actions generated by non-conscious biological algorithms or simple stimulus-response mechanisms. For example, a living being demonstrating the capacity for flexible problem-solving, anticipation of future events, or self-correction based on internalized models of the environment would arguably meet certain criteria indicative of awareness, contrasting sharply with a fixed-action pattern or a purely homeostatic physiological response.

Establishing these criteria is paramount not only for academic understanding but also for practical applications in fields ranging from animal welfare to clinical neurology. The necessary condition for designating a behavior as stemming from the psychic is often defined by the presence of non-deterministic behavior--the ability to choose among multiple courses of action based on perceived internal states or goals, demonstrating intentionality and agency beyond immediate physical necessity.

2. Historical and Philosophical Context

The quest for criteria defining the psychic is deeply rooted in the historical debates surrounding the Mind-Body Problem, which has been central to philosophy since antiquity. Philosophers like René Descartes posited a strict dualism, suggesting that consciousness (the *res cogitans*) resided in a separate realm from the physical body (the *res extensa*). For dualists, the criteria for the psychic would ideally identify the interaction point or the signature of this non-physical substance.

In contrast, modern approaches, particularly those emerging from materialist or functionalist traditions, seek to define the psychic entirely through observable or measurable physical processes, such as neural correlates or computational functions. The historical shift from seeking a spiritual or non-physical marker to identifying complex information processing capabilities marks the evolution of these criteria. Early behavioral criteria, such as the ability to use language or tools, were often proposed in attempts to delineate human consciousness from animal automatism, reflecting a long-standing anthropocentric bias in defining the psychic boundary.

Contemporary cognitive science attempts to bypass the strict dualist vs. materialist dichotomy by focusing on integrated information processing. The historical context shows a progression: from philosophical stipulation (e.g., language competence) to operational definitions (e.g., the Turing Test), and finally to neurobiological models that attempt to quantify the complexity required for subjective experience.

3. Key Behavioral Criteria

Behavioral criteria represent the oldest and most immediately accessible methods for inferring awareness, relying on external performance metrics to gauge internal mental activity. These signs are crucial when direct neural observation is impossible or unethical, such as in veterinary science or comparative psychology.

Adaptive and Flexible Behavior: A strong indicator of the psychic is the capacity for learning, memory formation, and the application of past experiences to novel, unpredictable situations. Simple reflexes are fixed; psychic actions are characterized by flexibility and optimal adaptation to environmental changes, indicating goal-directed planning.

Intentional Communication: True communication, beyond mere signaling (like pheromones), requires the capacity to represent external objects or internal states symbolically and to direct that representation toward a receiver with the intent of modifying the receiver's behavior or knowledge base. This intentionality implies a "theory of mind" or at least a rudimentary model of the other's mental state.

Self-Recognition and Agency: Demonstrating self-awareness, often tested through the mirror self-recognition test, is a powerful criterion. Furthermore, the exhibition of agency--actions that appear motivated by internal desires or goals rather than immediate environmental triggers--suggests a subjective perspective and an internal representation of the self as distinct from the environment.

Emotional and Affective Responses: The capacity to display context-appropriate emotional responses (joy, fear, pain) that influence subsequent decision-making is often considered fundamental. While pain reflexes can be physiological, the complex avoidance behaviors, mourning, or sustained affective states observed in many species suggest subjective emotional experience tied to the psychic apparatus.

4. Key Neural and Physiological Correlates

As neuroscience advances, the criteria of the psychic increasingly incorporate objective measures of brain function, focusing on the Neural Correlates of Consciousness (NCC). These physiological markers attempt to identify the minimal set of neural events sufficient for a specific conscious experience.

One critical physiological criterion involves the concept of widespread, integrated information processing. Techniques such as electroencephalography (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) are used to map areas of the brain that exhibit coordinated activity across disparate regions, indicating a unified, global workspace where information is broadcast and integrated. High levels of complexity and integration, particularly involving high-frequency gamma oscillations, are often posited as necessary conditions for awareness, distinguishing conscious activity from localized, modular processing.

Furthermore, theoretical models, such as Giulio Tononi's Integrated Information Theory (IIT), propose a quantitative criterion known as Phi (Φ). This measure aims to quantify the amount of integrated information generated by a physical system, effectively measuring the system's capacity for consciousness. While theoretical and difficult to measure precisely in complex systems, this approach represents a rigorous attempt to move the criteria of the psychic from pure behavioral observation to mathematical rigor, defining the psychic based on the inherent structure and causality within the physical system itself.

5. Challenges in Application: The Problem of Other Minds

Despite the development of sophisticated behavioral and neural criteria, the application of the criteria of the psychic remains fundamentally challenging due to the "Problem of Other Minds." This philosophical conundrum highlights the inherent inability to directly access or verify the subjective experience (qualia) of another entity, meaning all criteria are ultimately based on inference rather than direct observation.

A primary challenge arises from simulation and mimicry. Advanced computational systems or even organisms might exhibit behaviors that perfectly satisfy all external behavioral criteria (e.g., complex language use, strategic decision-making) without possessing genuine subjective experience. This hypothetical situation is encapsulated by the philosophical concept of the philosophical zombie (p-zombie), a creature functionally identical to a conscious human but lacking any internal awareness. The existence of p-zombies, though debated, illustrates the potential inadequacy of purely functional or behavioral criteria in capturing the essence of the psychic.

Moreover, the criteria face scaling issues across species. While certain criteria are well-established for humans (e.g., linguistic self-reporting), applying these same measures to non-verbal animals or

pre-linguistic infants requires highly sensitive proxy measurements, risking both false positives (over-attribution of awareness) and false negatives (missing subtle signs of awareness). The inherent subjectivity of interpreting complex animal behavior often necessitates employing multiple, redundant criteria rather than relying on a single, definitive sign.

6. Ethical and Legal Significance

The determination of whether an entity meets the criteria of the psychic carries profound ethical and legal ramifications, particularly concerning moral status and rights. The acknowledged presence of awareness dictates how society treats non-human animals and how medical decisions are made for patients with impaired consciousness.

In animal welfare, meeting the criteria--especially demonstrating the capacity for suffering, pleasure, and intentional action--is often the prerequisite for granting protections against undue cruelty or exploitation. The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness (2012), for instance, concluded that many non-human animals meet the criteria for consciousness, demanding a reassessment of their moral standing. Similarly, establishing the presence of consciousness in artificial intelligence or highly advanced computational systems is a critical emerging legal and ethical challenge, as the criteria of the psychic will define whether such entities possess rights or obligations.

In clinical medicine, the criteria are vital for diagnosing states of altered consciousness, such as the persistent vegetative state (PVS) or the minimally conscious state (MCS). Specific physiological and behavioral criteria (e.g., responsiveness to commands, evidence of internal communication via fMRI) are used to determine if a patient retains awareness, profoundly affecting end-of-life decisions, palliative care, and the allocation of medical resources. The failure to detect psychic criteria in these challenging clinical situations often leads to the highest degree of ethical uncertainty.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Despite their necessity, the criteria of the psychic are subject to rigorous academic debate, centering largely on whether any finite set of objective markers can truly capture the subjective nature of consciousness.

One major criticism stems from the Hard Problem of Consciousness, coined by philosopher David Chalmers. This problem argues that while science can solve the "easy problems" (identifying the neural mechanisms responsible for function, memory, and behavior), it cannot explain *why* these processes are accompanied by subjective experience. If the criteria only map function, they may fail to address the core psychic reality. Critics contend that relying exclusively on measurable criteria risks confusing correlation with causation, potentially leading to an incomplete or

misleading definition of awareness.

Furthermore, debates exist regarding the potential circularity of the criteria. If the criteria are defined based on behaviors previously associated with human consciousness, they might inherently exclude novel forms of awareness (e.g., alien life forms or radically different nervous systems). This anthropocentric bias limits the universality of the criteria, suggesting that a truly comprehensive definition of the psychic must remain flexible and system-independent, focusing perhaps on abstract concepts like causal efficacy or informational integration rather than specific neuroanatomical structures or human-like behaviors.

Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Consciousness](#)

[The Neural Correlates of Consciousness: An Update](#)

[Wikipedia: Problem of other minds](#)

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