

MULTIPLE DRAFTS HYPOTHESIS

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Multiple Drafts Hypothesis

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

Proponents: Daniel Clement Dennett, Marcel Kinsbourne

1. Core Principles

The **Multiple Drafts Hypothesis** (MDH) posits a revolutionary, decentralized model of consciousness, fundamentally rejecting the notion of a single, privileged locus of subjective experience often termed the Cartesian Theater. According to this theory, proposed primarily by philosopher Daniel Dennett in his seminal 1991 work, *Consciousness Explained*, there is no moment or location where all sensory information "comes together" to be viewed by a centralized observer or "self." Instead, perception, thought, and experience are generated through a continuous process of parallel, stream-of-consciousness interpretations occurring across different brain areas. These various processes--the "drafts"--are constantly being written, edited, and revised, and consciousness is simply the resulting, temporally extended effect of these distributed activities, rather than a cause or a centralized product. The hypothesis insists that any belief about perception is merely one of these simple drafts found in the sensory cortex, emphasizing that the brain is a system of competing and cooperating processors.

A crucial implication of the MDH is the fluidity and non-linearity of subjective timing. If the brain is processing sensory input and forming interpretations simultaneously and asynchronously, the experienced sequence of events may not map directly onto the actual chronological sequence of neural events. Dennett uses this framework to explain puzzling temporal phenomena, such as the phi phenomenon, where the perception of motion seems to precede the sensory input that creates it. MDH resolves such paradoxes by arguing that conscious experience is always a retrospective narrative created by the brain. When we report an experience, we are accessing the latest, most stable "draft" of the narrative available at that moment, which may have been finalized well after the initial sensory event occurred. This perspective shifts the focus from finding the precise neural correlate of a conscious moment to understanding the processes by which the brain constructs a coherent, albeit artificial, timeline of events.

The hypothesis further argues against the existence of qualitative, intrinsic properties of experience--or **qualia**--as traditionally understood in philosophy. Because there is no single vantage point (the Cartesian Theater) where these qualities could be "displayed," the experience itself must be reducible to the functional organization and computational structure of the drafts. Subjective experiences, therefore, are not fundamentally different from other forms of information processing; they are simply the contents of the most dominant, currently accessed drafts. This strongly functionalist and eliminative approach to consciousness ensures that the MDH remains entirely within the boundaries of physicalism and natural science, aiming to explain all phenomena

without resorting to dualism or the postulation of unexplained, non-physical properties.

2. Historical Development and Context

The Multiple Drafts Hypothesis emerged in the late 20th century, specifically formulated by Dennett and Kinsbourne in the early 1990s, at a time when the cognitive sciences were actively grappling with the "hard problem" of consciousness and the challenge of integrating subjective experience into neuroscientific models. The prevailing models often struggled to account for the perceived unity and immediacy of consciousness without invoking some form of centralized integrator, which invariably led back to the metaphor of the homunculus viewing a screen. Dennett recognized that this reliance on a central observer was the fundamental conceptual mistake hindering progress in the field. MDH was therefore developed as a robust, thoroughly materialistic alternative designed to explain subjective phenomena using only distributed, parallel computational mechanisms.

Dennett formalized the MDH in his landmark 1991 book, *Consciousness Explained*, building upon earlier philosophical arguments against centralized mental processing. His collaboration with neurologist Marcel Kinsbourne was crucial, as Kinsbourne provided empirical insights into how brain damage and neurological anomalies often reveal a distributed, rather than unitary, organization of mental functions. They used evidence from experiments concerning sensory timing and perception, such as those conducted by Benjamin Libet, which showed surprising delays and reversals in the subjective experience of time relative to neural activity. Dennett argued that these timing anomalies were not paradoxes requiring dualistic intervention, but precisely what one would expect if consciousness were a set of competing narrative drafts rather than a single, perfectly synchronized stream.

The development of MDH also relied heavily on Dennett's prior philosophical methodology, specifically **Heterophenomenology**, which serves as the prescribed method for studying consciousness under the MDH framework. Heterophenomenology dictates that researchers should treat subjects' verbal reports of their conscious experience (their phenomenology) as data--as a narrative--without assuming the objective truth or internal perfection of that narrative. Instead, the researcher analyzes the subject's self-report alongside objective behavioral and neural data. This methodological stance is essential for MDH, as it prevents the researcher from falling into the Cartesian trap of assuming that the subject's unified, immediate self-report reflects a corresponding, unified, immediate neural event. Consciousness is thus treated as a verbal output or a behavior, fully explainable by physical mechanisms, rather than an internal, privileged substance.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The Narrative Self: According to MDH, the sense of self, or the continuous "I" that experiences

the world, is not a substance but a continuously updated narrative created by the brain's internal processes. This narrative is the most current and comprehensive "draft" compiled from various ongoing sensory and cognitive inputs. The brain constantly weaves this story together to maintain cognitive stability, but this story is always historical, slightly lagging behind the true moment-to-moment neural activity. The continuity of consciousness is thus an illusion maintained by the coherence of the narrative, not by a persistent, unchanging central entity.

Content Fixation: MDH rejects the idea that conscious content is "fixed" at a single moment in time. Instead, content fixation is a matter of degree and duration. An event becomes "conscious" not by being projected onto a central screen, but by gaining sufficient activation or longevity in the distributed processing centers to influence subsequent behavior and memory. The content becomes fixed when the brain commits to one interpretation over others, making that interpretation available for retrieval and verbal report. This process is inherently gradual and competitive, not instantaneous.

The Absence of Hard Qualia: A cornerstone of the hypothesis is the rejection of hard qualia--the idea that subjective experiences have intrinsic, non-physical, ineffable properties (like the "redness" of red). Dennett argues that when we describe the quality of an experience, we are simply reporting on a bundle of functional dispositions and informational differences coded in the brain. The vividness or intensity of an experience is merely the result of complex patterns of processing, and any attempt to isolate a pure, essential quality inevitably leads back to the Cartesian error of seeking a central viewer for that quality.

Parallel Processing Streams: The core mechanism of MDH is that the brain utilizes numerous dedicated processors working simultaneously on sensory data. These processors interpret the data in various ways, creating multiple competing drafts of reality. Only those drafts that successfully "win" the competition--meaning they are robust enough to guide action, influence memory formation, or become verbalized--are considered the contents of consciousness. This model replaces the single stream of consciousness with a multitude of active, competing streams, none of which holds ultimate authority until a behavioral commitment is made.

4. The Rejection of the Cartesian Theater

The Multiple Drafts Hypothesis is perhaps best defined by its unwavering commitment to dismantling the notion of the Cartesian Theater. The Cartesian Theater is a conceptual trap that stems from René Descartes' dualism, suggesting that somewhere in the brain (Descartes suggested the pineal gland, though modern versions locate it vaguely in the cortex), there must be a point where physical input is translated into non-physical subjective experience and viewed by the inner self (the homunculus). Dennett argues that virtually all competing theories of consciousness, even those claiming to be physicalist, inadvertently retain this theater metaphor by

searching for a single neural correlate of consciousness (NCC) or a central moment of integration where subjective experience is finalized.

MDH systematically attacks this unitary view, asserting that seeking the "single moment" of consciousness is like asking where the story of a novel finally resides in the paper--it is nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. The brain does not wait for a perfect, integrated presentation before responding. Instead, perception and action are continuously shaped by the current state of the drafts. If the illusion of unity is maintained, it is due to the brain's incredible efficiency in self-monitoring and narrative synthesis, creating a temporally smooth experience from asynchronous, distributed physical events.

The implications of this rejection are profound for the study of temporal perception. Phenomena like backward referral (where subjects claim to experience a stimulus consciously only after the neural response has occurred) are explained not by mysterious non-physical time travel, but by the brain's willingness to "edit" the narrative retrospectively. The brain waits for the most stable interpretation across multiple processing streams before committing the event to the conscious narrative. Thus, the perceived moment of consciousness is merely the moment the final, dominant draft is committed to memory and report, regardless of when the stimulus actually arrived at the sensory organs. This completely naturalizes the seemingly paradoxical timing issues in consciousness research.

5. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its comprehensive physicalist framework, the Multiple Drafts Hypothesis faces substantial criticism, largely centered on its treatment of subjective experience. The most common critique is that MDH does not explain consciousness but rather **explains it away**. Critics argue that by eliminating the possibility of hard qualia and reducing subjective experience entirely to informational processing and narrative construction, Dennett fails to account for the intrinsic, felt quality of experience--what it is like to be conscious. Philosophers like David Chalmers argue that Dennett has only tackled the "easy problems" of consciousness (the functional aspects), while avoiding the "hard problem" of subjective experience itself.

A second major criticism concerns the inherent instability and arbitrariness of the "drafts." If consciousness is merely a collection of competing narratives, critics question how and why one specific draft achieves dominance and becomes the basis for action and memory, creating the stable illusion of reality we experience. If there is no central mechanism or threshold that determines "conscious entry," then the line between unconscious processing and conscious experience seems blurred to the point of being non-existent, which contradicts our strong subjective sense of being either conscious or not. Furthermore, some theorists believe that eliminating the possibility of a definitive NCC makes the theory unfalsifiable, as there is no specific

phenomenon the theory must account for besides the general ability to report experiences.

Finally, critics from the neuroscientific community often point to alternative models that successfully integrate centralized mechanisms while remaining physicalist, such as the Global Workspace Theory (GWT). GWT, for instance, posits a "global workspace" for broadcasting information, which, while not a Cartesian Theater, acts as a centralized bottleneck for conscious content. Proponents of GWT suggest that this model better captures the observed pattern of widespread, synchronized neural firing that accompanies conscious awareness, whereas MDH's extreme distribution seems difficult to reconcile with the measurable synchrony observed during conscious events. The debate thus often centers on whether consciousness requires a high degree of integration (as GWT suggests) or merely distributed processing (as MDH suggests).

6. Relationship to Other Theories

The Multiple Drafts Hypothesis stands in stark contrast to several leading theories of consciousness. Its main philosophical adversary is any theory that retains elements of the Cartesian Theater, including certain forms of identity theory or emergent dualism. More relevantly, within the cognitive science landscape, MDH serves as a radical counterpoint to Integrated Information Theory (IIT) and Global Workspace Theory (GWT).

While both MDH and GWT (championed by Bernard Baars and later Stanislas Dehaene) are functionalist and physicalist, GWT posits that consciousness arises when information is broadcast to a central, globally accessible working memory system. GWT suggests a specific functional architecture that temporarily concentrates information flow. MDH, conversely, rejects this central broadcast mechanism entirely. For Dennett, the brain's architecture is fundamentally modular and decentralized, and the unity of consciousness is a product of the content, not the architecture itself. The difference is subtle but crucial: GWT seeks a mechanism for integration; MDH explains the appearance of integration as a retrospective narrative effect.

In relation to Integrated Information Theory (IIT), developed by Giulio Tononi, the differences are even more pronounced. IIT focuses on the quantity (Φ) and quality of integrated information within a system, claiming that consciousness is equivalent to the degree of integrated information. IIT is inherently panpsychic and accepts the reality of qualia as intrinsic properties of highly integrated physical systems. MDH, being strictly functionalist and eliminative regarding qualia, offers an explanation rooted purely in computational dynamics and narrative construction, holding that consciousness is not an intrinsic property of information processing but rather an emergent, functional capacity of the whole system. These differing views highlight the fundamental divide in consciousness research between theories that prioritize subjective experience (IIT) and those that prioritize a purely objective, mechanistic explanation (MDH).

7. Further Reading

[Daniel Clement Dennett \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Marcel Kinsbourne \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Consciousness Explained by Daniel Dennett \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Cartesian Theater \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Qualia \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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