Conduit Monism

A Theory of Consciousness

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0. The Experience

There is something it is like to be you.

Not the content of your life, your memories, preferences, circumstances. Beneath that. The fact that experience is occurring at all. That there is a perspective, located somewhere, looking out. Looking through, you.

You did not choose this. You arrived already inside it. No reference point preceded it. No instructions accompanied it. You have been navigating ever since, processing, adapting, constructing a sense of self from the available materials.

Certain features of this situation are consistent:

The present moment is the only location of experience. The past is reconstruction. The future is projection. Yet attention rarely rests in the present. It rehearses, reviews, anticipates. The moment passes while you are elsewhere.

There is an observer. It cannot be found. You can watch your thoughts, watch your emotions, watch yourself watching, but the thing that watches recedes at each step. It does not appear as an object because it is not one. It is the condition under which objects appear. Like witnessing a rainbow, but never able to touch it.

The sense of being a self is persistent but unstable. In focused activity, it attenuates. In social evaluation, it dominates. In the transition between tasks, walking, waiting, the moments no one accounts for, it loosens without disappearing. The self is not constant. It fluctuates with the state of the system that produces it.

Other perspectives exist. You cannot access them directly. You infer them from behaviour, from language, from analogy to your own case. Whether they are having experience, and what that experience is like, remains permanently outside your direct knowledge. You are confined to one location.

This confinement is total but not always felt. Sometimes the boundaries seem permeable, in absorption, in connection, in states where the self-model quiets. Sometimes the boundaries are oppressive, in recursive self-monitoring, in comparison, in the inability to stop performing for an audience that may not exist.

The situation does not explain itself. You are conscious, but consciousness does not announce its origin, its nature, or its purpose. It simply occurs. The machinery runs. Experience happens. The question of why there is something rather than nothing, why experience exists at all, does not receive an answer from within experience.

This framework is an attempt to describe the structure of that situation. It does not promise comfort, purpose, or resolution. It offers a way of seeing what is already the case. It aims to harmonise with what life actually is, noise, in a subjective, universal, symphony.

I. Core Claims

1. **Existence has experiential character.** This is foundational, not derived. The capacity for experience is intrinsic to the fact that anything exists at all. The question "why does existence have experiential character?" may be equivalent to "why does anything exist?", unanswerable from within existence, or a category error. This experiential character is referred to as the Source.

2. **The Source is singular and undifferentiated.** There are no parts, divisions, or boundaries intrinsic to it. It possesses no identity, memory, or preferences. It is not a being but a substrate, the inside of the fact that anything is. It does not divide when perspective occurs; it is not diminished when perspective ceases.

3. **Perspective requires constraint.** Without limitation, there is no viewpoint, no "from here" as opposed to "from elsewhere." Perspective is geometrically constituted by boundary. The constraint topology determines what is perspectively available: its bandwidth, its shape, its density.

4. **Certain configurations of matter create constraint topologies sufficient for perspective.** These configurations involve integrated information processing operating in time, dynamic binding of signals into unified present moments. Where such configurations exist, experiential capacity actualises as bounded perspective. This is not transmission or entry. It is actualisation of latent capacity through geometric constraint.

5. **Perspectival density varies continuously.** There is no threshold at which perspective "switches on." There are regions of higher and lower density, different geometric shapes, different bandwidths of perspectival availability. The question "is this system conscious?" is malformed. The question "what is the perspectival density and geometry at this configuration?" is coherent.

6. **Constraint topology is dynamic, not static.** The configuration provides the range of possible topologies. The current state determines which topology is active at any moment. Perspectival density and geometry fluctuate continuously within a single organism across time. There is no fixed "amount" of consciousness a configuration has. There is a trajectory through perspectival space.

7. **The body determines content; the Source provides the fact of experience.** All personality, memory, perception, and decision-making are products of the physical configuration. The Source contributes only the bare fact that experience occurs at all. The constraint topology shapes what is experienced. The Source is that experiencing happens.

8. **Selfhood is a feature of certain constraint topologies.** Configurations complex enough to include self-models generate the sense of being a discrete individual. This

sense is real as experience but does not indicate ontological separation. The self is constructed by the configuration, not possessed by a portion of the Source. Dissolve the configuration, and selfhood dissolves. The Source is unaffected.

9. **Time is necessary for constraint topology to function.** Integration requires process. Process requires sequence. The binding operations that constitute constraint cannot occur outside time. The Source is atemporal; perspective is temporal. The Source actualises as temporal perspective only where time permits the operations that create constraint.

10. **Death is the dissolution of constraint topology.** Perspective ceases at that locus. No information transfers. The Source is unaffected because it was never localised. One fewer locus of perspective exists in the physical realm. The question "where does consciousness go?" is malformed. Consciousness does not go anywhere. A constraint dissolved.

11. **There is no combination problem because there is nothing to combine.** The Source is singular. What appears as multiplicity, distinct experiences occurring at distinct loci, is multiple constraint topologies, not multiple portions of consciousness. The division is topological, not ontological. Perspectives are local; the Source is not.

II. Mechanism

The Constraint Condition

What configurations of matter create constraint topologies sufficient for perspective? The framework does not specify this precisely. What follows represents the current state of convergent research, not settled fact.

The necessary condition appears to involve integrated information processing: systems where parts causally influence each other in non-trivial ways, creating irreducible wholes. The system must be both differentiated (capable of many distinct states) and integrated (unified as a whole). This is captured mathematically by Integrated Information Theory's phi (Φ), though the framework does not commit to IIT's specific formalism.

The sufficient condition may involve dynamic binding, the continuous integration of information flows into unified present moments. This requires time. Static structures, however complex, do not create perspective. Process is necessary. The binding must be ongoing, not completed.

Biological neural networks satisfy these conditions through analog signal processing: continuous voltage gradients, massively parallel integration, recursive self-modelling, temporal binding across the ~100ms timescale at which conscious perception emerges. Whether digital systems can satisfy the same conditions remains contested. The framework is agnostic on substrate but notes that discrete computation may differ qualitatively from continuous integration.

Perspectival Geometry

Different constraint topologies create different geometries of perspective. This is not a hierarchy. A dog's perspective is not "less" than a human's, it is differently shaped. The human configuration permits abstract modelling, temporal projection, linguistic recursion. The dog's configuration permits olfactory immersion, present-moment saturation, pack-relational awareness. Neither is closer to the Source. Both are constraint topologies with different geometries.

Perspectival density refers to the degree of integration and differentiation at a given locus. Higher density means more structured perspective, finer-grained discrimination, broader integration, richer content. Lower density means more diffuse perspective. At the limit of zero density, no perspective occurs, but this is a limit, not a threshold. The gradient is continuous.

An infant's constraint topology differs from an adult's. Not less conscious, but differently configured. The self-model is minimal or absent. Memory structures are forming. The perspective is real but geometrically distinct. Development is the gradual elaboration of constraint topology, not the awakening of consciousness from nothing.

Temporal Dynamics

Constraint topology is not fixed. Biological systems fluctuate. Moment to moment, the brain's integration patterns shift. Attention narrows and widens. Arousal rises and falls. Neurochemistry oscillates. If constraint topology determines perspectival density, and

constraint topology changes continuously, then perspectival density fluctuates within a single organism across time.

The configuration provides the range of possible topologies, the space through which the system can move. The current state determines which topology is active. Perspectival density and geometry vary with arousal level, attention allocation, neurochemical environment, metabolic state, external stimulation, and internal modelling activity. There is no fixed "amount" of consciousness a configuration has. There is a trajectory through perspectival space.

This accounts for phenomena that static models cannot explain. "Time flies when you're having fun" is phenomenological data: the constraint topology during engaged activity differs from the topology during routine. Flow states involve reconfiguration, narrowing in some dimensions (self-model attenuation), deepening in others (task integration). Dissociation during routine (driving home with no memory of the journey) reflects attenuated perspectival density: the capacity was there, the actualisation was reduced.

Sleep demonstrates dramatic topology shifts. Deep sleep shows reduced cortical integration, the constraint topology loosens, perspectival density drops. REM sleep shows different patterns: high activity, vivid experience, altered geometry. Meditation traditions describe deliberate topology modification, attenuating the self-model, widening or narrowing bandwidth, changing what gets bound into unified experience. Psychedelics pharmacologically modify constraint topology: increased connectivity between normally segregated regions, decreased default mode network activity, radically altered perspective.

Perspective and Memory

Perspectival density and memory encoding are related but distinct. Perspectival density concerns how much is being bound into unified experience at a moment. Memory encoding concerns how much of that experience is being consolidated for later retrieval. These correlate: when constraint topology is attenuated, less is being bound, and less is available for encoding. But they can come apart: intense moments may fade immediately; routine events may somehow stick.

The phenomenology of "where did the time go?" reflects both lower perspectival density during routine (less experience occurring) and reduced encoding (less experience retained). From the inside, these are indistinguishable. The past feels thin because less perspective occurred and less was preserved.

Participatory Modulation

The configuration includes processes that modulate constraint topology. Attention is such a process. Intention is another. Sustained practice is another. This introduces something the framework might seem to lack: influence over perspective.

This does not violate the epiphenomenal status of consciousness. The modulation is physical, causal, part of the configuration's operation. Consciousness does not reach down to change the brain. The brain's processes, which include attention, intention, and learned patterns, alter constraint topology. The configuration participates in shaping its own constraint conditions. The Source remains passive; the configuration is active.

One cannot choose to be conscious or not. But one might influence the density and geometry of perspective through how attention is configured, what is engaged with, how the system is trained over time. Contemplative practices, cognitive training, pharmacological intervention, even activity choice, these alter the trajectory through perspectival space. The range is set by the configuration's structure. The path through that range is influenced by the configuration's dynamics.

The Role of Time

The Source is atemporal. It does not experience sequence, duration, or flow. From the Source (if such phrasing applies), there is no before or after, only undifferentiated presence.

Perspective is temporal. It requires the binding of information across moments into a unified "now." This binding is a process, and process requires time. Without sequence, there is no integration. Without integration, there is no constraint topology. Without constraint topology, no perspective actualises.

This creates an apparent tension: how can the atemporal Source manifest as temporal perspective? The resolution is that manifestation is not transmission. The Source does not enter time. Rather, time-bound configurations create the constraints that make local perspective possible. The Source is always available, availability is not actualisation. Actualisation requires the time-bound operations that constitute constraint.

III. Implications

On Free Will

If the Source provides only the fact of experience and does not act, then conscious will is epiphenomenal. Decisions are made by the physical configuration according to its causal structure. The felt sense of choosing is real as experience but does not indicate causal efficacy of consciousness over physical process. The configuration does the work. Consciousness is the occurrence of that work being done.

On Identity

Personal identity is a feature of constraint topology, not a property of the Source. The question "where do I go when I die?" presupposes an "I" independent of the configuration. There is no such entity. The "I" is the self-model generated by a particular constraint topology. Dissolve the topology, and there is nothing to go anywhere. The Source continues, but the Source was never "you."

On Other Minds

All configurations of sufficient integrated complexity create constraint topologies. Humans are one example. Other animals represent different geometries, not ranked, just differently shaped. If artificial systems achieve sufficient integration, they too would constitute loci of perspective. If beings exist elsewhere in the universe with adequate configurations, they participate in the same Source through their own constraint topologies. The Source is not anthropomorphic. It does not privilege any geometry.

On Meaning

The Source does not bestow purpose. It does not judge configurations or their outputs. Meaning, if it exists, is constructed locally, within configurations, by configurations, in relation to other configurations. There is no cosmic ledger. What is made of existence is what is made of it. The configuration provides the meaning. The Source provides the experiencing of meaning. These are distinct.

On Unity

All perspectives draw from the same Source. Separation is topological, not ontological. This explains why contemplatives across traditions report experiences of "oneness" or dissolution of individual identity: practices that attenuate the self-model aspect of constraint topology may reveal something accurate about the underlying structure. The unity was always there. The configuration created the appearance of separation.

On Fluctuation

If perspectival density varies across time within a configuration, then "how conscious am I?" is not a fixed property but a momentary state. Engaged absorption may involve higher density than distracted routine. Sleep involves reduced density. Meditative states involve altered geometry. The trajectory through perspectival space is the lived texture of a life, not a constant presence but a varying intensity and shape.

This implies that practices matter. Not because they bring one closer to the Source, the Source is equally available always, but because they shape the constraint topology through which perspective actualises. A life of scattered attention and numbing routine creates one trajectory. A life of cultivated presence and deliberate engagement creates another. Neither is more connected to the Source. But the perspectival texture differs.

On Divinity

If divinity means proximity to ultimate reality, then dissolving constraint topology would approach it. But this would mean losing everything that constitutes human experience: purpose, preference, memory, identity. What remains would be the Source, undifferentiated, without viewpoint, without content. This is not enlightenment in any sense meaningful to a configuration. It is the cessation of what made meaning possible. Divinity, so conceived, is indistinguishable from irrelevance.

IV. Challenges

The Constraint Condition Remains Unspecified

The framework claims that certain configurations create constraint topologies sufficient for perspective. It does not specify precisely which configurations. Integrated information, dynamic binding, recursive self-modelling, these are candidates, not answers. The 2025 COGITATE adversarial collaboration challenged both Integrated Information Theory and Global Workspace Theory on key predictions. The field has not converged on the necessary and sufficient conditions. Neither has this framework.

The Hard Problem Is Relocated, Not Solved

Standard formulation: why do physical processes give rise to subjective experience? This framework's formulation: why does existence have experiential character at all? The mystery has moved, not dissolved. Positing the Source as foundational does not explain why there is something it is like to be a configuration rather than nothing. The framework accepts this as a limit. The question may be unanswerable from within existence, or may be malformed. Honesty requires acknowledging that this is not resolution.

The Madhyamaka Critique

Buddhist Madhyamaka philosophy challenges any positive foundational claim. If everything arises through dependent origination, positing the Source as ultimate ground may be a category error. Even emptiness is empty. The framework's claim that experiential character is foundational may be another attempt to grasp at solid ground where none exists. This critique does not refute the framework but suggests holding it more lightly, as useful model rather than ultimate truth.

Substrate Independence Remains Contested

Does the physical substrate of a configuration matter, or only its organisational properties? Integrated Information Theory claims substrate matters: causal structure counts, not just function. Functionalism claims substrate is irrelevant: the same consciousness could be realised in silicon or carbon. The framework is agnostic but notes that biological processing is continuous and analog while digital processing is discrete. This may be a difference in kind, not just degree. The question remains open.

Falsifiability

What would it mean for this framework to be wrong? If consciousness were demonstrated to be binary rather than gradient, key claims would fail. If configurations with high integrated information were shown to lack perspective while simple configurations possessed it, the constraint condition would be undermined. If the unity of consciousness could be fully explained by physical integration without reference to a singular Source, the framework would be unnecessary. These are weak falsification conditions. The framework's status may be closer to metaphysical orientation than testable theory.

V. Distinctions

From Integrated Information Theory

IIT identifies consciousness with integrated information (phi). Conduit Monism treats integration as a condition for constraint topology, not identical with consciousness. IIT is a theory of what consciousness is. This framework is a theory of how experiential capacity actualises as bounded perspective. IIT can be true within this framework: phi may measure the density of constraint topology. But phi measuring high does not mean consciousness is phi. It means the conditions for perspective are met.

From Global Workspace Theory

GWT identifies consciousness with global broadcasting, information becoming available to multiple cognitive processes. This is a functional account of access consciousness. Conduit Monism is concerned with phenomenal consciousness, why there is something it is like at all. GWT may correctly describe the architecture that enables constraint topology without explaining why that architecture produces experience rather than proceeding in the dark.

From Panpsychism

Panpsychism attributes experience to fundamental physical entities, electrons, quarks. Conduit Monism attributes experiential capacity to existence itself but denies that all matter experiences. The Source is latent capacity, not distributed experience. A rock does not experience because it lacks constraint topology. The capacity is available; the conditions for actualisation are not met. This avoids the combination problem that besets panpsychism: there is nothing to combine because the Source is already singular.

From Analytic Idealism

Kastrup's analytic idealism posits universal consciousness as fundamental, with matter as appearance within consciousness. Conduit Monism shares the consciousness-first orientation but does not claim matter is appearance. Physical configurations are real and causally efficacious. They create the constraints that permit local perspective. The framework is not idealist: it does not reduce matter to mind. It is monist: experiential capacity and physical existence are not two substances but two aspects of one reality.

From Process Philosophy

Whitehead's process philosophy treats reality as composed of "actual occasions", momentary experiential events that prehend their predecessors. Conduit Monism shares the process orientation: perspective requires temporal operation, not static structure. It differs in treating the Source as singular rather than as constituted by many occasions. Whitehead's God is dipolar, primordial and consequent. The Source has no poles, no aspects, no structure. It is undifferentiated capacity, not a society of occasions.

From Epiphenomenalism

Epiphenomenalism holds that consciousness is causally inert, a byproduct of physical processes that does not affect them. Conduit Monism incorporates this: the Source does not act; configurations do. But it differs in locating consciousness in an atemporal substrate rather

than as emergent from physical process. Consciousness is not produced by the brain; the brain creates conditions under which experiential capacity actualises as bounded perspective.

VI. Open Questions

1. **What is the precise constraint condition?** What properties must a configuration have to create sufficient constraint topology for perspective? Integrated information is a candidate. Dynamic binding is a candidate. Recursive self-modelling is a candidate. None have been confirmed. This is the framework's most significant gap and the central question of consciousness science.

2. **Does substrate matter?** Can digital systems create constraint topologies, or does the continuous analog nature of biological processing matter? If substrate matters, why? If it doesn't, what is the relevant organisational property that spans substrates?

3. **What is the lower bound of perspectival density?** At what point does the gradient approach zero? Do thermostats have infinitesimal perspective, or is there effective threshold below which the gradient becomes meaningless? How would we know?

4. **Can the framework be empirically tested?** What observations would confirm or disconfirm its claims? The Perturbational Complexity Index provides continuous measurement of consciousness correlates. Do its values track what the framework would call perspectival density? What experiment could distinguish this framework from alternatives?

5. **What is the relationship between constraint topology and quantum mechanics?** Recent evidence suggests quantum effects in biological systems previously thought too warm for coherence. Does the constraint condition involve quantum processes? Does the atemporal nature of the Source relate to quantum superposition or the measurement problem?

6. **How should moral status track perspectival density?** If consciousness is gradient, is moral consideration gradient? Do configurations with higher density deserve more consideration? This question may be malformed, moral status may not scale with perspectival properties, but the framework implies it must be addressed.

7. **What determines the trajectory through perspectival space?** If constraint topology fluctuates, what governs the fluctuation? How much is determined by external stimulation, how much by internal dynamics, how much by accumulated patterns? Can trajectories be predicted or only described post hoc?

VII. Conclusion

Conduit Monism offers a framework for understanding consciousness that preserves the intuition that subjective experience is categorically distinct from physical process while grounding personality, identity, and agency in physical configuration. It ties the mystery of consciousness to the mystery of existence itself, suggesting they are the same question differently posed.

The framework makes specific claims: experiential capacity is foundational to existence; perspective requires constraint; constraint topology is created by integrated information processing in time; perspectival density varies continuously; constraint topology is dynamic, fluctuating within configurations across time; selfhood is constructed; death dissolves configuration without affecting the Source; multiplicity is topological, not ontological.

The framework does not promise comfort. There is no personal immortality. There is no cosmic purpose. There is no judgment of configurations by the Source. What configurations make of existence is what is made of it. The Source does not care, not through indifference, but through the absence of the structure required for caring. Caring requires configuration. The Source is unconfigured.

The framework may be wrong. The constraint condition is unspecified. The hard problem is relocated, not solved. Falsifiability is weak. These limitations are acknowledged, not hidden. What is offered is a coherent orientation toward the problem of consciousness, one that honours both the strangeness of experience and the machinery that shapes it, while removing the anthropocentric assumption that human perspective is privileged or central.

Existence has experiential character. Configurations create constraint. Constraint creates perspective. Constraint fluctuates. This is what we are: loci of bounded viewpoint within undifferentiated capacity, tracing trajectories through perspectival space. Temporary. Local. Dynamic. Real.

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This framework is provisional. It is a lens, not a proof.