

Conduit Monism

A Theory of Consciousness

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Conduit Monism v7.0

Existence has experiential character. Configurations create constraint. Constraint creates perspective.

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.

You did not choose this. You arrived already inside it. No reference point preceded 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.

There is an observer. It cannot be found. You can watch your thoughts, watch your emotions, 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.

The situation does not explain itself. You are conscious, but consciousness does not announce its origin. It simply occurs. The machinery runs.

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.

I. Core Claims

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?" is treated as a limit condition, equivalent to "why is there something rather than nothing?".

This experiential character is referred to as the Source.

The Source is singular and undifferentiated. It possesses no identity, memory, or preferences. It is not a being but a substrate. It does not "act" or "enter" matter. It is the carrier wave of existence, omnipresent but phenomenologically silent until constrained.

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.

Perspective obtains where configurations create constraint.

Certain configurations of matter satisfy three conditions: Structural Integration, Temporal Process, and Re-entrant Binding. Where these exist, the undifferentiated Source is locally isolated into a bounded perspective. This is not a process of "entry" or "actualization" (which implies movement in time), but of permissibility. The configuration acts as a prism; the Source is the light. The prism does not create the light, but it determines the spectrum and direction.

The Asymptotic Threshold.

There is no binary switch where consciousness "turns on". However, the three conditions are not merely additive; they are multiplicative.

As the integrity of re-entrant binding approaches zero, perspectival density approaches zero asymptotically. Below a critical threshold of integration, while the capacity (Source) remains, the perspective (Conduit) approaches zero without constituting a distinct perspectival interior. It does not snap off; it dissolves into the background noise of the universe.

The body determines content; the Source provides the fact.

All personality, memory, perception, and decision-making are products of the physical configuration. The Source contributes only the bare fact that experience occurs. The configuration creates the "what"; the Source provides the "that."

II. Mechanism

The Constraint Condition

Perspective obtains where a configuration satisfies three conditions jointly. These are continuous constraints, not binary gates.

1. **Structural Integration (Phi).** The system must be integrated such that the whole cannot be reduced to independent parts. This provides the *capacity* for a unified perspective.
2. **Temporal Process (Active Inference).** The system must use this structure to minimize surprise (entropy) over time. This provides the *trajectory* of the perspective. Static structure (like a crystal) has no duration.
3. **Re-entrant Binding.** The immediate past must causally constrain the present. The system must "touch itself" through time.

Re-entrant Binding: The Video Buffer Problem

A video buffer holds information from Frame 1 (past) and Frame 2 (present), but they are causally isolated. They are neighbors, not partners. The buffer contains data but creates no "now".

In a conscious configuration, the past is not stored; it is constitutive.

When you hear a melody, you do not hear Note C then Note E—you hear the interval. The memory of Note C fundamentally alters the experience of Note E. The past creates a constraint that shapes the present moment.

This structural interference of past-on-present generates the "thick now" necessary for perspective. A hard drive stores the past; a consciousness integrates it.

The Gradient

- **Zero Integration (Thermostat/Video Buffer):** No re-entrant binding. Perspectival density approaches zero.
- **Immediate Binding (Simple Organisms):** Re-entrant integration of the immediate past creates a vivid "now" but with a short horizon. The perspective is reactive.
- **Deep Binding (Complex Animals/Humans):** High integration combined with counterfactual simulation. The system binds modeled futures into the present moment. This constitutes **temporal depth**—the ability to run simulations of self-preservation.

Participatory Modulation

The configuration includes processes that modulate constraint topology (e.g., attention, arousal, neurochemistry).

This accounts for the fluctuation of experience. "Time flies" or "flow states" are descriptions of specific topological shapes.

Clarification on Epiphenomenalism: Covariation between physical modulation and perspectival density does not imply downward causation; it reflects that both are descriptions of the same physical reconfiguration from different explanatory stances.

III. Liminal Configurations (The Stress Test)

To test the validity of Conduit Monism, we must examine cases where the constraint topology degrades or fractures.

- Dementia & The Dissolution of Self:
In advanced Alzheimer's, the "Self-Model" (narrative identity, temporal depth) erodes as memory structures fail. However, re-entrant binding of the immediate present often remains intact until the very end. The framework predicts that Perspective (the "lights are on") remains long after Personhood (the "who") has vanished. This confirms that Selfhood is a geometric feature of the configuration, not the Source.
- Split-Brain (Corpus Callosotomy):
When structural integration is severed between hemispheres, the topology bifurcates. The framework predicts two distinct loci of perspective, each with lower integration (phi) than the whole, but each retaining the re-entrant binding necessary for a "now." This is not the Source dividing; it is one window becoming two narrower windows.
- Anesthesia Gradients:
Propofol collapses the re-entrant loops required for binding. As the binding coefficient drops, perspective slides down the asymptotic curve toward zero. It does not "switch off"; the "thick now" becomes infinitely thin until it is indistinguishable from non-existence.
- Locked-In Syndrome:
Full constraint topology with output isolation predicts high perspectival density despite behavioral invisibility, consistent with patient reports of preserved experience.

IV. The Explanatory Role of the Source

Why posit the Source at all? Why not simply say "brain activity equals consciousness"?

1. **Ontological Necessity:** Physical descriptions describe structure, function, and behavior. They do not describe *what it is like* to be that structure. Without the Source, experience must emerge *ex nihilo* (a miracle) or be dismissed as an illusion (eliminativism).
2. **The Axiom of Interiority:** The Source serves as the axiom that **interiority is intrinsic to existence**. It does no mechanistic work. It does not explain *why* we see red or *how* we do math (configurations explain that). It explains *why there is an experience of doing math at all*.

3. **Prevention of Dualism:** By defining the Source as "existence-as-such," we avoid treating consciousness as a "ghost" that enters the machine. It is the metal of the machine, felt from the inside.

V. Evolutionary Necessity

The Cost of Perspective:

High-density topologies are metabolically expensive (NESS maintenance). The brain consumes 20% of the body's energy.

The Function of the Conduit:

Perspective allows for Prediction via Simulation.

Organisms with zero temporal depth must test survival strategies in reality. If they fail, they die.

Organisms with high temporal depth can test strategies in their generative models. They can "die" in the simulation to avoid dying in reality.

Evolution selected for architectures that happen to isolate the Source because that isolation (perspective) enables the "thick now" required for simulation.

VI. Implications

- **On Identity:** You are a pattern of interference, not a solid object. The "I" is a feature of the topology. Dissolve the constraint, and the "I" vanishes. The Source remains, but it is not "you".
- **On Death:** Death is the dissolution of constraint. The prism breaks. The light returns to undifferentiated ubiquity. There is no personal survival, because the person was the shape of the prism.
- **On Meaning:** The Source is indifferent. It lacks the structure required to care. Meaning is a local construction of the configuration. It is real to the configuration, but not cosmic.

VII. Empirical Anchors & Falsifiability

While the Source is metaphysical, the **Constraint Condition** is physical and testable.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Perspectival Density should correlate with **Re-entrant Loop Integrity** (e.g., as measured by the Perturbational Complexity Index or PCI).

- **Hypothesis 2:** Disruption of re-entrant binding (via feedback-inhibiting anesthetics) should eliminate perspective *before* it eliminates sensory processing (feed-forward).
- **Falsification:** If a system is found which possesses high structural integration and re-entrant binding but demonstrates no perspectival character (a "philosophical zombie"), the Constraint Condition is insufficient.

VIII. Open Questions

- **The Lower Bound:** Does the asymptotic curve ever truly hit zero? Do thermostats have infinitesimal perspective, or is there an effective threshold below which the gradient becomes meaningless?
- **Substrate Independence:** Does the continuous analog nature of biological processing matter, or can digital systems create sufficient constraint topology?
- **Inter-subjective Coordination:** How do topologically separate perspectives coordinate via language, culture, and institutions? If separation is topological rather than ontological, does this imply a mechanism for empathy or shared meaning beyond mere signaling?
- **AI Consciousness:** Do recurrent architectures in large language models currently create low-density constraint topologies, or do they lack the re-entrant binding required for a "thick now"?

IX. Conclusion

Conduit Monism offers a framework that preserves the strangeness of experience while grounding personality and agency in physical configuration.

It replaces the binary question "Is it conscious?" with the topological question "What is the geometry of this perspective?".

It locates the "Self" in the fragility of the constraint, and the "Fact of Experience" in the permanence of the Source.

We are loci of bounded viewpoint within undifferentiated capacity.

Temporary. Local. Dynamic. Real.

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Developed in collaboration with AI systems (Claude, Gemini, ChatGPT, Grok)

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