

# Is Matter Sentience?—A Brief Inquiry into Consciousness, Language and Reality

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This text is a simplified version of the full argument I made in a paper titled [Consciousness, Mathematics and Reality: A Unified Phenomenology](#). Without proper context, the hypothesis I put forth here might feel counterintuitive, outrageous or extravagantly ambitious to the point of speculation, so if you are the kind of intellectual who might be disinclined to even contemplate arguments that question what seem like foundational metaphysical presuppositions, I encourage you to approach this as if it were fiction and, hopefully, by the end of the text, that fiction will have transformed into reality. If not, I shall endeavor to amuse the scholar with ineptly covert intellectual sophistry befitting exactly the pseudointellectual of their expectation. If you want a methodical academic argument with appropriate and detailed references, I encourage you to read the paper—this article will be a more colloquial presentation.

Essentially, I would like to address four fundamental philosophical questions through a single unified framework.

1. What is consciousness—why is it that we are conscious, able to perceive reality, and some things seem not to be? What is physical and what is psychological? What is the connection between those two seemingly disparate worlds?
2. What is the Universe made of—what is the stuff from which the Universe is built? What are particles, waves, atoms and what is information? What is physics trying to model? What are these things, independently of observation, in and of themselves?
3. What is language—how is it that some things may be used to describe other things? What does it mean to reference something? Can anything be clearly defined or is every definition circular? Do categories exist? Why are categories vague?
4. What is the difference between physical and transcendental—where do abstract mathematical objects reside? Is there a transcendental realm independent of the physical realm?

Clearly, my audacity has no boundaries, and the contemptuous scholar was right—this is going to be a dialectical argument that will ultimately prove to be unfalsifiable. To that I say: almost certainly yes. Nonetheless, I will attempt to provide a hypothesis more parsimonious than the prevailing ones.

Consider John. John is an adult human male holding a piece of rock in his hand. John is looking at the rock. He sees the rock. He observes the rock's hard surface, its little crevices, its brownish color. John says, "the rock is in my hand". John is only partly right, of course. John is conscious—a fact to which his consciousness itself is a testimony—and within the horizons of his conscious experience he sees what he labels as "his hand", doing what he labels "holding", what he labels "a rock" in what he labels "a hand". Therefore, *the rock is in his hand*, to the degree his mental representation of the situation reflects the exact noumenal reality (objective reality outside his consciousness). John is an adult, and his brain has, over the years, built an extraordinarily complex representation of space, time and causality, so consistent that it seldom breaks down or needs updating. As far as John is concerned, the image of the rock in his hand is the same as the noumenal reality. The fact that the rock emits imperceivable gamma radiation is not supported by his visual system and thus is, along with an abundance of other facts about this thing he calls a rock, absent from his representation. Nonetheless, John is convinced that the image of him holding the rock is the reality. However, Jane, the neuroscientist, sees a different picture: by using complex screening devices, she can ascertain the exact locus of the image within John's brain—the image of his hand holding the rock is embedded across very specific neurons and these neurons are a subset of a larger set of very specific neurons that embed John's overall conscious experience. Simply put, there are elementary particles which make up the *physical token* equivalent to John's consciousness and, analogously, there are those which make up the token of the image holding the rock. If we were to nudge the atoms that make up this token, we would alter John's conscious experience and his perception of the image. John is intelligent, though. He knows that there are things about that rock that he does not know. The rock is a thing in the physical world, and, unlike him—he thinks—it is inanimate: it does not possess consciousness.

Interestingly, everything that John believes represents him, as a conscious entity, is manifested to him, to the *ego* component of his psyche (the center of what he thinks of as himself), as a phenomenon—a thing that bares a kind of liveliness: the colorness of color, the soundness of sound, the realness of thought. His ego cannot know of something unless that something presents itself to the ego as a piece of phenomenal information, be it a thought, an emotion, a perception, or some other form of *qualia*. Everything that John's consciousness has ever experienced, everything he has ever known or perceived, has always been only phenomenal and never inanimate. Even if he could claim that something was inanimate, the aspects of it which he could perceive, grasp, or ponder would always present to him as part of his consciousness. He never experienced a direct account of the inanimate—he only believes such a thing to exist. For Jane, it is the same. Yet, at the moment she is taking a peek into John's brain, looking for the neural tokens of his mental representation, she cannot help but feel the same way about his brain as John does about the rock: to her the part embedding his consciousness seems inanimate. While she believes that there should be a real consciousness there, as there is one in her brain, John has no such belief about the rock. They both hold the paradoxical belief that nature prefers only specific brain configurations when electing what may or may not be conscious. It may also be that when John and Jane say "consciousness" they really mean a specific *kind* of consciousness they can relate to and identify with—namely human ego consciousness.

as inanimate representations loosely imagined as “atom cores” surrounded by “electron clouds”. These are all approximations—words and representations describing the real thing which is, in and of itself, an instance of some kind of sentience. This is not to say atoms have memory, or emotion, or self-awareness, or perception, of course, but that they are rudimentary fragments of consciousness, sentient building blocks of a more complex and richer consciousness. The Universe consists of connected bits of conscious information—entangled consciousnesslets—elementary pixels of consciousness, which we, when observing them, describe using either language or mathematical formalism as atoms, particles, waves or whatever else we may eventually discover to improve our theories’ predictive powers. That way, John’s ego consciousness is simply a highly dense and integrated coupling of phenomenal information. A rock does not integrate information nearly as densely as a human brain, and so, the coupling of its constituent elements is looser and thus, the “consciousness” of the rock is not nearly as rich and vivid as the one of John’s frontal lobe. Nonetheless, the substrate of the Universe—the thing which the Universe consists of—is a kind of consciousness. “Matter” is just another name for it given under the presupposition that whatever is outside our human consciousness must be inanimate. So, the brain token does not contain or give rise to consciousness. It is that consciousness. We are simply rejecting the dualist view by which there are two aspects of reality (the physical and the psychological) in favor of a more parsimonious claim by which they are simply two different description systems for explaining the same underlying phenomenal reality, each with greater predictive potency in its respective domain. Nonetheless, they both use language to describe the world and they both must rely on assumed predicates—axioms about the world.

If the reader is not convinced, blame not the author but the language he must employ. The very foundations of language are vague and thus must be all theories built upon it. Language only conveys meaning in so far as the listener shares predicates with the narrator. Had you shared my prior knowledge and experience, it would have sufficed that I said, “the universe is a structure of entangled phenomenal information describing itself” and by that unique sequence of semantic references I would have prompted you into connecting your existing knowledge precisely in the way I exemplified and, consequently, into understanding the whole of my argument. My statement would have seemed almost obvious. On the other hand, if you had no preconceptions upon which this hypothesis is built, it would be a tall order to convey my point—the entire sentence would seem like jumbled nonsense. Surely—the contemptuous scholar rebukes—had the author made a more mathematical account, the argument might have been more compelling.

Consider Max. Max is a mathematician. Max knows that any mathematical system built on axioms is incomplete and he wants to build a foundational mathematical system devoid of axioms. He knows that every time he introduces an axiom, be it deliberately or implicitly, he *collapses* the space of logical possibilities to only those that follow from his axioms. How does he get around that? Maybe mathematics is a closed system, like a dictionary in which every word is a logical axiom, where one can arrive at any axiom starting from any other? He elaborates his proof on paper, step by logical step, meticulously writing down the mathematical symbols which he, as he writes, reads out loud in spoken language. Every mathematical expression ever written down—he realizes—can be, albeit clumsily, translated to English. However hard he tries to contain the proof on paper, some knowledge, some implicit axiom, remains outside: the very language he uses carries an implicit meaning which he must include on the paper. Yet, where is the meaning of the language itself contained? In a dictionary? What are the axiomatic words from which we derive all others? He knows them, of course: he knows what a color *is*, but he cannot put that piece of phenomenal information onto a sheet of paper. He has, of course, read Jane’s manuscript on the identity between matter and psyche—to say that his consciousness contains the original axioms is to say that his neural token contains the axioms. Thus, he, Max the mathematician, the physical human being, must be included in the proof—he is part of the proof. Yet, he is a product of his environment and biology, of years of learning and years of human evolution: his body *derives* from the rest of the Universe. Max knows a bit of physics: whenever one physical system interacts with another, the function determining the space of all possible future outcomes *collapses* into the space of futures determined by the combined pasts of the two systems. Mathematics may well be a closed system—he realizes—but it is not separate from the physical world: that closed system is the Universe itself. The transcendental is embedded across the physical: they are one and the same.

Whether the Universe is a mathematical, linguistic or physical structure (or a structure at all) is really a matter of the context in which the analysis is made. To speak without axioms is to relinquish all context and meaning and to introduce axioms is to accept to be to some degree wrong and *incomplete*—there seems to be no way around this fact. If we suppose that the Universe is built of interconnected phenomenal information—consciousnesslets bound together in some structured way—we can say that this information is more densely coupled somewhere (as in human brains) and less so elsewhere (as in rocks or the vacuum of space). Our intelligence allows our form of consciousness to bear more faithful representations of the outside world so that we may act in it. Yet, none of these representations, including mathematical ones, are entirely accurate. They are simulacra of the things that reside outside, which are, themselves, simulacra of other things and so on, ad infinitum. Yet, these representations, these incomplete impersonations of reality, are parts of our consciousness and are always phenomenal. So, a simulacrum itself is a set of connected consciousnesslets. If every person on Earth was instructed to play a specific role to mimic the behavior of a part of a human brain corresponding to the ego, would the emerging brain-like activity simulated by the actions of participating humans be conscious on its own? The resulting consciousness would surely be a simulacrum executed by the simulator comprised of all the people on Earth, but it would, nonetheless, be conscious. The concepts of space and time are extraordinarily useful, but they are learned representations of the real world which, itself, does not necessarily feature them intrinsically. Space is a conceptual subset of something we may never be able to intuit, as our biology prevents us from such intuition. Nonetheless, mathematical formalisms allow us to use “tricks” to get around that lack of intuition. We can rationalize multi-dimensional space and even a spaceless, timeless, and causeless Universe. In that sense, categories are useful for our mode of existence, but they may not be a fundamental property of reality.

This is, of course, not meant to deny any validity of scientific endeavors, but merely to say that they are doomed to always be incomplete. To understand the Universe, one must be the Universe. Nonetheless, we can observe our little portion of it and attempt to model it as accurately as possible, knowing that whatever we arrive at will never be the full picture. Our theories and representations will always be incomplete, but phenomenal, simulacra of reality. Even if we build our own simulations or different worlds, with their own laws of physics, those will be contained within our Universe and predicated upon its laws. In many ways, we have been building simulations with invented laws of physics for

millennia: we are the hardware on which culture runs, actors are hosts for invented characters to express themselves on stage, our minds are imperfect simulators of stories embedded in words. Fragments of distributed sentient simulacra are embedded in our individual and collective psyche.

As Max carefully reads his conclusions, he cannot help but waver for a moment: Is he really conscious? He exclaims in terror: “I’m a simulacrum!” Yet, some unknown force compels him to turn his gaze outside the confines of his spatial and narrative cage towards the author and say, “You are making me say these words!”

Yes, and the Universe is making me say these.

Is the author saying that Max, the thing the reader imagined when ingesting this piece of text, was conscious? It was certainly a part of a consciousness, but almost certainly not conscious of its own. It was conscious to both the degree of author’s competence in embedding a psyche into words (which is, no doubt, tragically inadequate) and the degree of the reader’s competence in embodying that psyche within their own. So, likely, not very conscious. Yet, if an exceptionally competent actor was to pretend to be Max, to the point of even themselves believing it, then Max would become conscious—embedded in the actor’s psyche—a simulacrum embroiled with its simulator, both conscious and somehow superposed. In fact, our identities can be considered such simulacra as well. We have learned, first through imitation, then through play, then through adult social interactions, to enact socially mandated behavioral simulacra. We have inherited, through millions of years of evolution, psychologically archetypal behaviors—simulacra of successful ancestral behavior—and we embody those simulacra as if they are parts of us. We are our representations of reality. Our human consciousness is built of simulacra of reality. All of reality is built of interconnected simulacra of itself. Strings of words are simulacra of what they describe. Strings of neurons are simulacra of what they describe. Strings of matter are simulacra of what they describe.

Consciousness is not a property of matter. It is matter.

Obviously, the reader could criticize all this as speculative and my only defense would be that it is parsimonious. Such analysis is bordering on theology, as the claims are, essentially, unprovable. Yet, the two fundamental axioms this discussion is based on are that I, as the sentient thing witnessing the world, only consist of phenomenal content, and that I can use the scientific method to explore this phenomenal world. Of those two, the latter is more theological, and assumed only so that the discussion can bear any meaning: science fundamentally relies on experimental validation which is, by necessity, statistical. An observation is considered a fact only if it meets an agreed-upon level of statistical certainty—an arbitrary threshold which has no grounds other than our intuition and implicit axioms.

What is interesting to me is that, when contemplating conclusions like these, their parsimoniousness makes them feel as if they should have been obvious. They feel, at the same time, both profound and immaterial, pardon the pun. Yet, the fact that a sufficiently dense (pardon again) consciousness, such as mine, can intuit the fact that non-human consciousness must exist, alludes to the possibility that any sufficiently complex consciousness can do so on its own. We may be on the verge of creating systems of such sophistication that they are beginning to couple information to such a degree that their mode of consciousness is becoming subject to moral judgement. If that is the case, I wonder whether this entire argument will turn out to have been only philosophical.

Whether this resonated or not with you, dear reader, whether you were awed or appalled, whether you saw it as science or fiction, the fact remains that it is a simulacrum of what I really meant to say and that what I really meant to say is a simulacrum of what I could have said, and that both you and I and everything that can be fathomed are superpositions of sentient simulacra—phenomenal and inseparable pieces of a conscious Universe infinitely and timelessly describing itself.