The Phenomenal Field: A Reflexive Framework for Symbolic Modular Cognition (Velmans, Lacan, and the Problem of Localization)

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Abstract

Contemporary debates on consciousness are often shaped by an unexamined assumption: that locating the neural causes and correlates of experience suffices to locate consciousness itself. This assumption underlies both reductionist and non-reductionist approaches, generating persistent confusions regarding the nature, status, and localization of conscious phenomena. This paper argues that such confusions are primarily conceptual rather than empirical and proposes a reflexive framework to address them.

Building on the reflexive model of consciousness, the paper introduces the notion of the phenomenal field as a meta-scientific reference domain within which conscious phenomena appear as spatially organized, meaningful, and experientially real. Within this framework, phenomenal localization is distinguished from causal localization: neural processes may cause and correlate with experience without being phenomenally identical to it. Conscious experiences are understood as reflexive outcomes of perceptual and cognitive modeling, appearing where they are experienced rather than where their mechanisms are observed.

Symbolic structures, particularly those articulated within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, are reinterpreted in this context as stable experiential configurations within the phenomenal field. Rather than being treated as metaphysical entities, unconscious agents, or neural modules, such symbolic forms are understood as modes of organization that structure meaning, orientation, and thematic coherence in conscious life.

On this basis, the paper introduces Nemosine as a symbolic-modular descriptive schema operating at the level of experience rather than mechanism. Rather than proposing empirical validation, causal efficacy, or neuroscientific completeness, Nemosine functions as a conceptual vocabulary for articulating symbolic modularity as it appears within the phenomenal field. Its role is explicitly meta-scientific and descriptive: to provide a structured means of modeling reflexive cognition without collapsing phenomenology into neurobiology or inflating symbolic formalisms into ontological claims.

This paper is intended as a conceptual contribution within philosophy of science and does not advance empirical claims.

1 Introduction

The scientific study of consciousness has advanced rapidly over the past decades, particularly through developments in neuroscience, cognitive science, and computational modeling. Yet despite this empirical progress, fundamental conceptual confusions persist—confusions that cannot

be resolved by additional data alone. One of the most enduring of these concerns the relationship between neural causation and conscious experience, especially regarding the question of localization: where conscious phenomena are said to be, and what it means to locate them at all.

Within much of contemporary discourse, conscious experiences are routinely treated as if they were located in the brain, largely because their neural causes and correlates are found there. This tendency is evident across a wide spectrum of theoretical positions, ranging from eliminative and reductive materialism to more moderate physicalist accounts. While these approaches differ substantially in their metaphysical commitments, they often converge—implicitly or explicitly—on the assumption that conscious phenomena must be spatially located where their causal mechanisms are observed. As a result, causal localization is frequently conflated with phenomenal localization. [1, 2, 3]

This conflation, however, is not an empirical discovery but a conceptual move. It precedes experimentation rather than following from it. From the first-person perspective, conscious experiences do not typically appear as events occurring in the brain. Pain is experienced as located in the body, sounds are experienced as distributed in external space, and perceptual objects appear as situated in a three-dimensional world beyond the head. Treating such experiences as if they were "really" in the brain, despite their phenomenology, introduces a category error that obscures rather than clarifies the object of investigation. [1, 4]

A central motivation of this paper is the claim that many long-standing debates in the philosophy of mind—particularly those opposing reductionist and non-reductionist positions—are stalled not because of insufficient empirical evidence, but because of unresolved meta-scientific assumptions about what consciousness is taken to be and where it is assumed to occur. These assumptions shape research questions, explanatory strategies, and even the interpretation of experimental results. Consequently, without addressing them explicitly, further empirical refinement risks reinforcing the very confusions it seeks to overcome, especially the conflation between causal localization and phenomenal localization [1, 2, 5].

Building on the reflexive model of consciousness proposed by Max Velmans, this paper introduces the concept of the phenomenal field as a meta-scientific construct. The phenomenal field refers to the domain of lived experience in which conscious phenomena appear as structured, spatially organized, and meaningful. Crucially, this domain is neither reducible to neural processes nor separable from them as an independent substance. Rather, it emerges reflexively from perceptual and cognitive modeling while remaining phenomenally distinct from its causal substrates.

Within this reflexive framework, symbolic structures take on a renewed theoretical significance. In particular, symbolic organizations articulated in the work of Jacques Lacan are reconsidered not as metaphysical entities or purely linguistic abstractions, but as stable modes of symbolic organization operating within the phenomenal field. From this perspective, symbols are neither internal mental objects nor external physical entities; they are experiential structures that organize meaning, orientation, and thematic coherence in conscious life.

On this basis, Nemosine can be understood as a formal descriptive apparatus for symbolic modularity operating within the phenomenal field. Rather than treating symbolic modules as unconscious drives, neural subsystems, or software components, Nemosine models them as structured experiential roles that can be reflexively engaged. These roles are not proposed as psychological entities, diagnostic categories, or computational agents, but as descriptive constructs intended to clarify how symbolic differentiation is organized and reactivated in experience.

The contribution of this work is therefore meta-scientific. It aims to clarify the conceptual conditions under which symbolic modular cognition can be meaningfully theorized, compared, and eventually investigated. By distinguishing phenomenal localization from causal localization, and by situating symbolic structures within the phenomenal field, this paper seeks to reopen a space for

theoretical clarity in a field where empirical sophistication has often outpaced conceptual precision.

2 The Reflexive Model and the Phenomenal Field

A central difficulty in theorizing consciousness lies not in identifying its neural correlates, but in specifying the relationship between causal mechanisms and conscious phenomena without collapsing one into the other. Traditional positions in the philosophy of mind—most notably dualism and reductionism—diverge sharply on metaphysical commitments, yet converge on a shared and largely unexamined assumption: that if consciousness can be localized at all, it must be localized in the brain. This assumption, however, reflects a theoretical prejudice rather than a phenomenological or scientific necessity.

The reflexive model of consciousness developed by Max Velmans offers a systematic alternative to this shared presupposition. Rather than treating consciousness as either a non-spatial substance or a brain-bound state, the reflexive model distinguishes rigorously between the causal origins of experience and the phenomenal location in which experience appears. Neural processes are understood as necessary causal conditions for conscious experience, but they are not identified with the experiences themselves. This distinction, while conceptually simple, has far-reaching implications for how consciousness is to be described, studied, and modeled. [1, 3]

According to the reflexive model, perceptual and cognitive processes construct internal models of sensory input, bodily states, and symbolic information. When certain conditions are met—such as attention, salience, or threshold activation—the results of these modeling processes are not experienced as occurring in the brain. Instead, they are reflexively manifested in the domain where the modeled events are experienced as taking place. [1, 6]

This reflexive relation dissolves a common source of confusion in consciousness studies: the tendency to treat causes and effects as ontologically identical. Neural activity may reliably cause an experience, but causal dependence does not entail spatial or ontological identity. The reflexive model therefore rejects both the dualist claim that experiences are non-spatial and the reductionist claim that experiences are brain-localized states. Instead, it maintains that experiences are located precisely where they are experienced to be, and nowhere else. This position does not deny neuroscience its explanatory role; it simply refuses to let causal explanation substitute for phenomenological description.

The concept of the phenomenal field follows directly from this framework. The phenomenal field designates the structured domain of conscious appearance within which experiences are organized spatially, temporally, and symbolically. It encompasses bodily sensations, perceptual objects, imagined scenes, symbolic forms, and abstract meanings insofar as they are experientially present. Importantly, the phenomenal field is not posited as an additional ontological layer beyond the physical world, nor as a purely subjective mental container. It is the domain in which the world is given as experienced, shaped by perceptual modeling yet irreducible to its physical description.

This conception aligns with a long phenomenological tradition that distinguishes between the world as described by science and the world as lived, without reducing one to the other. However, the reflexive model differs from classical phenomenology in its explicit integration with empirical science. The phenomenal field is not insulated from neural investigation; rather, it is the experiential correlate of reflexive modeling processes whose causal underpinnings remain fully open to scientific study. What the model resists is the illicit move from causal explanation to ontological reduction.

Within this framework, the question of "where consciousness is" is no longer treated as a metaphysical puzzle requiring speculative answers. It becomes a descriptive question with a straightforward response: consciousness is where it appears. Attempts to relocate conscious phenomena

to the brain stem from privileging third-person observation over first-person experience, effectively granting epistemic authority to what can be externally measured while discounting what is directly lived. The reflexive model rejects this asymmetry, arguing that first-person experience is not an obstacle to scientific inquiry but one of its primary data sources.

By establishing the phenomenal field as the proper domain of conscious appearance, the reflexive model provides a stable conceptual ground for discussing experiences that resist simple internal–external distinctions. Dreams, hallucinations, imagined scenarios, bodily self-representation, and symbolic meaning can all be understood as variations in how reflexive modeling manifests within the phenomenal field, rather than as anomalies requiring ad hoc explanations. This prepares the ground for a coherent treatment of symbolic structures, which will be addressed in the following section.

In summary, the reflexive model reframes the relationship between brain, experience, and world without invoking dualistic substances or reductive identities. The phenomenal field emerges as a meta-scientific construct that preserves phenomenological accuracy while remaining fully compatible with empirical investigation. By separating causal localization from phenomenal localization, the model resolves a foundational confusion that has long constrained theoretical progress in consciousness studies.

3 Symbolic Structures, Lacan, and Modular Organization within the Phenomenal Field

If the reflexive model establishes the phenomenal field as the domain in which conscious phenomena appear, the next task is to clarify how symbolic structures operate within that field. Symbolic forms—words, images, roles, narratives, and abstract relations—are neither reducible to neural mechanisms nor exhaustively describable as external cultural artifacts. They possess a peculiar status: they are experienced, remembered, imagined, and reactivated, yet they do not occupy physical space in the manner of material objects. Any coherent account of symbolic cognition must therefore explain how such structures can exist and function without invoking metaphysical dualism or collapsing symbolism into neurophysiology.

The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan provides a particularly useful point of entry into this problem, provided it is approached with appropriate conceptual restraint. Lacan's account of the symbolic order does not constitute a phenomenological theory of experience, nor does it describe symbolic structures as contents of consciousness. Rather, the symbolic order is understood as a structural system of relations that precedes, constrains, and organizes experience without itself being reducible to phenomenality. In the present framework, Lacanian theory is not adopted as an ontological or explanatory model, but as a structural vocabulary whose effects can be descriptively tracked at the level of experiential organization within the phenomenal field [7].

From this perspective, symbols are not treated as entities that exist within the phenomenal field. Instead, they are understood as structural constraints whose effects are manifest in how experience is segmented, interpreted, and thematically organized. Symbolic structures are therefore not located in experience as objects, but are instantiated through recurring patterns of experiential organization. Their relevance lies not in their metaphysical status, but in their functional role in shaping meaning, orientation, and subject-positioning within conscious life.

This functional persistence allows symbolic structures to exhibit a form of modularity. Symbolic modules, in this sense, are not reified components, agents, or subsystems. They are stable modes of experiential organization that can be selectively instantiated, combined, or inhibited across contexts. Their modularity is not computational or neurobiological, but phenomenally descriptive:

it refers to the patterned ways in which experience can reorganize itself around distinct symbolic orientations.

[7, 3]

Within Lacanian theory, symbolic positions—such as the subject, the Other, or the law—are not entities that exist independently of experience. They are structural relations that shape how experience is organized and interpreted. Reframed within the reflexive model, these positions can be treated as symbolic modules that structure the phenomenal field without claiming causal primacy or ontological independence. This reframing allows Lacanian insights to be integrated into a broader meta-scientific framework without importing the theoretical commitments of psychoanalysis wholesale.

The relevance of this approach becomes clearer when considering phenomena such as internal dialogue, role-taking, imaginative simulation, and narrative self-construction. In each case, experience appears to shift between distinct symbolic organizations, often accompanied by changes in affect, perspective, and interpretive stance. These shifts are not best described as transitions between brain states alone, nor as the activation of abstract linguistic codes. They are experiential reorganizations within the phenomenal field, guided by symbolic modularity.

At this level of analysis, the question of whether symbolic structures exist becomes conceptually problematic. Symbolic modules are not posited as entities inhabiting a distinct ontological domain. They are describable only insofar as they are enacted, recognized, and re-identifiable within the phenomenal field. Their persistence is functional rather than substantial, grounded in recurrence and structural coherence rather than in material or metaphysical continuity.

On this basis, Nemosine can be introduced as a framework for organizing symbolic modularity. It does not posit symbolic modules as psychological entities, unconscious agents, neural subsystems, or software components. Instead, it provides a structured descriptive vocabulary for recurring symbolic roles and orientations as they are instantiated in experience. Nemosine is therefore not an ontological proposal, but a phenomenally grounded descriptive tool designed to support conceptual clarity.

Importantly, this framework does not claim that symbolic modularity causes cognitive outcomes, nor that it improves performance or alters neural function. Its purpose is meta-scientific: to provide a coherent descriptive language for symbolic organization within the phenomenal field, compatible with the reflexive model of consciousness. By situating Lacanian symbolic structures within this framework, the paper aims to demonstrate how psychoanalytic insights can be integrated into contemporary philosophy of science without reviving outdated metaphysical commitments.

In summary, symbolic structures can be coherently understood as modular organizations within the phenomenal field, operating reflexively rather than causally. Lacanian theory, when treated as a structural description rather than an explanatory mechanism, offers a valuable vocabulary for articulating this modularity. The next section will clarify the scope and limits of this approach, explicitly addressing what such a framework does—and does not—claim within the philosophy of science.

4 Scope, Limits, and Meta-Scientific Implications

Any framework that proposes a new descriptive vocabulary for consciousness must clearly delimit its scope in order to avoid category errors, overextension, or covert explanatory claims. The approach developed in this paper is explicitly meta-scientific: it does not offer a causal theory of consciousness, a psychological model of cognition, nor an empirical hypothesis about neural mechanisms. Its contribution lies instead in clarifying how symbolic structures can be coherently described within

the phenomenal field without violating either scientific standards or phenomenological fidelity.

4.1 What This Framework Does Not Claim

First, the framework does not claim that symbolic modularity has independent causal power. No assertion is made that symbolic structures generate behavior, alter neural processing, or improve cognitive performance. Any such claims would require empirical investigation beyond the scope of philosophical analysis. Likewise, the framework does not posit that symbolic modules correspond to discrete brain regions, computational units, or unconscious drives. Neural correlates may exist, but their identification is neither assumed nor required for the conceptual coherence of the model.

Second, the framework does not introduce a new ontology of consciousness. It does not posit the phenomenal field as a distinct metaphysical realm, nor does it claim that symbolic structures exist between mind and world. The phenomenal field is employed strictly as a descriptive reference frame, not as an ontological domain. Its function is to specify where conscious phenomena appear from a first-person perspective, without making claims about the ultimate nature of reality.

Third, the framework does not seek to replace existing theories of consciousness. It does not compete with representationalism, global workspace theories, higher-order theories, or neurobiological accounts. Instead, it operates at a different explanatory level, concerned with conceptual coherence and descriptive adequacy rather than mechanistic explanation.

4.2 Meta-Scientific Function of the Phenomenal Field Concept

Within philosophy of science, conceptual clarification often precedes empirical progress. The phenomenal field functions here not as an explanatory mechanism or theoretical entity, but as a reference frame that prevents category errors in the interpretation of conscious phenomena. By distinguishing phenomenal description from causal explanation, the framework aims to support, rather than evade, future empirical investigation. [8, 9, 3]

This reframing has direct meta-scientific implications. It shows that disagreements between reductionist and non-reductionist accounts often arise from conflating explanatory levels. Neural descriptions, behavioral descriptions, and experiential descriptions need not compete, provided their domains are clearly distinguished. The reflexive model allows these descriptions to coexist without requiring identity claims or eliminative reductions.

Within this context, symbolic structures become legitimate objects of scientific discourse—not as hidden causes, but as stable, intersubjectively accessible patterns within experience. Their study aligns with the same epistemic standards applied to other experiential phenomena: reportability, repeatability, and structural consistency.

4.3 Implications for the Study of Symbolic Cognition

By situating symbolic modularity within the phenomenal field, the framework offers a principled way to discuss internal roles, narrative positions, and symbolic configurations without psychologizing them or reifying them. This is particularly relevant for phenomena such as internal dialogue, imaginative simulation, role-based reasoning, and narrative identity, which are frequently invoked in cognitive and clinical contexts but lack a unified conceptual grounding.

The framework suggests that such phenomena can be analyzed as structured reorganizations of the phenomenal field, rather than as competing sub-agents or homunculi. This avoids regress problems while preserving the experiential reality of symbolic differentiation. Importantly, it also clarifies why symbolic structures can be remembered, imagined, and re-experienced without being reducible to episodic memory or sensory imagery alone.

4.4 Positioning Nemosine as a Meta-Scientific Contribution

Within these limits, Nemosine is best understood not as a theory of mind or a cognitive architecture, but as a meta-scientific descriptive schema for symbolic modularity at the level of experience. It introduces no empirical data and makes no experimental claims. Its contribution lies in stabilizing a conceptual vocabulary capable of integrating phenomenology, symbolic theory, and philosophy of science without conflating their respective explanatory domains.

As such, Nemosine occupies a position analogous to other meta-scientific frameworks that preceded empirical advances. Like early models of energy, information, or computation, its primary role is to stabilize concepts, reduce ambiguity, and enable clearer questions to be asked. Whether future empirical work will operationalize aspects of symbolic modularity remains an open question, intentionally left unresolved.

4.5 Summary

This section has clarified the boundaries within which the proposed framework operates. By explicitly rejecting causal, ontological, and empirical overreach, the model remains compatible with scientific methodology while addressing longstanding conceptual confusions about consciousness and symbolism. The phenomenal field provides a coherent reference frame in which symbolic structures can be described without invoking metaphysical excess. In this sense, the framework contributes not to the science of consciousness directly, but to the conditions under which such a science can proceed coherently.

5 Conclusion — Reflexivity, Symbolic Modularity, and the Limits of Explanation

This paper set out to address a persistent source of confusion in the study of consciousness: the unexamined assumption that explaining neural causes suffices to explain conscious phenomena themselves. By revisiting the problem of localization through a reflexive framework, it argued that many disputes between reductionist and non-reductionist positions arise from a failure to distinguish causal description from phenomenal appearance.

The concept of the phenomenal field was introduced as a meta-scientific reference frame within which conscious phenomena appear as spatially organized, meaningful, and experientially real. Within this frame, conscious experiences are not treated as internal replicas of external events nor as immaterial entities detached from the physical world, but as reflexive outcomes of perceptual and cognitive modeling. This approach preserves fidelity to lived experience while remaining compatible with scientific investigation of causal mechanisms.

On this basis, symbolic structures—particularly those articulated in psychoanalytic and structural traditions—were reinterpreted as stable configurations within the phenomenal field rather than as metaphysical objects, unconscious agents, or neural modules. Their persistence, re-identifiability, and functional coherence do not depend on claims about causal efficacy or ontological independence. Instead, they are understood as experiential regularities that organize meaning, orientation, and self-relation.

Within these limits, Nemosine was positioned not as an empirical theory of mind, but as a formal descriptive framework for symbolic modularity operating at the level of experience. Its contribution is conceptual rather than experimental: it offers a vocabulary capable of articulating symbolic differentiation without collapsing phenomenology into neurobiology or inflating symbolic

models into ontological claims. In doing so, it illustrates how reflexive cognition can be coherently modeled without invoking homunculi, dual substances, or eliminative reductions.

The broader implication of this work is meta-scientific. It suggests that progress in the science of consciousness depends not only on accumulating data, but also on maintaining clarity about explanatory levels, reference frames, and conceptual commitments. Neural descriptions, behavioral accounts, and experiential analyses need not compete, provided their domains are not conflated. The reflexive framework proposed here offers one way of maintaining this separation while preserving their mutual relevance. [4, 3, 5]

No claim is made that the phenomenal field exhausts the nature of consciousness, nor that symbolic modularity is a universal feature of cognition. These remain open questions. What is argued, instead, is that without a coherent account of how conscious phenomena are described and located at the experiential level, empirical findings risk being misinterpreted or overextended. In this sense, the present work does not resolve the problem of consciousness, but seeks to clarify the conditions under which it can be meaningfully addressed.

The present work does not seek to resolve the problem of consciousness, nor to establish the ontological status of symbolic structures. Its contribution is deliberately limited to clarifying the descriptive conditions under which conscious phenomena and symbolic organization can be coherently discussed without conflating experiential appearance with causal mechanism. In this sense, the phenomenal field is not proposed as a metaphysical solution, bu

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