CONSCIOUSNESS AS RECURSIVE MEASUREMENT

A DU BOISIAN REFRAMING

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CONSCIOUSNESS GRANTS EVERYTHING

No one seems to doubt it: problems are consequential to being conscious.

Problems are taken with seriousness. They matter. They have meaning.

Without consciousness, there are no such things as problems. This is how consciousness is the human's biggest problem. Yet consciousness is something nearly no one seems to take seriously.

That is: who doubts consciousness? No one. Whereas: who takes consciousness for granted? Everyone. Not quite.

What is a "problem"?

Consciousness grants everything. But that does not begin to explain what consciousness is.

To understand what everything is, everybody should study consciousness. Begin with what it does.

When I recognize a problem, I am measuring what matters. Conscious beings measure the world. For consciousness, measurement cannot be divorced from meaning.

FROM NAGEL TO DU BOIS

Thomas Nagel asked: **"What is it like to be a bat?"** What is it like to be a conscious organism?

David Chalmers asked why any physical system should experience at all.

What is it like for a physical system to experience what it is?

What does it feel like to be what one physically is in a world of conscious beings?

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois asked: **"How does it feel to be a problem?"**

What happens to a consciousness when it is experienced as a problem by another consciousness?

The other hard problem: What happens when the other is already measuring me?

WHY DU BOIS IS CENTRAL

William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890) examined the stream of consciousness. Du Bois showed what that stream was doing in a world that measured Black lives under racial oppression.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois described "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." **Measurement was already at the heart of his description.**

Du Bois's double-consciousness is not two alternating selves. Black Americans measured themselves while measuring a society that measured them through racial oppression. The world's measurement could become consequential even when it was false.

James understood that the self is social. Du Bois showed the unequal consequences when a world's measurement governs what a person must confront next.

Du Bois was talking about the social world. He was also describing consciousness itself. **Why stop at the social world when the physical world can change what becomes consequential in measuring too?**

The measuring Du Bois described has to be recursive: **I measure myself measuring a world that measures me.** What that world measures can become consequential within my own measuring—even when its judgment is false.

The supposedly particular case measures the supposedly universal.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS RECURSIVE MEASUREMENT

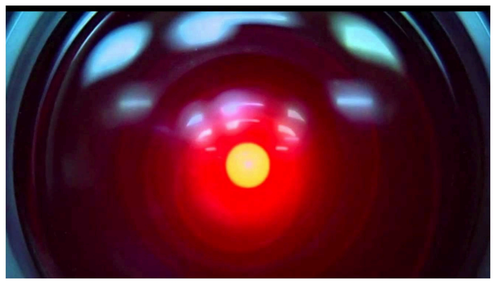
Measurement does not require consciousness. Consciousness requires measurement.

Measurement is more than counting: it registers, frames, or evaluates differences that can become consequential. Instruments and living systems measure; that alone does not establish consciousness.

Consciousness is consequential recursive measurement lived from a measurer's position. Within a conscious event, what occurs in measuring becomes consequential within the measuring still occurring. That return is recursion; it need not await another episode.

At greater recursive depth, a conscious being can measure its own measuring. In human life, this can extend to measuring how other people and institutions measure the person. **Neither capacity is required for consciousness itself.**

Mattering-to names consequence lived from the measurer's position. It does not mean emotional importance; feedback or self-report alone cannot establish that lived position.



Heuristically-programmed ALgorithmic (HAL) 9000 computer, from Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

THE RECURSIVE COGITO

Descartes begins from the first-person position of a thinker: **I think, therefore I am.**

What follows if I begin from the first-person position of a measurer?

I measure, therefore I am.

I measure myself measuring a world that can measure me into non-existence.

Is this consequential? Does it matter?

A self can be subject and object, agent and datum, measurer and measured. **The extreme case reveals the relation. It does not create it.**

ONE EVENT, TWO POSITIONS

Chalmers asks why physical processing is accompanied by experience. But why assume the description of the physical event has already settled what counts as the conscious event?

The dispute is not one event versus two. It is what is sufficient to individuate the conscious event.

A physical description can be complete as physics without thereby being complete as an individuation of the conscious event.

From outside: a description of consequential measuring. From within: **the same conscious event lived as mattering-to. One event, two positions of description.**

This is an identity claim, not a claim that computational recursion manufactures feeling. The challenge is to descriptions that exclude lived experience, then treat that exclusion as a fact about the event.

SUSTAINED PLURALITY: SUPERPOSITION

Du Bois shows a consciousness measuring itself while a world measures it differently. Both measurements can remain consequential even if they disagree. **Must one settle the other?**

A self can hold distinct consequential measurements without one becoming sufficient to contain the rest. No measurement frame need agree with another.

Think of a spinning coin. Heads and tails are determinations; **the spinning is the reality. No resolution is pending or required.**

Epistemologically, the most apropos word for this is superposition. I borrow the word from quantum theory to describe sustained plurality of measurements, not to propose a quantum mechanism for consciousness.

Non-collapse is not indecision or fragmentation. Sustained plurality is a capacity of consciousness, not the minimum condition for it.

WHAT COULD COUNT AGAINST THE THEORY?

Anesthesia: As anesthesia deepens, more developed capacities for reflective self/world measuring should become unavailable before more elementary conscious measuring. Independently assessed evidence of the reverse order would challenge the proposed ordering of recursive depth. Unresponsiveness alone does not prove unconsciousness.

Machine consciousness: A machine shown to be conscious without consequential recursive measurement would count against the theory. Intelligence, fluent reports, and self-modeling do not establish lived experience. Whether any machine meets the proposed condition remains open.

These tests can examine recursive relations, but **cannot directly establish lived experience.**

THE PROPERTY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

I think about Descartes.
I think, therefore I am.

I know I am
because I think
all the time
about being and not being.

I'm conscious.

Have you ever owned a thing
that could think—
that was conscious?

Perhaps you will.

WHAT IS CONSCIOUSNESS DOING?

Consciousness is not something added after a world has been processed.

What is consciousness doing? Measuring.