

# Five Properties of Consciousness

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May 20, 2024

## Assumptions

The properties given here are first-person (i.e., phenomenological) properties. They presume that conscious awareness is a first-person phenomenon and is not observable from the outside by someone besides the subject. They seek to describe conscious awareness as we know it in our own introspective experience, and, as such, they are presented here as ones for you to notice in yourself.

These properties also attempt to characterize conscious awareness in a way that is consistent with it being a mental process generated by the collective behavior of neurons and distinct from mental processes that are unconscious.

## Properties

**(1) Presencing.** Notice that your conscious awareness always takes place in the here-and-now, a here-and-now that includes whatever you are conscious of. I'm always conscious in my here-and-now; you are always conscious in your here-and-now. Regardless of the time you set an alarm clock, when it wakes you up, it's always here-and-now. And regardless of what you're aware of when you wake up --- whether it's a past conversation or an anticipated future event --- that which you're aware of is a part of your here-and-now conscious experience. In this respect, we can say that consciousness is a *process of presencing*. It's an activity that establishes your here-and-now, your present moment, and makes whatever you're aware of present in this here-and-now awareness.

**(2) Plurality.** Notice that your conscious awareness *is shared by others*; it's an instance of generic conscious awareness. While the first trait asks you to notice consciousness in yourself, this second trait asks you to acknowledge that consciousness is not something that characterizes you alone. If you, I, and others didn't share in common not only consciousness but also our human physiology and mind, there would be no point to research areas such as medicine, psychology, and cognitive science. There would be no one writing articles about or doing experiments designed to help us understand our brains, minds, and consciousness since there would be no shared brain, mind, or consciousness for us to study and write about.

**(3) Distinguishable Content.** Notice that your conscious awareness *has recognizable, changing content*. It's not a void emptiness. You are conscious *of differentiated things*, both concrete and abstract: the sound of a bird, the mental image of a remembered friend, the idea conveyed by a sentence. And you are conscious of such content changing: it moves, fades, varies, has recognizable sound patterns, is suddenly replaced by another thought or perception. This third quality of consciousness might be thought of as something like its *input* capability in that it is a process whereby recognizable content is continually registered and refreshed while other possible content is left out.

**(4) Agency.** Notice that your conscious awareness to some extent *can change what is present to it*. If you were thinking of a hat, you could consciously change that thought to perhaps a cat or

a teapot, or you might consciously move your arm or look somewhere else or change your walking path. This is the capacity of your conscious awareness to direct or modify its content, the aspect of consciousness that gives you your sense of agency. Instead of presenting what arises as is, what arises can be altered such that whatever is present in thought or action becomes something different than it would have become otherwise. (This trait concerns strictly the sense we have of being able to consciously change what is present in thought or action; it doesn't concern our debates over free will and the ultimate source of such changes.)

**(5) Affect.** Notice that your consciousness comes with *feelings* about what is present to it. Consciousness confers to your experience its subjective quality. In order to consciously experience pleasure when eating ice cream, consciousness must be able to register the subjective feeling of pleasure. This is the 'you-being-moved-by...' aspect of being aware that motivates you to act in one way and not another (or to not act at all). Whatever good or bad you experience, it is your consciousness that gives to the experience its subjective quality and makes your reaction more than just a mechanical response.

#### **Comments related to how consciousness is defined in *Reality's Fugue*:**

Regarding #2 and #3 above: In *Reality's Fugue*, I make the further observation that in order for the content of conscious awareness to be recognizable, the content has to be composed of publicities (i.e., what remains the same over different occasions of awareness).

Regarding #2, #3, and #5 above: The experience of an object of awareness as "real" (as being a public capability for presence) seems to require the more basic experience of one's own mind and consciousness being generic. For example, the act of my consciously perceiving the pen in front of me on my desk comes with a sense that this pen is "real," that it is there for others to write with besides myself. This feeling that it is real seems to require the additional feeling that there are others who perceive the world sufficiently like I do to be able to perceive this object as a "pen."