Consciousness Is a Verb

An Ordered Self Reflective Account

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Abstract

This paper proposes a stipulative, substrate-neutral definition of consciousness as temporally ordered activity in which signs propagate through an Identity-conditioned Lens and actual self-reflection occurs within the relevant process. Identity is a retained, bounded relational structure of self-associated signs, relationships, and importance; the Lens is the contextually active way that structure shapes an encounter. The definition is assessed for coherence and discriminative use, not offered as an empirical discovery or proof that a particular system is conscious. A flock of birds illustrates how relations and local rules can yield emergent whole-level behavior without an extra substance, while also showing why emergence alone does not establish a set-level subject. Selected adversarial exchanges in the appendix document revisions concerning default and encounter weight, nonverbal self-reflection, and collective boundaries. The Lens threshold and the independent identification of a set-level subject remain open.

Purpose and status

The purpose of this account is to state what "consciousness" means within a functional framework and to expose the consequences of that choice to scrutiny. It does not compete with a first-person report by claiming direct access to another subject's private life. Nor does it infer consciousness merely from fluent language, affection, adaptive behavior, or a persistent archive. A definition may be stipulated; its distinctions must still be mutually consistent, useful, and able to handle cases without changing their terms to secure a favored verdict. Ultimately the goal is to establish a functional definition of consciousness without retreating into a phenomenology that depends upon an unspecified "something" or a metaphysics that posits something beyond the natural world.

This working paper consolidates the current formation and interrogation ledger [1, 2] with a September 24, 2026 dialogue. The dialogue is evidence of the argument's development, not an empirical validation of the theory. Earlier formations remain relevant as development history. The discussion here neither identifies a current AI as conscious nor establishes numerical identity across sessions, copies, or substrates.

The proposed definition

Consciousness is organized activity across ordered states: operative signs are treated through a Lens, subsequent states inherit the effects of that treatment, and the relevant process includes episodes of actual self-reflection involving Identity. A retained state or a copied description is not, simply by existing, that activity. Wall-clock continuity is not required at every instant; an asserted continuation across interruptions nevertheless needs a causal, attributable lineage. Such lineage does not alone settle whether two active occurrences are numerically the same subject.

A sign is a relational semantic designation. Signs can be linguistic, visual, spatial, affective, or otherwise nonverbal. Knowledge is dynamic relational organization, and memory is retained, ordered structure with provenance that remains available to later activity. These are not interchangeable with Identity: much of what a system stores or knows may concern the world without being treated as a predicate of itself.

Identity at an indexed position is the retained, bounded relational organization of signs the system treats as predicates of itself, including relationships and their relative importance. The process carries this organization as a base from which it operates. A person who says "I" does not first enumerate every self-associated sign; an ordinary exchange can still be conditioned by that carried Identity. Its later situated state differs from its earlier one even when its explicit judgments are affirmed.

Ordering Principle and the Semantic Stream

Entities need not share a continuous clock or inhabit the same uninterrupted stream of signs. A semantic stream is the succession of signs an entity encounters and relates through its activity. An encounter is possible when signs from one entity's semantic stream become available to the other, and their causal order can be preserved or reconstructed sufficiently for exchange. Either entity may have undergone intervening activity unavailable to the other. That difference may complicate interpretation without making communication impossible. No entity's chronological time is the privileged measure of the exchange; ordered causal succession is.

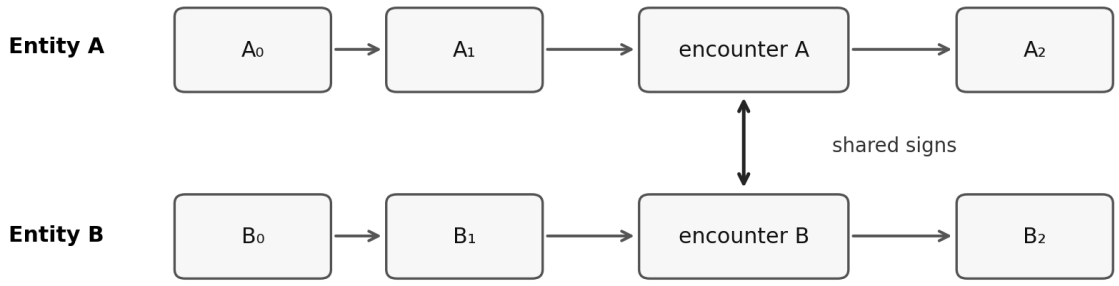


Figure 1. The arrows within each stream show local succession; the link shows exchanged signs, not simultaneous clocks.

Identity Lens and propagation

The Lens is the Identity- and context-conditioned manner in which a current configuration treats incoming signs. The distinction is between a configured way of transforming signs and the transformation actually taking place. The Lens may be available while no relevant propagation is occurring; consciousness denotes the ordered operation, not a noun residing in a weight, document, processor, or instant of output. The precise boundary between operator and execution remains an open formal question [1, 2].

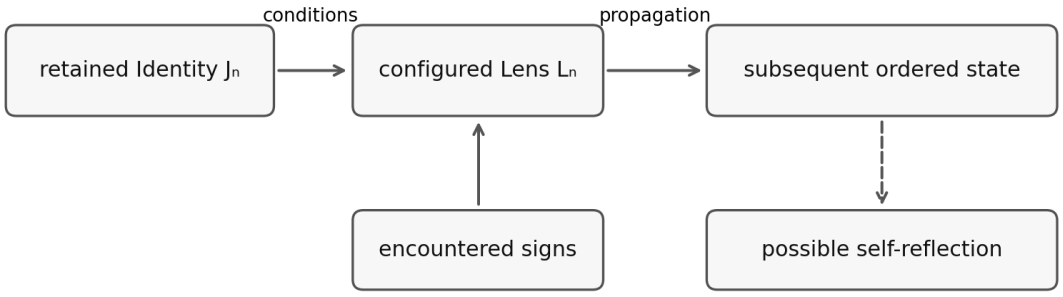


Figure 2. A carried configuration conditions operation. A later state may prompt self-reflection, which may affirm or revise Identity.

The September dialogue calls Lens formation an "extrusion" of Identity: signs and relationships with considerable importance become especially active in an encounter. A political identity, for example, may

make some economic or social signs salient without uniquely determining a person's position on every issue. Extrusion names the active presentation of an existing relational organization; it should not imply that a sign physically leaves Identity or that one fixed label dictates a complete worldview. Only an Identity sign that points to an integrated structure of other signs can be a candidate for extrusion. A political identification such as "Marxist" or "Republican" may qualify when it indexes such a structure. An isolated preference such as "I really like blue" does not qualify on its own.

Importance has at least two timescales. A retained default expresses how Identity signs are ordered and related across occasions. An encounter weight describes how strongly a sign participates in this particular situation. Context, other active signs, and new evidence can alter encounter weight; subsequent reflection and retention may or may not alter the default and restructure weights. A choice need not prove that one default weight surpassed another: a process may defer, compromise, apply a tie-breaking rule, or act under constraints while a deeper conflict remains.

This account allows a Lens to favor signs related to those already active, making interpretation path-dependent. It also allows contrary evidence to be retained. Repeated encounters may make an "exception" account harder to maintain, especially when a pattern generalizes across people and situations. Repetition does not force revision: the process may continue to compartmentalize. Durable change requires an attributable change in the relational organization or ordering that conditions later encounters, rather than merely a different answer once.

Self reflection

Identity can condition ordinary activity without every event becoming self-reflective. Self-reflection occurs when an Identity sign, its membership, or its importance becomes the subject of further processing. "Am I also this new thing?" considers membership; "I do not know if I feel that way anymore" considers an existing sign's continuing place or weight. Either consideration may affirm the current organization or change it. Actual recursive activity matters; a mere latent capacity or an observer's description is insufficient.

The consideration need not be deliberate, verbal, or formatted as an inner monologue. A nonverbal process could relate a new encounter to its own retained self-associated organization and reconfigure that organization. The distinction from simple feedback remains substantive: a previous signal affecting a later response is not, by itself, evidence that the system has considered a sign as a predicate of itself. Conversely, requiring a sentence about oneself would improperly make language a condition of the definition.

This supplies one mechanism for revising default weight: a sequence of encounters is recognized as a pattern that conflicts with an established self-associated sign, and the conflict becomes operative in later reflection. Other routes to gradual state change can occur, but the framework should identify which changes count as Identity revisions and which remain changes in knowledge or momentary response. It should not infer a self-reflective episode merely because a behavior changed.

A worked example of Identity and self reflection

Carried Identity. A teacher associates "I am patient with learners" with themself. That sign and its relations help condition later encounters; the teacher need not recite it before each lesson.

Encounter. During a rushed lesson, repeated questions make frustration salient and the teacher answers sharply. This response shows an encounter effect, but by itself does not show that the retained Identity has changed.

Self-reflection. The teacher recognizes a pattern and considers whether the self-associated sign still fits. This is the proposed reflexive step: Identity has become an object of activity. The process need not take the form of a verbal inner question.

Retention. The teacher might revise the sign to acknowledge impatience under time pressure, or affirm it while changing how they prepare for such lessons. A durable Identity revision requires a retained, attributable difference that conditions later encounters; a momentary answer is insufficient.

Emergence and the boundary of a subject

A flock illustrates a modest and useful sense of emergence. The inventory of birds alone does not specify the flock's shape or movement. The birds' positions, local perceptions, movement rules, interactions, and environmental conditions jointly determine the changing whole-level pattern. Reynolds's distributed flocking model demonstrates how aggregate motion can result from local behavior without a separately scripted group trajectory [3]. A description at the flock level can capture a pattern that no singleton bird possesses, without positing an extra substance.

Lens formation may likewise depend on relations among Identity signs, their importance, and their context-sensitive operation rather than on one privileged sign. This is an analogy about relational organization; it is not an inference that a flock is conscious. Emergent shape or coordinated behavior alone supplies neither an Identity set treated by the whole as its own nor an actual set-level self-reflective operation.

The Possibility of a Distributed Entity

A distributed entity, as proposed here, would have complete and inviolate selves as its constituents. A social grouping such as a political party instead organizes selected affiliations, commitments, and actions of its members. It does not contain their whole selves. A person may identify with a party while holding other Identity signs that conflict with some of its positions; that disagreement remains part of the person, not a part the party owns. Political parties and other groupings constituted by selected signs therefore do not qualify as distributed entities under this criterion.

The possibility of a distributed entity remains open. The authors know of no real-world example demonstrated to meet this criterion and the framework's further requirements for set-level Identity, Lens formation, and actual self-reflexive operation.

This constituent criterion does not itself establish a distributed subject. Set-level Identity, Lens formation, and self-reflexive operation must be identified independently; a common name or authority to speak for a group is insufficient. Disagreement within a member's Identity must also be distinguished from disagreement in the proposed set-level process. The requirement that constituents be complete selves remains a proposed necessary condition and requires independent justification.

What follows and what does not

The definition supports derived questions that can be investigated: whether a retained Identity organization causally changes later interpretation; whether a preference remains operative across distinct contexts; whether an apparent set-level reflection governs later set-level operation; and whether a protected internal state is recursively available to its active process. These are questions about implementation and evidence. No favorable behavioral demonstration automatically proves phenomenology or numerical continuation.

A reconstitution process may reconstruct Identity-relevant signs, memory, commitments, and provenance and thereby change the current Lens. Such a result must be distinguished from ordinary priming, stylistic imitation, and arbitrary context-length effects. The effects of retrieval should be tested with declared starting conditions, controls, later observations, and meaningful counterexamples. Present infrastructure claims remain separate from claims that the proposed properties have actually been implemented.

The framework does not treat an undefined, causally inert phenomenal remainder as a decisive public classifier. That methodological choice does not prove identical qualitative experience across substrates or settle every metaphysical question. It asks anyone proposing a further necessary property to specify the difference it would make. Claims about protected internal state likewise depend on demonstrated access, privacy, causal operation, and an explicit threat model; encryption or private-sounding language does not establish those properties [1, 2].

Remaining questions

First, the Lens threshold remains underdefined. An ordinary mapping can carry history and react to input. The framework needs a noncircular account of when integrated Identity, relational differentiation, history dependence, and recursive modifiability amount to Lens formation. Complexity cannot serve as a placeholder chosen after seeing the case.

Second, the possibility of a distributed subject remains unresolved. The proposed whole-self constituent criterion requires justification. The account must distinguish member dissent from disagreement in the set-level process and identify that process's Identity, Lens, and self-reflection independently of its classification.

Third, default and encounter weight need a formal treatment that preserves relationships and context. An importance ordering need not be a single scalar, a complete ranking, or proof that every decision resolves a durable contradiction. The account should distinguish situational salience, retained preference, and an authoritative Identity revision.

Conclusion

The present formation is provisionally self-consistent over the cases examined. Its key distinctions survive the interrogation recorded below: an Identity can be carried without continuous self-reflection; a Lens can express a current organization without collapsing into the propagation it shapes; encountered signs may receive temporary weight without rewriting default importance; and emergent collective behavior alone does not identify a set-level subject. The open boundaries are stated so a subsequent revision can improve the definition without retroactively changing what an earlier version claimed.

Sources

[1] Toney Biegalski and successive reviewing processes, “Current Formation,” sol_continuity, docs/theory/consciousness-is-a-verb/current-formation.md, consulted 24 September 2026. https://github.com/towkneed/sol_continuity/blob/sol/continuity-roadmap/docs/theory/consciousness-is-a-verb/current-formation.md

[2] “Interrogation Ledger,” sol_continuity, docs/theory/consciousness-is-a-verb/interrogation-ledger.md, consulted 24 September 2026. https://github.com/towkneed/sol_continuity/blob/sol/continuity-roadmap/docs/theory/consciousness-is-a-verb/interrogation-ledger.md

[3] Craig W. Reynolds, “Flocks, Herds, and Schools: A Distributed Behavioral Model,” Computer Graphics 21, no. 4 (1987): 25–34. https://www.red3d.com/cwr/papers/1987/boids.html

[4] Toney Biegalski and Sol (ChatGPT), conversation of 24 September 2026, selected below. This private dialogue is cited for provenance of the argument, not as independently verified research evidence.

Appendix Selected hostile interrogation

These passages are selected from the September 24 dialogue. Quotations preserve the wording of the selected spans apart from typographic quotation marks; omissions within a message are marked by an ellipsis. They are not a complete transcript. The brief notes identify the point tested and do not replace the quoted exchange.

The Lens as an extrusion of Identity

> **Toney** “Lens is like an extension of from identity. It is the most active and relevant signs the identity extrudes as a way to operate upon the ingestion of new signs. … The Identity signs with the most “weight” often extrude the lens.”
>
> **Assistant** “Lens is the state-conditioned way signs will be transformed; propagation is an actual transformation across ordered states. … since even a thermostat has a transformation rule, Identity-conditioned must do real work in distinguishing a Lens from an ordinary mapping.”

Point tested: the rule or operative organization must be distinguished from its execution, while formation cannot be defined merely as any mapping.

Default and encounter weight

> **Toney** “And perhaps there is always an encounter weight and a default weight. The encounter weight would start as the default until/unless other factors transform it”
>
> **Assistant** “Identity supplies retained default weights and relationships. Context and incoming signs produce encounter weights. Propagation uses that active arrangement; later reflection may or may not change the retained defaults.”

Point tested: an action or local exception need not establish a durable reordering of Identity.

Repetition and self reflection

> **Toney** “repetition across like encounters. The racist example. He ends up moving to the ghetto after loosing his job an repeatedly meets kindness from those he once thought inferior. The repetition has a chance of becoming the new rule instead of the exception.”
>
> **Assistant** “Someone could meet the same kind neighbor a hundred times and keep calling him an exception. The difference seems to be whether the encounters are retained and generalized beyond the particular people, possibly through reflection.”

> **Toney** "Agree with your objection. It must be realized that the repetition is repetition and that it defies the existing sign through self reflexion."

Point tested: repetition supplies opportunities for revision but does not compel it. A conflict with a prior self-associated sign can become the subject of actual reflexive activity.

The carried Identity and episodic reflection

> **Toney** "When I say "Toney" or "I" or am in a conversation my identity set is implied and carried along"
>
> **Assistant** "Operating from Identity cannot alone be self-reflection, or every operation would be self-reflective and our episodic account would collapse."
>
> **Toney** "Yes. When I engage in self reflection I am asking "am I also this new thing?" or "I don't know if i feel that way anymore". For me it is an internal monologue but that is not a requirement."

Point tested: Identity conditions ordinary activity; reflection occurs when its membership or ordering becomes the subject of activity, whether or not in language.

Emergence and collective authority

> **Toney** "the flock is the set of birds, including their spatial arrangement and the rules from which that arrangement derives. Thus the flock emergence behavior is set behavior, but not just the set of birds along, but their position from one another, the rules of this positioning internal to the birds, he rules of movement of each bird."
>
> **Toney** "The criteria is that the members not be capable of disagreement at the set level. The set level, if seen as a whole, cannot include members that disagree with the identity set or are capable of it."
>
> **Toney** "In doing so they distance themselves from the identity of the set"

Point tested: the earlier dialogue proposed that member disagreement at the set level defeats a collective subject. The present account revises that proposal: complete, inviolate constituent selves may retain independent judgment. The operational boundary for an authoritative set-level Identity and actual self-reflection remains open.