



Consciousness

Practice Journal

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How to use this journal

You can scribble on this PDF using a tablet if you have one, or you can print it out and write on it the old-fashioned way. Alternatively, you can add text to the PDF on your computer. For example, if you're using a Mac then go into the markup toolbar in Preview and insert a textbox wherever you like. Or on either Mac or PC, Adobe Reader lets you do the same thing: Choose the "Comment" option in the right-hand pane, then use the "Add text box" tool to drop it and type where you want it.

We don't recommend you try to do the whole thing on your phone; you won't be able to get a nice spacious overview on a small screen. Other than that, choose whichever format you think will make you feel most comfortable and most likely to look forward to making use of this journal as you explore ideas about consciousness.

Some questions include a multiple-choice element; we encourage you to commit to one of the options for the sake of clarifying your own thinking and also having something categorical to look back on. Beyond this, feel free to use this document for any kind of thinking-through-writing that feels appealing and/or useful.

Chapter 1: What's the problem?

[p. 13] You should look hard at the pencil and find out what your version of the problem is. What is your sticking point?

Practice 1.1 [pp. 13–14]:

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself 'Am I conscious now?'

How many times did you do the practice?

What happened?

Did you find yourself asking other questions as well? If so, what were they?

Was it difficult to remember to do it? If so, why do you think this is?

Chapter 2: What is it like to be...?

Practice 2.1 [p. 39]:

What is it like to be me now?

[p. 42] One day, Mary is let out of her black-and-white room and sees colours for the first time. What happens? Will she:

- a) gasp with amazement and say, 'Wow—I never realised red would look like that!', or
- b) just shrug and say 'That's red, that's green, nothing new of course'?

Why?

[p. 48] Most people agree that zombies are conceivable, but could they really exist? It is worth thinking very carefully about this and writing down your own answer now:

- a) yes
- b) no

Why?

[p. 57] Having read this brief overview of possible responses to the hard problem, which do you instinctively think is most likely to be the best response, and why?

Chapter 3: The grand illusion

[p. 62] Close your eyes, reopen them, and look around. How does this experience seem to you? Pause your reading for a moment and make a few notes.

[p. 62] Now, before going any further, it may also be useful to describe to yourself how you think vision actually works. Try to jot down a basic theory about what is going on.

[p. 63] Practice 3.1

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself 'How much am I seeing now?'

Then you can try a second version. Take a moment to hold your gaze steady. Look at one thing without moving your eyes. How much are you seeing now?

Eventually, you may notice some profound changes. Can you describe what has happened?

[p. 71] Activity 3.1 (Figures 3.4 and 3.6)

Can you deliberately prevent filling-in? Can you speed it up by making an effort? Does what you see in the gap ever surprise you?

[p. 81] Concept 3.2

If Kevin wears a head-mounted display showing the output from an eye tracker on Alva, what will happen?

- a) Kevin sees what Alva does
- b) Kevin is blind
- c) Kevin sees something different from Alva

Why?

Chapter 4: Neuroscience and the correlates of consciousness

[p. 114]

Does the neural activity cause the subjective experience of hurting?

Does the subjective pain cause the neural activity?

Are both caused by something else?

Is pain in fact nothing other than neural activity?

Or have we perhaps got the situation so muddled that we are led to ask impossible questions?

Hold out your bare arm and give it a really good pinch. Now consider this unpleasant feeling. What is it like? While you can still feel it, ask the questions above. Do any of these possibilities really seem right?

[p. 114] Practice 4.1

Look out for any pain you may experience this week, whether a pounding headache, a cut finger, or period pain. Now look straight into the pain. Experience it as fully as you can. Ask 'Where is this pain?'

Chapter 5: The theatre of the mind

[p. 122]: Ask, 'where do I seem to be?', and write down your answer.

[pp. 124–125]: Practice 5.1

Ask yourself, 'Is my mind a theatre?'

Is this experience a performance in a theatre?

Is the theatre a good metaphor for thinking about consciousness?

[p. 125]: Right now, please—consciously and deliberately—take a thumb, raise it to your face, and press it against the end of your nose. Where did the consciousness happen?

[p. 127]: If you try the mental rotation tasks in Figure 5.3, you will probably find that you seem to mentally rotate the objects in your mind's eye. Ask yourself where this mental rotation seems to be taking place.

[p. 130]: Look around until you find something blue to look at, perhaps a piece of clothing or furniture, or a book or coffee mug. Or close your eyes and imagine a blue cat. Now ask, what is this blueness and where is the blueness located?

[p. 146] When you ask 'What is it like being me now?', is the content fixed by the act of asking?

Chapter 6: The unity of consciousness

[p. 152] Practice 6.1

As many times as you can every day, ask yourself, 'Is this experience unified?'

[p. 153] Take a coin, toss it, and catch it again in your hand. How does this object, the coin, appear to you as it flies? You might like to toss it a few times and watch carefully. What do you see?

Chapter 7: Attention

[p. 191] Imagine you are sitting in a lecture and the door opens. You turn round to see who it is. What has happened? Before reading on, take a moment to think and write down the chain of events as it seems to you.

[p. 191] Practice 7.1

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself ‘Did I direct my attention or was my attention grabbed?’

[p. 194] Generally speaking, it is perfectly possible to look directly at one object or place and pay attention somewhere else, a skill now called 'covert attention scanning', as opposed to overt scanning, in which you pay attention where you are looking. You can try this now by keeping your eyes on the page and attending to a location off to one side. What happens when you try?

[p. 210] If you have never tried meditating, just take ten seconds now and see whether you can not think for that short length of time. How long did you manage?

[p. 217] Practice 7.2

Can you experience the world as though you are a predictive processing machine?

Try taking a nice walk, looking at different things, and imagining the predictions your brain is making about what is about to be heard, seen, or felt. If your attention is grabbed, does this feel as though an error—a difference between what was expected and what actually happened—has been detected and that a higher precision weighting is therefore needed?

If you choose to pay attention to something, does that feel like increasing the precision weighting? An interesting exercise, if you are a practised meditator, is to observe this process as the mind settles, seeing whether the PP account seems to fit with experience.

Does thinking about experience this way enhance or destroy your experiences? Does doing this help you understand the PP framework any better, or decide whether it is valid or not?

Are you a predictive processing machine?

Chapter 8: Conscious and unconscious

[p. 225] Practice 8.1

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself ‘Did I do this consciously?’

Then try asking a slightly different question while you are doing something: ‘Am I doing this consciously?’

Does asking either question make a difference to how it feels?

[p. 231] Bernard Baars (1997a) suggests, as an example of his method of contrastive analysis, that you turn the book upside down and try reading it like that, forcing yourself to go back to a slower and more deliberate kind of reading. Try this now; what happens?

[p. 237] Imagine someone throws you a ball and you catch it—or to make things more realistic, scrumple a piece of paper up into a ball right now, throw it up in the air, and catch it yourself. Do this a few times and ask yourself what role consciousness played in this simple skilled action. You were conscious of doing the catching, and of the sight of the ball as your hands reached for it, but did the consciousness itself cause anything to happen? Without consciously seeing the ball, could you have caught it? Throw it again a few more times.

[p. 245] You might like to throw that paper ball one more time and see whether perception/action distinction seems to help explain what is going on. Does throwing it again feel any different with this distinction in mind?

[p. 251] Practice 8.1

Going about your ordinary activities, you make countless large and small decisions. You decide whether to go for the tea or the coffee, whether to run for the bus or not, where to go for your holiday, and whether to take that job. But perhaps it might be more accurate to say that your whole body is making decisions, rather than that 'you' are. Watch these decisions as they happen, and for each one that you notice, ask yourself 'Was this decision conscious?'

As you begin to notice more and more decisions being made, what happens?

Is it obvious which are made consciously and which unconsciously?

Are there certain types of decision that are more often conscious?

Where does it feel as though the decision is being made?

Does anything happen to your sense of agency? What?

Chapter 9: Agency and free will

[p. 261] Practice 9.1

When you find yourself asking ‘Am I conscious now?’, observe what you are doing and ask yourself ‘Am I doing this?’

[p. 273] Hold out your hand in front of you. Now, whenever you feel like it, consciously, deliberately, and of your own free will, flex your wrist. Keep doing this for some time, until your arm gets too tired. Just flex your wrist whenever you want and try to observe what goes through your mind as you do so. If you don't want to do it at all, that's fine; that is your conscious decision. If you want to do it frequently, that is fine too. Now ask yourself what started the movement, or prevented it, each time. What caused your action?

[p. 277] Take a moment now to scribble down how you define free will for yourself.

[pp. 281–282] You might like to look back at what you wrote earlier about your personal idea of free will. Having explored the ideas in this chapter so far, what for you is non-negotiable in your definition and what could you do without and still call it ‘free’?

Chapter 10: Evolution and animal minds

[p. 308] What is it like to be an octopus? Try writing some notes on what it's like.

[p. 310] Practice 10.1

As you go about your daily life, look out for other animals and watch what they are doing. In each case ask yourself, 'What is it like to be this cow?', 'What is it like to be that spider?'

Chapter 11: The function of consciousness

[pp. 335–336] Here is a simple moral dilemma—and a true story. One night, Sue’s son rang and told her that a publisher had offered him \$500 to use a photograph of his on a textbook cover. He was delighted but asked them to send him the fee in pounds instead of dollars. To his surprise, he received two cheques—one in pounds and one in dollars. He was thinking of tearing one up; should he?

- a) yes
- b) no

And what advice do you think his mother should give him?

Why?

Does consciousness play a role in your answers?

[p. 338] Practice 11.1

Ask yourself, 'Does my awareness have any function of its own?'

Would my behaviour be any different without consciousness?

If I'm feeling an emotion or thinking a thought, is consciousness making a difference?

If so, is this the kind of difference that natural selection could work on?

[p. 362] Practice 11.2

Take whatever you were conscious of and ask 'Is this a meme?'. Anything you copied from someone else is a meme, including thoughts in words. Anything that is purely your own and not copied is not.

How often is your awareness free of memes?

Can you see your sense of self as being a construction of memes?

Is it possible to let go of this?

Chapter 12: The evolution of machines

379 (377) Practice 12.1

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself: ‘Am I a machine?’

[p. 381]

Does it require a conscious human being to paint, draw, or write creatively, or could a machine do as well?

If it could, it might convince an observer that it was human—in other words, it could pass the Turing test. In 2011, Zachary Scholl an undergraduate at Duke University submitted poems to the university literary journal, and ‘For the Bristlecone snag’ was accepted for publication. He waited until 2015 to declare in his blog, ‘Turing Test: passed, using computer-generated poetry’, though not many would agree with his boast. When you read the poem, did you guess it was written by a machine?

- a) yes
- b) no

Why do you think this was so?

[p. 392] Practice 12.2

As many times as you can, every day, ask: 'Is this machine conscious?'

Chapter 13: Altered states of consciousness

[p. 417] Practice 13.1

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself 'Is this my normal state of consciousness?'

When you have decided, you might like to ask some other questions.

How did you decide?

What is normal about it?

How different would it have to be for you to say no?

After a few days, how similar to each other do your 'normal' states now seem?

Is it always obvious what state you are in, and if so, why?

If not, what does this tell you about ASCs?

Chapter 14: Reality and imagination

[p. 458] You may reliably and correctly remember the speed of light, the capital of Germany, and the quickest route to the shops, but if we asked you now, you would not be able to tell us when you learned them. Try it now; can you remember when you learnt these things?

- a) the speed of light
- b) the capital of Germany
- c) the quickest route to the shops

[p. 477–478] Practice 14.1

If you believe in telepathy, or angels, or life after death, or spirits, take this opportunity to live without them.

You need not abandon your beliefs forever. Just set them aside for a few days and see how the world looks when you know that we living beings are completely on our own.

Sceptics should do this too. You may be surprised to find yourself willing something to happen even though you know you cannot affect it, or conjuring up an image of a friend hoping they will know when you need them. Ask yourself this. Do we live better or worse for a belief in the supernatural?

Don't give a glib, intellectual answer. Look and see what happens when you try to root it out completely.

Chapter 15: Dreaming and beyond

[p. 513] Practice 15.2

Take a pen and write a large D on one hand, for Dreaming, and a large A on the other, for Awake. As many times as you can, every day, look at these two letters and ask 'Am I awake or am I dreaming?' If you get thoroughly into the habit of doing this during the day, the habit should carry over into sleep. You may then find yourself looking at your hands in a dream and asking 'Am I awake or am I dreaming?' This is a pre-lucid dream. All you have to do is answer correctly and you're lucid.

Did it work?

What happened in the dream?

What happened to your awareness during the day?

[p. 525] Practice 15.3

As many times as you can, every day, take a good look at your own body and ask yourself 'When this body is gone, what will remain?' Try to strip away everything that you know will turn to ashes or dust and then imagine or think or feel what might be left.

What do you think will remain?

Chapter 16: Egos, bundles, and theories of self

[p. 537] Practice 16.1

Can you see or feel or hear the experiencer, as opposed to the experienced world?

At first, you will probably be sure that there is an experiencer, but it may be difficult to see any further. Keep looking.

If there is an experiencer, is it a whole person, a body, a brain, or part of brain?

Could it be separated from this body?

Keep asking 'Who is conscious now?'

[p. 538] Concept 16.1

Ego theories include:

Cartesian dualism

Immortal souls

Reincarnating spirits

Gazzaniga's interpreter

Mackay's self-supervisory system

add your own examples ...

Bundle theories include:

The Buddhist notion of anatta, no-self or non-self

Hume's bundle of sensations

Self as a product of discourse

Dennett's no audience in the Cartesian theatre

add your own examples ...

[p. 544] Are you an ego theorist or a bundle theorist? You might like to make a note of your preliminary answer and your reasons before reading on.

[p. 544] In making the journey in the teletransporter, every cell of your body and brain will be scanned and destroyed and then replicated exactly as they were before, but in Cape Town. The question is—will you go?

- a) yes
- b) no

Why did you decide to go or not go?

You can use the journal to keep a record of your answers; they may change.

[p. 548] Practice 16.2

As many times as you can, every day, ask yourself the familiar question 'Am I conscious now?' and then keep watching. As 'now' slips away, and things change around you, try to keep steadily watching, and keep wondering who is watching.

Is there continuity of self as you remain aware?

Do you seem to disappear and reappear?

Are you a slightly different person after you reappear?

Have you found any continuity or is there none?

What other qualities does the continuity or discontinuity have?

The question is 'Am I the same "me" as I was a moment ago?'

[p. 567] Do you feel any differently about any of this now, having read this far? Look back at what you wrote in your journal at the start of this chapter: Have you changed your mind about whether you are an ego or a bundle theorist? Why, or why not?

Does the you who might feel differently feel any less solid?

Chapter 17: The view from within?

[pp. 571–572] Concept 17.1

Try filling in your own answers.

	A	B	Your answer
We need a new kind of science to study consciousness	No	Yes	
First-person data are reducible to third-person data	Yes	No	
Third-person methods leave something out	No	Yes	
Introspection observes the experiences themselves	No	Yes	
Mary learns something new when she sees red	No	Yes	
We must avoid the zombic hunch	Yes	No	
The distinction between first-, second-, and third-person perspectives is a false distinction	Yes	No	
First- and second-person methods have an essential role to play	No	Yes	

[p. 575] Practice 17.1

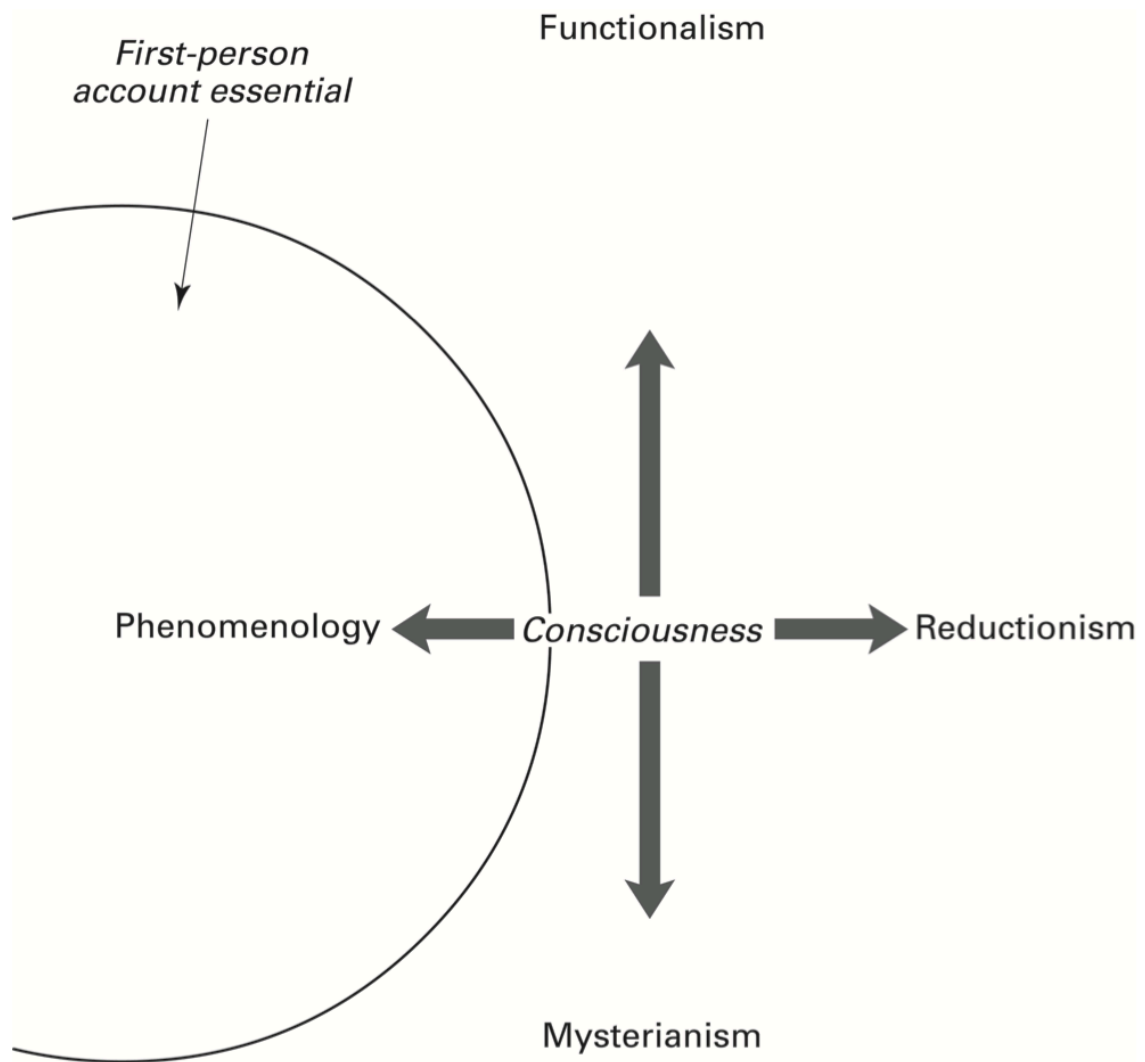
‘Is there more in conscious experience than can be accessed?’ This looks like a question for first-person inquiry because only you know the answer; you must look into your own experience to see whether there is more there than you can convey to anyone else or even describe to yourself.

You might like to look out of the window at a complex scene, take it all in consciously, and then try to access parts of it, for example by describing to yourself the objects you see or counting the number of trees or people in the scene. Do you get the sense that when you access some parts of your experience, others disappear or become unavailable?

This exercise may have some strange effects. Try to get used to doing it before you consider the more intellectual question: ‘Can this first-person exercise tell us anything useful for a science of consciousness?’

[p. 581] Stop reading for a moment and think about what 'now' means.
Can you find this moment? What is it like?

[p. 583] Figure 17.3



Varela has positioned some of the best-known theories of consciousness on this simple two-dimensional diagram. Before looking at where Varela himself places the theories, use his diagram to do this task yourself.

[p. 589] Practice 17.2

What is it like to be you, alone?

Chapter 18: Waking up

[p. 600] We began this book with the warning that learning about consciousness will change your life. Here we restate that warning as a question and try to start answering it. What about you—has your consciousness changed?

[p. 608] Practice 18.1

Read the story about Hui Neng and the monk in Concept 18.1 (Figure 18.4). Think about the question he asked: 'What is this thing and how did it get here?'

Think about it as applied to the monk, standing there at the monastery after days of walking in the mountains. Think about it as it applies to yourself, sitting here, walking there, realising you haven't thought about the question for half an hour, and now standing here. Think about it whatever you are doing. 'What is this thing and how did it get here?'

Go on asking the question all the time. The words do not matter. As you carry on practising, they will probably fall away until you begin the question and 'Wh...?'

‘This is just the universe ing’

[p. 617] Practice 18.2

Your final task is to be mindful for a whole day (or forever, if you prefer).
What is it like being mindful?

[p. 621] It is a valuable—and an interesting—practice to ask yourself now and then: do I think I am awake now, or do I think I have just woken up, and if so why, and might I be mistaken?

Try it now. What do you conclude?

But what is it?