

UNITED WISDOM

Consciousness as a Field: Metaphor, Model, and Testable Hypothesis

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“It is nothing jointed; it flows.”*

William James, Psychology: Briefer Course, 1892, chapter XI, “The Stream of Consciousness”; a short phrase about consciousness checked against the original.

Flow describes experiential continuity. It does not establish consciousness as a particular physical field.

What this article is about

“Field” promises to unite seemingly scattered sensations, thoughts, attention, and a conversation's atmosphere. Sometimes it is a useful image, sometimes a model component, sometimes a claim about consciousness's physical arrangement. Trouble begins when it quietly moves from the first meaning to the last while retaining the impression of proof already obtained. This article distinguishes these ways of speaking through a specific example: Johnjoe McFadden's electromagnetic cemi hypothesis. We separate electrical interactions in neural tissue from the assertion that a field itself is the substrate of experience, and consider why theories need different testable predictions. James and the Chandogya Upanishad appear alongside, but their images of continuity and common ground retain their own contexts. The practical task is understanding what an explanation does: helps notice experience, organizes inquiry, or asserts a mechanism still requiring testing.

I. A spacious word permits quiet substitution

Imagine someone leaving a meeting and saying the room had a heavy field. Perhaps they mean pauses, tense faces, cautious replies, and an important question nobody could discuss. The word joins impressions. It can help begin conversation if events can subsequently be specified. By itself, it does not report discovery of a special physical object.

Someone else speaks of a field of attention: some things stand out while others remain peripheral. This represents experience's organization. A third person discusses an electromagnetic field and its parameters' relation to neural activity. Here the meaning is technical. Using one noun does not make their assertions versions of one measured phenomenon.

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The word moves conveniently between contexts. It permits wholes without sharp boundaries, influence without visible pushes, and distribution without one center. These appeal in descriptions of consciousness. Linguistic appeal does not determine an object's nature. We need to identify the relationship an author conveys and how they propose establishing it.

“We entered a shared field” might mean participants began listening and considering one question. Adding “therefore one person's thoughts physically reach another without ordinary communication” introduces a new claim. A successful description of togetherness cannot establish it. Experience and an information-transmission mechanism need a separate bridge.

Rather than banning the word, ask for completion. A field of what? Where and how does it appear? Which relationships does it explain? What would differ without it? Answers may remain figurative or lead to a model. Neither should transfer more certainty to the other than each acquired. An open word should permit clarification rather than explain everything elusive in advance.

II. An image can help us notice experience

James's stream of consciousness resists picturing thought as a chain of stationary pieces. Dividing experience that way loses transitions and continuity. This historical description draws attention to how experience is described; it does not present a later physical theory.

Imagine remembering a conversation containing words, tone, anticipated replies, and your relationship with someone. Listing ten spoken nouns will not restore the encounter. Relationships made the utterance intelligible. Flow helps ask about transitions, retained expectations, and the whole's meaning.

“Field” can serve similarly when indicating jointly available experiential details. You hear music and notice the room, but attention is distributed unevenly. One sound becomes central; another remains background. Field description may reveal this relationship without immediately specifying the physical mechanism of availability.

A metaphor is checked primarily through whether it distinguishes experience and supports clear speech. If a field of attention reveals that expected evaluation occupies a conversation, a useful question appears. If no concrete distinction follows, the image may remain beautiful but unhelpful. Its strength depends on actual work performed.

Describing experience does not provide complete knowledge of causes. Someone may confidently report relief after conversation without knowing which processes produced it. This ordinary distinction between experience and explanation need not be immediately covered by a chosen word.

An image can remain useful without becoming causal theory. A metaphor then avoids expanding into universal law or being dismissed for lacking measurement protocols. It remains a tool of human attention. Mechanisms receive their own place and research methods, rather than being quietly settled by an effective phrase about experience.

III. A specific hypothesis concerns a specific physical field

In McFadden's 2020 article, cemi means conscious electromagnetic information. He proposes causally active information integrated in the brain's electromagnetic field as consciousness's physical substrate. He connects this to integrating experiential content and discusses predictions not yet tested. This is a particular author's hypothesis, rather than science's established general answer.

Its subject must remain specific. The field has physical meaning and concerns the brain. It cannot automatically be renamed an unlimited field of cosmic consciousness or a meeting's atmosphere. That would expand the hypothesis and change conditions. Extensions require their own grounds; the original reference cannot supply them automatically.

Distinguish three propositions. Electrical processes exist in neural tissue. Particular field interactions can affect activity. A particular field organization constitutes experience's substrate. Each adds content beyond its predecessor. Confirming the first does not complete testing of the third.

Consider a hypothetical device. Current exists, and voltage changes affect output. These facts do not establish that the device experiences operation. Experience claims need further premises and criteria. The analogy does not refute the field hypothesis; it identifies what invoking electricity alone has not established.

Theories may propose new explanatory candidates. Research thereby expands its questions. A candidate remains a candidate until distinctive assertions receive appropriate testing. A persuasive initial problem does not make its proposed solution unique.

Readers can occupy a position between extremes. Neither every field reference must be empty mysticism nor every physically phrased proposal a proved mechanism. Reconstruct the hypothesis, understand its motivation, and leave adequacy of grounds open. An idea becomes discussable and revisable through testing rather than a badge of membership in opposing camps.

IV. Real influence does not establish identity with experience

Anastassiou and colleagues' 2011 study investigated rat cortical pyramidal neurons in slices. The primary paper's abstract describes extracellular fields affecting membrane potential and coordinating firing, especially during slow oscillations. This is a physical effect under stated conditions. It does not directly establish identity between electromagnetic fields and human consciousness.

Influence and identity differ fundamentally. Temperature affects many processes without making them temperature. Conversation conditions influence understanding without reducing understanding to room dimensions. A substrate or mechanism requires a more specific relationship than a factor's general participation.

Imagine a changed team schedule improving coordination. This supports the schedule's importance, but the team is not its schedule. One successful factor adjustment does not establish that factor explains every outcome. Other conditions, continuing roles, and transfer limits require investigation.

Neural tissue is more complex, but scope can be retained. An experiment studying fields' influence on particular cells reports that influence. A theorist treating the result as support for consciousness hypotheses interprets it within a broader explanation. Readers should preserve the distance between experiment and interpretation.

That distance need not weaken a theory. Broad explanatory projects connect findings from different conditions. The question concerns justified links and whether alternatives accommodate the same effect. One observation may fit several theories without finally selecting one.

“The field influences” needs an object and conditions. “Consciousness is a field” needs additional grounds. Repeating only the first effect makes the second conclusion circular. Retain real physical content without assigning explanatory work the experiment has not performed.

V. Experiential unity is a question rather than a ready answer

Seeing a face, hearing a voice, and understanding a phrase does not feel like a collection of independent messages. That unity raises an explanatory question: how does diverse content become connected? Posing it does not select physical fields as the sole solution. Different theoretical languages can discuss it.

Reasoning sometimes moves too fast: experience is unified, fields appear continuous, therefore fields explain unity. The first two propositions offer an attractive analogy, but a

conclusion needs relationships linking specific content and parameters. Otherwise shared adjectives do a mechanism's work.

Consider a book. Its story feels whole despite pages, words, and readers' understanding. A field of plot can be a useful image for discussing connections. Naming it does not explain why that sequence yields a particular understanding. Text arrangement and reading need examination. The example concerns explanatory logic, rather than the brain's nature.

Develop the unity question further. How do contents differ? How do transitions occur? What persists when conditions change? How do experiential availability and reporting relate? Each theory may answer, but must identify its distinctive commitments rather than repeat the problem.

Nor should experience descriptions face impossible demands. People need not know neural mechanisms to report seeing color and hearing sound together. Their reports form part of inquiry's subject. Reports do not automatically yield complete physical models. Preserve experience's right to description and causes' need for investigation.

This avoids reducing experience to a convenient word or declaring it too special for mechanisms to be questioned. Work remains between these positions. It starts by clearly identifying what needs explaining and permits an intelligible image to help formulate questions without supplying final answers.

VI. Testability requires differences between explanations

A theory becomes substantive for research when risking difference from competitors. Compatibility with observed processes alone is insufficient. What should its premises lead us to expect, and which changed result would require revising a central proposition? This applies to every candidate, including field theories.

Imagine two explanations linking conversational clarity to participant coordination. One invokes turn-taking rules, the other a special field. If both predict every possible conversation equally, preference lacks a basis. An additional effect beyond ordinary communication needs separately defined detection conditions.

Physical hypotheses require more precise distinctions: measurable quantities, altered conditions, outcome criteria, and intervention limits. Readers need not conduct experiments themselves. Understanding why testability does not mean testing and confirmation suffices. A proposed check and a completed outcome are different knowledge states.

Discuss unsuccessful outcomes beforehand too. What limitation follows from a weak effect? Which proposition is affected by an absent relationship? If a method cannot distinguish

explanations, how must the task change? Failure then supplies information. Otherwise every negative result can be dismissed as wrong conditions without specifying correct ones.

Everyday life uses a related distinction. A habit intended to reduce postponed letters is assessed through the letters, rather than its inspiring explanation. This does not test a physical consciousness theory. It illustrates the commitment to identify expected change beforehand and preserve the subject afterward.

A proposal's research boldness is not the breadth of its promise. It is willingness to show where the proposal might be inadequate. Theories can then learn. “Field” stops sheltering everything unexplained and becomes part of a specific explanation revisable together with its grounds.

VII. Competing theories can work together

The COGITATE Consortium's study published in 2025 compared integrated information theory and global neuronal workspace theory. Experimental conditions, divergent predictions, and interpretation rules were preregistered. There were 256 participants and several methods of recording neural activity. Findings agreed with some predictions and challenged key propositions of both theories.

The relevant feature is the work's form rather than declaring a winner. It did not directly test cemi or prove it through competitors' difficulties. Trouble for another explanation does not positively confirm a theory. Its own distinctive grounds remain necessary.

Imagine two specialists proposing queue arrangements. Instead of debating beauty, they agree what to measure and which cases matter. Both approaches may help under some conditions and fail elsewhere. A clearer task emerges. Cooperation does not require declaring explanations equivalent or obliging everyone to share an answer.

Consciousness research has more complex stakes, but clear commitments retain value. Parties identify differences in advance and let results affect favored theories. Commitment to a research question becomes distinguishable from defending every current formulation.

Public reading should distinguish outcome levels. Testing some predictions is not finally solving consciousness. Limiting one version does not destroy inquiry as a whole. Unclear findings do not equally confirm every explanation. Conclusions should match what was actually compared.

Discussion can be strict and open together. Someone may support a hypothesis while acknowledging results requiring refinement. Objections need not attack personal experience or worldview. Separating experience, theory, and completed testing permits inquiry without making uncertainty a war over consciousness's only permissible vocabulary.

VIII. A traditional common ground is not a laboratory field

In Chandogya Upanishad VI.1, a father explains how knowledge of a material relates to objects made from it. The clay example belongs to teaching about common ground and differing names. This is philosophical and religious reasoning, rather than electromagnetic brain parameters or neural-tissue experiments.

The related motive is understandable: seeking a ground connecting diversity. But ground can mean material, metaphysical reality, a condition of knowledge, or physical mechanism. Without distinctions, comparison quietly translates everything into one chosen word.

If an ancient example helps someone think about unity, ask which difference became clearer—for instance, names changing versus objects changing. If it supposedly proves a contemporary theory, ask which theoretical claims appear in the source and how agreement was established. A common motive cannot replace justification.

Respecting tradition means not demanding contemporary technical vocabulary before its emergence. Its argument can be examined independently: what is assumed, how does inference proceed, and what understanding is expected? Agreement, disagreement, and translation clarification are more substantive than appointing an old image proof of a modern mechanism.

Conversely, a physical hypothesis need not settle the meaning of unity in human life. It has a selected subject and testing method. Philosophy may discuss its premises' significance without becoming another experiment through similar wording.

Questions can connect these approaches: how can a whole preserve differences, what separates description and explanation, and what grounds make knowledge shared? Answers remain discussable in their contexts. Traditions need not secretly be one field theory. Their differences reveal the several tasks behind the wish to unite experience.

IX. Experiencing connection does not establish its transmission

“We understood each other without words” may accurately describe an impression. Familiar encounters, gestures, and pauses can convey more than long phrases. Absence of spoken words does not mean absence of ordinary communication. Gaze, posture, shared experience, and circumstances can participate.

Immediately appointing a special field risks overlooking available connections. Reconstruct what each person saw, already knew, and chose. This preserves an encounter's beauty while preventing closeness from automatically proving an unestablished physical channel.

Imagine longtime coworkers. One notices the other seeking a document and opens its folder beforehand. Coordination can feel remarkable, yet have an ordinary history: a familiar task stage, established order, repeated actions. Identifying that history does not reduce its value.

Other cases remain unclear. We can acknowledge significance and an unestablished mechanism together. The second need not be immediately filled by an image. Uncertainty neither makes an event false nor confirms every proposed cause. It marks current knowledge's boundary.

Separating levels protects participants' autonomy. Someone certain they feel a shared field must still allow another person a different account. Unity grants no privileged access to another's experience. Check understanding through ordinary questions and respect unexpected replies.

Retain a human scale: closeness without infallible access to inner life, subtle noticing with clarification, connectedness without complete causal knowledge. Participants remaining different do not impoverish an encounter. Unexpected answers keep understanding alive and correct what the initial unity image quietly assigned to another.

X. Three languages can remain alongside one another

Metaphor, model, and testable hypothesis need not displace each other. Images help notice, models organize relationships, hypotheses assert what to investigate under conditions. Trouble begins when one language's virtue is used to confirm all others.

Suppose field language reveals that everyone waits for a manager's permission to speak. Name tension, describe initiative distribution, and propose different turn-taking. This concerns a human situation. Any benefit belongs to the meeting and action, rather than indirectly proving cemi or universal consciousness.

The reverse is possible too: read a physical hypothesis attentively without making it a relationship guide. A mechanism may interest researchers without requiring trust in every shared-field feeling or decisions against known conditions. Theory-action connections need their own argument.

These languages' autonomy permits encounters. Philosophical images can generate questions later refined. Physical research can alter admissible explanations. Experience descriptions can reveal omitted content. Every transition must be demonstrated rather than declared through repeated vocabulary.

When uncertain about claim status, formulate it more modestly and precisely: this image helps me; this author proposes a mechanism; this experiment observed an influence; this distinctive

prediction remains untested. Statements need not sound final. They let subsequent knowledge actually change discussion.

Consciousness remains a large question. Its scale requires neither immediate belief nor predetermined denial. Identify the current subject, supplied grounds, and next step's work. “Field” can then be used responsibly, preserving inquiry's precision and human experience's richness instead of containing every wish for unity.

What this means in practice

When field language appears, clarify its meaning first. Is it a shared feeling, attention-distribution model, or physical quantity? An author may need only an image or claim a mechanism. Distinguishing them avoids unnecessary disputes about every possible meaning simultaneously.

Check what a reference provides. A primary paper may investigate electrical influences on cells while surrounding prose discusses universal consciousness. New propositions have been added between them. Ask for the transition's grounds. An excessive headline neither invalidates an experiment nor gains confirmation merely from its existence.

Choose a describable event for personal observation. Replace a bad meeting field with unanswered questions, avoided objections, and an unagreed deadline. Suggest discussing the question separately, allowing response time, or clarifying responsibility. If clarity improves, the result belongs to human action and should be described at its observed scope.

Do not use felt connection as another person's consent. Close understanding still permits clarification. Ask whether you understood a request and allow correction. This respects experience rather than destroying togetherness.

If the physical hypothesis interests you, begin with the author's text, defined quantities, and predictions. Distinguish completed testing, proposals, and results fitting several explanations. Unfinished research does not oblige immediate selection of a final worldview. A more precise question and recognition of missing grounds can be a useful reading outcome. Inquiry can continue alongside living, conversation, and decisions under accessible human conditions.

Key quotation

> *“the truth being that all is clay”*

Chandogya Upanishad, VI.1.4; short fragment checked in F. Max Müller's The Upanishads, Part I, 1879, text.

The example concerns clay objects and the relation of material to different names. It does not declare every contemporary field that same ground.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Essential difference
James's stream and attention-field metaphor	How can continuity be described without losing transitions and background?	Experience-description language does not establish a physical substrate.
Chandogya Upanishad and cemi	What lets diversity be understood through common ground?	Religious-philosophical example and physical hypothesis have different premises and grounds.
Ephaptic influence and consciousness field hypothesis	Which field connections participate in neural activity?	Observed cellular influence does not establish field-experience identity.
COGITATE and reading cemi	Which distinctive commitments does a theory make before testing?	The 2025 experiment compared IIT and GNWT directly, not cemi; competitors' difficulties do not confirm a third theory.

Primary sources and research

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3. COGITATE Consortium et al. “Adversarial testing of global neuronal workspace and integrated information theories of consciousness.” Nature 642, 2025, 133–142. DOI: 10.1038/s41586-025-08888-1. PubMed abstract and figure descriptions read. The publisher's full text was unavailable during that source check; this article uses only information from the accessible abstract.

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5. Chandogya Upanishad, VI.1.1–6. F. Max Müller, The Upanishads, Part I, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 1, 1879, pp. 92–93. Section text. Key quotation at VI.1.4; the translation's version is explicitly identified.

Tags

consciousness, field, metaphor, model, hypothesis, cemi, McFadden, electromagnetic field, brain, neural activity, ephaptic interaction, integration, experiential unity, continuity, James, stream of consciousness, Chandogya Upanishad, ground, difference, COGITATE, integrated information theory, workspace, prediction, testability, causality, experience, explanation, scientific precision, communication, autonomy, open question.

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