

UNITED WISDOM

Consciousness as process, property, or relation

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

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@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *“...it does stand for a function”. — William James, Does 'Consciousness' Exist?, 1904; sentence fragment concerning the word “consciousness,” from the English original. James’s denial of a separate entity does not deny the existence of thoughts.*

What this article is about

Calling consciousness a process, property, or relation can make it seem that we only need to choose the right noun. Yet these words raise different questions. Process directs attention to what happens through time; property asks what is attributed to something and under what conditions; relation asks which connection makes a description complete. This article uses three frames for reading and discussion, without presenting them as an exhaustive classification of philosophical theories. Historical sources help distinguish James’s stream of thought, Descartes’s argument about the thinker, James’s knowing function, and Aristotle’s distinction between capacity and its exercise. Their concepts do not translate automatically into one another. We consider how one situation supports several questions, why capacity differs from a current episode, and when relation adds substance. The practical purpose is to formulate a thought more precisely, without turning a preferred vocabulary into a final account of consciousness or a judgment of human worth.

I. Three frames change the question as well as its name

Imagine someone reading a short note. They notice a mark, recognize a word, connect it with the preceding phrase, and understand a request. This is a hypothetical scene, not an experiment establishing processing order. Asking what happened first and next selects a question about process. Asking in what sense the content is available to the reader begins a question about an attributed state or capacity. Asking how the reader, note, and situation connect in understanding selects a relation. These questions can meet within one discussion, but their answers take different forms. Replacing a noun alone explains neither a sequence nor a capacity nor a particular connection.

Here process, property, and relation serve as working frames for our argument. We do not claim that every philosopher belongs to exactly one of three groups. An author can describe a process, make a claim about who thinks, and explain thought’s connection with its object.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Understanding the text requires reconstructing where each claim operates. Otherwise a historical disagreement becomes a contest between words: one source is assigned to processes, another to properties, another to relations, and the differences appear resolved. Such a table might be convenient, but convenience cannot supply the grounds for a classification. We keep these questions open and consider selected primary passages at their own scale.

A frame needs to make something more definite. If process only means that something happens, it conveys little. If property merely repeats that consciousness belongs to someone, we still need to specify what is attributed. If relation connects everything with everything, it does not explain the connection at issue. We can therefore continue each term with a question: which process, which property, a relation between what and what? This step requires no final metaphysics. It makes clear what has been said and which question remains unanswered. Without that continuation, the label can indicate a direction for inquiry, but should not pass as an explanation already completed.

Choosing a frame does not cancel other questions. The note’s reader might describe a sequence of understanding without settling what experience is in general. They might know they can read a familiar language without reconstructing every moment of today’s reading. They might understand a request in its situation without possessing a universal theory of relations. Such bounded answers can carry substance. Difficulty arises when one answer claims authority over all the others merely through the shared word consciousness. A more precise discussion returns the answer to its particular question. It leaves room to connect the frames later, if grounds emerge, without requiring that connection in advance to create an appearance of completeness.

II. A process question preserves time and change

In Chapter IX of The Principles of Psychology, James describes thought as personal, changing, and felt as continuous. The selected passages belong to a historical account of experience. They offer no modern neural scheme for every transition, but help us avoid turning what happens into a collection of static names. When someone hears a sound against an experience already in progress, the description concerns both the sound and its place in a sequence. We use this context to ask about process: what changes, what connects moments, and which temporal scale is chosen? This is an editorial application, not a claim that James established the sole possible explanation of consciousness.

In the hypothetical note scene, we can distinguish recognizing a word from understanding a request. But how moments are separated depends partly on the task. The reader might describe understanding as a whole, while someone organizing a learning exercise asks about one word. Both descriptions can be useful when their scope is clear. We cannot decide

beforehand that a finer scale is always truer, or that describing the whole automatically explains every part. A detailed sequence needs grounds just as a general account does. Our scene establishes no obligatory order for everyone. It shows why process should be accompanied by a time scale, the subject of change, and a way of identifying a transition.

A process need not be continuous in every sense of that word. Someone might report a connected experience while a research record separates intervals and events. The difference alone creates no contradiction. We must ask which kind of continuity is meant and how it is examined. In James's historical text, felt connection should be preserved without presenting it as the absence of all physical change. Likewise, separate time marks in a record do not prove that experience consists of independent, finished pieces. Those further conclusions would require a passage between descriptions. For now, naming both subjects is more useful than silently making one meaning of time answer for another.

The process frame also helps show why a current episode is not a complete characterization of a person. Reading might stop at an unfamiliar word today; that does not by itself mean the general capacity to read has disappeared. A familiar note might be understood differently tomorrow because a different question is asked of it; this does not prove yesterday's experience was invented. These hypothetical examples establish no causes of actual difficulties. They separate scales of assertion: what happens now and what is attributed more enduringly. Connecting those scales needs stated grounds. Otherwise a temporary episode readily becomes a judgment of capacity, character, or worth, although the process question promised none of those conclusions.

III. A property requires a bearer and specified content

Saying that someone is in a conscious state attributes something to them. Its meaning depends on what is attributed: a particular experience, a possibility of answering, the availability of content, or another specified state. This article offers no diagnostic vocabulary for these states. We examine an assertion's structure: its bearer, content, and conditions of application. Without them, property remains too general. The label alone cannot tell us whether the subject is a current episode, an enduring capacity, or a metaphysical thesis. Making the assertion more precise keeps those questions separate, even when grammar expresses each as something belonging to the same person. Similar sentence forms need not perform the same explanatory work.

In the second Meditation, Descartes asks what he can assert about himself within his adopted procedure of doubt. In the Molyneux translation read here, he calls himself a thinking thing and unfolds thought through doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining, and sensing. This is a philosophical move within an argument, not a measurement of a modern participant's capacity. The selected passage also leaves open what he does not yet know

concerning the body. We therefore cannot replace this reasoning with an experimental proof of an independent substance. A narrower point matters here: thinking receives specified activities and conditions under which the author considers his assertion justified, rather than remaining an empty label.

Grammatical attribution does not settle ontology on its own. We say that an object is red, a person can read, or an event lasts a long time; similar sentence structures do not make colour, capacity, and duration the same kind of being. Consequently, saying consciousness is a property requires continuation: a property of what, in which sense, and on what grounds? A philosophical answer may be offered, but it adds content beyond the grammar. Using a noun alone cannot obtain that answer. This limit also helps with historical reading. When an author names a thinker, understanding the argument requires more than substituting a familiar modern word and declaring the translation complete.

An attributed capacity also differs from its exercise at this moment. Someone might know a language while silently looking at a closed note; they might read the words without yet understanding an unfamiliar request. These are different assertions in our hypothetical scene. We have not measured the capacity or determined a single sign by which it can be established. The example shows that describing a bearer and describing a current action impose different requirements. One episode may support a narrow account of what happens while failing to justify a general conclusion about someone’s possibilities. More precise language preserves this distinction. It prevents a pause, silence, or isolated mistake from becoming a complete portrait disguised as an explanation of consciousness.

IV. A relation must disclose a particular connection

In his 1904 essay, James denies consciousness as a separate, original entity while retaining the function of knowing. In the selected passages, he proposes understanding knowing through relations among parts of pure experience: in one connection a part acts as knower, in another as what is known. This is his philosophical hypothesis and argument, not a modern experiment eliminating experience. We do not accept an entire system from a few paragraphs. What matters here is that relation receives particular roles and contexts. James’s denial should not be paraphrased as saying thoughts do not exist. He explicitly preserves thoughts and asks how knowing operates when a separate entity is removed from first principles.

In the hypothetical scene, the note represents a request through more than the shape of its letters. We need to know who addresses whom, what the expression refers to, and which question the reader is answering. These connections do not prove James’s system; they are our everyday illustration of why a relation needs specification. The same inscription might serve as a handwriting sample or a message about a meeting, depending on the task. The letters acquire no power to change facts themselves. Their role in the described situation

changes, and its grounds need naming. Relation gains substance when a reader can reconstruct its parties, how the connection is established, and the difference it helps explain.

Relation need not mean that all content lies outside the person or that personal experience vanishes. That formulation would require a separate position. Within our frame, it is enough to notice that some questions remain incompletely described unless connections are specified. We can acknowledge someone’s experience while separately examining what object it represents, the situation in which a question arose, and how a report is used. This does not make every description equal. Some connections may be well supported; others may be invented afterward. If relation explains everything without distinctions, it again becomes too general. It needs the same discipline as process and property: identify the asserted transition and the grounds supporting that particular transition.

Preserving function after rejecting a separate entity matters especially when reading striking titles. Does 'Consciousness' Exist? can readily sound like a denial that anyone experiences or thinks. In James’s selected argument, the denial has a narrower subject: a particular conception of an original entity. It does not release explanation from showing how knowing works. We do not settle whether the author accomplishes that task throughout the work. We preserve his own formulation. Disagreement can then concern the proposed connection and its assumptions, rather than an invented rejection of thoughts. Specifying a denial’s scope allows a philosophical proposal to be discussed without turning it into a sensational announcement that human experience is empty.

V. Capacity and actuality belong to another historical vocabulary

In the first part of Book II of On the Soul, Aristotle distinguishes possessing knowledge from using it. His selected definition connects soul with the form of a natural body potentially having life. Its subject exceeds a current conscious episode and includes life, nutrition, and growth. Soul therefore cannot automatically be translated as modern consciousness. We turn to this passage for the distinction between capacity and its exercise while preserving the historical concepts. Actuality here carries a particular philosophical meaning, rather than simply denoting any action. The text provides no laboratory confirmation of our frame or proof of a modern brain theory. It shows another way to distinguish a state, a possibility, and its exercise.

Aristotle’s comparison with knowledge helps avoid confusing a retained possibility with current use. In our example, the reader knows the language but has not yet opened the note. This illustrates a distinction rather than applying Aristotle’s entire system to a contemporary person. A capacity need not disappear from a description whenever it is unused for a second. At the same time, attributing it requires grounds and does not guarantee success in every task. Discussing consciousness as a property can thus ask whether a statement concerns a possibility or its present exercise. A process question may then examine how that exercise

unfolds. A specific connection between frames emerges, without proving their complete identity.

The historical concept of form should likewise not be converted into the modern word information without further argument. Similar general vocabulary establishes no identity of content. In Aristotle's selected passage, natural body, life, capacity, and grades of actuality matter. Removing these conditions would make the quotation about soul so broad that it could serve almost any explanation. We need the reverse move: return the quotation to its definition, then name the bounded distinction we borrow. This preserves interest in a historical source without requiring acceptance of all its positions. It also prevents an old formula from being declared an advance confirmation of future research models about which it says nothing.

At the end of the part read, Aristotle retains questions about soul and body, including qualifications about the possible separability of some parts. His text should not be compressed into one modern label as though it finally selected our present answer. This article's frames do not constitute a tribunal judging historical theories through a prepared table. We ask what a passage contributes to a particular question and where that use ends. The distinction between capacity and exercise proved useful; other philosophical commitments neither disappeared nor became automatically accepted. We can move forward with a precise borrowing while leaving open how a contemporary theory would justify the relationships we have so far only distinguished.

VI. One situation permits several incomplete descriptions

Process, property, and relation can describe different aspects of one situation without immediately contradicting each other. Someone unfolds a note and gradually understands its request: a process scene. They can read the language: an attributed possibility. They understand an expression as this person's request in this situation: a specified connection. Each statement needs its own grounds. Their compatibility is not proved for every philosophical system; it is the logical structure of our hypothetical example. It helps show that choosing a frame can follow a task rather than exclude every other frame. Before disagreeing, we can check whether statements answer one question or share a word while answering different questions.

Disagreement arises when a description begins claiming completeness. If a sequence is called a sufficient explanation of every capacity, the transition must be shown. If a property is presented as the cause of the entire sequence, that causal assertion needs an account. If relation is said to eliminate a bearer or time, the elimination needs justification. None of these moves is forbidden beforehand, and none follows automatically from a name. We can select a specific sentence and ask what it adds to what is already known. Disagreement then no longer

depends solely on preferences for vocabulary. It acquires a subject open to argument, refinement, or recognition that a direction has been outlined rather than an answer obtained.

Different descriptions can be useful for different tasks. Discussing when a note was understood probably calls for a process question; articulating a reader’s command of a language calls for capacity; understanding the request’s role calls for a connection within the situation. Here usefulness means fit with the chosen question, not measured educational or therapeutic effectiveness. We conducted no comparison of teaching methods. The example supplies a more modest criterion: can the language identify the distinction we are asking about? If so, it can be used at that scale. This does not imply that it should govern every other explanation or determine the ultimate nature of experience.

People sometimes choose language because of their own experience: speaking of a flow, presence, or connection feels natural. Such a choice can matter for expressing experience without immediately becoming a universal thesis. Two notes can be kept distinct: this language helps describe this situation; this theory asserts something about all cases. Their grounds differ. A personal response need not be devalued because it supplies no general theory, and a general theory should not be confirmed by the strength of a personal response. This distinction supports the reader’s autonomy. They can seek appropriate words, change them, and leave the philosophical question open without declaring their earlier experience mistaken or proof of consciousness’s only possible structure.

VII. Discussing a frame with a definite subject

The first step is turning a label into a sentence with conditions. Instead of consciousness is a process, ask which transition is described here and how its sequence could be identified. Instead of consciousness is a property, ask what is attributed to a bearer and whether it concerns an episode or capacity. Instead of consciousness is a relation, ask which parties are distinguished and what changes with context. These questions prescribe no answer. They make an assertion definite enough for further discussion. A theory rejecting the frame itself can explain which assumption it rejects. Without that clarification, conversation may end in an exchange of labels understood differently by each participant.

Next, identify the kind of ground involved. A historical philosophical argument, a description of personal experience, and a result from a specified procedure are not interchangeable evidence. One assertion may call for conceptual analysis, another for observation, another for research. Our sources are primarily philosophical and historical psychological texts; they do not stand in for modern neural experiments. A reader can therefore examine an argument or distinction here without obtaining a numerical account of the brain’s organization. This boundary does not make the text useless. It specifies its actual work: clarifying the question’s

subject and transitions between concepts while keeping further empirical obligations separate. A source remains useful within that stated purpose.

We can also ask what would change the assertion under discussion. If a process description permits no refinement of sequence, its content remains unclear. If any response confirms an attributed capacity, we need to understand the grounds for distinguishing it. If a relation explains opposite cases without conditions, its rule of distinction needs disclosure. These are questions for our frame, not accusations against historical authors or a universal method for refuting every philosophy. Some arguments require another mode of assessment. Even then, stating how a proposition will be evaluated remains useful. The reader can follow the reasoning and recognize where it gains new grounds and where a familiar word merely acquires a more attractive replacement.

For a shared discussion, one neutral scene and one specific question can be enough. Nobody needs to test another person’s capacities or demand proof of private experience. Compare three formulations and identify the conditions each names. When speakers disagree, first reconstruct the difference between their tasks. Sometimes the disagreement then becomes smaller; sometimes genuinely incompatible assumptions emerge. Neither outcome is promised. The value lies in clarifying the subject: an appropriate argument or source can now be sought instead of endlessly repeating a general position. Philosophical interest is sustained when a formulation can encounter new grounds, rather than requiring immediate agreement with the preferred frame before inquiry can proceed.

VIII. A precise distinction leaves room for the next question

These sources do not form a single ladder toward our final answer. James in 1890 describes the stream of thought; Descartes examines the thinker within doubt; James in 1904 proposes function and relations of experience; Aristotle distinguishes capacity and actuality within his account of soul. Their subjects connect, but their starting concepts and modes of argument differ. They can be read together without declaring every later text a correction of its predecessor or giving historical resemblance the force of proof. We use them for particular distinctions. Comparing entire systems would remain a separate undertaking, requiring other criteria and a wider range of actual reading than the passages used here.

After this reading, a bounded result is possible. In our scene, process clarifies sequence; property requires a bearer and possibility; relation requires a specified connection. This result chooses no worldview for anyone. It helps identify what must be added to reach a broader conclusion. The next question may concern the process’s organization, grounds for attributing a capacity, or the character of a connection with an object. Distinction directs inquiry without replacing its outcome. It also allows partial understanding to suffice for the present task,

keeping unfinished questions visible without turning them into a deficiency of the reader. Further work becomes possible because its subject has become clearer.

The human scale of discussion deserves particular care. Preferring a frame, or having difficulty formulating it, establishes neither a person’s worth nor their intelligence or health. A theoretical word can be convenient in one discussion and unnecessary in another. Readers can retain an ordinary account of experience when it suits their task. Choosing a stricter question creates new requirements for argument, without an obligation to solve the whole philosophy of consciousness immediately. This approach allows learning without turning life into a continuous examination of conceptual correctness. Precision serves understanding, rather than permanently distributing people according to their preferred words or their speed in adopting a philosophical vocabulary.

Process, property, and relation become useful when each label opens a definite question. Before that, words may indicate only an intention to explain. Once the question is disclosed, conditions for a substantive answer appear, together with a way to see its limit. Historical reading supports this work when concepts retain their origin and are not transplanted into today’s language without qualification. We do not establish what consciousness is in every possible sense. We preserve three ways to clarify discussion: what happens, to what content is attributed, and which connection makes an account fuller. The next conclusion will need its own grounds. That is why the distinction can remain open and support further understanding.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose a neutral scene of reading a note or listening to a familiar melody. You need not reproduce an experience on command or assess another person. Write one question about sequence, one about a capacity or state, and one about a connection with an object and situation. If a question is unnecessary here, keep that as a result rather than inventing an answer to complete the list.

For each sentence, identify its grounds: personal description, argument, or specified observation. Check whether one episode has become a general conclusion about someone. Then select one transition needing clarification. You can leave it open or seek a suitable primary text; a historical source need not automatically provide a modern experimental solution.

Finish with a sentence about your current understanding: this frame clarifies this question; that question remains open. The exercise is voluntary, and is neither diagnosis, an intelligence test, nor an established therapy. Its possible result is a clearer subject for reasoning. You can stop or return to ordinary language without defending your chosen formulation as the only correct theory of consciousness.

Key quotation

> *"...soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized." — Aristotle, On the Soul, II.1; fragment of J. A. Smith's English translation. The definition concerns a natural body potentially having life; soul is not identified here with a modern conscious episode.*

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Substantive connection and boundary
James IX and Descartes II	A sequence of thought and an assertion about a thinker have different subjects. Describing a stream does not complete the Cartesian argument.
James IX and James 1904	Describing a process and explaining a knowing function can address different questions. The selected passages establish no complete history of the author's changing position.
James IX and Aristotle II.1	A current course of experience differs from possessing a possibility. This bounded comparison preserves the broader scope of Aristotle's soul.
Descartes II and James 1904	A thinking bearer and a knowing connection are discussed through different assumptions. They are not combined as proof of one kind of entity.
Descartes II and Aristotle II.1	Naming a bearer and defining a capacity are different argumentative moves. Historical concepts of soul and body are not declared identical.
James 1904 and Aristotle II.1	Function and actuality require specified roles and conditions. Resemblance does not make pure experience and a natural living body one system.

Primary sources

1. William James, The Principles of Psychology, Chapter IX, 1890, original English, York University transcription edited by Christopher D. Green. Selected passages on personal thought, continuity and sound context, and experience's fringe read, printed pages 225–226, 239–241, 258–259. Neither the whole chapter nor a modern neural model.

2. René Descartes, Six Metaphysical Meditations, Meditat. II, William Molyneux's English translation, London, 1680, Project Gutenberg 70091. Selected opening of Meditation II through the thinking thing's activities read, printed pages 11–19; neither all meditations nor collation with Latin.

3. William James, Does 'Consciousness' Exist?, Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods 1, 477–491, 1904, original English, York University transcription edited by Christopher D. Green. Selected opening and the author's explanation of function and two contexts of experience read; neither the entire essay nor the whole system of radical empiricism.

4. Aristotle, On the Soul, Book II, Part 1, historical English translation by J. A. Smith, MIT Classics. II.1 read in full, including concluding qualifications; the translation's date is not established here, and Greek was not collated. The broad concept of soul is not identified with a contemporary neuroscientific variable.

Tags

consciousness, process, property, relation, experience, thought, time, change, stream of thought, bearer, capacity, actuality, function, knowing, object, context, soul, body, form, possibility, James, Descartes, Aristotle, philosophy of consciousness, historical reading, primary sources, concepts, argument, inference limits, autonomy

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.