

Exploration

Logopsychism: The Meaning of Consciousness

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Abstract

Logopsychism is introduced as an ontologically neutral theory of consciousness that posits its primary function as the ascription of subjective meaning. It shifts the discussion from what consciousness *is* to what consciousness is *for*. Its framework is built upon four axioms: (1) the universe is a source of infinite meaning potential; (2) consciousness is the structure through which meaning is ascribed to all events; (3) subjectivity interprets this meaning into potential lived experience; and (4) consciousness either accepts this interpretation or recursively layers new meaning until an acceptable condition is reached. Meaning can be layered and mapped on a three-dimensional plane along the axes of depth, breadth, and time. Logopsychism is presented as a supplemental theory that can be integrated into any account that recognizes meaning and subjectivity as integral to first-person experience.

Keywords: Consciousness, subjectivity, meaning, logopsychism, ontology, teleology.

Radical ideas may be needed, and I think that we may need one or two ideas that initially seem crazy before we can come to grips with consciousness scientifically.

-David Chalmers

Surely the apple is the noblest of fruits.

-Henry David Thoreau

It would be great if scientists and philosophers could all agree on a theory of consciousness. What is it? How does it work? The debate within the two major philosophical camps has predominantly been between materialist views, which posit that consciousness is a product of the physical and the variety of non-materialist views that suggest consciousness to be something fundamentally experiential. This decade's-long immobility of theories of consciousness is perplexing. To put this in perspective, the internet was almost twenty years from launching when Nagel (1974) introduced us to his bat. We can safely say that enough time has gone by that the little guy is probably a full-grown vampire by now.

Maybe our perception of the problem is askew and what is needed is a realignment of perspective. After all, the Penrose triangle, an impossible figure, cannot be understood until we

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shift our line of sight a few degrees. What I suggest is that perhaps we are asking the wrong question. Rather than trying to arrive at a definitive understanding of what consciousness *is*, perhaps we may benefit from asking what consciousness *is for*. What is the meaning and function of consciousness? The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the meaning of consciousness is the meaning that consciousness makes. In so doing, it will lay the foundation for introducing my own framework, logopsychism, which proposes that the primary function of consciousness is to generate meaning, as reflected in the prefix *logos* (Greek for “meaning”).

Before we explore what logopsychism is, it is prudent to begin with what it is not. Logopsychism is not a theory which claims to establish what consciousness is. It is not an examination of the ontology of consciousness. It does not close what Levine (1983) called the “explanatory gap” nor answer what Chalmers (1996) later coined the “hard problem”, both of which allude to the inability to explain subjective conscious experience through objective scientific means. More than 225 published theories already address this problem (Kuhn, 2024). To add another one at this point would risk just piling on rather than presenting something new. Instead, we look beyond the disagreements that have resulted in stagnation and focus on what all theories agree upon: meaning.

Logopsychism is not meant to categorize or define; it is meant to supplement. This is primarily due to the apathy toward ontological considerations. Again, what consciousness *is for* takes precedence over what consciousness *is*. Most theories of consciousness are incompatible because of the latter but are open to the recognition and importance of meaning. Because of this, the tenets of logopsychism can easily be adopted into almost all contemporary theories, from illusionism to idealism, from reductive materialism to neutral monist. It does not replace these theories; it provides the tools that might enhance and deepen them. Most theories devote much of their efforts to understanding and explanation of the ontology of consciousness, focused on what consciousness is. Because of the ontological neutrality of logopsychism, it can coexist with current theories while adding the functional dimension of consciousness that most of these theories overlook.

The four axioms of logopsychism

Axiom 1: The universe may be considered an infinite source of potential meaning and everything within it is imbued with this potential.

The universe may be conceived as a source of infinite meaning. It is not an ethereal substance or ineffable cosmic dust, but rather a condition. Everything within the universe is enveloped by this condition and as such, has intrinsic meaning potential. This is not an attempt to provide a cosmic ontology. On the contrary, the remaining axioms that constitute the theory of logopsychism do not need this first supposition to be structurally valid. Hence the disclaimer “may be considered” rather than simply “is”.

The inclusion of this axiom has two purposes. First, because logopsychism claims that consciousness is the structure through which meaning is ascribed, it is more plausible to suggest a field of potential from which meaning is generated rather than meaning emerging *ex nihilo*. Second, it is evident that many non-materialist theories are on a trajectory in which metaphysical claims are being re-examined and reintroduced as possible tenets within theories of consciousness. Attributing meaning potential as a condition of the universe gives latitude to future exploration within more metaphysical models.

It is necessary at this point to clearly state what is meant by *meaning*. Meaning can be defined from two distinct perspectives. The first is the linguistic interpretation of meaning. In his book *Semantics: The Study of Meaning*, Leech (1981) provided seven interpretations of meaning. He states the most important are the conceptual meaning (literal) and the connotative meaning (referential). The second interpretation of meaning is its phenomenal aspect. In this regard, meaning is the significance that is ascribed to subjective interpretation of perceived reality. It is the self-reflective answer to the question, “What does this mean to me?” In this case, meaning is subjective and unique to the individual. For the remainder of this paper, *meaning* will refer to this phenomenal aspect, the ascription of significance to lived experience rather than linguistic interpretation.

Axiom 2: Consciousness is the process-based structure through which meaning potential is ascribed as meaning.

Meaning potential is not a cosmic library of pre-scripted meanings from which one is chosen and ascribed. To presuppose this would reduce the function of consciousness to a metaphorical search engine rather than an active participant in creating significance. Experience as represented by objects, events or phenomena presents itself to consciousness as a neutral condition upon which consciousness ascribes meaning. This process is the same for objective external perception such as identification, and subjective internal awareness of thought and emotion. Familiar experiences are given meaning based on previous history, experience and knowledge. A novel encounter contributes a new entry into the catalogue of meaning that will create a reference of lived experience. In both instances, the meaning ascribed will become the sediment upon which subsequent experience will be perceived. In this regard, meaning potential is represented as all possible interpretations that consciousness can ascribe to a given situation.

Axiom 3: Subjectivity provides the interpretation of lived experience with the ascribed meaning.

Once meaning has been ascribed to a situation, the subjective process of consciousness interprets how this new meaningful event will be experienced by the subject. It becomes the epistemic lever that makes known how this experience will be perceived and felt in the first person. Without subjective interpretation, all experience is reduced to meaningless noise. It is this process that is missing from Chalmers’ philosophical zombies.

The ontological guesswork of consciousness is irrelevant to subjective interpretation. No theory of consciousness denies the felt phenomena of first-person experience are real to the subject experiencing it. Regardless of whether it is a by-product of neural cluster activity, an illusion of free agency, an integration of information or implied by quantum superposition; feelings and their impact on lived experience are self-evident to the subject. Qualia may be shown as illusory in some theories, but the function of consciousness to provide subjective interpretation of the meaning of qualia perceived by the subject remains unchanged. As such, logopsychism takes first-person experience generated by conscious process and puts it front and center as its most important function.

The subjective quality of this process cannot be overstated. There is no cosmic rule book that predetermines the significance or meaning an experience should have. The interpretation of the newly ascribed meaningful event is a product of the subject's morals, values, available knowledge, history of previous experiences and desire of a future condition. However, subjective interpretation does have constraints. First, subjective interpretation is constrained by physical law. The existence of gravity is not subjectively optional. Second, subjective interpretation is constrained by social norms of the location a subject is in. Unlike physical laws, social norms can be violated, but not without consequences. Finally, subjective interpretation is constrained by linear time. Time constraint is more relevant to the function of consciousness in axiom four which is discussed below.

Axiom 4: Consciousness reflects on this interpretation and either accepts the significance of this experience or re-ascribes a new layer of meaning. This recursive process continues until the lived experience becomes aligned to a desired condition

Axiom four is the teleological aspect of consciousness and what makes logopsychism a dynamic rather than explanatory theory. It is here we answer the question "What is consciousness for?" After the process in axiom three - where the subjectivity of consciousness provides a lived experience scenario based on the meaning ascribed to the situation - the recursive process of reflection and possible revision occurs. Consciousness can accept the condition of the meaningful event as interpreted and make the experience its lived reality.

In other cases, the interpretation of the meaningful event may offer a lived experience that does not align with the internal structure of the subject such as morals, values, or desires for a particular future state. In such cases, consciousness can ascribe a new layer of meaning onto the event, creating an alternate interpretation of how the experience will be lived. This recursive process continues until an interpretation of lived experience emerges that aligns with the subject's evolving framework of meaning.

Once again, it should be reiterated that there is no universal right or wrong way to interpret the ascription of meaning to an object or event, provided it does not ignore physical laws. The binary labels of right-wrong, good-bad, preferable-unpreferable, can be used with validity solely

by the subject. It is only their subjective interpretation that can define meaning dichotomously. Even if one interpretation of lived experience is rejected in favor of a new layer of meaning, it does not represent a meaningless option. Rather, the lived experience that was considered becomes a reference for future situations. It would be analogous to trying on a coat and discovering it does not fit. Moving forward, one will always know how that particular coat fits and can project accordingly. What is most important is that the subject chose the coat to try on. It was not given to them as the only option. As such, the subject can try on a different one, or as many as they so choose until they find one that fits perfectly.

Logopsychism: a functional analysis

The first and second axioms of logopsychism are declarative, providing the presuppositions upon which axioms three and four are built. The dynamics of the theory are realized in the latter two. In this section I will provide a more detailed description of logopsychism in action, focusing on the function of consciousness within this axiomatic framework.

In this first example, one sees an apple on a table. This represents a simple objective event. The subject identifies it as an apple and ascribes initial meaning to it. This initial meaning is the recognition of what it is; it is an apple. We will assume that the subject has had previous lived experience with apples, which substantiates recognition. The subjective process of consciousness may then interpret the lived experience as “there is an apple in front of me”. Consciousness may then provide an additional layer of meaning to the experience identifying the apple with “The last time I ate an apple, I found a worm in it”. Subjectivity now takes this new layer of meaning and interprets the lived experience as “the memory of finding a worm”. Consciousness reflects on this potential lived experience and determines that reminiscing about a worm in an apple will not lead to a desired state of being. As such, consciousness aborts the recursive process of ascribing additional layers of meaning, avoids reliving the experience of the worm, and turns its awareness to something else.

It should be noted here that the recognition of an object does not imply that associative thoughts or layers of meaning are always ascribed. As I sit here at my desk writing this article, I am surrounded by dozens and dozens of objects. There are books on the shelf, prints on the wall, and a variety of sundry items on my desk. I am consciously aware of all these items, yet I do not find myself ascribing additional layers of meaning onto them. I could if I chose to, but it is by no means an automatic response to becoming aware of them. Were that to be the case, I would suspect that I would never leave the house; sitting in a trance drawing inferences from everything in my line of sight. Most of the time, recognition becomes a satisfactory condition and no reflection on this interpretation is needed. The layering of meaning is volitional, not perpetual.

Let us now look at an example that is purely subjective. A man has just been informed that he is being laid off from work. He is married. His wife is a stay-at-home mom and together they have

two small children. He is not wealthy but has enough savings to stay financially afloat for about three months. This is the first time he has been released from employment and has no lived experience to compare with. In essence, this experience presents itself as a blank canvas upon which he can ascribe meaning, which could be seen as a blessing or a curse. As Sartre observed, “We are condemned to be free” (Sartre, 1992/1943, p. 553).

At this point, the man has a choice of what meaning he will ascribe to this novel situation. Suppose the meaning ascribed is “I am scared that I cannot provide for my family”. Subjectivity interprets this with the lived experience of fear, and consciousness reflects and accepts this condition. From the perspective of fear which he is now experiencing, he layers this with an additional level of meaning “I have failed my family”. One can see how this recursive process can progress if he chooses to continue layering additional meaning with this negative self-perception.

In contrast, the man could have at any time created a different meaning that reflected a positive perception of the situation. He could have done so initially by ascribing meaning represented by the thought of “This will provide a new opportunity for myself and my family” or could have interjected this new thought at any point in the previous negative sequence. At every moment, he has a choice. The function of consciousness as meaning maker is a directed and volitional process. The subject has the ultimate say in the meaning of their lived experience.

To further illustrate the idea of the volitional role of consciousness, consider the alternative. Is it plausible that meaning is NOT ascribed by the subject? When confronted with a subjective situation such as the man losing his job, are we to suppose that how he interprets what this means is by random selection from some pre-existing library of possibilities? Does consciousness present him with a meaning mystery box whose contents will be a surprise when he opens it up? “Oh look! I got fear and insecurity as my lived experience”. Of course not. To suggest this would then beg the question, who or what chose fear and insecurity to be this man’s experience if he did not choose it for himself? The obvious answer is that no one or nothing did.

Mapping meaning: a 3-dimensional model

The process of recursive meaning making is repeated in a combination of breadth and depth along the axis of time. These three axes, breadth, depth and time, combine to create a 3-dimensional framework that can be used to show how subjective meaning can be layered and mapped. The three-dimensional coordinate plane as shown below in Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the mapping process using the following example.

Consider an apple. The first meaning ascribed (1) is recognition of its intrinsic nature: that it *is* an apple. A second meaning (2) concerns its redness. A third meaning relates to its sweetness (3), which in turn invokes the thought of apple pie (4). From there arises a memory of the apple pie one’s mother used to make (5) and recalling that she always made them for Thanksgiving (6). That memory branches into considering plans for this coming Thanksgiving (7), which leads to

the notion of hosting dinner (8). This spawns a memory of the last time one hosted Thanksgiving dinner and the amount of work it required (9). The thought of having it catered seems far more appealing (10) prompting a quick internet search for Thanksgiving caterers (11). The mapping of this stream of thought and experience is represented in Figure 1 below. For the purpose of highlighting the layers of depth, this sequence is plotted using a fixed point along the X-axis of time. This is done solely for visual clarity; in lived experience, each successive layer of meaning would occur one unit forward along the temporal axis.

An additional point of clarification is the distinction between breadth (or branching) and depth of meaning. Depth of meaning refers to layering of additional meaning directly onto the initial meaning ascribed. Layers of depth are often associated with or follow from the preceding meaning. For example, an apple can lead to roundness which can lead to the sweetness of taste which can lead to an apple tree, to apple groves, to apple pie and so forth. In each layer of meaning, the initial meaning of apple remains the core (pun intended) principle. How deep the layering goes is determined by the person in part through the length of time they choose to give the experience and their historical reference to the object attended to. For example, a five-year-old may have limited experience with apples and would thus have less depth of meaning compared to an apple farmer. The example in Figure 1 shows many layers of depth across two different themes, apples and Thanksgiving.

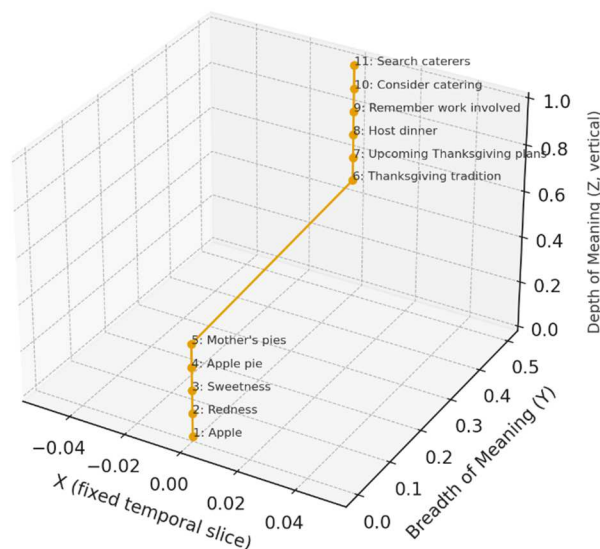


Figure 1. Mapping depth in subjective meaning.

When the initial meaning or a particular layer leads the subject to a thought or experience of something not in the same “category”, a new branch of meaning is created giving breadth to this line of meaning making. For instance, the meaning of an apple might evoke the memory of a favorite teacher, which recalls disliking math, which in turn brings the feeling of relief that one’s

child excels in math. In this case, there was no layering of meaning, only branching of meaning into new directions.

To further illustrate breadth, let us return to the apple (1), and its redness (2). This red color reminds one of a red sports car they have always wanted (3) and how it must feel to drive that car (4). Reality hits when they realize how expensive that car is (5) and that they do not earn enough money to afford it (6). They consider a better paying job (7) and reflect on available opportunities for a career change (8). This leads to the recollection of a lifelong desire to become a lawyer (9) and to imagine giving closing arguments in an important case (10). This pattern is illustrated in Figure 2. In this example, depth occurs once followed by a branching of meaning. This branch–depth alternation repeats four times.

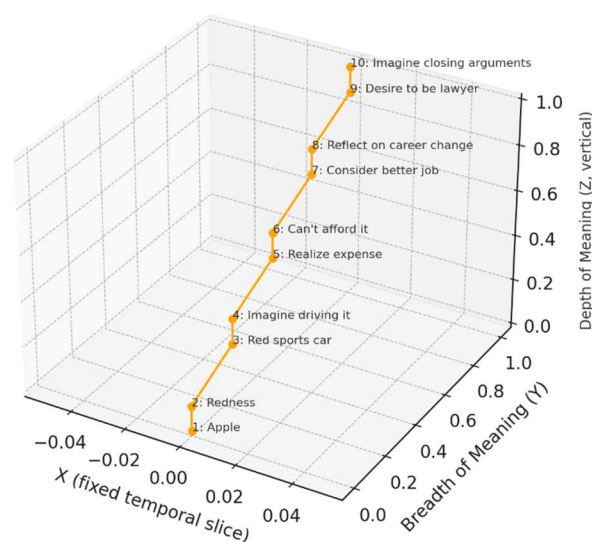


Figure 2. Mapping the alternation of depth and branching in subjective meaning.

As a final example, we will observe the mapping pattern for only the branching of meaning, without depth. Again, starting with an apple (1), which is a fruit (2). This leads to the critique that one does not eat enough fruit (3) followed by the recognition of being overweight (4) and wonders if there are unknown health concerns (5). This concern causes a reflection on their mortality (6). The subject wonders if their life has been meaningful (7) and considers the things they wanted to do in life but were never able to (8). They realize it is not too late to pursue some unfulfilled goals (9) and decide to book a trip to Japan (10). Anxiety and existential angst are replaced with excitement (11). This example of branching of meaning is illustrated in Figure 3.

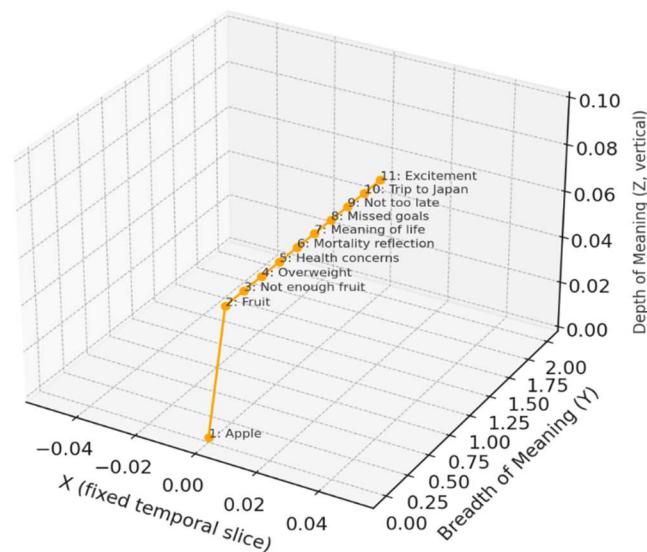


Figure 3. Mapping the branching of subjective meaning.

This is by no means some new mathematical method for mapping cognition and experience. Rather, it is merely a visual representation of the infinite interpretations of meaning that consciousness ascribes. How recognizing an apple leads to any of the outcomes in the preceding examples is quite a random causal chain and are arguably unique to each subjective meaning making process.

In my description of the branching and layering of the initial thought of an apple, I used a variety of words to describe the jump from one layer or branch of meaning to another; words such as *thoughts*, *reminded*, *leads to*, *choice*, *recalls*, *decision*, *arises*. All of these, and countless others, describe ways in which an experience can be encountered, whether through stimuli processed by physical senses or through feelings and memories shaped by cognition. Although there is much debate regarding the relationship between cognition and consciousness, recent research suggests that the two cannot be meaningfully separated (Grindrod & Brennan, 2023). Logopsychism is not concerned with ontology, which includes the ontological status of external stimuli. How it gets to consciousness is irrelevant; what matters is the meaning that consciousness ultimately ascribes to it.

Shared Subjectivity

If experience is subjective to the person, how is it that we observe a convergence of similar if not identical meaning ascribed by different people? If there is an apple on the table, why would almost everyone identify it as an apple? This is the product of what I call shared subjectivity, and it can occur on three levels: object-based, experiential and social. The object-based level is the recognition of what an object is given the presence or absence of previous experience with the object. The often-used illustration of recognizing an apple as an apple is an example of

object-based subjectivity. Experiential refers to how one perceives and interprets feelings, states or qualia. Here subjectivity is expressed as the meaning ascribed to our sensory perceptions. The apple may represent a sweet or tart taste, depending on the subjective meaning of “apple taste”. Social subjectivity is a construct created by historical institutions and promulgated through the internalization of practices and worldviews that have been passed down through generations. It is typically instilled in childhood by parents, the community and cultural tradition (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1991). Socially, an apple could represent a gift for a teacher or the symbol of good health captured in the saying, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.”

When more than one entity ascribes the same meaning to an object, experience or social construct, that meaning is shared. If two people both see an apple, or both feel cold in 30-degree weather, or both hold as truth to honor their father and mother, their subjective meanings are aligned on the same layer. They both may additionally layer or branch meaning in the same direction and arrive at another place of convergence: the apple is red; I should wear a coat outside; I love my parents. In each case, the subjectivity remains shared. Subjectivity may also be socially shared based on culture in which meaning may be imposed rather than self-created, such as religious meanings that are adopted through the belief in a figure or institution of authority

Subjectivity may remain shared completely or it may diverge. To illustrate, consider again the example of identifying an apple. Most who are presented with an apple would state that it is an apple by the recognition of its object-based meaning. However, as additional layers of meaning are ascribed, the likelihood of divergence would increase. For example, I see an apple and then think of its “redness”, then its sweet taste, then of the grocery store where I purchase apples. Another person who sees the same apple may share the same subjective experience of “redness” and sweet taste but might diverge at that layer by thinking of an apple tree instead of a grocery store. If both I and another stop the meaning making process at “tastes sweet”, no divergence would occur, and we would remain on the same branch of meaning. The example given represents objective shared subjectivity, but this dynamic of convergence and divergence would also apply at the experiential and social levels of shared subjectivity.

Addressing conceptual concerns

Does logopsychism collapse into relativism?

One might suggest that logopsychism collapses into absolute relativism; the idea that one completely shapes reality through one’s mind. If meaning is always subjectively interpreted, then it could appear that “anything goes” with no constraint on reality. This is simply not the case. Although meaning ascription is a volitional process that entails choice, it does not imply that consciousness can generate meanings entirely detached from the natural laws that govern the universe (Goff, 2019). Meaning making is constrained by both physical and societal laws.

Physical laws such as the laws of space-time, gravity, chemistry and mathematics form the scaffolding within which consciousness must operate. For example, water is the combination of two hydrogen atoms bonded to one oxygen atom under the right conditions. No amount of subjective meaning ascription could change this chemical composition to one hydrogen atom and one oxygen atom. Reality as interpreted by subjectivity is constrained by these physical laws.

In addition to physical laws, subjectivity is also constrained by societal laws. Shared social subjectivity can align on moral and ethical standards but also include the subsequent consequences for breaking them. Although it is possible for one to claim that meaning is found in harming others, most social constructs forbid such behavior and levy consequences in response. As is the case with physical laws, no act of subjective interpretation of meaning exempts one from social consequences. Consciousness can interpret, frame, and channel meaning freely, but it cannot redefine chemical structure, suspend gravity, or posit a four-sided triangle, nor can it violate social norms without incurring consequences. Logopsychism promotes infinite subjective meaning, not infinite subjective reality.

Does ontological neutrality avoid the real problem of consciousness?

The theory of logopsychism has no position on the question of ontology of consciousness. It is concerned only with the function of consciousness. As such, any theory of consciousness that recognizes the validity of meaning and subjectivity to the subject can incorporate the axioms of logopsychism without cracking their ontological foundation. This does not avoid the real problem of consciousness; it questions what the real problem is.

It may be fair to ask how philosophy of mind has been progressing in its quest to discover what consciousness is. During the past fifty years, the brightest minds along with exponential advances in technology have yielded virtually no progress in an ontological explanation of consciousness. Philosophy continues to be hopelessly deadlocked in a materialist vs. non-materialist, empirical vs experiential, quantum vs qualia interpretation of mind. And for what purpose? If tomorrow saw the discovery of a unified theory of what consciousness is, would that change anything about what it means to be conscious? I suspect that we would all continue to ascribe meaning and subjectively interpret it as we move forward in living a life full of meaning.

Logopsychism adopts ontological neutrality by design, thus avoiding the stagnation created by the pursuit of explanation. In so doing, it issues a call back to the what the ancient Greeks heralded as the purpose of philosophy, a love for wisdom and the desire for a better life. I would be remiss if I did not somehow incorporate apples into this final argument. Philosophy of mind has been obsessed with learning everything it can about apples; what kind are they, where are they grown, what they look like, are they sweet or tart. But it has never been about the apples; it has always been about the delicious pie we make from them.

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