

CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS: DEFICIENCY, POSSIBILITY, AND SELF-LIMITATION IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

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ABSTRACT: In the contemporary era of deep technological penetration, human consciousness is facing an unprecedented confluence of crisis and possibility. Departing from traditional transcendentalist and naturalist paradigms of consciousness research, this paper proposes a “structural-phenomenological method” and, from an ontological perspective, defines consciousness as a structural apparatus operating between “crisis” and “possibility.” Based on a deficiency theory of human nature—according to which humans exist as innately incomplete, disease-living beings—consciousness is neither a transcendental illumination nor a mere mental function, but a dynamic compensatory mechanism forced into being by crisis, continuously reinforcing its own crises and possibilities through a positive feedback loop. Self-consciousness is then regarded as a secondary “pseudo-center” that emerges from the failure of conscious operations, possessing a dialectical structure of forgetting and recollection. Facing the contemporary predicament in which technology infinitely amplifies both possibility and crisis, the way out for consciousness lies not in unlimited expansion but in learning self-limitation. The paper ultimately reflects on the mode of existence of modern human beings and reaffirms the philosophical mission of “know thyself.”

KEYWORDS: Consciousness; Crisis; Possibility; Deficiency Theory of Human nature; Self-limitation; Structural-phenomenological method; Deferral and Wandering; Positive Feedback Mechanism

INTRODUCTION: THE "CRISIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS" IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

"Consciousness," as one of the most captivating yet elusive concepts in the history

of philosophy, continues to stir us as questioning beings. Traditional philosophers often regard consciousness as an expression of subjectivity. However, this paper attempts to start from a "structural-phenomenological analysis" and define consciousness as a mechanism operating between crisis and possibility. It is activated by deficiency and crisis, while simultaneously activating new crises. In this sense, consciousness is no longer a transcendental illumination, but rather a structural product of deficient humanity—the very tension inherent in the being called "human."

We seek to bring together Buddhist anātman (no-self) doctrine, Zhuangzi's fables of "the Emperor of the Southern Sea" and "the man who feared his shadow and disliked his footprints," as well as insights from modern natural science. They all point to a common conclusion: consciousness is something forced into being, a dynamic but ultimately ineffective compensatory device that operates in a positive feedback loop of "crisis" and "possibility." It is a structural mechanism functioning within a self-reinforcing positive feedback loop between crisis and possibility.

Faced with the contemporary predicament of technology infinitely amplifying both possibility and crisis, the way out for humanity lies not in planning its own possibilities, but in learning "self-limitation." This is not only a philosophical reconstruction of consciousness but also a profound reflection on the way modern human beings exist.

In today's world, deeply penetrated by artificial intelligence and digital technology, we are experiencing a highly crisis-ridden society. With the emergence of virtual reality, the metaverse, and intelligent algorithms, we find ourselves increasingly trapped in situations where it is difficult to distinguish truth from falsehood. Similarly, we observe that the belief systems of different groups are so disparate as to be nearly irreconcilable. These phenomena appear independent on the surface, but they all reflect the same underlying question: Why does human consciousness operate through crisis?

What is consciousness? French philosopher René Descartes opened up the philosophical inquiry into "consciousness," yet no concept in the history of philosophy has been as simultaneously captivating and ambiguous. On the one hand, we experience consciousness every moment; on the other hand, we struggle to provide a complete definition of it. In a crisis-ridden society, we urgently need to reexamine what consciousness truly means.

Before proceeding with the argument, two fundamental questions need clarification: First, what are we examining? Second, how are we examining it? The first question concerns the philosophical stance we take in studying consciousness; the second concerns the methodological path we adopt. We must first clarify our stance and method before we can open a broad avenue for consciousness research.

First, we need to examine two different philosophical stances: transcendentalism and naturalism. These two stances are not merely different positions regarding the same object, as in quantum mechanics where different interpretations address the same empirical phenomena. Rather, different stances create different understandings and apprehensions of consciousness. These two different modes of apprehension themselves define, and even create, the conceptual meaning of consciousness.

In English, "consciousness" can be referred to as "mind," pointing to a kind of mental function or capacity. However, in the tradition of transcendental philosophy, "consciousness" does not exist merely as a mental capacity; its meaning is far richer than the simple term "mind." Transcendental philosophers are more accustomed to using the German word "Geist" (spirit) to describe it. For "Geist," a much richer set of connotations is endowed, along with a certain mystical element. Transcendental philosophers try to tell us that "human beings are spiritual animals." But what does "spirit" mean here? It essentially points to "the self's understanding of itself," as a reflexive operation of consciousness. Thus, transcendental philosophers warn us not to understand consciousness as a mere, functional mental capacity, nor to simply reduce it to a physiological brain function. Instead, we should encompass consciousness and everything created by consciousness, thereby reflecting on self-consciousness's own self-understanding.

For naturalists, however, they oppose the transcendentalist mode of understanding. All phenomena and forms of existence of consciousness can be naturalistically explained and studied using the methodology of natural science. Although there are internal disagreements, on the whole, even if not reducible to physics alone, consciousness can be studied by integrating biology, cognitive science, and other interdisciplinary knowledge. The renowned consciousness scientist Francis Crick put forward "The Astonishing Hypothesis": "You, your joys and sorrows, your memories, your ambitions... are nothing but a collection

of neurons." This means that consciousness is not an independent entity but a semblance generated by the collective behavior of nerve cells. This stance is seen not merely as a philosophical debate but also endowed with religious implications. Many "new atheists," such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, gather around this position, attempting to completely deny the epistemic status of religion through science, thereby drawing a clear line between science and superstition.

Thus, before discussing consciousness, we seem to need to decide between these two stances. We should admit that both transcendentalism and naturalism cannot be ignored, yet each has clear flaws. Regarding naturalism, the problem is that it overlooks the distinction between "utility" and "concept." Take "pain" as an example: although a naturalist can provide a causal explanation of pain, this does not truly tell us what pain is. It merely attempts to tell us how pain is created step by step in a causal chain, with pain being nothing but an effect of that chain. What does such research imply? It implies that if we grasp the cause, we can seek benefits and avoid harms. For instance, knowing that a needle prick causes pain, we naturally avoid being pricked. But this does not mean we truly understand what pain is.

Therefore, if we want to discuss the intrinsic nature of consciousness, a purely naturalistic account is insufficient. As for transcendentalism, it is built upon the philosophy of subjectivity created by Cartesianism, bearing clear marks of anthropocentrism and subjectivism. This means that although transcendentalism does not, like naturalism, attempt to discard all human achievements, it falls into its own predicament: it cannot but stop at the subject's perspective, and thus cannot but be teleological. And it is precisely this teleological imprint that natural science rejects.

Thus, once we understand the pros and cons of naturalism and transcendentalism, we can seek a new path. The advantage of naturalism lies in offering a non-teleological, non-anthropocentric perspective from which to survey our conscious activity.

However, its reductionist methodology would cancel out all human achievements, thereby making all humanistic foundations suspect or even eliminable. Moreover, naturalistic discussion stops at the probe of "effects" and cannot truly inquire into consciousness. The advantage of transcendentalism, on

the other hand, lies in endowing consciousness with richer content, acknowledging the legitimacy of all achievements created by humans. Yet its teleological and subjectivist perspective prevents it from grasping the essence of consciousness. Therefore, we need a new path: a non-teleological perspective on consciousness, which allows us to transcend both positions.

A brief clarification of this position: It should be made clear that this paper is not directed against naturalism per se. If "emergent naturalism" means that consciousness arises under natural, biological, evolutionary, and technological conditions, yet cannot be reduced to lower-level physical or neural mechanisms, then it is compatible with the position defended in this paper. The criticism in this paper is actually directed at those versions of emergence theory that continue to understand consciousness primarily as a higher-level function or capacity within a causal-hierarchical framework. Methodologically, these theories remain rooted in functionalism or the causal-hierarchical framework, which makes it difficult to reveal the positive feedback mechanisms within the "crisis-possibility tension" structure of consciousness.

Another philosopher worth considering is Daniel Dennett. His view holds that consciousness is merely the result of numerous parallel information processing processes in the brain, while the "self" is a narrative fiction. In spirit, our view shares common ground with Dennett's skepticism toward the metaphysical self or the Cartesian theater. In our view, self-consciousness is a compelled product, a symbol of the failure to reconcile crisis and possibility. However, our disagreement with Dennett is that he does not provide a conceptual inquiry into the nature of consciousness. In short, Dennett offers a causal-mechanistic discussion, essentially a variant of functional narrative. Similarly, Integrated Information Theory (IIT) claims that "consciousness is integrated information." IIT attempts to prove this by establishing an "isomorphism" between the abstract structure of conscious experience (defined by axioms) and the causal structure of physical systems. But isomorphism can only prove structural similarity, not identity. More importantly, the notion of "information" is unclear, because "information" always pertains to information for an observer. Thus, a theory attempting to explain consciousness (the ultimate observer) must first presuppose an observer's perspective, falling into a logical circle. Moreover, IIT neglects the positive feedback mechanism between crisis and possibility,

instead tending toward a reconciliatory demand.

Next, we need to address the second question: how do we examine consciousness? That is our methodological challenge. Here again, we have two different paths: functional narrative and structural narrative. By "functional narrative," we refer to the mode of thinking widely used by philosophers and scientists since modern philosophy. Its characteristic is that we use the contents and objects of consciousness to retrospectively reflect on the functional system of consciousness. For example, when we see a red flower, retrospectively reflecting on our consciousness necessarily requires a perceptual system for color, and also a perceptual system that processes objects. Thus, in our language, discussions of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles, and dharmas retrospectively define so-called vision, hearing, etc. That is, conscious activity is functional, and this functional conscious activity in turn creates the corresponding objects of consciousness.

Why does this functional narrative need to be reflected upon? Because the argumentation of the functional narrative system has two problems:

1. It leaves room for skepticism. Suppose we claim that the auditory function creates sound. But since the auditory function is grasped retrospectively through sound, how can we be sure that sound is indeed created by the auditory function? In fact, this mapping is a hypothetical relation. Thus, a skeptic could argue that such functions do not actually exist; they are merely products of hypothesis.
2. The functional narrative system cannot grasp consciousness itself. Even if we understand hearing, vision, and even Kant's apperception and imagination, do we thereby understand what consciousness is? Would we not still need to use functional narrative to understand consciousness as a specific functional entity or aggregate?

Therefore, the functional narrative approach to the philosophy of consciousness needs to be reconsidered. Why do philosophers so often fall into the functional narrative system? There are three reasons:

1. The functional narrative system is a techno-scientific mode of thinking. Techno-scientific thinking is based on inferring mechanisms from effects—a retrospective discussion. The large-scale epistemological reflection that accompanied modern natural science was inevitably influenced by this scientific mode of thinking.
2. The emergence of the functional narrative system is largely due to the decoupling of epistemological or philosophical discussions of consciousness from

ontological discussions. Lacking an external, top-down perspective, philosophers can only analyze by retrospectively grasping conscious activity, even directly substituting effects for causes. For instance, behaviorists believe that behavior and mental states are identical, directly replacing the inquiry into the nature of mind with behavior.

3. The functional narrative system is built on modern subjective philosophy. In the objectifying activity of the subject, the implicit logic is that the objects manifested to different subjects are different. For a subject oriented toward physics, the world presents a mechanistic picture; for a humanistic subject, the subject cannot be a detached observer but must be involved. The result is that the subject becomes bifurcated or even fragmented: as many subjects, as many modes of manifestation of objects.

Therefore, the functional narrative mode should be treated with caution in the methodology of consciousness research. This does not mean we should completely abandon functional narrative, but rather that when we attempt to investigate the nature of consciousness, a purely functional narrative is insufficient. Our investigation of consciousness must first be based on ontological discussion, conducting a structural analysis from the top down. That is, we should adopt the structural narrative mode.

By "structural narrative," we mean not retrospectively seeking functional systems through some conscious effect, but rather deductively proceeding from ontological inquiry, top-down. Structural narrative is not mere logical deduction; it establishes an ontological ground by revealing the structural conditions upon which the emergence of consciousness depends. It does not appeal to empirical functional effects but attempts to reflect on consciousness from the perspective of the possibility of phenomena.

However, this deduction is risky, as it may lead to dogmatism. To overcome this possibility, we must adhere to the principle of the finitude of consciousness and always proceed from our experiential phenomena of consciousness, studying them in a conciliatory manner. Thus, relying solely on functional narrative inevitably faces the possibility of skepticism. Structural narrative provides a unifying perspective but also the possibility of dogmatism. Therefore, structural analysis alone is insufficient; it must be combined with phenomenological description. This is a structural-phenomenological method, which attempts to avoid the risk of dogmatism while overcoming the skeptical predicament of

functional narrative.

In summary, we advocate exploring consciousness from a non-teleological ontological perspective using a structural-phenomenological method. This means transcending both the transcendentalism/naturalism opposition and the functional/structural narrative opposition, approaching various conscious phenomena with a more inclusive attitude. We do not regard consciousness as a presupposed special entity or mere function, but rather examine it within the overall framework of human existence. It is precisely on this new path that we can reveal the essence of the crisis consciousness encounters in the modern technological context, and discover the opportunities for possibility inherent in the crisis.

HUMAN DEFICIENCY AS ONTOLOGICAL GROUND

To truly understand "why consciousness is possible," we must first start from a more fundamental question: "What is the human being?"

The ontological status of the human being determines the soil from which consciousness grows. In the history of philosophy, there are also two approaches to understanding the human: one regards the human as an object with a fixed essence, analyzing its specific attributes; the other takes "how humans understand themselves" as a clue, focusing on the process of human becoming and evolution. The former emphasizes logical essence, the latter historical becoming. We clearly lean toward the latter, because only by acknowledging human becoming can we understand the origin and evolution of consciousness. Yet we cannot abandon structural analysis of consciousness.

Modern evolutionary theory provides a key insight: humans are "a kind of deficient creature." Compared to other animals, humans are not the perfect pinnacle of evolution; quite the opposite, humans survive by virtue of "defects." Consider a specific biological fact: the high development of human intelligence results in relatively large skulls in human newborns, making smooth delivery through the birth canal difficult. The long course of evolution has led to premature birth, with babies born in an extremely immature state. Thus, every human infant is born a "premature infant," requiring a long period of care and socialization. That is, at the biological level, humans are inherently deficient and non-self-sufficient. The history of human evolution is filled with various makeshift

remedies for "deficiencies." For example, high blood pressure may seem harmful, but it helps conserve sodium ions, thus ensuring survival. These phenomena of "living with disease" are not exceptions in Darwinian evolution but rather the general rule of biological evolution. As medical research has revealed, sickle cell disease (SCD) harms the body, yet in malaria-endemic regions, carriers of the sickle cell gene are more likely to survive. Similarly, there are mismatches: humans in cold highland regions carrying diabetes genes are more likely to survive, but under the affluent conditions of mass industrial production, they become more prone to diabetes.

Moreover, the most important insight provided by Darwinian biological evolution is that all organisms follow a "pathological" mode of survival. In the traditional metaphysical perspective, the relationship between health and disease is understood as a "balanced" and "teleological" relationship. Aristotle's discussion of disease and health was metaphysical. In his metaphysical system, a thing is what it is because it tends toward its natural end. Thus, health is a natural state, the manifestation of the "good order" and "proper function" of a living being in its essential purpose. Disease is a deviation from the natural order, a disharmony between form and matter, purpose and realization.

But from the Darwinian evolutionary perspective, all organisms exist along a path of "living with disease." For instance, sickle cell disease (SCD) harms the body, yet in malaria-endemic regions, carriers of the sickle cell gene are more likely to survive. Similarly, there are mismatches: humans in cold highland regions carrying diabetes genes are more likely to survive, but under the affluent conditions of mass industrial production, they become more prone to diabetes.

This means that pathology is not a failure of evolution but rather a necessary condition for evolution to succeed. If a thing were non-pathological, it would not be recognized by natural selection. This implies that "pathology" should not be understood as something to be rejected, but rather as something to be coexisted with and reconciled. In medicine, the concept of "health" is suspect. If we set aside Aristotle's metaphysical presuppositions, by what standard do we judge "health"? We can only rely on the statistical average state of most people to distinguish health from disease. But the statistical average, lacking a metaphysical presupposition, is itself questionable. Pathological states in medicine can actually be seen as an individual's attempt to continually reconstruct their own path of

survival.

Extending this perspective, what we call "physiological" activities are, in the course of evolution, all pathological. Imagine that as our bodily structure becomes more complex, it deviates from the demand for low oxygen consumption, forcing the emergence of new tissues and systems. For example, to increase oxygen, we are compelled to develop a respiratory system to supply our seemingly "healthy" and "physiological" body. Likewise, the complexity of the body compels the heart to pump blood to all organs, so that even the slightest deviation can quickly turn the seemingly healthy body pathological. Our bodies operate pathologically from the start. So-called health is merely a temporary balance that allows us to survive in a perilous environment. Thus, health is a luxury; pathology is fundamental.

Bernard Stiegler provides a brilliant interpretation of this innate human "deficiency," calling it the "fault of Epimetheus." Stiegler describes this mode of human self-continuation through external organs as "epiphylogenesis." In this sense, humans are defined as "animals lacking essence": without fixed instinctual advantages, yet possessing the "spark" of artificial tools, thus falling into endless self-transformation and change.

From this, we propose a "deficiency theory of human nature": the essence of humans lies not in possessing some unique, complete attribute, but in innate deficiency and incompleteness. This deficiency forces humans onto a path of existence different from other animals, creating a "second nature"—a world of culture and technology.

Compared to animals' instinctual adaptation, the human "second nature" has three distinctive features:

- Long-term nature: Human activities can be planned and sustained over long periods, whereas animal adaptations are mostly short-term and immediate.
- Indirectness: Humans do not only use natural tools at hand but also invent entirely new tools, transforming the world through a series of mediating means. This endows humans with a mediated world created by humans themselves.
- Continuity: The tools and culture created by humans can be transmitted across generations and cumulatively improved.

These three points show that it is precisely because of their deficiency that humans have developed an extraordinary gene-culture-technology coevolutionary path.

Deficiency is the mother of human innovation: precisely because of natural insufficiency, humans are motivated to invent language, institutions, religion, and science to expand the possibilities of survival. The "post-genetic evolution" process of long-termness, indirectness, and continuity has freed humans from merely obeying instincts, constructing civilization. However, as humans go further and further into the "second nature," we often forget our original biological defects and finitude.

A possible objection might come from the Neoplatonic theory of "emanation." From this perspective, humans are not deficient but rather abundant, even having so much excess energy that it must emanate outward. This "emanation" is often metaphorically compared to the sun emanating light. In the 20th century, Georges Bataille similarly articulated ideas of "unproductive expenditure" and "luxury energy," arguing that human cultural, religious, artistic, and sacrificial behaviors are manifestations of the need to find outlets for dissipating excess vital energy. If human activity stems from a plenitude of "flow," we must ask: why is this energy used to establish moral laws rather than pure self-destruction? Why does it develop symbolic orders rather than indulge in natural chaos? Without an internal "differentiating structure" as a guide, merely appealing to "energy excess" cannot explain the structural and directional nature of behavior.

In summary, the deficiency theory of human nature reveals a paradoxical conclusion: human incompleteness opens the way to human brilliance.

THE MECHANISM OF CONSCIOUSNESS AS AN APPARATUS: OPERATING BETWEEN CRISIS AND POSSIBILITY

Based on the above ontological foundation of human nature, we can explore more deeply: what is consciousness, and how does it operate? We propose a core thesis: consciousness is a structural apparatus operating between "crisis" and "possibility." In other words, consciousness both originates from crisis and responds to crisis by planning possibilities, and in this process constantly reinforces new crises and new possibilities. Consciousness is not a static entity but a dynamic mechanism activated in critical situations to solve problems; at the same time, the operation of consciousness itself creates and amplifies new problems, forming a positive feedback loop. This view can be broken down into

three sub-theses:

1. Consciousness is a product of crisis.
2. Consciousness is an active apparatus for planning possibilities.
3. The possibility-planning operation of consciousness and crisis form a mutually reinforcing positive feedback mechanism.

Below we argue each of these points and thereby outline the working principle of "consciousness."

First, consciousness arises from crisis. Without crisis, there is no consciousness. Our ontological inquiry into human nature has already shown that "human beings" exist as deficient creatures. This means that humans must plan their own survival activities among possibilities. This planning activity itself expresses a basic view: humans are non-self-sufficient, hence they operate in finitude and incompleteness. They must rely on the path of "epiphylogenesis" to maintain their survival through technology, religion, art, and other means. Consciousness is not to be examined apart from this fundamental background; on the contrary, consciousness is clarified precisely on this basis. That is, conscious activity is necessarily the result of responding to one's own deficiency and crisis. Hence consciousness is necessarily a product of crisis.

Conversely, if consciousness itself were self-sufficient, perfect, and invincible, it would forever remain immersed in its own perfection, with no need to turn outward, let alone deal with crises. But the opposite is true: we can experience anxiety in consciousness, and this anxiety already hints at the non-perfection of consciousness. The non-self-sufficiency and non-perfection of consciousness mean that consciousness must be a product of deficiency and incompleteness, and thus a product of crisis. It must respond to its own deficiency, incompleteness, and crisis.

From a phenomenological perspective, consciousness is always thrown outward. It is difficult for us to remain long in a self-enclosed, isolated state; consciousness must always perceive and respond to alien things in the outside world. This stepping out of itself to encounter the "other" is itself a crisis process. Faced with a strange environment and unknown information, consciousness is forced to leave its comfort zone to understand and respond. This is a structural crisis rooted throughout the operation of consciousness. This is the insight of Husserl's theory of intentionality: consciousness is not a closed black box; rather,

every time consciousness intends a new object, it enters a possibility beyond the given, present state, requiring additional effort to respond. This can be called the "continuous crisis state" of consciousness. In short, consciousness is by no means a comfortable self-immersion but a product constantly stimulated, disturbed, and forced out by heterogeneity.

Second, consciousness plans possibilities. The function of consciousness is to plan "possibilities" in order to resolve crises. Once awakened, consciousness does not passively feel crises but actively seeks various ways out. It can be said that consciousness inherently possesses a kind of "agency," manifested in the conception and planning of possibilities. Therefore, from a teleological perspective, consciousness is essentially a "possibility machine"—constantly generating hypotheses, plans, and intentions to deal with current or potential problems.

Philosophically, this creative aspect of consciousness is called intentionality: consciousness has an active meaning-conferring capacity. For example, the same stone may be seen by a Russian as a tool for cracking nuts, while by a painter as material for a painting. This means that consciousness always endows objects with some possible intention, giving them different meanings, thereby transforming crisis into concrete action plans. Without this operation of possibility, we could not even define what a "conscious object" is. Thus, in phenomenological description, consciousness necessarily deals with heterogeneous things, expressed both as consciousness having to throw itself outward to confront a strange heterogeneous thing, and as consciousness having to plan itself in terms of possibilities in order to deal with heterogeneous things.

Third, the positive feedback between crisis and possibility. The stronger the "possibility planning" of consciousness, the deeper the "crisis" it faces; conversely, the greater the crisis, the more it stimulates consciousness to explore more possibilities. The two mutually excite each other, forming a positive feedback mechanism that drives consciousness to evolve and escalate continuously. This may sound paradoxical—does solving crises actually bring more crises? For example, ancient humans invented the bow and arrow to solve the crisis of hunting, but this brought new crises of warfare and killing. Modern humans use fossil fuels to solve energy scarcity, yet bring about global crises of environmental pollution and climate change.

Moreover, in the process of biological evolution, there is an "energy compensation effect": if an organism develops new cognitive functions, it must pay a price—energy, directly expressed as consuming more glucose. Therefore, any consciousness, if it wants to expand the scope and limits of its possibility planning, must pay a price. This means that the strengthening of consciousness's possibility planning is not cost-free; on the contrary, consciousness must follow the economic principle of minimal energy for maximal utility. In biological evolution, excessively adding new cognitive functions is a luxury. Extra hardware, fuel, and redundant traits are unnecessary, even harmful, over long evolutionary periods.

Thus, if the possibility planning of consciousness increases, it means that the limits, scope, and depth of consciousness in cognitive activity are all increasing. For instance, with the invention of the telescope, we can see farther stars; our cognition of objects becomes deeper, and our cognitive scope expands. But this expansion and deepening in turn push forward new crises for consciousness, which compel consciousness to produce new utilities.

Synthesizing the above three points, we arrive at an overall conclusion: consciousness is a structure that encompasses both crisis and possibility, and at the same time, consciousness is an apparatus that tries to reconcile the two. However, the reconciling activity of consciousness itself also reinforces the crisis, thereby activating possibility operations, forming a resonance and positive feedback mechanism between crisis and possibility. This can be expressed in two ways: on the one hand, it drives the continuous strengthening and deepening of conscious functions; on the other hand, it drives the continuous deepening and intensification of crises.

We can more systematically formulate the above mechanism into three corollaries:

(1) Consciousness cannot close in on itself: Consciousness is by nature not a closed system; it must be "activated" by crisis to unfold outward. This means that any attempt to treat consciousness as a purely introspective, self-sufficient domain is mistaken. Consciousness is always implicated in environment and others; otherwise it would not be consciousness.

(2) Consciousness can never fully achieve its intended purpose: The efforts of consciousness always tend toward resolving crises, but crises cannot disappear once

and for all; instead, they continuously emerge in different forms. Thus, consciousness endlessly runs about in crisis management, never reaching an end.

(3) Consciousness is always in a state of imperfection and

misrecognition: Because consciousness can only understand the world within its own finite framework, its grasp of the external world is always partial and biased.

Misrecognition is inevitable and is precisely a necessary condition for consciousness to operate. Consciousness confers meaning on objects, but this meaning is not equivalent to the "thing itself" of the object. For example, when using a hammer, we focus on the meaning "hammering a nail," not on the hammer's true nature.

These three points can be collectively called the "deferral and wandering" (yándàng) of consciousness. Here we endow the term "yándàng" with a unique meaning: "yán" means delay, "dàng" means roaming or deviation. It is manifested in two aspects:

- Deferral of crisis: The crisis does not break out at the present moment but is deferred into the future, into the realm of possibilities. While the crisis is being latent, it is also deepened. Regarding the deferral of satisfaction, through temporary reconciliation of the crisis, a temporary survival and stability is achieved, allowing consciousness to dwell therein, thereby obtaining temporary satisfaction. This satisfaction is not cost-free; on the contrary, it actively channels the crisis into its own operation, so that consciousness is also expressed as increasingly expanding into possibilities, mobilizing its own potential, and also allowing the crisis to be latent in a deeper form.

- Deferral of satisfaction: Consciousness is activated by crisis and continually reconciles with crisis. The core operation here is that consciousness can never achieve complete reconciliation with crisis; their reconciliation can only be temporary balance. This means that consciousness cannot achieve reconciliation with crisis instantaneously; it must seek through deferral, operating itself in a deferred manner, until crisis reconciliation seeks temporary satisfaction. Thus, this compels "consciousness" to be deferential, unable to seek immediate satisfaction. It must internalize the crisis within itself, construct the crisis as its own potential, as its own field of possibility, while simultaneously suppressing the crisis, making it latent, and ignoring its existence. Through this double mechanism, both "crisis" and "satisfaction" achieve deferral.

More subtle is wandering: consciousness can never find a permanently fixed place in the world; it wanders through networks of meaning. The relationship

between consciousness and its objects is like a game of chase: we confer meaning on objects, hoping to grasp them, but meaning itself is fluid and elusive. This can be called the "tragedy of the Danaides." Thus, consciousness always wanders among various possible meanings. This wandering leads to necessary misrecognition. Precisely because consciousness can only see objects through specific meanings, it cannot see the whole picture of the object. But conversely, this "misrecognition" is the precondition for consciousness to function. If we demanded absolutely accurate and error-free knowledge of objects, consciousness would accomplish nothing, because the complexity of the world far exceeds our capacity. Yet we need to be aware of the crisis behind this, lest we fall into the fable of Zhuangzi's "the man who feared his shadow and disliked his footprints." It is important to note that it is not the shadow that causes the man's crisis, but rather the deficient and crisis-ridden operation mapped by the man's own deficiency that brings about the pattern of death.

The intertwined operation of crisis and possibility can also be seen in the historical transformation of cognition. For example, early *Homo sapiens* used religion to maintain group stability. Today, we must use science. The transition from religion to science expresses both different functions of consciousness and the evolving interplay of crisis and possibility. Crisis has a deep dynamic evolutionary mechanism: crisis promotes the unfolding of possibilities, and the unfolding of possibilities in turn promotes the unfolding of suppressed crises, thereby doubly reinforcing each other. In terms of the development of human civilization, this is a gradual shift from existential crises to cultural crises. Culture replaces inherent survival and further unfolds crisis operations. Since culture is artificially constructed, its crises become more diverse and multifaceted, falling into even harder-to-satisfy conditions. Existential crises can be satisfied, but cultural crises gradually tend toward nihilism and hollowing-out. To resolve the tension between crisis and possibility, consciousness must inhibit itself; it cannot easily mobilize its own possibilities, because any mobilization of possibilities must also express a repayment of costs. This actually corresponds to the cybernetic "Ashby's principle," i.e., the law of requisite variety. This principle tells us: "A control system must possess at least as much variety as the system it controls in order to control it effectively." From the perspective of consciousness philosophy, its mechanism is even more important. We can express it in three points: 1. The

degree of control and the crisis it faces are mutually reinforcing.

As the degree of environmental crisis faced by an organism increases, it must release its own latent possibilities to cope with the crisis of complexity. 2. The strengthening of the degree of control and diversity further reinforces its own crisis. As our diversity increases, the nature of objects reveals more aspects to us, and we must produce new control means to deal with these aspects. This is a positive feedback mechanism. 3. There is a mutually reinforcing trend between control diversity and crisis. Therefore, this principle superficially suggests that when the controller's variety, diversity, and possibilities are sufficiently large, it can effectively control the controlled to achieve stable control. But in fact, the growth of possibility accompanies the growth of crisis; rather, possibility and crisis are two sides of the same coin. This means that the diversity of the controlled forces the controller's possibilities, and the growth of possibility precisely promotes the expansion of its own disturbances and crises. Thus, the diversity between controller and controlled exhibits a reflexive character, driving the system toward a non-equilibrium balanced state. Faced with an endless mutual promotion of crisis and possibility, if consciousness is not to be detonated by itself, it must learn self-inhibition.

THE GENERATION OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: COMPELLED EMERGENCE AND A PRODUCT OF FAILURE

So far, our discussion of "consciousness" has mainly been about consciousness in general, without presupposing a clear and distinct "self" within it. We could even say that the analysis up to this point belongs to a perspective of "ownerless consciousness," i.e., not a priori assuming a subject or self that controls consciousness, but rather treating consciousness as a process or structure. The self is not a priori present from the beginning. So how is self-consciousness generated from ownerless conscious activity? To what extent does it influence and constrain the operation of consciousness? This is our next question.

Based on the previous analysis of the structure of consciousness, we can propose three conditions for the emergence of the self: compelled emergence, failure, and crisis accumulation.

First, compelled emergence. As the name suggests, self-consciousness is not born autonomously or naturally, but is "forced" out by a force. This force can be

either externally imposed by the environment or a structural demand internal to consciousness. Here, "compelled emergence" refers not only to external imposition but also to a structural internal need: conceptual consciousness must face a higher content or the call of a greater force to propel the emergence of self-consciousness. From the etymology of "subjectivity," the concept of "subject" contains both "subjection" and "thrownness"—that is, the subject involves an intertwined mode of passivity and activity. This means that the subject or self-consciousness is a compelled product. With the emergence of self-consciousness, the tense structure of crisis and possibility descends onto the subject, letting it continue the operation, bearing the continuation of the tense structure. This "compelled emergence" manifests as conceptual consciousness generating self-consciousness under compulsory structural pressure, making self-consciousness a passive rather than active product.

Failure. This refers to the ownerless operation of consciousness going awry at some point, thereby giving rise to the "I" to clean up the mess. In his analysis of everyday tool use, Heidegger famously observed that when a tool is working well, we do not pay attention to "ourselves" or the "tool." Only when the tool breaks or is unusable (e.g., the hammer's handle suddenly snaps) do we stop and turn our attention to the object and ourselves, realizing that "I am using the hammer." This exemplifies an ontological failure: the originally smooth, unified behavior disintegrates into a subject-object dichotomy, and self-consciousness emerges to fill the gap. Similarly, in the general operation of consciousness, if everything proceeds smoothly, consciousness does not need an additional "self" supervisor. Only when conscious operation fails does an "I" suddenly stand out, as if an emergency braking center.

The above "compelled emergence" and "failure" are both related to the deepening of crisis. It can be said that self-consciousness is born at the peak of the internal crisis of consciousness: when the intertwined operation of crisis and possibility reaches a critical threshold, the structure of consciousness itself fractures, requiring a "center" to suture it. That center is the self. The previously ownerless consciousness could self-regulate in ordinary crises, but when the crisis becomes so intense that consciousness loses its balance (e.g., a violent emotional outburst or traumatic experience), the normal regulation of consciousness collapses, and a new subject position is forced into being.

Proust, in *In Search of Lost Time*, described a phenomenon we might call the "Proustian moment" or flashback experience. It embodies a structural failure of consciousness triggered by crisis (emotional or memory shock), whereupon self-consciousness seems to reboot the computer, re-aggregating subjectivity to integrate the experience. As Proust wrote: "I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of *madelaine* which on Sunday mornings at Combray... when I used to say good morning to my aunt Léonie, she would give me after dipping it in her own cup of tea or tisane." In short, the self emerges to manage situations that consciousness cannot handle.

Once self-consciousness emerges, the mode of operation of consciousness changes significantly. The self plays the role of consciousness's manager and firewall. On the one hand, it provides a central reference for conscious activity—"all experience belongs to me"—preventing the mind from falling into complete fragmentation and dissolution. On the other hand, the self also isolates a large amount of background activity, suppressing many conflicts and contradictions into the unconscious, thereby maintaining superficial coherence and unity. This operation can be summarized as the dialectic of forgetting and recollection.

By forgetting, we mean that self-consciousness must selectively forget the fundamental crisis at the ontological level, i.e., forget its own deficiency. If the basic driving force of self-consciousness is the intertwined operation of crisis and possibility, how should self-consciousness temporarily cope with crisis? It can only mobilize its own possibilities and temporarily "forget" the crisis. Forgetting the crisis here means forgetting the crisis ontologically grounded in one's own deficiency, not forgetting specific crises. In fact, self-consciousness must deal with many specific crises, but after solving them, it does not fundamentally address the structural crisis, even though such addressing would be futile.

Thus, the forgetting activity of self-consciousness is not only necessary but essential. Only through forgetting can the structural "crisis" be transformed into many specific crises, and then, through the handling of specific crises, temporarily stabilize our existing order of survival. Therefore, the self tends to

forget "originary deficiency," shifting attention to more controllable immediate affairs. Only by forgetting certain deep crises can we avoid being swallowed by boundless anxiety and gain temporary stability through solving concrete problems.

Conversely, forgetting must be accompanied by recollection, because the crisis does not truly disappear through forgetting. Structural deficiency will eventually emerge from time to time, forcing the self to confront the truth of its own finitude. This is another driving force of self-consciousness: periodically returning to the ontological predicament. "Recollection" is also necessary because the "crisis" can never be truly resolved; the structural crisis forces self-consciousness to re-examine its own ontological position. This interrogation lies in having to re-determine its own position. Recollection is not a response to specific things, but a response to the structural crisis. Forgetting and recollection operate in an intertwined manner: forgetting is necessary for survival; we must forget ontology to maintain our existence. Conversely, recollection expresses the cruelty of existence: we must truly face our own deficiency.

In summary, self-consciousness is not the a priori starting point of consciousness but rather a "byproduct" or "secondary structure" developed by consciousness in response to its own crises. Its mission is, on the one hand, to stabilize and coordinate the various possibilities of consciousness so that they do not explode, and on the other hand, to introduce the illusion of the "self" through the emergence of a center. This seems to resonate with the Buddhist doctrine of anātman (no-self), which regards the "self" as the root of all suffering. However, Buddhism fails to realize that both "suffering" and "self" are products of a more hidden structural operation: the operation of crisis and possibility created by deficiency, which constructs our seemingly prosperous world as well as endless suffering. This is precisely what we attempt to reveal. Ultimately, we find that the emergence of the "I" is not the cause of suffering; rather, both "I" and "suffering" converge into the operation of the ontological ground. Buddhism was not entirely without insight; it recognized that ignorance (avidyā) and the self are mutually dependent, making it unclear whether ignorance creates the self or the self creates ignorance. Buddhism should have realized that behind this interdependence there is a deeper reason, but it missed this.

We should also note that in the contemporary technological age, "compelled

emergence" and "crisis" are no longer philosophical abstractions but psychological representations occurring at every moment. Algorithmic selection and focusing in short videos constantly reinforce this compelled manifestation. Consciousness has never been the reflective subject imagined by Enlightenment thinkers, but rather a crisis response based on deficiency. The contemporary technological age cannot fundamentally solve structural crises; on the contrary, it accelerates the cycle of deficiency-crisis-compelled emergence.

CONCLUSION: CONSCIOUSNESS AS SELF-LIMITATION AMID CRISIS AND POSSIBILITY

Through the above discussion, we can answer the question "what is consciousness?" more clearly: consciousness is neither an independent entity nor merely a sum of certain functions or experiences, but a structural apparatus forced into being by crisis and generated in deficiency. Therefore, the philosophical inquiry into consciousness can neither return to the old path of transcendentalism with its mystical, intuitive "spirit," nor succumb to the reductionist explanation of naturalism that reduces consciousness to neural processes. Consciousness as such exists precisely in the gap between the transcendental and the natural, the subjective and the objective. It is not a ready-made material or mental entity, but a structure operating within fissures. It is in the inconsistency between humans and the world, in the cracks and tensions of existence, that consciousness manifests its unique role.

We can summarize the core ideas of this paper into the following propositions, with interpretive remarks based on the preceding analysis:

Proposition 1: Consciousness is not a ready-made entity. It can be neither downwardly reduced to physical mechanisms nor upwardly reduced to social construction. Rather, it should be understood as an apparatus that coordinates and balances between crisis and possibility, while simultaneously creating new crises. Hence, consciousness cannot be simply understood as an adaptive product of evolution; instead, it should be understood as a positive feedback mechanism of crisis.

Proposition 2: Self-consciousness is not a priori but an after-effect expressed through the failure of consciousness. The self is not the source of consciousness; rather, it is a "pseudo-center" generated by the structure when conscious operation is thwarted, in order to maintain integration. The generation of self-consciousness stems from the accumulation of internal crises in consciousness. When the

originally ownerless consciousness can no longer reconcile its various contradictions, the "self" steps in as an expedient center. This means that we do not need to assume a Zahavian minimal self.

Proposition 3: Consciousness is a being of "deferral and wandering." As we have analyzed, consciousness always operates within the positive feedback loop of crisis and possibility, while also maintaining its self-inhibition and balance through the cyclic mechanism of forgetting and recollection. Deferral and wandering mean that consciousness has no absolute, immediate grasp or complete satisfaction, but always temporarily balances contradictions through delay, displacement, and compromise. Consciousness continuously defers the outbreak of crisis and defers the moment of its own complete satisfaction, keeping itself perpetually between "not enough" and "too much." Although this dynamic balance is fragile, it is precisely its fragility that endows consciousness with sufficient flexibility. Thus, deficient consciousness creates brilliant expressions of consciousness.

Proposition 4: The study of consciousness requires a "structural-phenomenological method" that transcends traditional dogmas. Synthesizing the above insights, we advocate a new method different from both transcendental idealism and simple physicalism. It starts neither from the internal subjective experience of consciousness to engage in functional narrative, nor from an external ontological presupposition to impose a rigid deductive framework. Instead, it proceeds from the internal inconsistency, crisis, and fissures of human existence, conducting a synchronic, comprehensive analysis of the phenomena and structures of consciousness.

The structural-phenomenological method can be specified into five principles:

1. Consciousness is the result of structural compelled emergence, not a priori presence.
2. The structure of crisis-possibility interweaving precedes the cognitive structure.
3. Consciousness is not functional reconciliation and adaptation, but the deferral-based reconciliation and amplification of crisis.
4. The self is not a priori but a symbol of the failure of consciousness.
5. Structural analysis ultimately aims to return to the insight into deficiency.

Returning to the practical concerns raised at the beginning of this paper: faced with the illusions created by artificial intelligence, the mental manipulation and fragmentation brought by digital media, how should we respond to the crisis that consciousness encounters? Now we can give a philosophical response: for

consciousness to survive critically within the "crisis-possibility" mechanism, the key lies in learning self-limitation and critical reflection. Technology provides unprecedented possibilities for human consciousness, such as massive information and virtual experiences, while also harboring unprecedented crises, such as the dissipation of meaning and nihilism.

Thus, perhaps we do not lack consciousness, but rather lack insight into the ontological ground behind consciousness, lack awareness of the deficiency-crisis-compelled emergence mechanism. The philosophical analysis of consciousness is not only about clarifying what "consciousness" is, but also about how we should reposition ourselves in this era, and how to continually engage in a kind of spiritual exercise. Philosophy is being reawakened here. The questioning of consciousness precisely revives the Socratic maxim: Know thyself.

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