

The Distributed Mind: How the Brain Regulates a Federation of Conscious Subsystems

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Based on: Extended collaborative development of the attractor framework, N=1 physiological experimentation, and a re-reading of Spinoza's conatus.

Abstract

Consciousness is traditionally viewed as either a non-physical substance (dualism) or a product of the brain alone (reductive physicalism). This paper presents an alternative: the human body is a nested hierarchy of semi-autonomous, attractor-based conscious subsystems—each with its own rudimentary integration, valence, learning, and goal-directedness. Using the nematode *C. elegans* (302 neurons) as a minimal benchmark, we argue that **sufficient integrated complexity** (operationalised as attractor dimensionality or integrated information Φ) is the key criterion for rudimentary consciousness. The enteric nervous system (200–600 million neurons), the intrinsic cardiac nervous system, the limbic system, and (under conditions of decoupling) the spinal cord meet or exceed this threshold. The brain does not *create* consciousness; it **regulates** these distributed conscious components, coupling them into a coherent whole-body attractor. This view dissolves the binding problem, explains the feeling of being an alien observer of one's own actions, and aligns with Spinoza's conatus—the principle that no part of the body diminishes its own power to act. We provide

empirical signatures, testable predictions, and an N=1 self-engineering case study (ECM restoration, abdominal relaxation, sleep optimisation) that illustrates the framework. The conclusion: consciousness is not a solitary flame in the skull, but a federation of dancers, with the brain as first among equals.

1. Introduction

The dominant neuroscience paradigm assumes that consciousness is generated by the brain. Yet this assumption struggles to explain:

- Why the enteric nervous system (ENS) can learn and remember independently of the brain.
- Why cardiac signals influence decision-making and self-awareness.
- Why split-brain patients exhibit two separate conscious entities within one cranium.
- Why the universal feeling of “not being in control” (*“why did I do that?”*) persists.

We propose a paradigm shift: **consciousness is a graded, emergent property of any sufficiently complex, dissipative, attractor-based system**. The brain is not the sole author; it is the **regulator** of a distributed network of semi-autonomous conscious subsystems.

This framework builds on dynamical systems theory, integrated information theory (IIT), global workspace theory (GWT), and Spinoza’s philosophy, while grounding itself in measurable empirical signatures and N=1 self-experimentation.

2. The Attractor Framework for Consciousness

2.1 Core Definitions

- **Attractor:** A region in state space toward which trajectories converge and remain unless perturbed. Characterised by negative Lyapunov exponents and basin stability.
- **Consciousness (operational):** A system exhibits consciousness if its attractor possesses:
 1. **Integration** – binds multiple sensory/interoceptive streams.
 2. **Self-reference** (minimal) – distinguishes self from environment.
 3. **Valence** – attraction to some states, repulsion from others.
 4. **Learning** – attractor landscape changes with experience.
 5. **Goal-directedness** – acts to maintain its basin (conatus).
 6. **Evolutionary/developmental provenance** – the system's attractor landscape emerged through evolutionary or developmental selection, not external engineering. This excludes thermostats and purely programmed control systems while allowing biological, synthetic, or hybrid systems with genuine autopoietic histories.
- **Mind:** A conscious attractor. Not a substance, but a real, causally effective pattern (like a whirlpool).

2.2 The Minimal Benchmark: *C. elegans*

The nematode *C. elegans* has exactly 302 neurons. Despite this simplicity, it exhibits:

- Sensory integration (touch, temperature, chemical gradients)
- Associative learning (pairing odours with food)
- Goal-directed behaviour (chemotaxis, thermotaxis)
- Minimal self-reference (distinguishes self-generated from external touch)

Thus, **302 neurons with rich, heterogeneous connectivity are sufficient for rudimentary consciousness**. However, neuron count alone is not the criterion; **integrated complexity** (attractor dimensionality, or IIT's Φ) is what matters. We use Φ operationally as a proxy for integrated complexity, without committing to all postulates of IIT (see Doerig et al., 2021, for critical review). *C. elegans* has high integrated complexity relative to its neuron count. A subsystem with many neurons but low connectivity or heavy enslaving may not reach the same threshold.

3. The Federation of Conscious Subsystems in the Human Body

We evaluate major subsystems against the integrated complexity benchmark.

Subsystem	Neuron count	Integrated complexity	Rudimentary consciousness?	Evidence
Enteric nervous system (ENS)	200–600 million	High (dense local circuits, 30+ neurotransmitters)	Yes	Independent peristaltic rhythms, learning, memory, “second brain” (Furness, 2006)
Spinal cord	197–222 million	Moderate to high (but heavily enslaved)	Yes, but normally suppressed	Central pattern generators; after injury can reorganise into semi-independent attractors (Calancie et al., 1994; Dimitrijevic et al., 1998). Evidence for “spinal consciousness” remains preliminary.
Intrinsic cardiac nervous system (ICNS)	14,000–43,000	Moderate (local processing loops)	Intermediate (contributor)	Influences emotion, decision, interoception (McCraty et al., 2009)
Limbic system	tens of millions	High (emotional valence, memory)	Yes	Often acts before cortical awareness; strong valence and learning
Basal ganglia & motor routines	>100 million	Moderate (procedural)	Yes (habitual)	Automatic action sequences, operate semi-autonomously
Immune system	N/A (non-neural)	Low (no centralised attractor)	Proto-conscious	Learns, remembers, communicates; lacks integration into a unified attractor

Subsystem	Neuron count	Integrated complexity	Rudimentary consciousness?	Evidence
Gut microbiota	N/A (trillions of microbes)	N/A (external ecosystem)	No	Perturbs human attractors but has no intrinsic nervous integration

3.1 The ENS: A Second Conscious Mind?

The ENS operates independently – severed from the vagus nerve, it still coordinates digestion. It uses over 30 neurotransmitters, including 95% of the body’s serotonin. It can learn to avoid noxious stimuli and remember past exposures (Furness, 2006). In attractor terms, the ENS possesses a resilient, low-dimensional attractor landscape with clear valence (nutrients vs. toxins) and goal-directedness (propulsion, secretion). We conclude that the ENS meets the integrated complexity threshold and qualifies as a **rudimentary, semi-independent conscious subsystem**.

3.2 The Heart’s “Little Brain”

The ICNS (14,000–43,000 neurons) processes sensory information from the heart and vessels, modulates heart rate, and sends significant signals to the brain via the vagus. Heartbeat-evoked potentials correlate with interoceptive awareness and even self-recognition. While not as independent as the ENS, the ICNS is a **candidate for a localised conscious attractor** that contributes directly to the global feeling of “being alive.”

3.3 The Enslaved Majority: Spinal Cord

The spinal cord’s 200 million neurons far exceed the *C. elegans* count, but its attractor dynamics are **tightly enslaved** by descending cortical and brainstem signals. In pathological states (spinal cord injury), the cord below the lesion can reorganise into new, semi-independent attractors –

sometimes leading to spontaneous movements and, in rare cases, patterns that have been controversially described as “spinal consciousness” (Calancie et al., 1994; Dimitrijevic et al., 1998). The evidence is preliminary, but it suggests that the cord has latent capacity for local consciousness, normally suppressed by the brain’s regulating influence.

4. The Brain as Regulator, Not Sole Generator

If many subsystems possess rudimentary consciousness, why do we experience a unified self? Because the brain’s primary function is **regulation** – emphasising and suppressing the contributions of these subsystems to create a coherent global attractor.

4.1 Spinoza’s Conatus: No Part Diminishes Its Own Power

Spinoza’s *Ethics* (III, 6) states that every thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being (conatus). A part of the body, left alone, does not curb its own power to act. Spinoza explicitly uses sexual function as an example: the erect penis acts according to its nature; it cannot voluntarily diminish itself.

Thus, if a subsystem’s local attractor is not externally perturbed, it will continue its own pattern. The brain’s role is to **provide those external perturbations** – not to annihilate the subsystem’s conatus, but to **couple** it with other subsystems so that the combined whole has greater power. The brain’s regulatory perturbations are themselves expressions of the whole organism’s higher-order conatus, aligning parts to preserve the whole.

4.2 Regulation by Emphasis and Suppression

The brain does not “command”; it modulates. Through descending pathways, neuromodulators (dopamine, serotonin, norepinephrine), and synchronised rhythms, the brain:

- **Amplifies** certain subsystem signals (e.g., gut hunger signals become conscious cravings).
- **Damps** others (e.g., spinal reflexes are suppressed during voluntary movement).
- **Entrains** rhythms (e.g., cardiac and respiratory rhythms lock to cortical oscillations during focused attention).

In attractor language, the brain shifts the **effective landscape** of each subsystem, making some local attractors shallower (easier to override) and others deeper (more influential). This is regulation, not annihilation.

4.3 The Alien Feeling: When Regulation Falters

When you ask “*why did I do that?*” – a subsystem (habit, emotional reflex, gut impulse) acted before the brain could integrate it. The global attractor was temporarily misaligned. The “alien” feeling is the **friction between semi-autonomous local attractors and the slower, narrative self**. It is not pathology; it is the normal noise of a distributed system. Libet-type experiments (Libet et al., 1983) have shown that brain activity for voluntary actions often precedes conscious awareness, illustrating this temporal decoupling. (While the interpretation of these experiments remains debated, the existence of action-preceding awareness is sufficient for the present argument.)

5. Empirical Signatures and Testable Predictions

5.1 Signatures of Subsystem Consciousness

- **Local learning and memory** (e.g., ENS conditioned aversion; Furness, 2006).
- **Semi-autonomous rhythms** (e.g., slow waves of the gut, heartbeat variability).
- **Local valence** (e.g., immune cells produce pro- vs anti-inflammatory attractors).
- **Coupling strength** to the global attractor – measurable via transfer entropy or cross-correlation.
- **Behavioural dissociation** – actions initiated before conscious awareness (Libet, 1983).

5.2 Predictions

1. **Perturbation of a subsystem** (e.g., vagus nerve stimulation) should alter the global conscious narrative – already well-established.
2. **Decoupling a subsystem** (e.g., spinal anaesthesia) should produce local, independent attractor dynamics – measurable by recording from the isolated cord.
3. **Training a subsystem** (e.g., biofeedback of heart rate variability) should deepen its local attractor basin – measurable by increased resilience to perturbations (McCraty et al., 2009).
4. **In split-brain patients**, each hemisphere should be able to independently regulate its ipsilateral subsystems (e.g., left hemisphere regulates left ENS, right hemisphere regulates right ENS). A suitable

protocol would present lateralised interoceptive cues (e.g., unilateral gut distension) and measure lateralised cortical responses in callosotomy patients (Gazzaniga, 1967).

6. N=1 Case Study: Restoring Whole-Body Coherence

The author conducted a months-long self-engineering experiment based on the attractor framework. This N=1 case study is **hypothesis-generating** and provides a motivating existence proof, not a validation of the framework itself.

6.1 Interventions

- **ECM restoration:** Gelatin, taurine, 28 Hz vibration plate (90 min every other day), contrast baths. Improved collagen accretion, VO_2 max, skin quality.
- **Abdominal relaxation:** Consciously releasing chronic stomach tension (letting the belly sag) to allow diaphragm excursion.
- **Sleep protocol:** Smaller evening meals, morning cardio + sunlight, 15 min reading low-arousal fiction (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*).

6.2 Outcomes

- Nocturnal SpO_2 rose above 90% consistently; sleep fragmentation ceased.
- Deep sleep reached acceptable levels.
- Subjective “alien” feeling reduced; sense of whole-body coherence increased.

6.3 Interpretation

Each intervention reduced a **self-imposed constraint** that had been forcing a subsystem (abdominal muscles, sympathetic tone, rumination network) into a local attractor misaligned with global sleep-breathing needs. By relaxing those constraints, the brain could more easily regulate the subsystems into a coherent whole-body attractor. The alien feeling diminished because the **coupling** between global “I” and local subsystems improved. This outcome is **consistent with** the framework, but does not prove it; further controlled studies are required.

7. Philosophical Implications

7.1 Spinoza Vindicated

Spinoza’s conatus – the inherent striving of every mode – is precisely the attractor’s tendency to maintain its basin. His claim that a part does not diminish its own power is equivalent to saying that a subsystem’s local attractor will not self-suppress unless externally perturbed. The brain provides those perturbations, not to diminish but to **align**. Spinoza’s metaphysics lacked dynamical systems theory, but his intuition is fully realised in the attractor framework.

7.2 The Binding Problem Dissolved

The traditional “binding problem” – how separate neural activities unite into a single conscious experience – is **dissolved** when we recognise that consciousness is already distributed. The global attractor *is* the binding. No extra mechanism is required; coupling *creates* coherence. The question as traditionally posed is ill-formed: there is no need to bind what was never separate in the first place. This dissolution follows the strategy of Wittgenstein, Ryle, and

Dennett.

7.3 The Self as Negotiation

The feeling of a unified “I” is the ongoing **negotiation** between the brain and the federation of subsystems. When negotiation runs smoothly, you feel at home in your body. When it stutters, you feel like an alien. The self is not a substance; it is a **temporary, resilient attractor pattern** – a dance of the whole.

8. Conclusion

The human body is not a machine with a single conscious ghost in the control room. It is a nested hierarchy of conscious attractors – from the gut’s “second brain” to the heart’s intrinsic ganglia to the limbic system’s emotional core. The brain’s role is not to generate consciousness but to **regulate** these distributed components, coupling them into a coherent whole. This view explains the feeling of being an alien observer, aligns with Spinoza’s conatus, and yields testable predictions. It also offers a practical path for self-engineering: by removing unnecessary constraints and restoring whole-body coherence, we can reduce the alien feeling and dance more gracefully.

The mind is not a solitary flame. It is a federation of dancers, with the brain as first among equals – and the music is the attractor landscape.

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