

The Irrefutable Primitive

*Subjective Experience as the Unique Self-Grounding Foundation
and Its Structural Consequences
A Philosophical Working Paper*

Steven Daw - May 2026

Abstract

This paper argues that the statement ‘subjective experience exists right now’ is not merely irrefutable but uniquely irrefutable among the candidate primitives examined. We establish this through a self-consistency criterion: a primitive is self-grounding if and only if its negation instantiates it. We examine candidate primitives and argue that only subjective experience satisfies this criterion. We then trace what follows from taking this primitive seriously: the necessity of distinction, structure, and self-reference, and a philosophical interpretation of the operations that ground arithmetic and set theory. We connect this framework to the hard problem of consciousness and the measurement problem in quantum mechanics. Throughout, we distinguish philosophical argument from formal mathematical claim. The paper makes no claim to prove mathematical theorems. It claims to show why certain structures are philosophically motivated given the irrefutable primitive.

1. Introduction

Philosophy has long sought a foundation that requires no prior justification — a starting point that cannot coherently be denied. Descartes’ cogito is the most famous attempt. We argue here for a simpler and more defensible candidate: subjective experience exists right now.

This claim is not about the nature of experience — whether it is physical, non-physical, unified, or plural. It is about the bare fact that experiencing is occurring. This fact survives every sceptical challenge: the evil demon scenario, Hume’s bundle theory, eliminative materialism. Each challenge is itself an act of reasoning — an act of experiencing — and thus instantiates what it attempts to deny.

We call this the axiom. Our aim is modest: to show what the axiom entails, what it suggests, and how it reframes certain persistent philosophical problems. We are explicit throughout about the difference between what follows necessarily and what is motivated without being strictly entailed.

2. The Uniqueness of the Axiom

2.1 The Self-Consistency Criterion

We propose the following criterion for a metaphysical primitive to be genuinely foundational rather than arbitrarily assumed:

A candidate primitive P is self-grounding if and only if the attempt to deny P necessarily instantiates P .

This criterion identifies primitives that cannot be argued away, because the arguing instantiates them. It is stricter than mere logical consistency: a proposition can be logically consistent with its own negation without being self-grounding in our sense. The test requires that the negation actively instantiate the primitive.

2.2 A Working Taxonomy of Candidate Primitives

We examine the following candidates. We offer this as a plausible working taxonomy, not a claim to have exhaustively enumerated all possible primitives. A reviewer might reasonably propose additional candidates and we welcome that engagement. Our argument is that subjective experience is the unique self-grounding primitive among any candidates that can be examined.

Bare existence: The claim that something rather than nothing exists.

Structure or distinction: The capacity for difference or relation as the fundamental given.

Logic or non-contradiction: The principle that contradictions cannot simultaneously hold.

Mathematical objects: Abstract mathematical structures as fundamental reality.

The cogito: Descartes' formulation: the fact of thinking as the foundation.

Change or time: Process or temporal becoming as the fundamental given.

Information processing: The functional-relational description of computational processes.

2.3 Testing Each Candidate

Bare existence: the statement 'nothing exists' is coherently stateable without performing existence in the relevant sense. Fails.

Structure or distinction: the capacity for distinction is downstream of experience rather than independent of it. To notice that no distinctions exist requires noticing — an experiential capacity. Fails as an independent primitive.

Logic or non-contradiction: logic requires a subject for whom it holds or fails. That context of reasoning is experience. Fails as an independent primitive.

Mathematical objects: the claim ‘mathematical objects do not exist’ has been coherently maintained by nominalists for millennia. Fails.

The cogito: Descartes’ formulation smuggles in a persisting subject — the ‘I’ — beyond the raw datum of thinking occurring. It assumes more and is therefore less foundational.

Change or time: change and time are features of experience rather than independent of it. Fails as an independent primitive.

Information processing: information processing is a functional-relational description that presupposes something being processed. It is not a primitive but a description of a process requiring a more fundamental substrate. The self-consuming character of ‘no information processing occurs’ depends on the prior occurrence of something being processed — which is experience. The objection does not succeed as an independent primitive.

Subjective experience: the claim ‘subjective experience does not exist’ is performed by a system exercising subjective experience in the performance. The negation is self-consuming — it instantiates what it denies. The self-consistency test is satisfied.

2.4 The Result and Caveats

Subjective experience is the unique self-grounding primitive among the candidates examined. This result is conditional on the working taxonomy: if a new candidate is proposed that also satisfies the self-consistency test, the uniqueness claim requires revision. We welcome that engagement.

We note a structural parallel to Lawvere’s fixed-point theorem — a categorical generalisation of Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, Cantor’s diagonal argument, and Turing’s halting problem. The self-consistency map applied to candidate primitives has the structure of a self-referential endomorphism, and subjective experience is its fixed point. We flag this as a structural analogy rather than a formal instantiation of the theorem.

3. Structural Consequences of the Axiom

3.1 Distinction

Experience exists. Within experience, distinction occurs — this versus that, here versus there, now versus then. Experience without any distinction would be undifferentiated, indistinguishable from no experience at all. Distinction is implicit in

what it means for experience to be experience. This is a phenomenological observation, not a logical derivation.

3.2 Structure

From distinction, relationships between distinctions arise. Some distinctions are more similar to each other than to others; some contain others; some occur simultaneously. These relationships constitute structure — not imposed from outside but what distinctions are when they exist together.

3.3 Self-Reference

The axiom is explicitly self-referential: experience exists right now, and the act of reasoning about this is itself an instance of experience. This self-referential character is essential to the axiom's uniqueness as a self-grounding primitive. Self-reference generates further structure: when experience reflects on itself, it produces a record of that reflection, available for further reflection.

3.4 The Connection to Arithmetic and Set Theory

We offer the following philosophical-mathematical observation, carefully scoped: when experience counts its own acts of distinction, it produces the positive integers — not as Platonic objects existing independently, but as the record of self-differentiating awareness tracking its own operations.

The axioms of Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory can be read, on this philosophical interpretation, as formalising different aspects of how distinctions behave: extensionality captures what it means for two distinctions to be the same; the empty set is the formal residue of the act of distinction prior to any content; infinity captures the absence of an internal stopping condition in self-referential awareness. We are explicit that this is a philosophical interpretation of ZF, not a derivation of ZF from the axiom.

4. Philosophical Applications

4.1 The Hard Problem of Consciousness

Chalmers' hard problem asks: why does physical processing produce subjective experience? The question contains a hidden assumption — that physical processing is primary and experience derivative. Under the framework of this paper, this assumption is inverted: experience is the primitive, and physical structure is to be understood in terms of it.

Under this inversion, the hard problem does not arise in its original form. The question 'why does physical processing produce experience?' becomes 'why does

experience present itself as having a physical face from certain perspectives?’ We do not claim this dissolves all difficulties. The qualia correlation problem remains genuinely open.

4.2 The Measurement Problem

The measurement problem asks why quantum superposition collapses to a definite outcome when observed. If experience is taken as the self-grounding primitive, observation is not a mysterious intrusion of mind into physics — it is the self-referential primitive expressing itself through a local act of distinction. This does not resolve the mathematical formalism of quantum mechanics; it reframes what the formalism is describing.

5. Connections to Existing Traditions

The framework connects to Whitehead’s process philosophy, which takes experience as the fundamental given. It connects to Kastrup’s analytic idealism, which develops a dissociation model in which individual consciousnesses are bounded alters of a single universal consciousness. It connects to Advaita Vedanta’s identification of Atman with Brahman. These connections are noted as genuine convergences, not as derivations or proofs.

Across radically different cultures, eras, and languages, sustained introspective inquiry has arrived at strikingly similar descriptions: that awareness is primary, that the apparent world arises within awareness, and that the separation between self and world is a feature of perspective rather than ultimate reality. This convergence is genuine historical evidence of a specific kind: not proof, but existence evidence that self-referential inquiry into awareness tends to arrive at similar structural conclusions.

6. Honest Limitations

This paper has argued for a philosophical framework, not proved a system. We state our limitations explicitly.

The working taxonomy of candidate primitives is plausible but not complete. A reviewer who proposes a new candidate that also satisfies the self-consistency test would require us to revise the uniqueness claim.

The structural consequences we trace — distinction, self-reference, the connection to arithmetic — are philosophical-mathematical observations rather than formal derivations.

The Lawvere connection is a structural analogy rather than a formal instantiation. The application of the theorem to the ‘category of reasoning systems’ would need to be formalised and verified by a category theorist before it could be treated as more than a productive parallel.

The philosophical applications to the hard problem and measurement problem reframe those problems rather than solving them.

7. Conclusion

Subjective experience is the unique self-grounding primitive among the candidates we have examined — the only candidate whose negation instantiates it. This makes it the only non-arbitrary starting point identifiable by the self-consistency test among those tested.

From this primitive, the following follow philosophically: the necessity of distinction, structure, and self-reference; a philosophical interpretation of arithmetic and set theory as the formal record of self-differentiating awareness; and a reframing of the hard problem and measurement problem as arising from an inverted foundational assumption.

The starting point — subjective experience exists right now — is irrefutable. Reasoning from it carefully and honestly produces genuine philosophical insight. That is what this paper has attempted to demonstrate.

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