

Circumscription and the Center: Determinacy, Objectivity, and Authored Choice

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Abstract

This paper develops a unified structural account of perceptual consciousness, awareness, objectivity, and free will. The core proposal is that any determinate episode instantiates an i-structure: a nested center–horizon organization generated by circumscriptions, understood as the reciprocal integration of differences into a whole. The “center” is a limit-like unity-role by which the whole is determinately one; the “horizon” is the structured field of co-implicated possibilities, constraints, background, and anticipations. I argue that the phenomenological center–horizon pattern can be treated, under a restricted transcendental move, as a condition on determinacy itself, provided one adopts a determinacy-for stance in a metaphysical sense: determinacy is inseparable from the space of possible determinations within systems of discrimination and interaction. Consciousness and awareness are then distinguished as emphases within i-structure: consciousness is stabilized thematic unity, whereas awareness is explicit openness of horizon and depth. Objectivity is characterized as communicatively stabilized approximation whose normativity lies in robustness under widening and deepening practices of determination. Finally, decision episodes are analyzed via identity- and affordance-determinacy, a crossing phase, and authored resolution. Compatibilists and libertarians share this structural target and differ primarily on the metaphysical reading of the openness in that shared structure.

Keywords: Consciousness; Phenomenology; Perception; Awareness; Free will; Agency; Intentionality; Objectivity; Structural realism; Mental causation

1. Introduction

The same structural puzzle appears under four names. In perception, a person apprehends an object as one despite being given only partial profiles. In awareness, she senses more than what

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is focal—depth, potential, and the readiness of experience to shift. In objectivity, many standpoints succeed in speaking of “the same” object and correcting one another. In agency, certain decision episodes present live alternatives and culminate in what is experienced as “taking a stand.”

My proposal is that these phenomena are different regimes of a single pattern: the *i*-structure, a nested center–horizon organization generated by circumscription. The ambition is deliberately limited. The paper offers a structural vocabulary, a restricted transcendental argument that links that structure to determinacy under an explicit determinacy-for stance, and a clarificatory contribution to debates about objectivity and free will. It does not attempt a complete theory of mind–body interaction, nor does it attempt to force a libertarian metaphysics from phenomenology.

Phenomenological description is treated here as constraint rather than ornament. Husserl’s analyses of object–horizon structure, Gurwitsch’s theme–field–margin, and James’s focus–fringe identify a stable organization of experience (Husserl, 1913/1982; Gurwitsch, 1964; James, 1890). My claim is that the same organization is present, *mutatis mutandis*, in decision episodes (Janew, 2026a). The question is what follows from this recurrence.

The bridge to metaphysics is explicit and restricted. It concerns determinacy, the aspect of being that can be discussed non-vacuously in this context. If determinacy is metaphysically inseparable from the space of possible determinations within systems of discrimination and interaction, then *i*-structure is not merely a feature of human attention but a condition on determinacy as such. A hard realist can reject this and accept brute unity instead. My goal is to make the choice between those packages precise, not to pretend it can be decided by stipulation.

2. Circumscription and *i*-structure

2.1 Circumscription

By “circumscription” I mean the constitution of a determinate whole through reciprocal relations among differences. The point is not that one begins with already determinate parts and then adds a whole as an extra object. Rather, the determinacy of the parts and the determinacy of the whole arise together through the relations that bind and contrast them.

Circumscription is evident in perception, where a perceived object is constituted as one across shifting profiles against a background. It is evident in deliberation, where a decision situation becomes present as “this choice now” through the agent’s oscillation among considerations and

options. It is also evident in scientific practice, where a micro-event counts as a “detection” only within an apparatus and a code that integrates it into a stable, discriminable whole.

2.2 The i-structure

Any circumscribed whole exhibits a center–horizon organization. The center is the unity-role by which the whole is determinately one; it is not a separable part, but the structural locus of “this.” The horizon is the structured field of co-implicated possibilities, constraints, background, and anticipations that belong to “this” without being fully focal.

This organization is assumed to be iterable indefinitely across nested scales. I call it an i-structure (“infinitesimality structure”). “Infinitesimal” is a role term, not a mathematical entity: it marks that the unity-role is converged like a limit (and in a nested way), not as an extra part. It is “nothing in itself” only insofar as it has no content apart from the whole(s) it unifies.² This is a claim about structure, not a claim that every i-structure carries rich phenomenology in the ordinary sense; i-structure is a structural condition on determinacy, while rich phenomenal character is a further fact about certain realized i-structures.

2.3 Example: reading a sentence

Consider a person reading a sentence. At any moment, the center is the current clause as “this thought.” The horizon includes prior clauses retained, syntactic and semantic expectations, background linguistic competence, and the task-context of reading to assess an argument. This also exhibits nesting. Letters are integrated into words, words into clauses, clauses into sentences, and so on. Each level functions as a whole with its own center-role and horizon.

If a surprising word appears, the overall center shifts, but it shifts by reorganizing the overall horizon. What was background becomes relevant, and what was anticipated is rejected. The sentence’s meaning is not a static entity behind the marks. It is the stabilized unity-role that results when all focal centers and structured horizons settle into coherence.

² Without *infinite* nesting and convergence, this organization would be better described as a “point-centers structure.” In any case, nesting implies that “shifting profiles” or “oscillation among considerations” refer to changing subcenters (Janew, 2014).

2.4 Relation to empirical theories and enactivism

The i-structure is meant as a cross-theoretic structural constraint that empirical models should instantiate. Global workspace models distinguish a globally available focal content against a background of specialized processes (Baars, 1988; Dehaene, 2014). Higher-order theories distinguish a first-order state from a higher-order stance, which can be read as one way of organizing a center and its horizon (Lau & Rosenthal, 2011). Predictive-processing frameworks treat perception and action as structured by hierarchical expectations and prediction-error dynamics, which resembles a horizon of anticipations constraining what becomes focal (Friston, 2010). IIT emphasizes integrated differentiation (Tononi, 2004), again capturing unity and difference in a single organization.

Enactivism frames cognition as sense-making by an autonomous system, bringing forth a world of significance through organized interaction (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). In my terms, sense-making is nested circumscription, and the brought-forth world is a stabilized i-structure.

3. Determinacy-for and the restricted transcendental move

The metaphysical leverage depends on a determinacy-for stance. I distinguish a semantic reading from the metaphysical reading required by the argument.

The semantic reading holds that our concept of determinacy is inseparable from determinability: we have no contentful grasp of determinacy except via conditions under which something could be discriminated and identified. The metaphysical reading holds that determinacy itself is inseparable from the space of possible determinations within systems of discrimination and interaction.

This metaphysical reading has positive support from scientific practice. Physical quantities are individuated by different measurement operations, and the invariance principles derived from them. Length is tracked through operations and comparisons that define congruence under rigid motion. Charge is tracked through stable interaction patterns and transformation/conservation rules. Spacetime intervals are tracked via invariances characteristic of relativistic structure. The temptation to say “that is merely epistemic” is understandable, but it becomes costly if one then posits an extra intrinsic “thisness” or “whatness” of the quantity that plays no explanatory role beyond the invariance patterns by which the quantity’s identity conditions are actually fixed in practice. Such a posit does not refine our grip on the quantity; it simply duplicates what the invariance structure already provides.

If one accepts determinacy-for in the metaphysical sense, the restricted transcendental move is straightforward. Determinacy is realized only within a space of possible determinations. Stable determinacy-for requires integration into structured wholes: perceptual objects, decision situations, measurement setups and codes, invariances under transformation. Such integration is circumscription, and circumscription exhibits a nested center–horizon organization. Therefore, i-structure is a condition on determinacy as such.

A realist who prefers a substrate metaphysics can refuse this package and accept brute unity. At that point, the dispute becomes a choice between metaphysical packages, plausibly decided (if at all) by broader considerations of explanatory fit, simplicity, and fidelity to our best accounts of determinacy and agency. In the present paper, I do not attempt to settle that global choice. I aim to make the choice explicit and non-costless.

4. Realist foils and structural realism

Armstrong-style realism offers a clear foil. It can treat determinacy as mind-independent and accept unity as primitive (Armstrong, 1978). My claim is not that this is incoherent, but that it leaves the unity-role unanalyzed at the point where determinacy is supposed to be most robust. The i-structure proposes a structural account of unity that is continuous with the organization revealed in experience and mirrored in scientific practice.

Ontic structural realism is a partial ally. It emphasizes invariance and relational structure (Ladyman & Ross, 2007). The i-structure proposal is best read as a supplement to structural realism rather than as a rival, because it aims to characterize the unity-role a structure must exhibit to count as a determinate whole and not merely a bare graph.

Russellian monism provides a further context. If physics gives structural description while leaving intrinsic character unspecified, then i-structure can be read as a structural characterization of the unity-role that such views already require (Russell, 1927; Goff, 2017). The paper remains compatible with, but not committed to, cosmopsychist construals of global unity, for readers inclined that way (Shani, 2015).

5. Consciousness and awareness

Consciousness and awareness are emphases within i-structure. Consciousness is stabilized thematic unity: the achieved center–horizon organization in which “this” is present and usable.

Awareness is explicit openness of horizon and depth: the lived sense that the focus is constituted by a field of potentialities and can shift.³

This distinction has some affinity with, but is not identical to, Block's access/phenomenal distinction (Block, 1995): my emphasis is less on access versus qualitative feel and more on the organization of horizon and unity that both kinds of theories must capture.

6. Objectivity as communicatively stabilized approximation, with normativity and error

Objectivity is best understood as communicatively stabilized approximation. A common object is not identical with any one standpoint's object. It is the approximation that circulates in the shared i-structure produced by communication and mutual correction (Janew, 1998/2022, ch. 18).⁴

Normativity enters because some approximations are better than others. Objectivity, on this view, is a matter of how well an approximation holds up under widening and deepening practices of determination. Stability by suppression maintains coherence by excluding contrary data, alternative standpoints, or inconvenient anomalies. Stability by integration maintains coherence by absorbing anomalies into a broader pattern that remains robust across more standpoints and practices.

Well-known historical error cases clarify the distinction. Geocentric astronomy stabilized a powerful approximation for centuries, coordinating observation and prediction, yet it increasingly relied on patching and could not integrate certain patterns without ad hoc complication. Under new instruments and expanded practices, heliocentric and later dynamical frameworks achieved greater robustness by integrating more phenomena with fewer distortive accommodations. Phlogiston theory stabilized useful talk about combustion, but it ran into trouble with the measured mass increase in calcination and with the emerging oxygen-based chemistry. It survived through patching until oxygen chemistry integrated the anomalies more coherently.

³ Talk of "horizon and depth" can be seen as a non-metaphorical way of expressing what I have elsewhere modeled as a "reality funnel": a structured field in which a narrow, articulated focus depends on a much richer, less articulated background (Janew, 1998/2022, ch. 13).

⁴ Communication here is a coupling in which distinct standpoints mutually constrain one another while exchanging "points of view" in any way.

This framework preserves a non-trivial sense of mind-independence. Objects can be independent of any one standpoint because they are stabilized across many and resist unilateral reshaping. They are not independent of all standpoint-structure as such; their determinacy is inseparable from the space of possible determinations that fix their identity conditions.⁵

7. Decision episodes, crossing, authored resolution, and the free will dialectic

A conscious decision episode instantiates an i-structure. The overall center is “this decision now.” The overall horizon encompasses sub-wholes of reasoning, imagining futures, constraints, and affordances. A crucial refinement is that determinacy in agency contexts is two-way. Identity-determinacy concerns how settled what the situation is has become. Affordance-determinacy concerns how settled what the agent can still do has become (Janew, 2026a).

In paradigmatic live decisions, there is a crossing phase, an overarching center, in which identity-determinacy is high (approaching infinity) and affordance-determinacy is low (approaching zero). The agent experiences himself as being at a decision point, yet multiple continuations remain live. The transition to commitment is authored resolution: one option becomes the overall center region, and the horizon/awareness reorganizes accordingly.

In hard choices, the agent can constitute will-based reasons through commitment (Chang, 2017). Moran’s account of avowal captures the same self-constituting character (Moran, 2001). Sartre emphasizes the existential gravity of such settling (Sartre, 1943/1956). Bratman and Pacherie clarify how intention then organizes subsequent action and reasons (Bratman, 1987; Pacherie, 2007).

The core clarificatory payoff is dialectical. Compatibilists and libertarians share the same structural target—crossing and authored resolution—and differ primarily on the metaphysical reading of the openness in that shared structure. Compatibilists may read the openness as epistemic or level-relative and ground responsibility in reasons-responsiveness and guidance control (Dennett, 1984; Fischer & Ravizza, 1998; Frankfurt, 1969; List, 2019). Libertarians may read it as nomic openness. The i-structure map does not decide between them; it makes their shared target explicit and prevents either side from dismissing the other’s central datum by fiat.

⁵ A metaphysical extension is developed elsewhere (Janew, 1998/2022, 2014).

8. Mental causation and closure

Papineau's closure argument and Kim's exclusion argument articulate the standard pressure: if the physical domain is causally complete, mental causation looks redundant or excluded (Kim, 1998; Papineau, 2001). The present paper's function is only to locate the structural project relative to familiar options, not to solve the exclusion problem.

The structural claims about i-structure and decision phenomenology are compatible with closure-friendly compatibilist readings. If one adopts a stronger libertarian metaphysics of global nomic openness (Janew, 2026b), strict microphysical—even quantum statistical—determinism plus completeness becomes difficult to maintain without reinterpretation, and one must choose among fundamentally indeterministic physics, emergent multi-level accounts, or dual-aspect/Russellian strategies. Here, I signal these options without arguing for one of them.

9. Conclusion

Circumscription, understood as the reciprocal integration of differences into a whole, yields an i-structure: a nested center–horizon organization in which a limit-like unity-role anchors a structured field of co-implication. Under a substantive determinacy-for stance, i-structure is not merely a feature of human attention but a condition on determinacy. Scientific practice supports this stance insofar as physical quantities are individuated by measurement operations and invariance principles, while extra metaphysical “thisness” buys no additional explanatory grip.

Within this framework, consciousness is stabilized thematic unity, awareness is explicit openness of horizon and depth, objectivity is communicatively stabilized approximation with normativity anchored in robustness under expanding practices of determination, and free decision is authored resolution in a crossing phase where identity is settled while continuation remains live. Compatibilists and libertarians can share this structural target while differing in metaphysical reading. My aim has been to offer a disciplined structural vocabulary that reconnects phenomenology, philosophy of science, and agency theory.

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Declaration

This paper was drafted and iteratively revised with the help of large-language-model tools. The overall conception and final endorsement of the arguments are mine, and I take full responsibility for the content.

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