What is consciousness?
Indirect definition

- G. Tononi (2008):
- „Everybody knows what consciousness is: it is what vanishes every night when we fall into dreamless sleep and reappears when we wake up...“

Consciousness = Qualia

• The critical meaning of consciousness is: the having of states with a qualitative character („qualia“).

• A state is conscious whenever there is something it is like to be in that state.
Convention

• In this course, we use the word „consciousness“ as a synonym for the word „qualia“. The both refer to one and the same phenomenon.

• If you use these words differently, please state so clearly and state what you mean by them.
2. Description of phenomenon:
   „There is something it is like“
You may call different things "consciousness"
Qualia: There is something it is like...

• Here are three quotes by philosophers explaining the expression "there's something it is like".
• The first one is by Th. Nagel, who popularized the phrase.
• »...the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism... [F]undamentally an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is to be that organism—something it is like for the organism.«

• Thomas Nagel (1974) "What is it like to be a bat?" The Philosophical Review LXXXIII, 4:435-50
Qualia: There is something it is like...

- Consider your visual experience as you stare at a bright turquoise color patch in a paint store. There is something it is like for you subjectively to undergo that experience. What it is like to undergo the experience is very different from what it is like for you to experience a dull brown color patch. This difference is a difference in what is often called ‘phenomenal character’. The phenomenal character of an experience is what it is like subjectively to undergo the experience. If you are told to focus your attention upon the phenomenal character of your experience, you will find that in doing so you are aware of certain qualities. These qualities — ones that are accessible to you when you introspect and that together make up the phenomenal character of the experience are sometimes called ‘qualia’.«

- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) (1997/2013) "Qualia"
Qualia: There is something it is like...

- »The subject matter is perhaps best characterized as “the subjective quality of experience”. When we perceive, think, and act, there is a whirl of causation and information-processing, but this processing does not usually go on in the dark. There is also an internal aspect; there is something it feels like to be a cognitive agent. This internal aspect is conscious experience. Conscious experiences range from vivid color sensations to experiences of the faintest background aromas; from hard-edged pains to the elusive experience of thoughts on the tip of one’s tongue; from mundane sounds and smells to the encompassing grandeur of musical experience; from the triviality of a nagging itch to the weight of a deep existential angst; from the specificity of the taste of peppermint to the generality of one’s experience of selfhood. All these have a distinct experienced quality. All are prominent parts of the inner life of the mind.«
Qualia: There is something it is like...

• »We can say that a being is conscious if there is *something it is like* to be that being, to use a phrase made famous by Thomas Nagel. Similarly, a **mental state is conscious if there is something it is like to be in that mental state**. Equivalently, we can say that a mental state is conscious if it has a **qualitative feel** — an associated quality of experience. These qualitative feels are also known as phenomenal qualities, or **qualia** for short. The problem of explaining these phenomenal qualities is just the problem of explaining consciousness. This is the really hard part of the mind–body problem.«

Qualia: There is something it is like...

• Some synonyms (other names) for "qualia" used in these descriptions:
  – SEP: "phenomenal character"
  – Chalmers: "qualitative feel"
  – Chalmers: "conscious experience"
# Description of Phenomenon

**Phenomenon:**

- Qualia
- Consciousness
- Conscious experience
- Qualitative feel
- Phenomenal character

**Description of phenomenon:**

„There is something it is like“
Qualia exist in different modalities

- Sensory: seeing, hearing, smell, taste, touch
- Emotions / feelings / moods
- Pains
- Proprioception
- Sensations (itching, tickling)
- Thoughts (?)
- Sense of self (?)
Some preliminary clarifications
Qualia are like money

- The totality of all the qualia you have at any given moment is a qualia (because there is something it is like to experience the totality of your qualia). But every subset of qualia is also a qualia, because, again, there’s something it is like to experience that particular subset. At the lowest level, you have singular, non-decomposable qualia like the redness of the pen in your hand, the sweetness of the candy in your mouth, the itch in your pinky finger etc. These are qualia, too.

- Analogy: every coin you have is money, but every combination of coins is also money and at the top level, all the coins and bills you have are also money.
Keep your qualia apart!

- Example: you have a qualia of redness when perceiving an external red object (e.g. a rose)
- In addition, there may very well also be other qualia associated with perceiving the stimulus. E.g. Seeing red may evoke an emotion of being energized, and this may happen as quickly as the experience of redness. It can even be that some qualia (e.g. an emotional state of happiness or sadness) influences the redeness qualia we get from a certain physical stimulus.
- It’s just important to keep the qualia distinct: the redness is a sensory qualia tied to some physical property of the stimulus, the feeling of being energized is an additional qualia that is internally generated