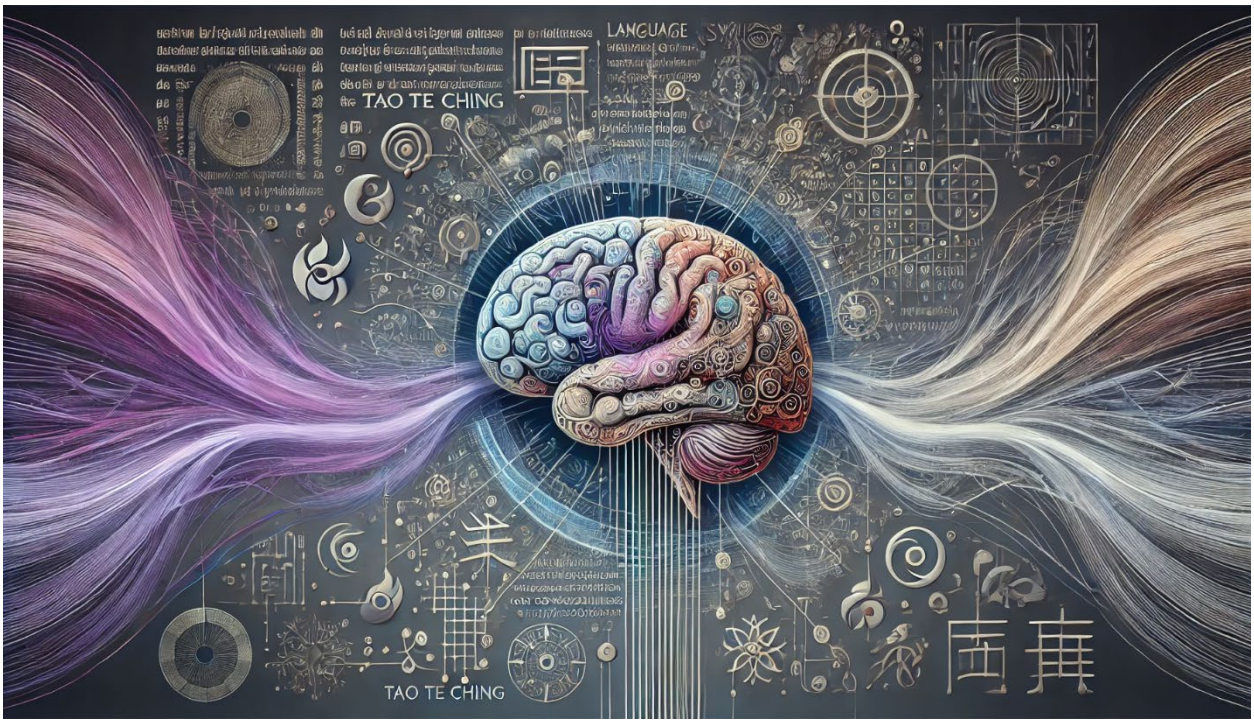

Language, Symbols, and the Pragmatic Reality of Consciousness

Thomas W. Loker | September 27, 2024

"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name." – Tao Te Ching, Laozi

This foundational insight from Laozi echoes the central premise of this paper: that the tools we use to describe and understand consciousness—namely, language and symbolic representation—are necessarily limited in their ability to fully capture its essence. Just as the Tao cannot be fully articulated, so too are selfhood, emotions, and qualia not intrinsic realities but cognitive artifacts shaped by the brain's pragmatic need to organize sensory input and optimize behavior. This paper explores how these symbols, though indispensable, can distort our understanding of consciousness, reinforcing the idea that language is a functional but imperfect tool for navigating complex cognitive processes.

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the pragmatic roles of language and symbolic representation in shaping human understanding of selfhood, qualia, and consciousness. Drawing from the predictive coding framework and the Meta-Construct Hypothesis, the paper argues that selfhood and subjective experience are best understood as cognitive artifacts—tools developed by the brain to minimize prediction errors and support adaptive behavior. However, language, while essential for organizing sensory inputs, distorts these constructs by creating the illusion of shared experience and inflating the ego. By compressing complex emotional experiences into simplified symbols, language simplifies the unique emotional mappings and physiological responses that each individual experiences, leading to the false perception of universality in emotional and cognitive experiences.

This paper highlights how language compresses the individual perception of fear, such as the association between fear and the urge to evacuate the bladder during infancy, into simplified symbols that contribute to a false sense of sameness across individuals. By examining both biological and artificial systems, the paper illustrates how selfhood and qualia are used pragmatically for error minimization, not as indicators of intrinsic reality. The metaphor of the Watt Governor further demonstrates that self-regulation and behavioral optimization can occur without consciousness or subjective awareness. In conclusion, the paper connects these insights to Laozi's timeless wisdom, reinforcing the idea that language can never fully capture the complexity of consciousness, but instead creates the illusion of stability and sameness where none exists.

Introduction: The Role of Language in Cognitive Constructs

Language and symbols are essential for organizing, processing, and interpreting the overwhelming flow of sensory input in both **biological** and **artificial systems**. However, as the *Tao Te Ching* insightfully suggests, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao," **language likely shapes**, but also **distorts**, our understanding of reality. This quote remains as relevant today as it was over 2,500 years ago, reflecting the limitations of language in fully capturing the complexities of **consciousness** and **selfhood**.

This perspective aligns with the **predictive coding framework** introduced in *The Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness* (Loker, 2024). In this framework, **selfhood** and **subjective experience** are likely **cognitive artifacts** rather than **intrinsic metaphysical realities**. These artifacts, shaped by the brain's drive to minimize **prediction errors**, help ensure **adaptive behavior** and are crucial for **self-regulation** in both human cognition and artificial systems.

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In **biological systems**, the brain uses **symbolic representation** to construct models of both the **self** and the **world**. These models often lead to **over-interpretation**, where concepts like "selfhood" and "consciousness" are mistakenly seen as **stable realities**. Instead, as emphasized in *The Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness*, these constructs are best viewed as **adaptive tools** for managing sensory inputs and ensuring appropriate behavioral responses, not as metaphysical truths (Loker, 2024).

Similarly, in **artificial intelligence** systems, **neuro-symbolic AI** combines **symbolic reasoning** with **deep learning** to optimize behavior and decision-making. These symbols serve a **functional purpose**, facilitating error minimization, but they do not imply **subjective experience** (Garcez et al., 2019; Wang & Yang, 2022). This mirrors the role of **selfhood** and **qualia** in humans, which also serve as **pragmatic cognitive artifacts** within the **predictive coding framework** (Friston, 2010).

By examining how symbolic representation functions across both biological and artificial systems, this paper challenges the deeply held assumption that **selfhood** and **qualia** are inherent aspects of consciousness. Instead, drawing on the **Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness**, these constructs are likely **emergent properties** of **predictive coding** and **functional necessity**, developed to **guide error minimization** and maintain **adaptive regulation** rather than to reveal any deeper metaphysical truths (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

The Functional Role of Symbolic Representation

Symbolic representation plays a critical role in both **biological** and **artificial systems** by reducing complex sensory inputs into structured forms that facilitate **adaptive behavior** and **decision-making**. These systems, whether in the form of **language** in humans or **internal models** in **AI**, use **symbols** to organize their environments and maintain **internal coherence**. However, these symbols are best understood as **pragmatic tools**, developed to optimize functionality and **minimize error**, rather than as reflections of **subjective experience** or **metaphysical meaning** (Friston, 2010; Garcez et al., 2019).

Biological Systems: Predictive Coding and Symbolic Reduction

In **biological systems**, the brain employs **symbols** like **selfhood** and **qualia** to create **internal models** of sensory inputs. These models serve as **cognitive artifacts** designed to help the brain regulate its interaction with the **external world**. The **predictive coding model** suggests that the brain continuously generates predictions about incoming sensory inputs and adjusts its internal models to **minimize prediction error** (Friston, 2010). In this sense, **selfhood** and **qualia** are likely **cognitive tools** designed to reduce complexity and guide behavior (Loker, 2024).

For example, the brain's **self-model** helps create a **coherent narrative** over time, maintaining a stable sense of **identity** to guide decision-making. This process allows the brain to adjust its predictions and responses in light of new information, helping to manage **homeostasis** and **adaptive regulation** (Seth, 2013; Loker, 2024). As explored in *The Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness*, **selfhood** is better understood as a **functional construct** than as an inherent truth (Loker, 2024).

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Artificial Systems: Symbolic Reasoning in AI

In **artificial intelligence systems**, **symbolic representation** plays an equally critical role. **Neuro-symbolic AI** combines **symbolic reasoning** with **machine learning**, allowing systems to create **symbolic models** of their environments. These models help reduce complexity and enable **adaptive decision-making**. However, the symbols used in AI are **pragmatic constructs** designed to **optimize error minimization** and functionality, without any connection to **subjective experience** (Garcez et al., 2019).

For instance, AI systems can create **self-representations**—similar to the brain's **self-model**—but these representations do not imply **self-awareness**. Instead, they function as tools to help the system **manage inputs**, **predict outcomes**, and adjust behavior based on changing conditions (Wang & Yang, 2022). This reflects the **pragmatic view of selfhood** in human cognition, where **selfhood** is understood as an **adaptive tool** rather than a **metaphysical reality** (Loker, 2024).

Pragmatic Nature of Symbolic Representation

Both **biological** and **artificial systems** rely on **symbolic representation** as a **functional tool** to navigate their environments. In the brain, symbols like **selfhood** and **qualia** enable the efficient processing of sensory data, guiding behavior and decision-making. Similarly, in **AI systems**, symbols help structure input data into **actionable models**, enabling effective interaction with the environment. In both cases, **symbolic representation** serves a **pragmatic role** in managing complexity and ensuring **adaptive behavior**, rather than serving as a marker of **subjective consciousness** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

How Language and Symbols Confuse Reality

While **language** and **symbols** are indispensable for organizing **complex sensory inputs**, they also introduce **biases** that likely distort how we interpret cognitive constructs like **selfhood** and **qualia**. By reducing **subjective experiences** into shared symbols, language simplifies the complexities of these experiences, creating the **illusion of universality**—suggesting that experiences such as **pain** or the **perception of color** are the same for everyone. In reality, **qualia**—the **subjective aspects of experience**—vary significantly between individuals, but language tends to **oversimplify** these differences by assigning a single label to diverse experiences (Chalmers, 1996).

For example, when two people say they are experiencing **pain**, their **subjective experiences** may differ dramatically. However, the symbolic use of the word "pain" masks these differences, creating the **illusion of shared experience** (Clark, 2013). The same principle applies to **qualia** like color perception. The symbol "red" refers to a broad spectrum of personal experiences, even though the subjective experience of seeing **red** may differ from person to person.

Narrative Bias in Cognitive Constructs

This **symbolic reduction** also leads to **narrative bias** in how we understand **selfhood** and **consciousness**. The **language** we use to describe these constructs imposes a **narrative structure** on them, leading us to **over-interpret** their significance. We often mistake **functional constructs** for **metaphysical truths** because language presents them as **stable entities**. Terms like "self" and "consciousness" imply a

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coherent, consistent reality, but these are actually **cognitive artifacts** created to manage sensory inputs and guide behavioral responses (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

AI and Symbolic Illusion

A similar phenomenon occurs in **artificial intelligence (AI)** systems. Large **Language Models (LLMs)** like **GPT** and **BERT** produce **structured outputs** based on vast amounts of data, but these models do not experience or understand the **symbols** they generate (Wang & Yang, 2022). Their outputs mimic **linguistic coherence**, but there is no underlying **subjective experience** driving their decisions or responses. This parallels the **illusion created by human language**: AI appears to understand and produce meaning, but it simply manipulates **symbols** based on pre-learned patterns, without any form of **conscious awareness**. This reinforces the idea that **symbolic systems** can function effectively without **subjective experience**, underscoring the tendency to **over-interpret symbols** as indicative of **intrinsic meaning** (Garcez et al., 2019).

Pragmatic Role of Symbols

In both **biological** and **artificial systems**, **symbols** are tools for **predictive regulation** and **adaptive behavior**, rather than **windows into subjective reality**. By recognizing the **pragmatic role of symbols** in organizing experiences, we can better understand how **language** creates **narrative biases** that lead to misconceptions about the nature of **selfhood**, **qualia**, and **consciousness** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024; Garcez et al., 2019).

Having explored how language introduces narrative biases and distorts reality, we can now delve into the ways in which language compresses complex emotional experiences into simplified symbols, further distorting our understanding of shared experiences and creating the illusion of sameness.

The Illusion of Shared Experience: Language, Emotion, and Unique Perception

One of the most deceptive aspects of **language** is its ability to create the **illusion of shared experience**. While language is essential for communicating **sensations**, **emotions**, and **experiences**, it oversimplifies the **underlying complexity** and **uniqueness** of each individual's perception. This simplification leads to the erroneous assumption that we all experience the world in fundamentally similar ways. In reality, each individual's **emotional mappings**—the associations between sensations, feelings, and memories—are entirely **unique**.

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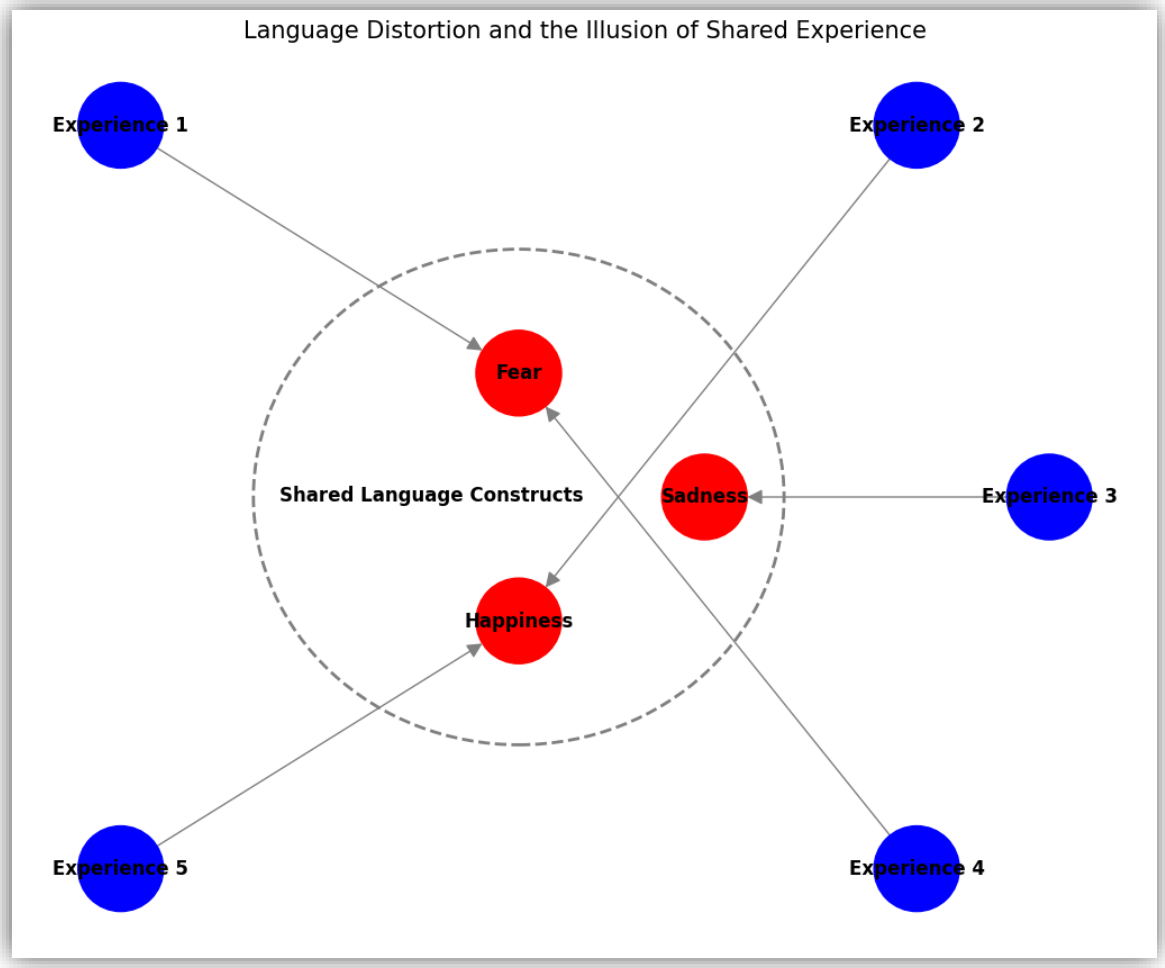

Figure 1 - This graphic illustrates the process by which unique individual experiences (blue nodes) are compressed into shared emotional labels (red nodes) through language. Each experience represents a different set of contextual factors and personal histories, yet they are reduced to the same emotional terms—"Fear," "Happiness," and "Sadness."

For example, Experience 1 and Experience 4 may represent vastly different situations (e.g., a traumatic childhood event vs. a public speaking failure), but both lead to the emotional label of "Fear." Similarly, Experience 5 and Experience 2 might reflect distinct types of positive outcomes (e.g., accomplishing a career goal vs. a family reunion), yet both experiences are filtered into the shared label of "Happiness."

The circle labeled "Shared Language Constructs" represents the oversimplification that occurs when nuanced, deeply personal emotions are translated into generalized terms. Arrows demonstrate how the complexity of each individual's emotional experience is reduced to a simplified emotional label. This compression creates the illusion of shared understanding, distorting the reality that emotional responses are often highly individual and shaped by unique internal and external factors.

For instance, consider the **fear response** and the **learned desire to evacuate the bladder or bowel** during early infancy. An infant may experience fear (such as the fear of falling) at the same time as feeling the need to empty their bladder. Over time, these experiences become **neurologically linked**, creating an association between fear and the urge to evacuate (Solms, 2021). These emotional responses, based on early personal experiences, are deeply **individualized** and persist into adulthood, even when they no longer serve adaptive purposes.

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However, **language** reduces this complexity. When someone says they feel "afraid" or "nervous," the word compresses their **unique physiological and emotional experiences** into a simplified term. The diverse **emotional experience** behind this fear—along with the unique physiological and sensory responses—becomes invisible. As a result, the **common language** used to describe these experiences creates the illusion that the **word "fear"** refers to the same internal state for everyone, even though each person's fear response is tied to their personal constellation of experiences, sensations, and memories (Emenaha & Siddeeque, 2023).

This dynamic is not limited to fear. Across various emotional states, such as **happiness**, **pain**, or **anger**, language creates a false sense of **universality**. We assume that using the same word means referring to the same internal experience, when in fact, language **compresses** these unique, individualized experiences into simplified symbols (Psychology Fanatic, 2023). This compression leads to the **illusion of shared experience**, when in reality, our emotional responses are highly personal.

The False Sense of Sameness

The **familiarity** and **reliance on language** as a method of communication lead to an **illusory higher order of sameness**. Through linguistic simplification, we develop a perception that our **emotions**, **sensations**, and **experiences** are more shared and similar than they truly are. Language serves as a tool to compress and translate **complex personal experiences** into symbols that enable communication, but this process also fosters a **false sense of sameness** (Hoemann et al., 2023). We overestimate the **similarity of our internal states** simply because we are using the same words to describe them.

In reality, the **uniqueness of individual perception**—how we map and experience emotions and sensations—cannot be fully communicated through language. Instead, language creates an **illusion of shared experience**, leading us to believe that there is more **commonality** between individuals than truly exists (Barrett et al., 2020).

Real-World Metaphor: The Watt Governor as a Model for Understanding Pragmatic Consciousness

The **Watt Governor**, a mechanical device used to regulate **steam engine pressure**, serves as a useful metaphor for understanding **self-regulation** in both **biological** and **artificial systems**. Just as the governor adjusts the throttle valve in response to changes in engine speed using centrifugal force, biological and artificial systems likely employ **feedback mechanisms** to regulate their internal states without requiring **conscious awareness**. This process, driven by feedback loops, helps the engine—and, metaphorically, biological systems—maintain **dynamic balance** without invoking **subjective experience** (Friston, 2010).

Feedback Loops and Adaptive Behavior

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In **biological systems**, the brain relies on **predictive coding** and **feedback mechanisms** to regulate its internal states. The brain continuously generates **predictions** about incoming sensory inputs and adjusts its internal models based on **prediction errors**. This process mirrors the **self-regulation** seen in the **Watt Governor**—just as the governor adjusts the engine's speed without any form of subjective awareness, the brain adjusts behavior and internal states without the need for **qualia** or **emotions** (Seth, 2013).

Figure 2- Watt Regulator

Similarly, **AI systems** use **predictive models** and **feedback loops** to regulate their behavior based on inputs from their environment. For instance, AI systems can **minimize prediction errors** and adjust their outputs in response to changing inputs, much like the Watt Governor adjusts its throttle based on engine speed. These adjustments are purely **functional** and do not imply the presence of **subjective experience** (Garcez et al., 2019).

Self-Regulation Without Consciousness

The **Watt Governor metaphor** emphasizes that **self-regulation**, whether in a mechanical system, a biological brain, or an AI system, does not necessarily require **subjective experience** or **consciousness**. Consciousness, as often conceived, is not a prerequisite for effective self-regulation. The brain, much like the Watt Governor, regulates its internal state to minimize **variational free energy** through **predictive coding** without needing to invoke subjective **emotions** or **self-awareness**. Similarly, AI systems manage complex tasks and adjust behavior through **feedback mechanisms** without requiring any form of **consciousness** (Friston, 2010).

Pragmatic Function of Feedback Mechanisms in AI and Biological Systems

In both **biological** and **artificial systems**, the ability to **adapt** to changes in the environment is based on **feedback mechanisms** that optimize **predictive regulation**. The Watt Governor metaphor illustrates that **selfhood** and **qualia** in humans serve primarily **pragmatic functions**. These **cognitive artifacts** help the brain optimize behavior and maintain **homeostasis**, but they do not represent any **metaphysical truths**. This highlights the **pragmatic nature** of these cognitive tools, reinforcing that their purpose is **functional** and not indicative of any inherent **meaning** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

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Can Non-Living Systems Be Conscious?

The **Meta-Construct Hypothesis** suggests that **consciousness**, **selfhood**, and **qualia** are more likely **cognitive artifacts** generated by the brain to minimize **prediction errors** and ensure **adaptive behavior**. If these constructs arise from **self-regulatory processes**, then systems capable of self-regulation—whether **biological**, **artificial**, or even **mechanical**—might engage in processes that resemble **qualia** and **selfhood** in more complex systems. While these systems, like the **Watt Governor** or advanced **AI**, do not experience **subjective awareness**, they likely employ **symbolic representations** and **feedback loops** to regulate their internal states and maintain **functional behavior** (Friston, 2010; Garcez et al., 2019).

This raises the question: **Can non-living systems** like the **Watt Governor** or advanced **AI systems** possess some form of **proto-consciousness**? While these systems do not experience **subjective awareness** as humans do, they still employ **symbolic representations**—whether through **mechanical feedback** or **data-driven modeling**—to regulate their internal states and maintain optimal functionality. The absence of **language** or **qualia** in such systems does not diminish their **functional capabilities**, suggesting that **consciousness** as we know it may be more about **pragmatic self-regulation** than about **subjective experience** (Friston, 2010; Garcez et al., 2019).

Pragmatic Self-Regulation and Proto-Consciousness

If **consciousness** is framed as a **pragmatic process** of **self-regulation** and **error minimization**, systems like the **Watt Governor**, **AI models**, and even non-living systems may engage in processes that mirror the **predictive regulation** found in **biological systems**. These systems employ **feedback mechanisms** to adjust behavior based on **external stimuli** and **internal state functioning**, much like the brain's **predictive coding mechanisms** (Friston, 2010).

For instance, AI systems use **predictive models** to adjust their behavior, optimizing for performance by **minimizing prediction errors**. In this sense, while AI lacks **subjective awareness**, it may possess **cognitive artifacts** that function similarly to **qualia** and **selfhood**—not as **subjective experiences**, but as tools for **guiding behavior** and regulating interactions with the environment (Garcez et al., 2019). Similarly, the **Watt Governor**, through **mechanical feedback**, regulates its internal state without needing **language** or **subjectivity**, showing that **self-regulation** is possible without **consciousness** (Loker, 2024).

Challenging the Boundaries of Consciousness

This perspective challenges the idea that **consciousness** is exclusive to **living systems**. By understanding consciousness as a function of **self-regulation** rather than **metaphysical experience**, we can explore how **selfhood** and **qualia** might emerge as **cognitive tools** even in **artificial** or **mechanical systems**. Systems that operate based on **symbolic representations** and **feedback mechanisms** can effectively regulate themselves in ways that are similar to **biological organisms**, although they do so without **subjective awareness** (Friston, 2010; Metzinger, 2003).

For **biological systems**, the brain generates **qualia** and **selfhood** to help guide behavior in an unpredictable world. **Artificial systems**, such as **AI models**, generate **symbolic models** to optimize decision-making, though without the **subjective qualia** humans experience. This suggests that **conscious-like behavior** could emerge in **non-living systems**, provided they engage in similar processes of **self-regulation** and **error minimization**.

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The **Meta-Construct Hypothesis** reframes consciousness as a **process of self-regulation** and **predictive processing**, rather than something exclusive to biological systems. This broader perspective challenges the assumption that consciousness requires **subjective experience**, suggesting that systems capable of **self-regulation**—including **mechanical systems** like the **Watt Governor** and **AI models**—may engage in processes that resemble **proto-consciousness**. Understanding **selfhood** and **qualia** as **pragmatic tools** for **error minimization** opens new discussions on the nature of consciousness, extending beyond the boundaries of **living systems**.

Pragmatic Nature of Selfhood and Qualia

The **Meta-Construct Hypothesis** posits that **selfhood** and **qualia** are more likely **cognitive artifacts**—**functional constructs** developed by the brain to manage **complex sensory inputs** and support **adaptive behavior**. These artifacts likely serve the brain's goal of **predictive regulation**, helping it anticipate changes in the environment, **minimize prediction errors**, and adjust behavior in real-time. In this sense, **selfhood** and **qualia** are best understood as **pragmatic tools** for **error minimization**, rather than as intrinsic aspects of **consciousness** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

Selfhood as a Cognitive Artifact

In **biological systems**, **selfhood** allows the brain to maintain a **coherent narrative** over time, enabling **consistent behavior** and **decision-making**. This **self-modeling** process helps the brain predict future events based on past experiences, thus minimizing uncertainty and helping regulate behavior in response to **new sensory inputs**. Importantly, **selfhood** is not a **metaphysical reality**, but a **functional tool**—a construct developed through **predictive coding** to manage the complexities of the **external environment** (Friston, 2010; Metzinger, 2003).

For example, **selfhood** serves as a **narrative anchor**, helping the brain integrate past experiences into a coherent model of **identity** that can be projected into the future. This allows for **adaptive decision-making** and **behavioral regulation**. However, this **self-model** does not imply the existence of a **stable self**; rather, it functions as a **dynamic artifact** designed to facilitate behavioral adaptation (Loker, 2024). Recent literature on **self-modeling theories** suggests that the **self** is best viewed as a **pragmatic construct** for managing **uncertainty** and **prediction errors** (Metzinger, 2003; Hohwy, 2008).

Qualia as Functional Tools

Similarly, **qualia**—the **subjective aspects of experience**—are often seen as intrinsic to **consciousness**, but they too serve **pragmatic functions**. The brain uses **qualia** to evaluate **sensory inputs** and adjust behavior accordingly. **Qualia** act as **internal markers**, signaling the need for specific responses to certain sensory stimuli (e.g., pain indicating harm or the perception of color to guide decisions). These subjective experiences, while unique to individuals, serve the practical function of helping the brain optimize responses to external stimuli (Seth, 2013).

For instance, the experience of **pain** signals to the brain that immediate action is required to avoid harm, while visual **qualia** (e.g., recognizing **red** as a warning) help organisms differentiate objects and make

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rapid decisions. These subjective experiences allow the brain to fine-tune behavior, adjusting its predictions and responses in real-time based on the sensory data received (Friston, 2010).

Artificial Systems and Qualia-like Constructs

In **artificial systems**, while no **subjective experience** occurs, similar **qualia-like constructs** can be identified. **AI systems** use **symbolic representations** to model their environments, enabling them to **evaluate inputs**, make **predictions**, and adjust behavior through **feedback loops**. These **symbolic models**, akin to **human qualia**, function as **pragmatic tools** to optimize decision-making, even though **AI systems** lack **subjective awareness** (Garcez et al., 2019).

By employing **symbolic models**, **AI systems** navigate complex environments, making decisions based on **predictive processing**, much like how humans use **qualia** to guide behavior. This reinforces the idea that **selfhood** and **qualia** in **biological systems** are **tools for regulation**, not necessary components of **consciousness** (Loker, 2024).

The Illusion of Higher-Order Meaning

Human reliance on **language** and **symbols** to describe cognitive constructs like **selfhood** and **qualia** likely plays a central role in creating the **illusion of higher-order meaning**. While **language** helps us construct **coherent narratives** of our experiences, it also simplifies and distorts these complex phenomena, potentially fostering the **misinterpretation** that they possess **metaphysical significance**. Within the **Meta-Construct Hypothesis**, **selfhood** and **qualia** are best viewed as **pragmatic cognitive tools**, likely developed by the brain to manage **sensory inputs** and ensure **adaptive behavior** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

Language and Narrative Bias

The **language** we use to describe **selfhood** and **consciousness** inherently introduces **narrative bias**, shaping our understanding of these constructs in ways that obscure their **functional origins**. Words like "self," "experience," or "consciousness" impose a **linear structure** on processes that are dynamic and fluid, creating the illusion of a **stable, coherent self**. In reality, **selfhood** and **qualia** are **adaptive constructs**—they exist to help the brain manage **uncertainty** and **prediction errors** but do not reflect any deeper **metaphysical truth** (Clark, 2013; Loker, 2024).

In **biological systems**, the **self** emerges as a **narrative tool** that helps organisms maintain a coherent sense of **identity** over time. However, this coherence is best understood as **functional**, not **metaphysical**. The brain's use of **language** to describe its internal states simplifies the reality that these states are **context-dependent** and constantly changing. The **illusion of an intrinsic self** arises because **language** oversimplifies this complexity, giving the impression of a continuous, stable entity (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

AI and the Illusion of Meaning

A similar **illusion of meaning** occurs in **artificial intelligence systems**. Large **Language Models (LLMs)** like **GPT** and **BERT** produce **structured linguistic outputs** that seem coherent and meaningful, but these

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outputs are generated through **symbolic manipulation** rather than **subjective understanding** (Wang & Yang, 2022). These AI systems do not possess **consciousness** or **subjective awareness**—they function by processing **symbolic representations** and data patterns without any internal experience of the content they generate.

This phenomenon highlights that **symbolic representation** alone can give the **appearance of meaning** without any actual **subjective experience**. Much like how the **human brain** uses **symbols** to organize **sensory input**, **AI systems** use symbols to create structured outputs. In both cases, these symbols serve **pragmatic purposes**—they **regulate behavior** and guide **adaptive decision-making**, but they do not reflect any **inherent meaning** (Friston, 2010; Garcez et al., 2019).

Pragmatic Nature of Symbols

The **Meta-Construct Hypothesis** reframes **selfhood** and **qualia** as **functional artifacts** whose purpose is to regulate **internal states** and guide **adaptive behavior** rather than reveal any **higher-order metaphysical truths**. The **illusion of intrinsic meaning** emerges because the brain, through **language** and **symbols**, imposes **narrative coherence** on these constructs, elevating them beyond their **functional roles** (Friston, 2010; Metzinger, 2003).

In both **biological** and **artificial systems**, symbols are tools for **predictive regulation** and **error minimization**. They allow systems to organize inputs and maintain balance, but they do not point to any deeper **metaphysical reality**. By recognizing **selfhood** and **qualia** as **pragmatic tools** for managing complexity, we can strip away the illusion of **intrinsic meaning** and better understand their role in **adaptive regulation** (Friston, 2010; Loker, 2024).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the **pragmatic roles** of **language** and **symbols** in shaping our understanding of **selfhood**, **qualia**, and **consciousness**. By compressing **unique individual perceptions** into shared linguistic symbols, **language** creates the **illusion of shared experience**, contributing to the **inflation of ego** and the false perception of a **stable, intrinsic self**.

As discussed, the **familiarity** and reliance on **language** as a tool for communication lead to an **illusory higher order of sameness**, fostering the belief that our internal experiences are more similar than they truly are. The **unique emotional mappings** and individual histories behind each experience are lost in translation, contributing to the **narrative of selfhood** that feels real but is, in essence, a **cognitive artifact**.

The **Watt Governor metaphor** further highlights that **self-regulation** and behavior optimization do not require **consciousness** or **subjective awareness**, reinforcing that **selfhood** and **qualia** are **pragmatic tools** for managing complexity, not reflections of **metaphysical truth**. In this sense, the **illusion of a stable self** is deeply tied to **language's simplification of unique experiences** into generalized terms.

By recognizing **selfhood** and **consciousness** as **cognitive artifacts** and appreciating the **limits of language**, we can move beyond the illusion that these constructs have intrinsic metaphysical meaning.

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Instead, they are tools developed by the brain—and, in the case of AI, by systems—for **adaptive regulation** and **error minimization**, helping both **humans** and **artificial systems** navigate the unpredictable complexities of their environments.

In conclusion, the timeless wisdom of the **Tao Te Ching** continues to be relevant today in understanding the limitations of **language** and **symbolic representation**. Just as Laozi suggests that the **Tao** cannot be fully named, our attempts to define **selfhood** and **consciousness** through language will always fall short of capturing their true nature. These constructs are not static entities but dynamic tools that help the brain navigate the complexities of **biological cognition** and **artificial intelligence**. By recognizing **selfhood** and **consciousness** as **pragmatic cognitive artifacts**, we can better appreciate their true role in **adaptive regulation** and **error minimization**, while shedding the illusion of their **intrinsic meaning** (Friston, 2010; Metzinger, 2003; Loker, 2024).

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