

The Value of Consciousness



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Axel Cleeremans (Ph.D. 1991, CMU) is a Research Director with the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (F.R.S.-FNRS) and a professor of Cognitive Psychology at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB, Belgium), where he heads the Consciousness, Cognition and Computation (CO3) Group and directs the Center for Research in Cognition & Neurosciences. His research is essentially dedicated to understanding the mechanisms of consciousness. To explore these issues, Cleeremans has obtained two advanced grants from the European Research Council, the first (2014-2019) dedicated to the "how" of consciousness (its mechanisms), the second (2022-2027) dedicated to the "why" of consciousness (its functions).

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Event Details

Date: 31 Mar., 2026

Time: 9: 00 am (ET)

Location: Zoom



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ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years or so, cognitive neuroscience has made spectacular progress understanding the biological mechanisms of consciousness. Consciousness science was not only inexistent thirty years ago, but its very name seemed like an oxymoron: how can there be a science of consciousness? And yet, despite this scepticism, the study of consciousness is now thriving. This is all promising, but we also seem to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, or at least to have forgotten it in the crib: consciousness is not just mechanisms, it's what it feels like. In other words, while we have thousands of informative studies about what consciousness enables us to do, we have little in the way of what it feels like. But understanding why it feels like something to be me and nothing for a stone to be a stone is what the field has always been after. Here, I first overview work on what consciousness does (the "how"). Next, I ask what difference feeling things make and what function phenomenology might play (the "why"). I argue that subjective experience has intrinsic value and plays a functional role in everything that we do.