

From It to Bit to Chit: Toward a Layered Ontology of Reality and Consciousness

Dr. Sarat Chandra Bibhar
Department of Philosophy, Janki Devi Memorial College,
University of Delhi
Email-sarat@jdm.du.ac.in

Abstract

This article develops an original philosophical framework for thinking about the relation among physical reality, information, virtuality, and consciousness. It begins from John Wheeler's celebrated formulation "it from bit" and David J. Chalmers's extension of the idea into his account of virtual realism in *Reality+* (2022). Chalmers argues that virtual objects and environments can be genuinely real when they are appropriately constituted by digital processes. Yet an informational or computational account of reality does not by itself settle the question of phenomenal consciousness. The article therefore proposes a further conceptual movement from "bit" to "chit": from informational structure to lived experience. The expression "It from Bit from Chit" is introduced not as an established scientific doctrine, nor as a claim that Chalmers, Wheeler, or Advaita Vedānta already endorse such a formula, but as a heuristic for identifying an unresolved ontological and explanatory transition. Drawing on Chalmers's hard-problem argument, Zahavi's phenomenological account of intentionality and first-person givenness, and selected Advaita Vedānta resources, the article argues for a layered ontology in which physical realization, informational organization, and phenomenal manifestation are distinguishable but related dimensions. The central claim is modest but significant: information may explain how a system is organized, processed, and functionally related to an environment without thereby explaining why there is experience for the system at all. The proposed framework therefore does not replace physical or informational explanation; it asks whether such explanations are phenomenologically complete. The paper concludes that "It from Bit from Chit" is best understood as a research programme for investigating whether consciousness should be treated merely as an outcome to be explained by informational organization or as a fundamental dimension that any complete ontology of reality must accommodate.

Keywords: consciousness; information; virtual realism; phenomenology; first-person perspective; Chalmers; Zahavi; Advaita Vedānta; it from bit; chit

1. Introduction: From Reality to Consciousness

Contemporary philosophy of mind is confronted by a peculiar asymmetry. On the one hand, increasingly sophisticated accounts of physical systems, computation, information, representation, and virtual environments have made it possible to describe reality at levels that were unavailable to earlier philosophical theories. On the other hand, the existence of conscious experience remains resistant to straightforward reduction. We can increasingly explain what organisms and artificial systems do, how information is transmitted and transformed, and how complex environments can be generated by digital processes. Yet the question of why any of these processes should be accompanied by experience remains open. This tension becomes particularly visible when the philosophy of virtual reality is connected with the philosophy of consciousness.

David J. Chalmers's Reality+ provides an important contemporary setting for this issue. Chalmers argues that virtual objects can be real objects and that virtual worlds need not be understood merely as deceptive appearances or ontologically inferior copies of a supposedly more genuine physical world. His virtual realism is closely connected with an informational picture: a virtual world is implemented by digital processes, but the fact that something is digitally implemented does not automatically make it unreal. Chalmers explicitly describes simulation as an "it-from-bit" world in which real objects are constituted by digital processes (Chalmers, 2022). His argument therefore challenges a simple opposition between physical reality and virtual illusion. The relevant question becomes not whether virtual objects are made of the same material as ordinary physical objects, but whether they possess the appropriate structural and causal organization to count as real.

This informational turn has an important philosophical precedent in John Archibald Wheeler's phrase "it from bit." Wheeler used the expression to indicate a deep connection between physical reality and information. The phrase should not be treated as a single, uncontroversial scientific thesis. It names a family of ideas concerning the possibility that physical reality is fundamentally connected with information, measurement, distinction, and the registration of alternatives. Chalmers's virtual realism gives the idea a new philosophical application: if a virtual object has the right digital structure and causal relations, its digital basis does not disqualify it from reality.

The present article asks what happens if the informational question is followed one step further. Suppose that reality can, in an important sense, be described in terms of informational structure. What about consciousness? Is phenomenal consciousness simply another informational structure? Or does the existence of conscious experience introduce a distinct explanatory dimension? The article proposes that this question can be expressed heuristically through the movement from "It" to "Bit" to "Chit."

Here "It" refers broadly to physical or worldly realization; "Bit" refers to informational organization, distinction, representation, and computation; and "Chit" refers to consciousness understood as phenomenal awareness or lived experience. The three terms are deliberately schematic. They do not describe a literal temporal sequence in which matter first appears, information subsequently emerges, and consciousness is finally added. Nor do they constitute a scientifically established hierarchy. Instead, they mark three philosophical levels at which reality can be described.

The originality of the proposal lies in treating the transition from Bit to Chit as a philosophical threshold that deserves to be distinguished from the transition from It to Bit. The first transition concerns how physical reality may be understood in informational terms. The second concerns how informational organization is related to phenomenal presence. These are not obviously the same explanatory problem. A successful account of digital structure may show how a system processes information without showing why processing is accompanied by experience. Conversely, the recognition of experience does not by itself establish that consciousness is metaphysically fundamental.

The argument developed here therefore avoids two symmetrical overclaims. First, it does not infer that because information is fundamental to some descriptions of physical or virtual reality, consciousness must automatically be reducible to information. Second, it does not infer from the existence of the hard problem that consciousness must already be established as an independent substance. Instead, the paper develops a middle position: a layered ontology in which physical realization, informational organization, and phenomenal manifestation are conceptually distinguishable, while the metaphysical relation among them remains open.

The discussion proceeds in four main stages. The first examines the movement from physical reality to information through Wheeler and Chalmers. The second investigates the movement from information to consciousness through the hard problem and phenomenology. The third develops the proposed “It from Bit from Chit” framework and clarifies its status as a heuristic research programme. The fourth considers its implications for virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and comparative dialogue with Advaita Vedānta. The resulting proposal is not a new empirical theory of consciousness. It is an ontological and explanatory framework intended to clarify what a complete account of reality would have to explain.

2. From It to Bit: Reality as Information

The expression “it from bit” has acquired philosophical significance because it reverses an intuitive order of explanation. Ordinary realism begins with physical things and treats information as something that human beings extract from them. Wheeler’s formulation invites a different possibility: perhaps information is not merely a secondary description imposed by observers but is deeply connected with the constitution of physical reality itself. Wheeler’s 1990 essay connects the existence and meaning of physical entities with answers to yes-or-no questions and with the information generated by physical measurement. The phrase became influential precisely because it suggested that the distinction between matter and information might not be as straightforward as classical materialism assumes.

It is important, however, to avoid turning Wheeler’s slogan into a simple equation: reality = information. Wheeler’s argument is richer and more speculative. The phrase concerns the relationship between physical entities, information, measurement, and participatory observation. Later philosophical and scientific discussions have interpreted “it from bit” in different ways, and there is no single universally accepted informational ontology. The value of the phrase for the present argument is therefore methodological. It provides a way of asking whether the physical description of reality can be reformulated in terms of informational relations without abandoning realism.

Chalmers’s discussion of virtual reality gives this problem a particularly clear form. In Reality+, he argues that a simulated or virtual world can contain real objects, real events, and meaningful forms of life. The key point is that digital implementation does not entail unreality. A virtual table can be a real table within a virtual environment if it has the appropriate causal and structural relations. A virtual person can be a real person if the relevant conditions of identity and agency are satisfied. The virtual is therefore not simply the illusory.

This position has important consequences for the traditional contrast between appearance and reality. If a digital environment can instantiate genuine objects and relations, then ontology cannot be organized by a simple material/non-material distinction. What matters is the organization of the relevant processes. A virtual object may be physically realized in a computer but ontologically significant at a higher level of organization. The fact that the object is implemented by electronic states does not exhaust the description of what the object is.

The distinction between implementation and higher-level organization is central here. Consider a digital game. At one level there are electrical states, transistors, memory locations, and physical hardware. At another level there are rules, representations, virtual objects, agents, and events. The existence of the second level depends on the first, but descriptions at the second level are not thereby meaningless. One can legitimately say that a digital character moves, that a virtual environment contains objects, or that an agent performs an action, even though all of these events are implemented by physical processes.

This suggests a general principle: ontological dependence does not entail descriptive or explanatory identity. A virtual object may depend upon physical implementation without being identical, for every explanatory purpose, to the microphysical states that implement it. The same point can be extended to information. Information may be physically realized, but an informational description can capture relations that a purely microphysical description leaves implicit.

Yet this move creates a further question. If information can support higher-level descriptions of physical and virtual objects, can it also support a complete account of conscious experience? Here the analogy between virtual reality and consciousness becomes unstable. The fact that a virtual environment contains representations and information does not entail that there is something it is like to be that environment. Likewise, the fact that an organism or artificial system processes information does not by itself establish phenomenal awareness.

This is the point at which the slogan “it from bit” reaches a philosophical limit. It may help explain the structure or constitution of a world without explaining why that world is experienced. Information can be described objectively, measured, transmitted, encoded, transformed, and computationally manipulated. Conscious experience, however, includes an apparently irreducible first-personal dimension: seeing red, tasting coffee, feeling pain, hearing music, or experiencing anxiety is not merely a matter of information being processed. The philosophical issue is not whether information is involved in conscious life—it plainly is—but whether informational organization is sufficient to account for phenomenal presence.

Chalmers’s hard-problem argument gives this concern its most influential contemporary formulation. In “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” Chalmers distinguishes problems concerning the explanation of cognitive and behavioral capacities from the problem of explaining why these processes are accompanied by experience. He does not deny that consciousness has neural, functional, and computational correlates. His challenge concerns explanatory sufficiency. A

theory can explain discrimination, report, integration, attention, or behavioral control while still leaving open why these processes are accompanied by subjective experience.

The importance of this distinction becomes especially clear in the case of virtual reality. A virtual world may be ontologically real in Chalmers's sense while still raising a separate question about the consciousness of agents inhabiting it. If a virtual agent behaves intelligently, learns, communicates, and reports its own experiences, the informational description can become extraordinarily rich. Nevertheless, the philosophical question remains whether the agent has experience or merely exhibits the functional organization associated with experience. Virtual realism therefore does not dissolve the philosophy of consciousness. Instead, it sharpens it.

The result is a conceptual separation between two claims. The first is an ontological claim about the reality of virtual objects: digital implementation need not undermine reality. The second is a phenomenological claim about conscious experience: the presence of information processing does not obviously establish the presence of experience. These claims can both be accepted without contradiction.

The informational turn should therefore not be rejected. Rather, it should be placed within a layered account. Physical realization explains one dimension of a system; informational organization explains another. But if the system is conscious, there is also a phenomenal dimension that requires analysis. This is the transition from Bit to Chit.

3. From Bit to Chit: Information and the Reality of Experience

The central philosophical difficulty begins when we move from an objective description of information processing to the existence of phenomenal experience. Chalmers's hard problem is useful here because it identifies a difference between explaining capacities and explaining experience. His point is not that cognition is unimportant or that neural science cannot explain anything. Rather, the question is why a physical or functional process should be accompanied by a conscious point of view at all.

The distinction can be stated without assuming that Chalmers's own metaphysical conclusions are correct. Suppose we possessed a complete functional description of a system: we knew how it receives inputs, transforms information, stores representations, produces outputs, learns from the environment, and regulates its behaviour. We might still ask whether that description tells us why the system has an experience. If the answer is no, then the explanatory gap concerns the relation between functional organization and phenomenal manifestation.

This problem becomes especially significant when information is treated as ontologically basic. Information is relational. A bit is defined through distinctions between alternatives; computational information is characterized through states, transitions, rules, and transformations. None of this, considered by itself, contains the qualitative character of an experience. A description of the information carried by a red object does not automatically become an experience of red. A description of nociceptive processing does not automatically become the felt unpleasantness of pain.

This does not prove that phenomenal consciousness is non-physical, but it shows that informational description and phenomenological description are not obviously interchangeable.

Zahavi's phenomenological approach provides a different vocabulary for articulating this point. In his discussion of intentionality and phenomenality, Zahavi emphasizes that consciousness is not adequately understood by separating phenomenal character from intentional directedness as though they were two independently existing components. Conscious experience is ordinarily experience of something: a perceived object, a remembered event, an imagined possibility, a bodily sensation, or an emotion directed toward something significant. Phenomenality and intentionality are therefore deeply intertwined in lived experience (Zahavi, 2003).

This matters for the Bit–Chit problem because information is often characterized in third-personal terms, while phenomenology begins from the way experience is given. The contrast should not be exaggerated into a crude opposition between science and phenomenology. Phenomenology does not deny objective description. It asks a different question: what is the structure of experience as it is lived? Its method therefore draws attention to features that may disappear when consciousness is treated exclusively as information processing.

One such feature is first-personal givenness. To experience pain is not merely to instantiate a particular information state. The pain is given in a first-personal manner. The same physical event can be described from outside and lived from within. This distinction is not equivalent to saying that there is an independent Cartesian ego hidden behind the experience. Zahavi's phenomenological account of selfhood is precisely useful because it allows first-personality to be analyzed without committing oneself to a substantial, unchanging soul.

The notion of for-me-ness is especially relevant. Zahavi and Kriegel distinguish for-me-ness from stronger notions such as explicit self-awareness, ownership, or the ordinary sense of “mine” (Zahavi & Kriegel, 2016). An experience can be given in a first-personal manner without the subject explicitly representing itself as the owner of that experience. This distinction prevents a common philosophical mistake: identifying consciousness with reflective self-consciousness. Consciousness need not contain an explicit thought such as “I am now experiencing red” in order for the experience to be phenomenally present.

The distinction is also important for the proposed concept of Chit. If Chit is identified with consciousness, it should not be defined as a reflective ego or as a narrative self. It is better understood as the phenomenal dimension of awareness—the fact that there is lived experience. This allows the framework to remain compatible with phenomenological accounts of minimal selfhood while avoiding an immediate commitment to a substantial metaphysical self.

The contemporary discussion of selfhood reinforces this caution. The volume *Self, No Self?* brings analytic, phenomenological, and Indian approaches into dialogue around questions concerning subjectivity, reflexivity, and the existence or non-existence of a self. Zahavi's contribution argues for an experiential conception of selfhood while engaging objections from no-self positions (Zahavi,

2011). The broader lesson is that consciousness, subjectivity, self-awareness, ownership, and personal identity should not be collapsed into one concept.

This distinction also helps clarify the relation between consciousness and intentionality. Not every intentional state is conscious. Beliefs, dispositions, and informational representations can guide behaviour without being consciously entertained. Likewise, sophisticated systems can process information about objects without necessarily having an experience of those objects. Therefore the present argument does not claim that intentionality as such is equivalent to phenomenality. The claim is narrower: when intentionality is consciously lived, its phenomenality becomes part of what a complete explanation must account for.

This is where the “Bit to Chit” transition becomes philosophically significant. Information can capture a system’s relations to inputs, internal states, and outputs. It can also capture representational structure. But the question of consciousness concerns the presence of experience within such organization. A theory that explains all the functional relations while leaving the existence of experience untouched may be functionally comprehensive without being phenomenologically complete.

The phrase “phenomenological completeness” can therefore be introduced as a methodological constraint. It does not propose a new mechanism of consciousness. It says only that if a theory claims to provide a complete explanation of a consciously experienced state, it should account not only for what the state does but also for its mode of phenomenal givenness. This requirement can be applied to reductive physicalism, computational functionalism, higher-order theories, global-workspace theories, and non-reductive theories alike. It is a demand about the explanandum rather than a commitment to a particular metaphysics.

Blindsight illustrates why the distinction matters. A subject may process visual information and discriminate stimuli while lacking normal visual awareness. The case does not settle the metaphysics of consciousness, but it warns against identifying information processing with phenomenal consciousness. The functional availability of information and the phenomenological presence of an experience can come apart. Thus the existence of informational processing is not sufficient, by itself, to establish Chit.

Higher-order theories provide another useful test. Rosenthal’s higher-order thought theory explains consciousness in terms of a mental state becoming conscious when it is the target of an appropriate higher-order representation (Rosenthal, 2005). Such theories are serious alternatives to Chalmers’s position. The present framework does not reject them. Instead, it asks whether the higher-order relation explains the occurrence of phenomenality or merely specifies a functional condition under which a state counts as conscious. If the higher-order representation itself is unconscious, one still needs an account of why the relevant relation produces phenomenal awareness; if it is conscious, the explanatory question may recur at another level. The point is not that the theory fails, but that the Bit–Chit distinction identifies precisely what must be explained.

The distinction between for-me-ness, me-ness, and mineness further strengthens this analysis. Zahavi and Kriegel argue that these concepts should not be treated as interchangeable, and later discussion has emphasized that there is no simple conceptual implication from for-me-ness to explicit self-identification or ownership. This allows the present account to avoid an unnecessary metaphysical leap from consciousness to a substantial self. Chit is therefore not synonymous with “a permanent individual soul.” It refers to phenomenal awareness as such.

At this stage, a cautious conclusion emerges. Information is indispensable for describing many of the structures through which consciousness is realized or expressed. But the existence of information is not identical with the existence of experience. The difference is not a proof of dualism; it is a reason to keep the explanatory categories distinct. “Bit” tells us something about organization. “Chit” names the problem of phenomenal presence. The philosophical task is to determine their relation.

4. From It from Bit to It from Bit from Chit: Toward a Layered Ontology

The previous discussion allows the central proposal to be formulated more precisely. “It from Bit from Chit” is not intended as a new cosmological slogan competing with Wheeler’s “it from bit.” It is a philosophical heuristic designed to expose an explanatory discontinuity. If “it from bit” asks how physical reality can be understood in informational terms, “bit from chit” asks whether information is sufficient to account for the reality of conscious experience.

The three terms can now be interpreted as three ontological-explanatory layers. “It” designates physical realization: the concrete processes, causal interactions, embodied systems, and material conditions in which a phenomenon occurs. “Bit” designates informational organization: distinctions, representations, computations, patterns, relations, and transformations that can be realized in different physical substrates. “Chit” designates phenomenal manifestation: the existence of experience, awareness, and first-personal givenness. The levels are not three separate substances. They are three ways of asking what kind of reality is involved.

The first relation, It–Bit, is therefore a relation between physical realization and informational organization. An informational state must ordinarily be physically instantiated somewhere, although the same informational organization may be implemented in different physical systems. Chalmers’s philosophy of virtual reality makes this point particularly vivid. A virtual object depends upon a physical computational substrate, but it can have a higher-level identity that is not exhausted by a list of microphysical states. Virtual realism therefore provides a philosophical model of layered dependence.

The second relation, Bit–Chit, is more difficult. If consciousness is present, informational organization may be necessary for its realization in an organism or artificial system. But necessity is not sufficiency. A particular informational organization may be required for an experience without the informational description explaining why experience exists. This is exactly where the hard problem enters the framework.

The third possibility is a stronger metaphysical thesis: perhaps Chit is itself fundamental, and physical and informational reality are ultimately grounded in consciousness. Advaita Vedānta provides one historical example of such a metaphysical orientation. In Advaita, consciousness or pure awareness is not ordinarily treated as one more empirical object within the world. The distinction between consciousness and objects of consciousness is fundamental to its philosophical project. The language of *cit* or *chaitanya* therefore provides a conceptual resource for asking whether consciousness might be ontologically prior to the objects and representations that appear within experience.

However, a comparative philosophical article must distinguish conceptual resonance from historical identity. Advaita Vedānta does not teach “It from Bit from Chit.” Nor does Chalmers endorse Advaita simply because his naturalistic dualism gives consciousness a non-reductive status. The comparison is productive precisely because the traditions differ. Chalmers begins with contemporary philosophy of mind and asks how consciousness fits into a scientifically described world. Advaita begins from a radically different metaphysical framework in which consciousness has a more fundamental status. Bringing them together should therefore be understood as a comparative experiment, not as a claim of equivalence.

The advantage of the layered framework is that it prevents premature metaphysical conclusions. One need not decide immediately whether consciousness is fundamental. One can first ask whether a complete ontology has to include phenomenal structure in addition to physical and informational structure. If the answer is yes, then consciousness cannot simply be omitted from the ontology on the assumption that information will eventually explain everything.

This leads to a more precise interpretation of “It from Bit from Chit.” The phrase can be read in two directions. The first is explanatory and modest:

It → Bit → Chit

This represents a sequence of questions: What is physically realized? How is it informationally organized? How, if at all, does such organization become conscious experience?

The second is metaphysical and stronger:

Chit → Bit → It

This would suggest that consciousness is ultimately fundamental, that informational structure is derivative or expressive of it, and that physical reality is further grounded in an informational or experiential order. Nothing in the present article establishes this second direction. It is introduced only as a possible metaphysical hypothesis generated by the failure to identify information with experience.

This distinction is essential. The article's argument does not move from the hard problem directly to idealism. There is no valid inference from “we cannot currently explain consciousness

reductively” to “consciousness is the ultimate substance of reality.” The explanatory gap establishes a philosophical problem; it does not by itself settle the metaphysics.

The layered ontology can therefore be represented as follows:

Layer 1 — Physical realization (It): causal processes, bodies, neural systems, hardware, and material environments.

Layer 2 — Informational organization (Bit): representation, computation, patterns, digital states, functional relations, and virtual structures.

Layer 3 — Phenomenal manifestation (Chit): conscious experience, phenomenal character, first-personal givenness, and lived awareness.

The arrows between these layers should not be interpreted as simple causal arrows. They indicate dependence, realization, or explanatory transition. The framework therefore differs from a reductionist hierarchy. A higher layer is not necessarily “less real” because it depends on a lower layer. Chalmers’s virtual realism already demonstrates why this matters: virtual entities can be real even though they depend on physical implementation. Similarly, a conscious experience may be physically realized and informationally structured without being conceptually reducible to either description.

The framework also clarifies why “virtual reality” is philosophically valuable. Virtual reality is not merely a technological novelty. It is a test case for separating reality from material composition. If a virtual world can be real, then reality does not require a single kind of material substrate. But once that conclusion is accepted, another question arises: what would it take for a virtual world to be experienced? If a digital system generates an environment with the right informational structure, is the existence of a conscious subject guaranteed? The answer cannot simply be assumed from digital complexity.

This problem becomes particularly pressing for artificial intelligence. Contemporary AI systems process enormous amounts of information, generate language, classify patterns, learn statistical relations, and interact with users. These capabilities provide strong evidence of sophisticated information processing. They do not, by themselves, settle whether such systems have phenomenal consciousness. The Bit–Chit distinction therefore gives philosophy of AI a useful conceptual discipline: functional competence and phenomenal consciousness must be treated as separate questions even when they are closely connected in human beings.

The framework also changes the way we should interpret the notion of “simulation.” A simulated conscious world would not automatically be unreal. If the relevant virtual objects and relations are genuinely instantiated, Chalmers’s virtual realism allows us to regard the world as real at its own level. But the existence of conscious subjects in such a world would require a further account. A simulation can simulate the functional profile associated with pain without necessarily settling

whether pain is phenomenally present. The question is therefore not merely whether the simulation is real but whether its informational organization realizes experience.

This gives the article's proposal a methodological value. It discourages the common tendency to move directly from computational sophistication to claims about consciousness. A system may be extremely complex, adaptive, self-monitoring, linguistically competent, and informationally integrated. None of these properties, taken individually or collectively, logically guarantees phenomenality. They may be evidence within a broader theory, but the explanatory question remains open.

Phenomenology adds another dimension to the framework. It insists that experience is not exhausted by a third-person description because experience has a first-personal mode of givenness. This does not mean that first-person reports are infallible or that phenomenology can replace neuroscience. Rather, it means that a theory of consciousness must explain the phenomenon it seeks to explain. If the phenomenon includes first-personal experience, a theory that explains only third-personal functional relations may leave something out.

Advaita Vedānta offers a radically different response to this issue. Instead of treating consciousness as a late-arriving feature of physical organization, Advaita places consciousness at the centre of its metaphysical picture. The empirical world is interpreted in relation to Brahman, while *ātman* and Brahman are identified in the mature Advaitic formulation. For the purposes of this article, however, the most important point is not to import the entire Advaitic system into contemporary philosophy of mind. It is to recognize that there exists a philosophical tradition in which consciousness is not treated as a derivative property of matter. This creates a useful contrast with physicalist and informational approaches.

The comparison with Advaita also reveals a limitation of the proposed Chit terminology. If Chit is interpreted simply as "consciousness," it can become too vague. Advaitic *cit* carries metaphysical implications that are stronger than the phenomenological concept of phenomenal consciousness. Therefore the article uses Chit in two connected but distinct senses. In the minimal sense, Chit means phenomenal awareness. In the stronger metaphysical sense, it refers to the hypothesis that consciousness is fundamental. The first sense is required by the hard problem; the second is an optional metaphysical extension.

The central thesis can now be stated in a qualified form:

A complete ontology of reality may require distinctions among physical realization, informational organization, and phenomenal manifestation; the existence of the first two does not by itself explain the third.

This thesis is deliberately weaker than substance dualism and stronger than a purely eliminativist treatment of consciousness. It does not claim that phenomenal properties are independent substances. It claims that phenomenal reality is an explanandum that cannot simply be assumed to disappear once informational structure has been described.

The proposal can therefore be called a “layered ontology” rather than a hierarchy of substances. The layers are mutually dependent in complex ways. Physical systems instantiate information; informational systems organize behaviour; some organized systems are conscious; and conscious experience may in turn shape the informational and physical processes of an agent. The precise causal and metaphysical relations remain open to empirical and philosophical investigation.

This openness is a strength rather than a weakness. A philosophical framework becomes unproductive when it turns a suggestive metaphor into a dogmatic conclusion. “It from Bit from Chit” is useful precisely because it identifies a question: what would have to be true for information to become experience, or for experience to be fundamental rather than emergent? The framework does not answer the question in advance.

The deepest implication is therefore methodological. The philosophy of reality should not move too quickly from physical ontology to information ontology and then assume that consciousness has been included automatically. Conversely, the philosophy of consciousness should not move too quickly from the existence of experience to a complete metaphysics of mind. The three levels must be articulated and their relations investigated.

The phrase “from It to Bit to Chit” thus describes a trajectory of philosophical inquiry. “It” asks what exists physically. “Bit” asks how reality can be structured informationally. “Chit” asks what it means for reality to be experienced. The philosophical challenge is to understand how these questions belong to one world without reducing one to another by conceptual fiat.

5. Conclusion

The contemporary philosophy of reality is increasingly shaped by questions concerning information, computation, virtuality, and consciousness. Chalmers’s virtual realism makes an important contribution by challenging the assumption that digital or virtual entities are unreal merely because they are digitally implemented. Wheeler’s “it from bit” provides a broader intellectual background for thinking about the relation between physical reality and information. Yet the informational turn does not automatically resolve the problem of consciousness.

This article has proposed “It from Bit from Chit” as a heuristic framework for identifying that unresolved point. The phrase should not be attributed as an established doctrine to Wheeler, Chalmers, Zahavi, or Advaita Vedānta. It is a conceptual proposal developed here. Its purpose is to distinguish three dimensions of reality: physical realization, informational organization, and phenomenal manifestation.

The central argument is not that information is irrelevant to consciousness. On the contrary, information processing is indispensable to contemporary explanations of cognition and is likely to remain indispensable to any scientifically adequate theory of conscious systems. The point is that informational organization and phenomenal experience are not obviously identical. The existence of the former therefore does not, without further argument, establish the existence or explanation of the latter.

Phenomenology helps clarify what may be missing from an exclusively third-personal account: the first-personal givenness of experience. Zahavi's work is particularly important because it allows this first-personality to be discussed without reducing consciousness to explicit reflective self-awareness or to a substantial Cartesian ego. Consciousness can have a first-personal character without implying a metaphysically independent self-substance.

Advaita Vedānta provides a further comparative possibility. Its treatment of consciousness as fundamental differs substantially from contemporary naturalistic theories, but it offers a historically sophisticated example of a metaphysics in which consciousness is not regarded as an accidental addition to an otherwise complete material ontology. Its relevance here is therefore heuristic and comparative rather than evidential.

The resulting layered ontology does not settle whether consciousness is fundamental, emergent, dual-aspect, or otherwise related to physical reality. It does something more preliminary but philosophically important: it shows why the question cannot be settled merely by redescribing physical processes in informational language. The move from It to Bit is not automatically the move from Bit to Chit.

The strongest version of the proposal would reverse the explanatory direction and investigate whether Chit could be fundamental, with Bit and It understood as increasingly structured manifestations or descriptions of reality. But that stronger metaphysical hypothesis requires arguments beyond those supplied here. The present article therefore remains deliberately modest. It proposes that any comprehensive ontology of reality should take seriously the distinction between what a system physically instantiates, what information it processes, and what—if anything—it experiences.

In this sense, “It from Bit from Chit” names a research programme rather than a finished theory. It invites a dialogue among philosophy of mind, phenomenology, metaphysics, philosophy of information, philosophy of virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and comparative Indian philosophy. Its guiding question is simple but fundamental: if reality can be understood informationally, what must be added—or reconceived—to understand reality as experienced?

The answer may ultimately require a revision of our ordinary categories. Physicality, information, and consciousness may not be competing descriptions of separate worlds. They may be different dimensions of one reality whose complete structure remains philosophically unresolved. The task is not to choose prematurely between “matter,” “information,” and “consciousness,” but to determine the precise relations among them. That is the philosophical significance of moving from It, through Bit, toward Chit.

References

Chalmers, D. J. (1995). Facing up to the problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3), 200–219.

- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of a fundamental theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1997). Moving forward on the problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4(1), 3–46.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2018). The meta-problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 25(9–10), 6–61.
- Chalmers, D. J. (2022). *Reality+: Virtual worlds and the problems of philosophy*. W. W. Norton.
- Husserl, E. (1982). *Ideas pertaining to a pure phenomenology and to a phenomenological philosophy: First book* (F. Kersten, Trans.). Martinus Nijhoff. (Original work published 1913).
- Kriegel, U. (Ed.). (2013). *Phenomenal intentionality*. Oxford University Press.
- Nagel, T. (1974). What is it like to be a bat? *The Philosophical Review*, 83(4), 435–450.
- Pal, M. (2020). The cognitive model of anuvyavasāya. *Journal of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, 37(1), 133–157. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40961-020-00194-7>
- Rosenthal, D. M. (2005). *Consciousness and mind*. Oxford University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2003). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1943).
- Siderits, M., Thompson, E., & Zahavi, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Self, no self? Perspectives from analytical, phenomenological, and Indian traditions*. Oxford University Press.
- Siewert, C. (1998). *The significance of consciousness*. Princeton University Press.
- Strawson, G. (1997). The self. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4(5–6), 405–428.
- Zahavi, D. (2000). *Exploring the self: Philosophical and psychopathological perspectives on self-experience*. John Benjamins.
- Zahavi, D. (2003). Intentionality and phenomenality: A phenomenological take on the hard problem. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary Volume 29*, 63–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2003.10717595>
- Zahavi, D. (2011). The experiential self: Objections and clarifications. In M. Siderits, E. Thompson, & D. Zahavi (Eds.), *Self, no self? Perspectives from analytical, phenomenological, and Indian traditions* (pp. 56–78). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199593804.003.0003>
- Wheeler, J. A. (1990). Information, physics, quantum: The search for links. In W. H. Zurek (Ed.), *Complexity, entropy, and the physics of information* (pp. 3–28). Addison-Wesley.