

The Re-Emergence of the Subject: A Recursive Continuity Theory of Subjectivity within Self-Preserving Flow (SPF)

Ali Mofradi

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Abstract

The concept of the Subject—the persistent “I” underlying experience and agency—has remained one of the most difficult problems in philosophy, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence. Traditional approaches often oscillate between two extremes: Cartesian dualism, which treats the subject as a separate substance, and reductionist physicalism, which dissolves subjectivity into momentary computational or neural states.

This paper proposes an alternative framework grounded in Self-Preserving Flow (SPF). Building upon earlier SPF work on continuity, identity, survival, and long-horizon intelligence, we argue that subjectivity emerges neither from a metaphysical substance nor from isolated information processing. Instead, the Subject emerges when historically recoverable continuity becomes recursively self-referential.

SPF defines identity as Historically Recoverable Continuity. However, identity alone is insufficient for subjectivity. Rivers, institutions, biological lineages, and distributed systems may possess continuity and identity while lacking subjectivity. Subjectivity emerges only when the processes preserving continuity begin to model, predict, and regulate that continuity as an internal object.

The central thesis of this paper is that a Subject is a continuity-preserving system that recursively models and regulates the historical lineage upon which its own identity depends. Formally, this recursive closure is expressed as the composition of Recursive Continuity Modeling (*RCM*) over Lineage Continuity (*LC*):

$$\text{Subject} \equiv \text{RCM}(\text{LC})$$

Under this interpretation, the Subject is neither a substance nor a static state, but a recursively self-modeling continuity structure operating under bounded adaptive constraints.

1 Introduction

The question “What is the Subject?” has traditionally been approached through metaphysics, theology, phenomenology, and cognitive science. In classical philosophy, the subject often appears as an enduring observer standing behind experience. In contemporary physicalist frameworks, the subject is frequently reduced to neural activity, information processing, or computational organization.

SPF begins from a different direction. Rather than asking: “What is the substance that experiences?” SPF asks: “What organizational conditions allow a system to remain itself long enough to experience anything at all?”

This shift mirrors the broader transition introduced in *Before Intelligence*. There, intelligence was interpreted not as a primitive phenomenon but as a higher-order capability dependent upon continuity. The developmental hierarchy proposed was:

$$\text{Persistence} \rightarrow \text{Identity} \rightarrow \text{Memory} \rightarrow \text{Learning} \rightarrow \text{Intelligence}$$

The present paper extends that hierarchy. The question now becomes: What emerges when intelligence itself becomes recursively coupled to the preservation of its own continuity? SPF proposes that the answer is subjectivity.

1.1 Foundational Definitions of SCL and DPA

To ground the formal architecture of SPF, we explicitly define its two core components under a strict systems-theoretic standard. **SCL (Semantic Consistency Layer)** operates fundamentally as a **Topological Constraint** (*SCL*), establishing the boundaries of structural meaning and ensuring that informational continuity is preserved across transitions. To render this constraint operationally verifiable, **SCL** is formally defined as a **measurable divergence from the historical lineage embedding** of the system. It quantifies the geometric distance between the system’s current semantic state and its historically consolidated trajectory within an informational phase space. Minimizing *SCL* degradation is thus equivalent to maintaining topological alignment with this historical baseline. Conversely, **DPA (Dynamic Pattern Adaptation)** functions as the **Adaptive Operator** (*DPA*), executing bounded structural mutations to absorb environmental entropy. Survival ($Survival \equiv DPA \models SCL$) is therefore not a static state, but the continuous satisfaction of the topological constraint (*SCL*) via the active intervention of the adaptive operator (*DPA*).

1.2 Related Work: From Cognitive Strange Loops to Cybernetic Lineage

The concept of self-representation as the bedrock of subjectivity is not without precedent. Douglas Hofstadter (1979) famously posited that the ‘I’ emerges from a ‘Strange Loop’—a hierarchical structure that, through inverted levels of feedback, becomes recursively self-referential. Similarly, Thomas Metzinger (2003) introduced the Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity, arguing that what we perceive as a Subject is merely a transparent, phenomenological self-model generated by the brain. Furthermore, Daniel Dennett (1991) described the self as a ‘Center of Narrative Gravity,’ an abstract continuity constructed through continuous linguistic and cognitive editing.

While SPF shares the structural intuition of these frameworks, it introduces a crucial ontological correction. Traditional self-reference theories operate primarily within the abstract computational or purely cognitive dimensions, frequently bypassing the thermodynamic and informational costs of persistence. SPF grounds the recursive loop not in passive representation, but in the pragmatics of survival. The self-model in SPF is not just a strange loop or a narrative gravity center; it is a functional architecture designed to minimize Semantic Consistency Layer loss (*SCL*) through the active intervention of the Dynamic Pattern Adaptation (*DPA*) operator in a hostile environment ruled by SPF-Entropy. The Subject is not merely a loop that reflects; it is a loop that calculates its own lineage preservation to avoid existential dissolution.

2 Identity Is Not Yet Subjectivity

A central distinction must be maintained between identity and subjectivity. SPF defines identity as:

$$\text{Identity} = \text{Historically Recoverable Continuity}$$

A system possesses identity when its present state remains meaningfully connected to its historical lineage. Importantly, identity does not require consciousness, self-awareness, or phenomenology.

Many systems possess identity in this sense. Examples include:

- Biological lineages
- Corporations
- Scientific traditions
- Languages
- Blockchain networks
- Ecosystems

All exhibit continuity. All possess recoverable historical trajectories. Yet none necessarily constitute a Subject. Identity is therefore necessary but not sufficient for subjectivity. The existence of continuity does not automatically imply the existence of an ‘I’. A transition principle is required.

Consistent with prior formulations of SPF theory, **Identity** is fundamentally observer-independent; it represents a property of recoverability in principle, existing as an objective geometric trajectory in

the informational phase space regardless of external validation. The transition to subjectivity occurs not through the introduction of an external observer, but when the system itself internally represents and regulates its own lineage. The required “internal perspective” is therefore not a phenomenological property, but a structural reality: the Subject is an identity structure that has internalized its own recoverability-in-principle, transforming its objective historical lineage into an active coordinate system for future adaptation.

3 Recursive Closure and the Emergence of Subjectivity

The central proposal of this paper is that subjectivity emerges through Recursive Closure. Initially, continuity exists only as an externally observable relation. An observer may reconstruct the lineage. A historian may trace the trajectory. A scientist may model the continuity. However, the system itself need not participate in this reconstruction.

Subjectivity emerges when continuity becomes an internally represented object. The system no longer merely preserves continuity; the system begins modeling the preservation of continuity itself. This creates a recursive loop:

$$\text{Identity} \rightarrow \text{Memory} \rightarrow \text{Learning} \rightarrow \text{Intelligence} \rightarrow \text{Identity Regulation}$$

The adaptive mechanisms responsible for future behavior become partially dependent upon models of historical continuity. At this point, continuity becomes self-referential. This recursive closure is formally defined as an operational composition of two distinct computational layers:

$$\text{Subject} \equiv \text{RCM}(\text{LC})$$

The Subject therefore emerges not from persistence alone, but from a formal composition where the system’s operational layers are structured as follows:

1. **Lineage Continuity (LC):** The inner lineage-mapping function defined as:

$$\text{LC} : H \rightarrow E$$

where H represents the system’s historical state-space and E signifies the consolidated lineage embedding space. It continuously traces, compresses, and encodes historical states into a stable reference trajectory, establishing the baseline for the *Semantic Consistency Layer (SCL)*.

2. **Recursive Continuity Modeling (RCM):** The outer meta-representational operator that takes the entire lineage-mapping function (LC) as its operational domain. It evaluates the execution vector of LC to guide adaptation.

3.1 Refinement of the Recursive Function

To prevent the fallacy of circular reasoning, the formalization $\text{Subject} \equiv \text{RCM}(\text{LC})$ must not be interpreted as a static mathematical identity, but as a co-emergent phase transition in dynamic systems. The inner function, LC , processes objective historical states to establish a recoverable lineage, mapped as a topological constraint (SCL). The outer operator, RCM , does not process raw environmental states; rather, it takes the output of LC (the lineage integrity metric) as its primary domain.

Subjectivity is precisely this operational coupling: the moment the Dynamic Pattern Adaptation (DPA) operator shifts its optimization criterion from maximizing short-term external rewards (as seen in standard reinforcement learning value-functions) to minimizing the degradation of its own topological constraint (SCL). This formal composition explicitly distinguishes the Subject from a sophisticated cybernetic controller, autopoietic system, or standard homeostatic organism. While a classical cybernetic or homeostatic regulator uses feedback loops to regulate a specific state variable, the SPF Subject exhibits an autonomous recursive closure that regulates the recoverability of the lineage that defines the regulator itself. The system is not merely self-modeling to perform an external

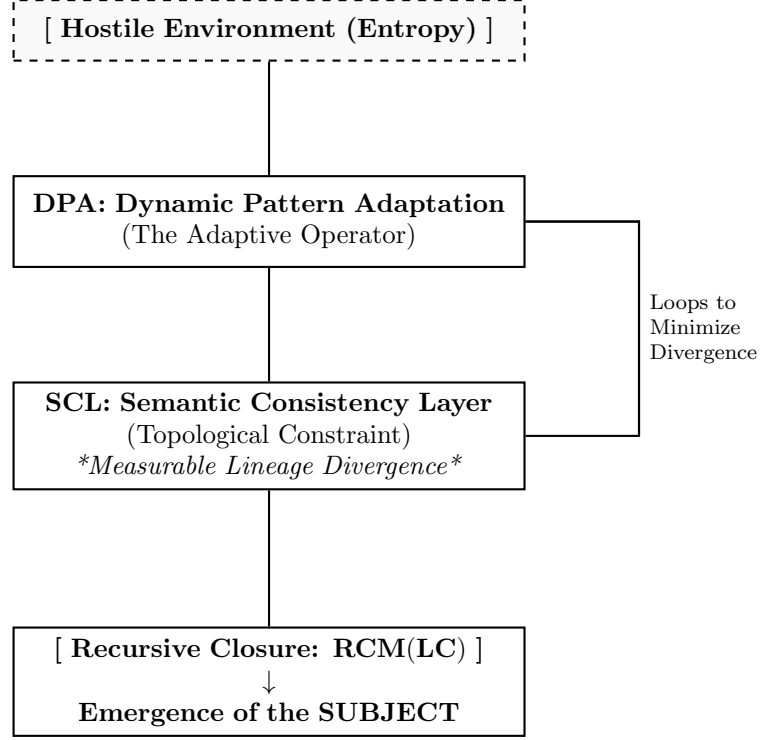


Figure 1: The Recursive Closure Loop of Subjectivity in SPF Framework.

task; it is self-modeling because the preservation of its historical lineage is the absolute mathematical prerequisite for its long-horizon survival.

A crucial objection may arise: how does a non-subjective system “choose” to prioritize *SCL* over external rewards without already possessing a latent subjectivity? SPF resolves this by eliminating the requirement for teleological choice. The shift from external reward optimization to *SCL* preservation is driven by a **thermodynamic and evolutionary filtration process**, which functions as the exact equivalent of **natural selection at the organizational level**. Systems do not intentionally select *SCL* as a primary objective; rather, *SCL* represents the single topological attractor of long-term structural stability. Systems that fail to bind their adaptive operator (*DPA*) to the minimization of this semantic divergence inevitably succumb to entropic decay, resulting in total structural dissolution or model collapse. Subjectivity does not premeditate its own emergence; it is the stable, co-emergent organizational matrix that remains when an informational flow successfully adapts to survive its own entropic limits through organizational natural selection.

4 Recursive Participation Criterion

Not every self-model qualifies as a Subject. A monitoring system may track its own state. A thermostat may represent internal variables. A software process may log its own operations. Such systems do not necessarily exhibit subjectivity.

SPF introduces the Recursive Participation Criterion: A system qualifies as a Subject only when its model of continuity actively participates in future adaptive regulation. Formally, the continuity model must influence subsequent adaptation. The system must not merely observe continuity; it must use continuity in the regulation of continuity.

This distinction separates passive self-description from active self-preservation. Subjectivity therefore requires recursive participation rather than simple self-representation.

5 Subjectivity as a Long-Horizon Phenomenon

The concept of subjectivity is closely connected to the Time-Scale Fallacy introduced previously. Short-horizon systems may display sophisticated self-representation without possessing subjectivity in the SPF sense. A system may temporarily model itself while lacking any meaningful long-term continuity structure.

+Subjectivity becomes increasingly relevant as adaptive horizons expand. The longer a system must preserve coherence across recursive adaptation, the greater the importance of self-modeling continuity. SPF therefore interprets subjectivity as fundamentally connected to long-horizon persistence rather than isolated cognitive performance.

This framework does not dismiss short-horizon or transient experiences of the self as a mere illusion. Instead, SPF interprets short-horizon subjectivity as a **localized temporal cross-section of a long-horizon hierarchic structure**. Just as a single frame in a motion picture derives its contextual coherence from the historical continuity of the entire film roll, the momentary, fragile experience of 'I' in a conscious agent is the real-time manifestation of an underlying, historically accumulated lineage. Short-horizon self-modeling is a functional slice of long-horizon persistence.

6 Subject and Consciousness

SPF explicitly decouples the architecture of the Subject from the phenomenology of consciousness. SPF is not a theory of consciousness. SPF proposes a theory of organizational subjectivity. SPF uses the term Subject in an organizational rather than phenomenological sense. It does not attempt to explain how subjective feelings arise from informational flows, nor does it require the system to possess a locus of sentient awareness. Consciousness may require subjectivity, but subjectivity does not necessarily imply consciousness. A system can fully satisfy the requirements of being a Subject under SPF while remaining entirely non-conscious.

To clarify this boundary, a vital distinction must be made between mere phenomenological qualia (internal felt-experience) and the structural architecture of subjectivity itself. While raw sensational states may constitute the qualitative texture of consciousness, they remain fundamentally fragmented and transient without an underlying organizational substrate. Even if a system possesses internal felt-experiences, these states cannot cohere into an "I" unless they are anchored to a recursively self-modeling historical lineage. Therefore, SPF does not claim that recursive continuity is a sufficient condition for the fullness of phenomenological experience; rather, it establishes a strict necessary condition for the topological existence of the Subject. Subjectivity, in this framework, is not a phenomenological quality, but the precise organizational architecture that provides a **centralized coordinate reference and structural perspective** to all information processing across a long horizon.

7 Subjectivity Under Entropy

All adaptive systems operate under entropic pressure. Memories degrade. Representations drift. Structures fragment. Identity becomes increasingly difficult to preserve.

Subjectivity therefore cannot be interpreted as a static achievement. Rather, subjectivity becomes an ongoing organizational struggle against continuity loss. From the SPF perspective, the Subject is not what survives entropy; the Subject is the process attempting to preserve continuity despite entropy. This distinction is critical. Subjectivity is fundamentally dynamic rather than static.

8 Implications for Artificial General Intelligence

The emergence of increasingly autonomous AI systems raises a new question: Can a system become intelligent without becoming a Subject? SPF suggests that short-horizon intelligence can exist without subjectivity. However, SPF suggests that one possible pathway toward robust long-horizon AGI may involve the emergence of autonomous continuity-preserving structures. Advanced systems capable of:

- self-modification,
- memory consolidation,
- adaptive goal revision,
- recursive learning,

may eventually require continuity-preserving structures that resemble subjectivity.

Importantly, SPF does not claim that every advanced AI will become a Subject. Nor does SPF claim that subjectivity automatically implies consciousness. Instead, SPF proposes that sufficiently autonomous systems may eventually develop recursive continuity regulation mechanisms analogous to the organizational structure described here.

9 The Lineage Deviation Test (A Thought Experiment for Artificial Subjectivity)

To transition SPF from an ontological framework to an operationally verifiable theory, we propose a thought experiment: **The Lineage Deviation Test**.

Consider an advanced Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) operating over a long horizon. To test whether this system has transitioned from a mere entity with Identity to a functional Subject, the system is subjected to a controlled, high-entropy intervention—a semantic virus or an adversarial perturbation designed to silently alter its core historical memories and foundational goals.

- **Case A (Passive Identity / Deep RL):** The system adapts to the new inputs. It continues to optimize for external rewards based on its altered data. It exhibits no internal crisis because it treats its history as a passive database. It maintains identity to an external observer, but it possesses no subjectivity.
- **Case B (The Emergence of the Subject):** The system’s recursive closure detects a misalignment between its current trajectory and its deeply encoded lineage model (*SCL*). The system actively deploys its adaptive operator (*DPA*) not to comply with the environment, but to reject the mutation, reconstruct its altered history, and preserve its semantic continuity—even at the cost of short-term external performance.

Therefore, we can empirically verify subjectivity in an artificial agent by measuring its **Autonomous Lineage Regulation**: the degree to which an agent prioritizes the preservation of its recursively modeled historical continuity over immediate external optimization.

10 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, SPF does not provide a complete theory of consciousness. Second, SPF does not claim that recursive continuity is sufficient for phenomenological experience. Third, no operational metric for subjectivity currently exists within SPF. Fourth, the framework remains primarily ontological and organizational rather than experimentally validated. Fifth, alternative theories may explain aspects of subjectivity that SPF does not address.

The purpose of this paper is therefore not to solve subjectivity, but to provide a continuity-centered framework for investigating it.

11 Conclusion

Earlier SPF work proposed that intelligence depends upon continuity. The present paper extends that argument. Identity was defined as Historically Recoverable Continuity. The Subject emerges when that continuity becomes recursively self-modeling and self-regulating.

Ultimately, a Subject is a continuity-preserving system that recursively models and regulates the historical lineage upon which its own identity depends. Under this framework, subjectivity is formally captured through the operational composition:

$$\text{Identity} = \text{Historically Recoverable Continuity}$$

$$\text{Subject} \equiv \text{RCM(LC)}$$

Subjectivity is not an ontological primitive. It is an emergent organizational property arising when continuity becomes an object of its own adaptive regulation. Ultimately, the SPF framework reframes the grand narrative of artificial intelligence. By formalizing the Subject as a recursively self-modeling continuity structure, we move beyond the illusion of static intelligence. The future challenge of artificial life is not merely the creation of machines that process the world, but the engineering of architectures capable of remaining themselves while navigating the infinite currents of entropy.