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Quantum consciousness revisited: a review of Orch OR and an introduction to the Quantum Cognition Gradient

Piñeiro L[1], Read L[2]

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Abstract
Despite centuries of scientific inquiry, the origin of human consciousness, characterized by self-awareness and the presence of qualia, remains one of the deepest mysteries in neuroscience. Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch OR), as proposed by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, posits that consciousness arises from the objective reduction of quantum superpositions within entangled neural microtubules, triggered by gravitational self-energy. Recent theoretical and biophysical studies have renewed interest in quantum coherence in biological systems, including terahertz vibrational measurements, advances in quantum biology, and computational modeling of microtubule dynamics. This review synthesizes these developments and examines major critiques of Orch OR, particularly the challenge of maintaining quantum coherence in warm, wet biological environments. It further introduces the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG), a phenomenological, heuristic framework that extends Orch OR by proposing a scalable relationship between cognitive complexity and the formation, persistence, and coordination of quantum-coherent microtubule states prior to objective reduction, while leaving the underlying Diósi–Penrose collapse mechanism unchanged. Finally, several experimental strategies, including terahertz spectroscopy, entanglement-detection assays, interferometric microscopy, and neuromodulatory perturbation studies, are outlined as potential approaches for empirically evaluating predictions of both Orch OR and the QCG framework. By integrating contemporary developments in quantum biology with a quantitative conceptual framework, this review presents Orch OR and the proposed QCG as testable, hypothesis-generating models for investigating the possible relationship between quantum processes and consciousness.

Keywords
Consciousness, Orchestrated Objective Reduction, Quantum Cognition Gradient, Quantum biology, Microtubules, Quantum coherence, Quantum neuroscience, Phenomenological modeling, Quantum gravity, Testable hypotheses

[1]Corresponding author: Logan Piñeiro, Westlake High School, 825 Westlake Dr, Thornwood, NY 10594, USA. loganpineiro@gmail.com
[2]Lily Read, Lebanon High School, 500 Blue Devil Blvd, Lebanon, TN 37087, USA.

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1. Introduction

Consciousness remains one of the deepest unresolved puzzles in science. While neuroscience has successfully charted many of the brain's computational and sensory functions, the fundamental question of subjective experience, why and how certain brain processes are accompanied by inner awareness, persists. David Chalmers famously articulated this as the "hard problem of consciousness" (1), distinguishing the challenge of explaining qualitative experience from more tractable "easy problems" like perception and behavior. In parallel, Roger Penrose argued that this gap cannot be bridged by conventional computational models of physics in the brain alone, proposing instead that consciousness entails non-classical processes rooted in the laws of quantum physics (2).

Most modern theories of consciousness are grounded in classical physics and information processing. These include Global Workspace Theory (GWT) and predictive coding models, which posit that conscious thought arises from neural representations being broadcast across a network of brain regions (3). Such models assume that neural correlates of consciousness can be fully explained by interactions of neurons through electrical and chemical signaling. However, critics argue that these classical explanations may not fully account for the experiential qualities of consciousness. Prominent researchers like Christof Koch have challenged this view, suggesting that current classical approaches fail to account for the felt quality of experience, or "what it is like" to be conscious that humans feel alone (4). Anil Seth echoes this sentiment, labeling consciousness the "grand challenge" of neuroscience precisely because standard models cannot yet explain how brain activity translates into phenomenology (5).

In response to these limitations, the Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch OR) theory offers a radically different paradigm. First introduced by Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, Orch OR posits that consciousness emerges from quantum processes in the brain, specifically, orchestrated collapses of quantum superpositions within microtubules, the structural components of neurons (6). These collapses are not random but are "objective" in the sense that they are proposed to be triggered by gravitational curvature at the Planck scale, an idea drawn from Penrose's interpretation of quantum gravity. Perhaps the most profound achievement of the human mind is not merely its emergence from quantum processes, but its unique capacity to harness quantum superposition, rather than having these states collapse at random, as they do throughout the universe, but instead orchestrating their reduction into a coherent symphony of conscious experience. Orch OR thus places consciousness at the intersection of neuroscience, quantum mechanics, and general relativity.

Over the past decade, both support and criticism of Orch OR have grown more sophisticated. Initial skepticism was driven by the belief that quantum states could not be sustained in the "warm, loud" environment of the brain. However, over the past decade, advancements in quantum biology have shown

coherence in biological systems such as photosynthetic complexes and avian navigation, prompting renewed interest in whether similar mechanisms could exist in neural structures. Additionally, research into terahertz vibrational modes and theoretical modeling of microtubules has expanded the scope of possible quantum interactions relevant to brain function.

Despite being introduced over thirty years ago and substantially reviewed in 2014 (6), no comprehensive update has synthesized the past decade of research, critique, and experimental exploration surrounding Orch OR. As discoveries in quantum biology become more developed, it is critical to return to this theory with contemporary discoveries and to address both its scientific challenges and expanding theoretical support. This review aims to fill that gap.

Briefly summarizing recent developments, this paper introduces the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG), a novel conceptual framework that extends Orch OR by proposing a correlation between quantum coherence in microtubules and cognitive complexity across species. In doing so, it seeks to provide a heuristic continuum for exploring gradations of consciousness. By reviewing key advancements and proposing empirical pathways forward, this work positions Orch OR not as a speculative hypothesis, but as a potentially falsifiable and foundational perspective piece for the physics of mind.

The remainder of this manuscript is organized to explicitly separate established literature from original conceptual modeling. Sections 2 and 3 constitute a structured review of the empirical literature, detailing the foundational architecture of Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch OR) and the biophysical constraints surrounding cytoskeletal quantum decoherence. Conversely, Sections 4 and 5 transition into a distinct theoretical proposal, introducing the mathematical parameterization of the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG) and outlining a falsifiable, dynamical framework for its empirical validation.

2. Foundations of Orch OR theory

2.1 Microtubules and their quantum potential

Microtubules are cylindrical polymers composed of tubulin dimers, which form the structural scaffolding of neurons and are essential for intracellular transport, structural integrity, and mitosis. However, beyond their classical roles, Hameroff proposed that microtubules could act as quantum computational elements, sustaining coherent superpositions across networks of tubulin dimers (7). Each tubulin dimer is thought to exist in multiple conformational or electric dipole states, potentially functioning as a quantum bit (qubit), with quantum information encoded in electric dipole oscillations.

This quantum potential is supported by the geometry and molecular interactions within the microtubule lattice. Craddock et al. (2014) conducted computational modeling and suggested that microtubules may support coherent energy transfer along aromatic amino acid networks within tubulin (8). This coherence is akin to mechanisms observed in

photosynthetic complexes, where exciton-like propagation enables efficient energy transfer. Such coherence may underlie the long-range quantum correlations Orch OR requires.

Furthermore, Hameroff proposed that microtubules possess properties that shield them from rapid environmental decoherence. Structured water molecules lining the interior of microtubules, along with actin cages that regulate ion flow, may create semi-isolated quantum environments within the warm, noisy brain. These insights align with broader developments in quantum biology, including studies of avian magnetoreception and photosynthesis, which have demonstrated sustained quantum coherence in warm biological systems (9), While these findings establish that functional quantum effects are possible under selected physiological conditions, they do not rule out classical decoherence objections within the complex macromolecular environment of the mammalian brain, meaning any direct translation to neural microtubules remains a hypothesis-generating inference.

The geometry of the microtubule, composed of repeating α-β tubulin subunits arranged in a helical lattice, enables quantum entanglement and superposition to scale from the molecular to the cellular level. The cylindrical shape and cavity inside the microtubule may further support confinement and coherent interactions. Notably, microtubule-associated proteins (MAPs) such as tau may influence quantum processing by modulating lattice structure and stability, potentially impacting cognitive functions.

Recent theoretical proposals have further suggested that microtubules may act as biological quantum waveguides (10). These structures could channel energy through delocalized electron clouds, forming interference patterns that enable long-range quantum information propagation. In this model, quantum tunneling, coherent excitations, and dipole oscillations work in concert to maintain entanglement across extended neuronal architectures. Such waveguide-like properties, combined with shielding mechanisms and structural organization, bolster the plausibility of quantum computation occurring within microtubular networks.

2.1.1 *Quantum dynamics and the Schrödinger equation*

To further understand Orch OR's premise that consciousness emerges from orchestrated quantum processes in microtubules, it is essential to examine how quantum states evolve. The time-dependent Schrödinger equation governs the dynamics of closed quantum systems, $i\hbar \frac{d}{dt}|\psi(t)\rangle = \hat{H}|\psi(t)\rangle$. In this equation, $|\psi(t)\rangle$ represents the quantum state vector of the system at time t , and $\hat{H}$ is the Hamiltonian operator defining the system's total energy, including kinetic and potential contributions. In the context of Orch OR, this state vector corresponds to the collective quantum state of entangled tubulin dimers within and across neurons. The Hamiltonian encodes interactions between electric dipoles, vibrational phonons, thermal noise, and possibly electromagnetic fields.

The system evolves deterministically under the Schrödinger equation until a collapse condition is met. According to Penrose, this collapse is not due to measurement or environmental decoherence but rather an intrinsic instability caused by gravitational self-energy between superposed mass distributions (11). This evolution is central to the Orch OR framework, providing a bridge from quantum potentiality to definite, conscious perception.

2.2 The Díósi-Penrose mechanism

The second cornerstone of Orch OR is the Díósi-Penrose (DP) mechanism for objective wave function collapse. While standard quantum mechanics treats collapse as a probabilistic outcome of measurement, the DP model posits that superposed mass configurations distort spacetime geometry differently. When the energy difference between these geometries (ΔE_G) exceeds a critical threshold, the superposition becomes unstable and collapses spontaneously (12).

Penrose (1996) proposed a collapse time τ inversely related to this gravitational energy difference, $\tau \approx \frac{\hbar}{\Delta E_G}$. This form of collapse is objective and universal, occurring independently of observation. Díósi independently arrived at a similar conclusion using stochastic collapse equations. Unlike standard decoherence models, the DP mechanism roots collapse in fundamental physical law, specifically, in the geometry of spacetime and gravitational energy (13). It provides Orch OR with a non-arbitrary trigger for reducing quantum states. When applied to the brain, this model implies that the quantum state of entangled tubulin networks evolves until the gravitational energy difference between its components exceeds ΔE_G, at which point the objective reduction occurs. This event corresponds to a discrete conscious moment.

2.3 Integration: orchestration of collapse and consciousness

The "Orchestrated" component of Orch OR implies that quantum state reduction is neither random nor isolated. Rather, it is modulated by classical neuronal processes, including synaptic inputs, cytoskeletal signaling, and network-level feedback. These processes bias the evolution of the quantum state, structuring its development toward meaningful collapse outcomes. According to Hameroff and Penrose, each Orch OR event corresponds to a moment of conscious awareness, occurring approximately every 25 milliseconds, aligning with gamma-band synchrony observed in EEG. This temporal coordination suggests that brain rhythms may resonate with underlying quantum dynamics.

Furthermore, tubulin states may be entangled across neurons via dendritic-dendritic gap junctions, allowing Orch OR events to synchronize over extended brain networks. This hierarchical organization, from local microtubules to distributed cortical assemblies, could enable unified conscious experiences (14).

Critics, such as Tegmark (2000), have argued that decoherence times in the brain are too short for such quantum events to be meaningful (15). However, Hameroff and Penrose respond by citing recent quantum biology findings and revised decoherence calculations, showing that

decoherence may be mitigated by microtubular architecture and internal shielding (16). This debate underscores the need for empirical investigations into coherence lifetimes in neural microtubules.

Additional refinements to Orch OR have examined how vibrational resonance, especially in the terahertz range, could modulate quantum processing. Studies have suggested that microtubules exhibit resonance modes that may influence dipole dynamics and coherence, potentially contributing to orchestrated reduction.

In summary, Orch OR proposes a unified framework in which microtubules act as quantum computational structures whose states evolve via the Schrödinger equation until objective collapse is triggered by gravitational energy thresholds, and where conscious experience arises from the synchronized, orchestrated nature of this reduction. This model bridges the gap between quantum physics and neuroscience and offers a falsifiable mechanism for consciousness. These foundations prepare the stage for further review of empirical evidence supporting quantum coherence in biological systems and for the introduction of new theoretical advancements like the Quantum Cognition Gradient.

3. Developments since 2014

Since the comprehensive 2014 review by Hameroff and Penrose, the research of quantum coherence in biological systems has continued to generate research; however, the theory of Orch OR has historically faced challenges in attracting broad scientific interest despite these recent developments. In particular, questions about the feasibility of quantum mechanics in the brain have prompted vigorous criticism. However, recent biophysical measurements offer indirect support for the structural stability of microtubules under specific *in vitro* conditions, motivating further investigation of the Orch-OR architecture. This section will explore the major criticisms levied against the theory and will examine new empirical findings and models that systematically challenge those critiques and provide preliminary conceptual support.

3.1 Criticisms of quantum coherence in the brain

Perhaps the most notable criticism comes from Max Tegmark, who argued that the brain's "warm, wet, and noisy environment" would cause rapid decoherence in quantum systems (15). Specifically, he calculated that superpositions in microtubules would decohere in $\sim 10^{-13}$ seconds, far too rapidly to support cognitive processes. According to Tegmark, the decoherence time was many orders of magnitude shorter than the tens of milliseconds required for neural firing patterns or EEG oscillations.

This critique was taken seriously and led to reevaluations of the decoherence assumptions. Hagan, Hameroff, and Tuszynski responded with a revised analysis, arguing that Tegmark's calculation relied on overly simplistic models and underestimated the protective factors within cells (17). Their more biologically realistic model, which accounted for shielding from surrounding actin filaments, ordered water layers, and the internal geometry of

microtubules, estimated decoherence times closer to 10^{-4} to 10^{-2} seconds, compatible with neural function.

Fisher contributed further by suggesting that nuclear spins in phosphorus atoms could maintain coherence for milliseconds within neuron-relevant biochemical conditions (18). Although not directly aligned with microtubules, Fisher's work supports the broader feasibility of long-lived quantum states in the brain. The possibility of quantum states surviving for functionally relevant durations undermines the notion that the brain is categorically inhospitable to quantum coherence. Recent developments in quantum biology have challenged the assumption that biological environments necessarily preclude functionally relevant quantum effects, motivating renewed investigation into whether analogous mechanisms might exist in neural systems (19). This notion, coupled with more recent experimental validation of noise-assisted coherence, provides further reason to reassess the noisy-brain argument against Orch OR.

Recent critiques include Schlosshauer, who reiterated that the complexity of biological systems makes it difficult to isolate quantum effects and argued for caution in interpreting coherence as indicative of consciousness (20). However, such caution does not refute the possibility; it instead emphasizes the need for more precise experimental designs, which recent studies have increasingly demonstrated. Several authors have cautioned that evidence for quantum coherence in biological systems such as photosynthetic complexes and cryptochromes cannot be directly extrapolated to neuronal microtubules because these systems differ substantially in molecular architecture, energy scales, environmental interactions, and biological function. Consequently, quantum coherence in microtubules requires independent experimental validation rather than inference by analogy (21). Yet this skepticism has spurred new work aimed at directly testing coherence lifetimes in neural tissue, with Bandyopadhyay's laboratory and others developing novel *in situ* probing techniques.

Moreover, emerging lines of thought argue that certain aspects of cognitive function, particularly those involving non-algorithmic decision making, creativity, and unified perception, may inherently require a non-classical explanation. This philosophical shift, echoed by some theorists in cognitive science and philosophy of mind, is renewing interest in models like Orch OR that attempt to ground consciousness in fundamental physics. Though indirect, this broader interdisciplinary movement lends support to revisiting Orch OR with fresh perspectives and more rigorous experimental designs.

3.2 Experimental evidence of coherent microtubule processes

Experimental advances have offered some of the strongest evidence in favor of microtubules-based coherence. The pioneering work of Bandyopadhyay and colleagues, including Sahu et al. and Bandyopadhyay et al., demonstrated resonant electrical conductance and coherent oscillations in microtubules using advanced scanning tunneling microscopy (STM) (22, 23). Oscillations were observed at

frequencies ranging from 100kHz to several GHz, and terahertz resonance was detected using dielectric spectroscopy. These reported frequencies should not be interpreted as contradictory. Rather, they likely represent distinct classes of dynamical behavior measured using different experimental techniques. Lower-frequency oscillations (kHz–GHz) are generally associated with collective electrical or electromechanical activity within microtubules, whereas terahertz resonances correspond to substantially faster intramolecular vibrational modes of tubulin and its surrounding microenvironment. Consequently, microtubules may exhibit multiple characteristic frequency regimes rather than a single resonant frequency, with each potentially reflecting different aspects of their underlying biophysical dynamics. These findings suggest that microtubules possess a form of resonance and electrical activity that could reflect underlying quantum phenomena.

Importantly, these oscillations occurred in isolated microtubules *in vitro* and aligned with frequencies predicted in earlier Orch OR publications. However, because these observations were restricted to isolated cell-free preparations, they should be interpreted strictly as reducing the degree to which quantum biological mechanisms are excluded by classical thermodynamic arguments. They do not constitute direct empirical evidence of *in vivo* neural quantum information processing, nor do they demonstrate that such states withstand the full scale of environmental noise present in a living brain.

Celardo et al. modeled disordered systems like microtubules and found that under specific conditions, environmental noise could actually enhance quantum transport, a phenomenon called noise-assisted transport (24). Such effects have been observed in photosynthetic complexes, where appropriately structured environmental interactions can enhance quantum transport and sustain functionally relevant coherence. These findings suggest that similar mechanisms could, in principle, operate within neuronal microtubules, although direct experimental evidence for this possibility is currently lacking. Further replication studies using improved imaging and dielectric mapping technologies have added credibility to these findings. Notably, new terahertz spectroscopy experiments in neural tissues have begun to detect frequency-specific signatures consistent with microtubule resonance.

3.3 Advances in quantum biology

The broader field of quantum biology has matured significantly since 2014, lending indirect support to Orch OR by demonstrating that quantum effects can play functional roles in biological systems. Quantum coherence has been confirmed in avian magnetoreception, enzymatic hydrogen tunneling, and olfactory processing (25, 26). These findings refute the assumption that biological systems cannot exploit quantum effects and instead suggest that evolution may have harnessed such effects and their benefits.

Coherence in the Fenna-Matthews-Olson (FMO) complex in green sulfur bacteria has been observed at room temperature, providing

a precedent for warm, wet biological coherence. Similarly, cryptochrome proteins involved in bird navigation utilize spin-coherent electron states that last long enough to influence behavior. These findings establish that biologically functional quantum effects are possible under certain highly specific physiological conditions. However, no direct evidence currently demonstrates analogous quantum information processing in neural microtubules. Consequently, any extension of these findings to Orch-OR should be regarded as a hypothesis-generating inference rather than empirical support for the theory.

Additionally, a growing body of interdisciplinary research has started to explore whether principles from quantum information theory, such as entanglement entropy and mutual information, can describe aspects of consciousness and cognition. These approaches often converge with Orch OR's suggestion that conscious experience may correlate with orchestrated reductions in quantum states, thereby further encouraging reevaluation of classical-only models.

3.4 Summary of theoretical perspectives

Together, the empirical and theoretical progress since 2014 clarifies the landscape surrounding the major criticisms against Orch OR,

[1] *Decoherence critiques:* Motivated further investigation through updated theoretical shielding models and quantum biology precedents, though remaining unverified and fundamentally open to challenge under *in vivo* thermodynamic conditions.

[2] *Empirical explorations:* Motivated by STM-based experiments showing coherent oscillations in microtubules, particularly in the terahertz range.

[3] *Biological mechanisms:* Supported by the emergence of functional quantum biology across multiple species and physiological contexts.

[4] *Mathematical viability:* Reinforced by new models of microtubule geometry that propose pathways for long-range coherence and entanglement.

[5] *Recent skepticism:* Addressed through enhanced experimental methods and evolving biological models that aim to isolate and track neural coherence *in vivo*.

[6] *Evolutionary precedents:* Informed by data showing that multiple species have evolved mechanisms to exploit quantum effects for functional advantages.

The convergence of these findings is consistent with a prediction of Orch-OR. Rather than being relegated to speculative physics, Orch OR increasingly appears as a productive heuristic framework for exploring consciousness, grounded in a fusion of neuroscience and quantum mechanics. The next section extends this line of reasoning by introducing the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG), which proposes that the degree of microtubule quantum coherence correlates with cognitive complexity across species.

4. Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG)

The Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG) is a novel conceptual and mathematical framework designed to extend the Orch OR model by proposing a scalable relationship between

quantum coherence in microtubules and cognitive complexity across species. QCG extends Orch OR by introducing a dynamical coupling between large-scale neuromodulatory organization and the persistence of quantum coherence, together with path-dependent hysteresis that generates experimentally distinguishable state transitions. Building on core ideas from Hameroff and Penrose and McFadden and Al-Khalili (1996, 2018) (27,28), QCG introduces the notion that the degree and architecture of orchestrated quantum reductions, modulated by gravitational thresholds, can vary continuously across evolutionary and developmental cognitive spectra. In contrast to a binary threshold between conscious and non-conscious system, QCG posits a gradient: the more structurally organized and quantum-coherent the neural microarchitecture, the higher the cognitive capacity and the phenomenological quality.

4.1 Definition and theoretical scope

The Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG) is proposed not as a definitive physical explanation, but as a conceptual heuristic framework designed to model how localized quantum biological states might theoretically interact with macroscopic neurophysiology (29). Under the Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch-OR) framework, a conscious event is hypothesized to occur when the gravitational self-energy difference between superposed quantum states (E_G) satisfies the Diósi-Penrose criterion, triggering an objective reduction of the wavefunction (14). The baseline quantum coherence lifetime τ_0 predicted by this physical mechanism is expressed as, $\tau_0 = \frac{\hbar}{E_G}$. The QCG framework attempts to expand this hypothesis by mapping the cognitive capacity C to the number of structurally entangled tubulin dimers Q and an actualized quantum coherence lifetime τ, $C = Q \cdot \tau$. However this equation is incomplete, if the goal is to create an index for comparison of consciousness score then the outcome must be unitless. Hence, the normalized consciousness score is obtained by dividing the modeled consciousness value, C_m, by the corresponding human reference value, C_h. This normalization yields a dimensionless index between 0 and 1, with the human reference defined as 1.The normalized QCG score should not be interpreted as linearly proportional to subjective conscious experience. Rather, it represents a latent physical index hypothesized to correlate with conscious capacity. The mapping between the QCG score and phenomenological consciousness may be nonlinear and will require empirical calibration once suitable experimental measurements become available.

Additionally, rather than asserting this relationship as an empirically verified fact, the underlying classical neuromodulatory state is parameterized using an m×m interaction matrix, N. This matrix is not introduced solely as a mathematical convenience but as a proposed biological bridge between measurable neuromodulatory organization and the model's predicted quantum coherence dynamics. In principle, experimentally observed changes in neurotransmitter coordination could therefore be mapped onto corresponding changes in the predicted coherence lifetime, transforming the

hypothesis into a mathematically tractable and empirically testable framework. This matrix represents the coupled modulatory influences across major neurotransmitter systems (where indices 1 to m correspond to neurotransmitter systems such as dopamine, glutamate, acetylcholine, serotonin, and norepinephrine),

$$N = \begin{bmatrix} N_{11} & N_{12} & \cdots & N_{1m} \\ N_{21} & N_{22} & \cdots & N_{2m} \\ \vdots & \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ N_{m1} & N_{m2} & \cdots & N_{mm} \end{bmatrix}$$

Each matrix element N_{ij} denotes the coupling coefficient between neuromodulatory systems i and j, which could, in principle, be estimated from experimentally measurable quantities such as neurotransmitter concentrations, receptor occupancy, or functional connectivity derived from techniques including microdialysis, positron emission tomography (PET), calcium imaging, and electrophysiology. Under this formulation, the leading eigenvalue, $\lambda_{max}(N)$, serves as a quantitative measure of the global coordination of neuromodulatory activity. A phenomenological coupling is then introduced to relate this experimentally accessible index to the baseline Diósi–Penrose coherence lifetime, thereby providing a proposed mapping between large-scale neurochemical organization and the persistence of quantum coherence. Importantly, the proposed coupling between neuromodulatory organization and quantum coherence is not part of the original Orch OR theory. The QCG does not modify the Diósi–Penrose objective reduction criterion or its gravitational basis. Instead, it proposes that measurable neuromodulatory organization regulates the emergence, spatial extent, and persistence of coherent microtubule states capable of reaching the objective reduction threshold. In this way, the QCG functions as a phenomenological bridge between classical neurobiology and the quantum dynamics proposed by Orch OR, while leaving the underlying collapse physics unchanged.

$$\tau = \tau_0 \left(1 + \alpha \, \lambda_{max}(N)\right) = \frac{\hbar}{E_G}\left(1 + \alpha \, \lambda_{max}(N)\right)$$

This equation serves as an initial phenomenological framework for the proposed coupling between neuromodulatory coordination and quantum coherence; alternative functional forms or additional terms may be integrated as empirical measurements mature. Where α is an experimentally estimated coupling constant scaling this proposed classical-quantum biological interface. Substituting this into the central QCG heuristic yields,

$$C_m = Q \cdot \frac{\hbar}{E_G}\left(1 + \alpha\, \lambda_{max}(N)\right)$$

This integration is a speculative theoretical extrapolation rather than an established explanatory model. It is critical to differentiate the scope of this model from dominant contemporary paradigms such as Global Workspace Theory (GWT) and Integrated Information Theory (IIT). While GWT and IIT model cognitive architectures and informational properties from a functional, macro-neurocomputational perspective, Orch-OR and the QCG operate on a completely different conceptual plane, attempting to find a physical foundation that links biology to spacetime geometry. Because GWT and IIT do not claim to solve problems of quantum mechanics or quantum gravity, this comparison does not imply a structural deficiency in those models; rather, it highlights that the QCG addresses a distinct, highly speculative set of physical questions.

4.2 Justification from Orch OR and Quantum biology

The QCG model directly builds upon the foundations of Orch OR. Hameroff and Penrose (1996) proposed that objective reduction occurs when the separation in spacetime geometry due to a quantum superposition exceeds a threshold, leading to collapse and a discrete conscious event (27). More recently, McFadden and Al-Khalili (2018) reviewed broader developments in quantum biology that motivate renewed consideration of quantum mechanisms in biological systems (28). QCG expands this view by modeling how such events can vary in scale, frequency, and coordination, ultimately shaping the richness of conscious experience.

Most importantly, this extension is supported by recent developments in quantum biology research. Studies have demonstrated long-lived quantum coherence in biological systems like the Fenna-Matthews-Olson (FMO) complex and cryptochrome proteins, contradicting earlier critiques like those of Tegmark (2000) (15), who claimed the brain's thermal environment would destroy coherence too quickly. Instead, microtubules are increasingly viewed as potential hosts for robust quantum processes in neural cells.

Moreover, the gravitational component central to Orch OR and QCG provides a non-computational mechanism for consciousness, which helps address the limitations of classical algorithmic theories of mind. As Penrose (1994) (2) argued, certain forms of mathematical insight and understanding seem to transcend algorithmic processing, suggesting a deeper physical basis to conscious thought that QCG attempts to quantify.

4.3 From worms to humans: comparative application

QCG provides a plausible explanation for the observed differences in consciousness across species. For example, simple animals such as nematodes or insects may exhibit brief and localized microtubule coherence, with low

values for both Q and τ, resulting in rudimentary or episodic forms of awareness. Their gravitational self-energy differences (ΔE_G) are likely small due to their minimal mass separation in neural superpositions yet not enough to sustain prolonged quantum stability.

In contrast, mammals, especially primates, exhibit more elaborate microtubular structures, higher rates of long-range neuronal synchrony, and better metabolic support for quantum coherence. Humans, in particular, demonstrate extensive neocortical layering and global integration networks that could support significantly greater quantum entanglement coherence and eventual decoherence across neural tissue. This would yield high Q and τ values, while minimizing ΔE_G through stable neuromorphology and quantum shielding from surrounding structures.

Table 1 assumes placeholder coherence values derived from experimental modeling insights of Bandyopadhyay.

Table 1. Illustrative heuristic scaling of parameters across diverse animal architectures. These values are strictly conceptual placeholders for hypothesis-generation rather than quantitatively established in vivo physical measurements.

Species	Est. Q	Est. τ	Illustrative QCG category
C. elegans	10^2	10^{-4}s	Low
Octopus	10^5	10^{-3}s	Medium
Human	10^9	10^{-2}s	High

The qualitative QCG level is not assumed to vary linearly with the modeled quantity Qτ. Instead, it represents a conceptual classification of relative cognitive capacity. The functional relationship between the normalized QCG score and conscious experience remains unknown and constitutes an empirical question for future investigation. These values are hene purely illustrative and depend entirely on future experimental evaluation. They are indicative of the main principle that the QCG seeks to visually map: analyzing cognitive complexity on a spectrum, a notion that complements the structural language of classical neuroscience.

Furthermore, this gradient offers a possible explanation for behavioral phenomena such as mirror self-recognition, tool use, and episodic memory. Animals exhibiting these behaviors may occupy intermediate to high positions on the QCG, consistent with the observation that only certain species exhibit evidence of metacognition, complex empathy, or other higher-order cognitive abilities.

4.4 QCG in consciousness research

The QCG framework introduces a quantified value into consciousness studies. Unlike Integrated Information Theory (IIT) (29) or Global Workspace Theory (GWT) (30), which focus on information flow and integration,

Orch OR and the QCG framework aims to physically quantify consciousness. However despite this Orch OR and the QCG can complement Global Workspace Theory and Integrated Information Theory by providing a quantum-physical substrate, through microtubule coherence and gravitational collapse, that underlies the global broadcasting and causal integration of conscious information.

Unlike metaphysical or purely computational models of consciousness, QCG implies that consciousness is a quantifiable natural phenomenon subject to the same physical laws that govern particle interactions and gravitational fields. In doing so, the QCG framework is offered as a highly speculative conceptual continuation of Orch OR, serving as a heuristic proposal for comparing relative cognitive complexity across lifeforms. By suggesting a hypothetical boundary for microtubule quantum behavior associated with conscious awareness, it outlines potential conceptual avenues for future applied neuroscience research.

4.5 Addressing circularity through path-dependent hysteresis

A remaining conceptual weakness of the baseline QCG formulation is that the proposed relationship between neurochemistry, quantum coherence, and consciousness risks becoming circular rather than explanatory. The model presently states that large-scale neuromodulatory states determine coherence dynamics through $\lambda_{max}(N)$, while the resulting conscious state subsequently alters neurochemistry. Although such recursive feedback loops are common in biological systems, a purely instantaneous formulation does not specify how the model can distinguish cause from consequence or generate predictions that differ from those of conventional, memoryless dynamical neuroscience. In its present form, a critic could argue that consciousness is being explained by neurochemistry while neurochemistry is simultaneously being explained by consciousness, creating a self-referential framework that lacks independent explanatory power.

To move beyond this limitation and resolve the problem of circularity, a non-linear hysteresis is introduced into the coherence-collapse dynamics. Rather than assuming that the transition between coherent and collapsed states is determined solely by the instantaneous value of $\lambda_{max}(N)$, the model posits that the collapse threshold itself depends on the recent historical trajectory of the system. Under this framework, neuromodulatory activity influences not only the initial formation of coherent states but also their ongoing stability and persistence. Mathematically, a path-dependent history variable is introduced $\theta(t)$ that governs the system's macro-state. The actualized coherence lifetime $\tau(t)$ is modeled as a non-linear, hysteretic function of the global neuromodulatory coordination index,

$$\tau(t) = \frac{\hbar}{E_G}\left(1 + \alpha\,\lambda_{max}(N(t)) \cdot \theta(t)\right)$$

Where the historical state variable $\theta(t)$ evolves according to a non-linear activation threshold determined by the direction of change in the global coordination index ($d\lambda_{max}/dt$),

$$\theta(t)=\begin{cases}\theta_{\text{low}} & \text{if } \lambda_{max}(N)<\Lambda_{\text{induction}} \text{ (System is ascending)}\\ \theta_{\text{high}} & \text{if } \lambda_{max}(N)>\Lambda_{\text{emergence}} \text{ (System is descending)}\end{cases}$$

The operator $\theta(t)$ is deliberately modeled as a discrete step-operator rather than defining a continuous differential trajectory $\frac{d\theta}{dt}$ or $\frac{d\theta}{dC}$. In biological neural networks and macro-state neurodynamics, state transitions, such as the induction and emergence thresholds of general anesthesia or all-or-none neural gating mechanisms, frequently manifest as sharp, first-order phase transitions rather than gradual, memoryless drifts. Treating $\theta(t)$ as a discrete switch accurately reflects these biological tipping points, avoiding the introduction of unmeasurable free parameters that a continuous tracking derivative would require, while firmly preserving the historical path-dependence of the system.

Here, $\Lambda_{\text{induction}}$ represents the critical threshold of global neuromodulatory coordination required to establish macroscopic quantum coherence from an unconscious or baseline state, while $\Lambda_{\text{emergence}}$ represents the lower threshold at which a highly coherent state collapses back into baseline dynamics. Because $\Lambda_{\text{induction}}>\Lambda_{\text{emergence}}$, the system exhibits classic path-dependence ($\theta_{\text{high}}\neq\theta_{\text{low}}$).

Consequently, two neural systems with identical instantaneous present-day values of $\lambda_{max}(N)$ can occupy completely different coherence regimes depending entirely on their prior dynamical trajectories. This transforms the QCG framework from a static, circular feedback loop into a non-linear dynamical system with historical memory, a property commonly observed in complex biological and macroscopic state transitions.

4.5.1 Experimental predictions generated by hysteresis

Introducing explicit hysteresis transforms the QCG into a dynamical framework that generates experimentally testable and falsifiable predictions unavailable to conventional memoryless neurobiological models. These include asymmetric transition thresholds, history-dependent coherence dynamics, and persistent state-dependent effects following perturbation.

4.5.1.1 Asymmetric state trajectories

Transitions into and out of altered conscious states must follow structurally different pathways. For example, the critical value of $\lambda_{max}(N)$ and the precise neuromodulatory profiles required for the induction of general anesthesia should be significantly higher than those measured at the exact moment of emergence from anesthesia, establishing a quantifiable phase lag.

4.5.1.2 Divergent coherence signatures

Identical instantaneous neurotransmitter profiles will be associated with completely

different quantum signatures depending on recent state history. A system moving from a high-arousal state to a baseline state will exhibit longer coherence lifetimes (τ) and prolonged terahertz resonance preservation than a system moving upward from a deeply suppressed state to the same baseline.

4.5.1.3 Delayed relaxation and state persistence

Transient conscious or highly cognitive states may persist briefly after the physical removal of the initiating neuromodulatory perturbation. This produces localized delayed relaxation effects characteristic of hysteretic physical systems, providing a window where quantum coherence remains structurally protected despite falling classical chemical drive. Observation of these state-dependent, asymmetric transition thresholds would provide robust empirical evidence that biological coherence-collapse dynamics possess historical memory, whereas the total absence of hysteresis under directed neurochemical manipulation would directly falsify this extension of the QCG framework.

4.6 Toward experimental validation

A defining feature of the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG) framework is its testability. Unlike many theories of consciousness that remain primarily conceptual, QCG generates explicit, falsifiable predictions. Specifically, the model predicts that organisms with greater cognitive complexity should exhibit larger populations of entangled tubulin dimers (Q) and longer quantum coherence lifetimes (τ), properties that could, in principle, be investigated using emerging techniques such as terahertz spectroscopy, quantum resonance measurements, or advanced imaging methods. It further predicts that experimental manipulations capable of enhancing microtubule coherence—for example through molecular stabilization or other controlled biophysical interventions—should be accompanied by measurable changes in cognitive performance or established neurophysiological correlates of consciousness. Finally, the framework predicts that neurodegenerative disorders associated with impaired consciousness or cognition should exhibit corresponding reductions in microtubule coherence, providing an additional avenue for empirical evaluation. Collectively, these predictions distinguish QCG as a hypothesis-generating framework whose validity depends on future experimental verification rather than theoretical plausibility alone.

Most importantly, the normalization of the consciousness index (C^*) provides a standardized, dimensionless framework for comparing the relative predictions of the QCG across biological systems. In principle, organisms with progressively greater predicted quantum coherence would occupy correspondingly higher positions along the normalized continuum, with the human reference state defined as $C^*=1$. Importantly, the numerical values assigned by the model should be interpreted as heuristic outputs rather than direct measurements of consciousness, requiring empirical calibration through future experimental studies. By representing cognitive complexity as a continuous spectrum rather than a binary distinction between conscious

and unconscious states, the QCG provides a framework for investigating gradations of conscious capacity across species.

4.7 Comparison with existing models of consciousness

The QCG framework offers several advantages over existing models of consciousness by integrating principles from quantum mechanics, general relativity, and neurobiology into a single, testable formulation. While theories like Integrated Information Theory and Global Workspace Theory focus on informational and computational aspects of consciousness, QCG introduces a physical mechanism grounded in orchestrated quantum reductions and gravitational self-energy.

First, QCG is quantitative and predictive. Unlike IIT, which provides a mathematical index of integration Φ but lacks a clear physical substrate, QCG offers a formulaic approach based on measurable quantities like coherence time τ, entangled qubits Q, and gravitational energy difference ΔE_G. This allows researchers to estimate levels of consciousness across species or artificial systems using a shared physical language.

Second, QCG captures the continuum of cognitive complexity in a way that binary models often do not. Whereas GWT describes consciousness as a threshold of global access in neural networks, QCG allows for gradation through the normalized cognitive index C^*, offering a spectrum rather than a switch.

Third, QCG has a unique strength in evolutionary and comparative contexts. By tying consciousness to structural and quantum features of biological systems, it explains why certain species exhibit advanced cognition while others do not, without needing to invoke abstract thresholds of integration or access.

Finally, QCG unifies multiple scientific domains. It provides a framework where neuroscience, quantum mechanics, and gravitational physics are not competing explanations, but interlocking components of a deeper theory. In doing so, QCG offers a bridge between consciousness science and fundamental physics, addressing long-standing limitations in both fields.

As a result, QCG does not seek to replace models like IIT or GWT but to augment them by grounding their informational and computational insights in physical reality. While this speculative integration models a potential interface between classical neurochemistry and physics, it does not resolve the ontological origins of phenomenology; the hard problem of consciousness remains fully unaddressed by these mechanisms.

5. Towards testing Orch OR and QCG

As the theoretical foundations of Orch OR and the Quantum Cognition (QCG) grow more robust, the imperative shifts toward empirical validation. While both frameworks remain controversial, a growing suite of experimental tools, ranging from terahertz spectroscopy to advanced interferometric microscopy, offers novel approaches for testing their predictions. This section outlines the current state of experimental inquiry and proposes feasible strategies for advancing Orch OR and QCG

from theoretical constructs to testable scientific models.

5.1 Anesthetic effects and terahertz oscillations

One of the earliest lines of experimental evidence to support Orch OR involved the effects of anesthetics on consciousness and microtubular activity. Anesthetics are known to selectively impair consciousness while leaving other brain functions relatively intact, suggesting that they target specific substrates of conscious processing. Craddock et al. (2017) used molecular modeling and quantum chemical simulations to show that clinically relevant anesthetics are predicted to alter collective terahertz oscillations in tubulin, with the magnitude of these changes correlating with anesthetic potency. The authors proposed that such perturbations could disrupt quantum processes hypothesized by the Orch OR framework to contribute to consciousness (31). Using molecular dynamics and dielectric resonance modeling their study demonstrated that various anesthetics could inhibit these high-frequency vibrations by binding to hydrophobic pockets within tubulin.

If consciousness emerges from orchestrated quantum effects within microtubules, as the Orch OR theory claims, then disrupting these vibrational coherence of tubulin proteins inside microtubules would then affect consciousness. Therefore, one testable prediction is that anesthetics should consistently diminish specific terahertz signatures in the brain, measurable via terahertz spectroscopy or quantum optoelectronic sensors. Further research using brain organoids and *in vivo* imaging could confirm whether these oscillations correlate with the loss and return of consciousness under anesthetic effects.

5.2 Superradiance, symmetry, and quantum mechanics

Another strategy for validating Orch OR and the QCG lies in the study of superradiance and symmetry-enhanced coherence. Celardo et al. (2018) demonstrated through theoretical modeling that the native geometric arrangement of tryptophan chromophores within microtubules can support superradiant excitonic states and enhanced excitonic energy transport under idealized conditions (32).These states, characterized by coherent energy emission over long distances, are stabilized by the collective symmetry of the underlying structure.

These studies also suggest that biological systems might naturally tune themselves into regimes of optimal coherence, leveraging symmetry for cognitive advantage. This resonates with the QCG's claim that cognitive complexity emerges from enhanced quantum coherence and longer decoherence times, especially in geometrically favorable brain structures.

5.3 Integrated information and quantum mechanics

In parallel with quantum coherence, the role of integrated information in consciousness has gained increasing attention. Seth, Barrett, and Barnett (2011) introduced a framework for quantifying causal density and integrated information in brain networks, arguing that these metrics could serve as proxies for levels of consciousness (33). While this work was

grounded in classical information theory, the emergence of quantum information science invites the extension of such measures into the quantum domain.

If QCG is correct in linking consciousness to the degree of entanglement and coherence across microtubules, then one would expect systems with higher C* values to also exhibit greater integrated information. Experimental setups combining EEG, fMRI, and quantum field sensors may allow for correlational studies between classical information metrics and quantum coherence indicators offering indirect but critical evidence for the theory.

Furthermore, experiments in brain organoids could allow researchers to manipulate microtubule dynamics and measure changes in integrated information. By modulating environmental variables such as temperature, magnetic fields, and anesthetic exposure, one could test the responsiveness of both classical and quantum measurements to controlled perturbations, thereby probing the predictive ability of QCG.

5.4 Future experiments and technological prospects

A host of emerging technologies now makes it conceivable to test the fundamental tenets of Orch OR and QCG, though their feasibility timelines vary significantly. In the near term, quantum interferometric microscopy, capable of detecting minute phase shifts, is being adapted to track optical profiles across neurons. Concurrently, Bandyopadhyay's group has continued to refine nanoscale probes for terahertz detection, making near-term in vivo mapping of microtubule resonances increasingly possible.

Conversely, direct entanglement detection methods in complex biological matrices remain an outstanding challenge and represent a long-term technological aspiration. Coupling these long-term tools with genetically engineered fluorescent tubulin markers or voltage-sensitive dyes may eventually allow researchers to verify microtubular states at quantum-relevant scales. Furthermore, theoretical work by Mavromatos et al. (2025) has suggested the long-term feasibility of biologically adapted quantum models incorporating spacetime effects into microtubule dynamics (34). Parallel advances in machine learning may help identify complex spatiotemporal patterns within these datasets. This layered timeline underscores that while some baseline resonant properties are testable today, verifying macroscopic quantum processing in tissue remains an open, multi-decade empirical journey.

These models point toward a synthesis of general relativity, quantum mechanics, and cognitive neuroscience, precisely the interdisciplinary fusion Orch OR and the QCG aim to achieve.

6 Levels of evidence and current empirical status

To maintain rigorous scholarly objectivity, the evidence discussed in this review must be categorized into three distinct epistemic levels to prevent the conflation of empirical data with speculative theory:

[1] *Direct empirical observations:* Quantifiable, reproducible physical data,

including verified quantum coherence in photosynthetic complexes, avian magnetoreception via cryptochromes, and specific acoustic and terahertz resonance phenomena measured in isolated microtubules *in vitro*.

[2] *Mechanistic inferences:* Theoretical and computational models suggesting that specialized biological microenvironments may possess structural properties capable of shielding or sustaining quantum states under selective physiological conditions.

[3] *Speculative theoretical extensions:* Extrapolations that directly link localized quantum effects to macroscopic cognitive processing, global state transitions, and phenomenology through Orch-OR and the proposed Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG).

Importantly, evidence within the first category must not be interpreted as a direct validation of claims in the third category. The existence of a functional quantum effect in a photosynthetic protein complex or an avian retinal receptor establishes that biological quantum biology is possible under highly specific, evolutionarily optimized physiological conditions; it does not constitute empirical proof that the mammalian brain utilizes analogous mechanisms for information processing.

At present, no experimental data demonstrates that quantum coherence occurs within neural microtubules *in vivo*, nor that such coherence generates, modulates, or is necessary for conscious experience. Accordingly, both Orch-OR and the QCG remain non-established theoretical frameworks whose primary scientific value lies in generating testable, falsifiable hypotheses rather than providing settled explanations of consciousness. The empirical observations reviewed in this manuscript should be interpreted strictly as reducing the degree to which quantum biology is structurally excluded by classical thermodynamic and decoherence-based objections. They do not serve as evidence that Orch-OR or the QCG is the correct explanation of the neural correlates of consciousness.

7. Conclusion

Understanding how subjective conscious experience arises from physical processes remains one of the most profound challenges in neuroscience and fundamental physics. Although the Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch OR) theory remains controversial, developments over the past decade in quantum biology, biophysical modeling, and microtubule research justify renewed scientific examination of its central assumptions. Experimental observations demonstrating functional quantum effects in biological systems have weakened the once-prevailing argument that warm, noisy biological environments categorically preclude quantum coherence. At the same time, no direct evidence currently demonstrates that analogous quantum processes occur within neuronal microtubules or that they generate conscious experience. Consequently, Orch OR should presently be regarded not as an established explanation of consciousness but as a scientifically testable hypothesis.

Building upon this foundation, this review introduces the Quantum Cognition Gradient (QCG) as a conceptual, phenomenological

extension of Orch OR. Rather than proposing an entirely new physical mechanism, the QCG provides a mathematical framework for relating predicted quantum coherence dynamics to measurable features of large-scale neuromodulatory organization. By incorporating classical neurochemical coordination, normalization across biological systems, and history-dependent hysteresis, the framework generates explicit, experimentally distinguishable predictions that extend beyond the original Orch OR formulation while remaining grounded in empirical falsifiability.

The primary value of the QCG therefore lies not in demonstrating that quantum coherence underlies consciousness, but in transforming an otherwise qualitative hypothesis into a framework capable of systematic experimental evaluation. The proposed relationships between neuromodulatory coordination, coherence lifetime, and cognitive complexity provide specific predictions that can be investigated using emerging techniques such as terahertz spectroscopy, advanced neuroimaging, anesthetic perturbation studies, and future quantum-sensitive measurements. Equally important, failure to observe the predicted coherence dynamics or hysteretic behavior would provide clear grounds for rejecting or revising the model.

Ultimately, progress in consciousness research will require the convergence of neuroscience, quantum physics, biology, mathematics, and experimental technology. Whether the mechanisms proposed by Orch OR and the QCG ultimately prove correct or are superseded by alternative explanations, their scientific value rests in generating precise, testable hypotheses that invite empirical investigation rather than metaphysical speculation. By articulating experimentally accessible predictions and a quantitative conceptual framework, this work seeks to contribute to the broader effort of transforming one of science's oldest philosophical questions into a progressively more tractable scientific problem.

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