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Neural Correlates of Consciousness Reconsidered

It is widely accepted among philosophers that neuroscientists are conducting a search for the neural correlates of consciousness, or NCC. David Chalmers (2000) conceptualized this research program as the attempt to correlate the contents of conscious experience with the contents of representations in specific neural populations. This interpretation, now standard, is inadequate in two ways. First, it is phenomenologically invalid insofar as it treats the contents of experience as stand-alone or discrete bits that can be isolated from their holistic subjective context. Second, and more important for the moment, the standard conception of the NCC obscures the actual nature of the empirical research by framing it in the metaphysically neutral language of “correlates” of conscious contents rather than as part of a larger causal/mechanical explanatory strategy. A notable claim on behalf of the correlate idea is that the neutral language frees us from philosophical disputes over the mind/body relation, allowing the science to move independently (Crick, 1996, p.486). Opponents of the standard NCC concept argue that the new neuroscience of consciousness needs philosophy now more than ever (Noe & Thompson, 2004). Certainly philosophy is still important in this context. But what is needed now is not so much more philosophy of mind but better philosophy of science.

The first issue facing the standard NCC concept concerns the nature of conscious content and the individuation of conscious states. This debate in philosophy of mind has been the primary focus of the NCC literature. The second issue has received less attention. It concerns the proper interpretation of the research itself, and thus it is an issue in philosophy of science. While it remains true that the neuroscience by itself does not adjudicate conceptual disputes regarding the nature of mental content, the experimental paradigms and explanatory canons
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