Title: Agency as a Marker of Consciousness: An Account of Flexibility

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Abstract:

A central issue for the study of consciousness concerns the measures we use to make attributions of consciousness. In perceptual psychology, verbal report is often considered the ‘gold standard’ (Frith, Perry, & Lumer, 1999; Weiskrantz, 1997). There are, however, well-documented problems with the reliability of report as a measure of consciousness (Irvine, 2012; Peters & Lau, 2015; Phillips, 2015). ‘No-report paradigms’ look to provide independent psychophysical measures that are indicative of consciousness (see, Tsuchiya, Wilke, Frässle, & Lamme, 2015 for a review). Such measures, however, rely upon report for validation and, as such, do not constitute independently validated measures of consciousness. Current methods, then, would be strengthened if measures of consciousness that do not depend on subjects’ reports—either directly or indirectly—were also available.

In this talk, we will explore the promising view that agency can be used as a marker of consciousness (Bayne 2012). In particular, we examine the proposal that consciousness enables the flexible control of behaviour. In our view, existing appeals to flexibility often leave the notion vague and overly general, and as of yet, few attempts have been made to give an account of flexible control. In this talk, we develop such an account, which allows that flexibility can come in degrees, and breaks it down into three broad dimensions: (i) input flexibility, which concerns the range of sensory inputs that a system has the capacity to be sensitive to, (ii) output flexibility, which concerns the range of outputs that a system has the capacity to produce, and (iii) control flexibility, which concerns the range of internal states and processes that can mediate between inputs and outputs. We will end by examining how this account can help clarify the connection between consciousness and agency, and how it might be used to help develop independently valid measures of consciousness.