Title: Can empirical evidence move forward philosophical debates on consciousness?

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Abstract:

One motivation driving the so-called ‘empirical turn’ in the philosophical work on consciousness is the possibility of assessing and comparing theories of consciousness based on their explanatory and predictive powers. The theoretical debates are increasingly gridlocked because the participants differ in conceptual commitments. There is general agreement on the phenomenon to be explained, and (roughly) on the terminology to deploy in such an explanation, but disagreement on how to conceive of the specific terms. Thus, the hope is that appeal to empirical evidence may be deployed to move the debates forward.

I highlight two problematic issues with deciding between competing theories of consciousness on the bases of their respective empirical support. The first issue concerns the relation between philosophical theory and empirical evidence. In particular, how empirical data is interpreted in light of a particular philosophical theory. Because philosophers, in their interpretation of empirical data, will deploy the conceptual framework that make the most sense to them, we run the risk that conceptual disagreements from the theoretical domain migrate to the empirical domain. An example that this already is happening to some extent can be seen in competing interpretation of the change blindness phenomenon. If the conceptual disagreement is allowed to bleed into the empirical debate, this undermines the project of deploying empirical evidence to move forward the theoretical debate. The other issue I highlight concerns the current developing debate regarding the neural correlates of consciousness (NCC). In this domain prominent philosophical theories of consciousness have become aligned with competing hypotheses about the NCCs. However, because of a disconnect between the kind of entities posited in the theoretical domain and the kind of data we can obtain measuring the brain, it is unclear whether confirming one hypothesis about the NCCs will also confirm its associated philosophical theory.