What Are the Subjective Processes in Our Brain? Empirical and Ethical Implications of a Relational Concept of the Brain

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The subjective brain therefore embodies the significance attached to things and the way that it shapes itself in the light of experience and inheritance.

—Gillett, 2009 (5)

I focus in my commentary of Gillett’s (2009) target article on the empirical and ethical implications of his relational approach to the brain. Empirically, his account raises the question for the kind of neural processes that organize and code the incoming stimuli in a relational and thus embedded way. While ethically, his relational approach makes a reconceptualization of ethical concepts such as informed consent in a relational rather than isolational way necessary. This means that more basic functions like emotions and empathy may be crucial in the outcome of the informed consent.

Grant Gillett (2009) describes in his wonderful target article the brain as essentially subjective as indicated in this quote. By the concept of subjectivity, he refers to the relation to the world, embeddedness. While he discusses some revealing clinical cases, the question for the exact process in the brain that makes such embeddedness, the relation to the world, possible. He may now argue that such process can neither be ‘located’ in the brain itself nor be characterized by neural content, or matter in the Aristotelian terms he uses so nicely. This would mean to fall back into isolating the brain from its environment and thus to opt for isolation rather than embeddedness. This has both empirical and ethical implications.

EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS

How must a brain process look like and be characterized in order to allow for embeddedness (rather than isolation) in the sense of Gillett (2009)? First, such brain process must be characterized by constituting and establishing a certain form, a relational form, which allows us to relate to the world and be embedded in it. The question is for a certain kind of neural form or better neural organization than for a specific neural content. Such neural form or neural organization is made possible by a certain kind of coding, the neural code. Hence, Gillett basically raises the question for the neural code, the neural processes that organize and shape the incoming stimuli from the world in such way that they are attached significance.

Second, such brain process must account for a very basic sense of subjectivity in the sense of Gillett (2009). His sense of subjectivity seems to be more basic than the meaning of subjectivity often (rather implicitly) presupposed in the current philosophy of mind and neurophilosophy. Here the concept of subjectivity is equated with the first-person perspective (FPP) as distinguished from third-person perspective (TPP) that then is characterized by objectivity. This is however is not what Gillett means when he talks of subjectivity. His concept of subjectivity is more basic lying beneath the distinction between FPP and TPP (that he would probably associate with the distinction between individuality and generality rather than subjectivity and objectivity). He would probably argue that his more basic sense of subjectivity first and foremost makes the distinction between FPP and TPP (and hence between individuality and generality) first and foremost possible. While conceptually his notion of subjectivity seems to be very much in the sense of Kant, empirically he may associate rather lower-order processes like affective and sensorimotor functions than higher-order processes like cognitive functions with the concept of subjectivity.

What do these notions of neural coding and subjectivity imply in experimental-empirical and conceptual-ethical regard? Experimental-empirically, we must search for a very basic neural process that organizes and codes incoming stimuli in a relational and thus embedded way. Our group pursues the search for such process and assumes what we call ‘self-related processing’ to be such basic organizing and coding neural process (Northoff 2004, Northoff and Bernholt 2004, Northoff et al. 2006). By the concept of self-related processing, we do not refer to some entity or substance termed self; rather we mean by ‘self’ subjective experience very much in the sense of Gillett’s (2009) concept of subjectivity. By ‘related’ we mean that the process establishes a relation between the own organism including the brain’s actual (resting) state of neural activity and the

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informed consent may be realized in their emotional correspondence and more specifically in their mutual degree of empathy. This means that emotions and empathy may be crucial in constituting the decisional capacity implicated in informed consent and also in determining the outcome of informed consent, i.e., whether the subject refuses, accepts or remains ambivalent. If so, one may conduct empirical studies about the impact of emotions and empathy on the decisional capacity and the outcome of the informed consent (see, for example, Northoff 2006; Northoff 2009). Furthermore, one may need to include the emotional and empathic abilities of both the consenting subject and the investigator obtaining the consent. Conceptually, this implies that one may need to develop a truly relational or social and embedded concept of informed consent as distinguished from an isolated (and cognitive) one (Northoff 2009).

REFERENCES


