Review of: "The Case for Conscious Experience Being in Individual Neurons"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This lucid and interesting paper, well worth reading, concerns the neural correlates of conscious experiences. The authors (A, henceforth) argue that conscious experience 'must be events in individual neurons, not spread across neuronal networks or brain regions.' They own that 'conscious events in individual neurons would make our subjectivity massively multiple' and add 'Yet it appears this is how neuroscience shows things must be.' In what follows, I will forgo explaining how A argues neuroscience shows this (these arguments are well worth considering) and I will instead raise questions about this position's consequences.

A writes: 'A neuron is a what, in that we can think of it as an object with size and shape. But the idea is that some neurons, maybe thousands or millions of them, must also each be a 'me', in the sense that 'there is something it is like to be in a world' for a me. That may not quite make a neuron a who, or Jo Edwards, but maybe not so far off, at least for how things seem to the neuron. It is not a human being – that is the colony.' So the man writing these words is a colony of selves (or separate subjects) for many of which there is something it's like to be in the world. They may not all have the same content but, as I understand A, each neuron has conscious experiences that represent being in a world. Hence our subjectivity is massively multiple.

Is each of these neurons not just a subject of conscious experience but a person too? A holds that a person is 'best seen as a self-story, told over a period of years, partly in real time, partly with memory re-plays, and future plans, by a colony of cells to a colony of cells.' So a person is a self-story. This leads to difficulties, I think. First, a story is a set of propositions or sentences. I am a person. It follows that there exists an x such that x is a person and I = x. But I weigh 160 lbs. However sets of propositions are weightless. It follows that either I'm not a person or a person isn't a self-story. I am a person. Therefore a person isn't a self-story.

Second, a self-story is a story about a self. Whatever is represented in the story as the self should be our initial choice of what persons are. On the face of things, that's a self-aware human animal that is a subject of experiences. Persons are physical things and, if neurons turn out to be the physical things that are subjects of experiences and are self-aware, neurons are going to be persons–or as close as we can get. So I'm made of millions of distinct persons, which is hard to accept. We can't identify persons with colonies of cells since, as persons are subjects of experience, colonies of cells would be subjects of experiences, contrary to A's thesis that conscious experiences are not spread out over brain regions. And A can't get rid of persons without getting rid of us. The view that neurons are subjects but not persons (though nothing else seems to be a person) appears unstable.

Some gestures and questions: A suggests the self-stories of different neurons in one brain are usually going to be the same, though many may differ in detail. But that makes them numerically distinct stories. Suppose I rehearse the saga of my life and hard times. But which neuron is reporting? And if just one neuron is reporting, which one is it? How does it get to be the one that reports? What happens to the neurons that don't report? Are they unconscious, or.....?

And how does introspection work on this account? Suppose I have a Lockean inner sense and I perceive the pain in my left foot. Which neuron do I introspect? Suppose a million neurons have tokens of that pain. Is that phenomenologically different than just one?

Finally suppose Godel suddenly grasps how the incompleteness proof should go. That's a conscious experience. It's hard to see how one neuron is going to grasp how the proof should go and also feel what it is like to suddenly grasp it. There seems to be a dilemma. Either we allow that neural networks (or brain regions) are the subject of the realization or we force vast computational power into a lone neuron. I