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Can we Assess Consciousness in AI?

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Abstract

Progress in AI has led to a lively debate about the possibilities of creating and assessing consciousness in AI, building on Putnam's conjecture that computational functionalism is more plausible than a biological view of consciousness.

I discuss Butlin et al.'s (2025) proposal for extracting computational indicators of consciousness from neuroscientific theories and critically evaluate computational functionalism in light of the alternative, biological naturalism. While computational functionalism allows for AI consciousness in principle, it is questionable whether conscious AI systems are practically possible, and whether we are in an epistemic position to judge that a specific AI is conscious.

Putative computational indicators extracted from neuroscientific theories of consciousness can never be as well (or even better) supported by empirical evidence than their neurobiological realizers measured in human brains. All potential markers of consciousness that are typically alluded to in humans or non-human animals are either absent, ambiguous, or question-begging in the case of AI systems.