UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES OF THE BRAIN & MIND IN THE AFTERMATH OF TERRI SCHIAVO & RELATED CASES

When you look into someone’s eyes, can you know what they are thinking or feeling if they cannot tell you? Knowing whether that person is conscious—thinking, perceiving, or feeling in the way that you yourself are doing these things—is a matter of judgment. But how are these judgments made when faced with patients in the setting of severe brain injuries? What tools can be used and how advanced is our knowledge? In this Science Café, neurologist Nicholas Schiff, MD (Weill Cornell Medical College) and psychologist Daniel Wegner, PhD (Harvard University) address this key problem in the understanding of persistent vegetative state and minimally conscious state. Schiff will examine several recent cases and consider their proper placement within the spectrum of disorders of human consciousness. The review will explore how modern neuroimaging may extend our understanding of mechanisms underlying these conditions. Wegner will consider how these states are judged from the outside, by examining how people perceive other inscrutable minds—such as the minds of animals, robots, and babies. Together, the speakers will bring current research to bear on the question of how we can know the mind behind the eyes.

Speakers for the evening:
— Nicholas D. Schiff, M.D., Director, Laboratory of Cognitive Neuromodulation; Assistant Professor of Neurology and Neuroscience, Weill Medical College of Cornell University; Assistant Attending Neurologist at the New York Presbyterian Hospital
— Daniel M. Wegner, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Harvard University

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