Explaining variation within the meta-problem

Abstract

It is a working assumption in much of the literature on the meta-problem that problem intuitions are (fairly) universal, and they are (fairly) universally treated as being psychological or rationally significant. I argue that variation in the universality and psychological or rational significance of problem intuitions is worth taking seriously, and that doing so places significant and challenging constraints on what an answer to the meta-problem might look like. In particular, it raises a potential challenge for (full blown) realists on how solutions to the meta-problem link to the hard problem.

Introduction

I am one of those people who doesn't think that there's a (genuine) hard problem. I have argued elsewhere for a position of scientific eliminativism about the concept of consciousness (2012), and for a Type Q(uinian) approach to consciousness and the hard problem more generally (2017). More so than others, this kind of position very obviously demands addressing the meta-problem: "…the problem of explaining why we think that there is a problem of consciousness" (Chalmers 2018, p. 6).

Chalmers (2018) outlines an approach to the meta-problem as essentially a search for an explanation of why people have problem intuitions, or more properly, why they have dispositions to generate phenomenal reports that express problem intuitions. Problem intuitions are the sort that "reflect our sense that there is some sort of special problem involving consciousness" (*op cit*, p. 12).

The theme of this short commentary is to work on the 'we' and 'our' in these quotations. I take it that the 'we' minimally refers to members of philosophical and scientific communities interested in consciousness (perhaps also the general public). Clearly, it is possible that even if 'we' don't all take the hard problem that seriously, or have problem intuitions, that 'we' can still find the meta-problem of interest. But it is a working assumption in much of the literature on the meta-problem that 'we' really do all have these problem intuitions, and that we find them fairly significant.

I argue that these assumptions are worth questioning. First, I argue that one should take seriously the possibility that problem intuitions are not (all) universal, and that doing so places significant and challenging constraints on what an answer to the meta-problem might look like. In particular, it raises a potential challenge for (full blown) realists on how solutions to the meta-problem link to the hard problem. Second, I raise the issue of variation in how much 'psychological weight' people give to problem intuitions. After all, merely having an intuition does not mean that one automatically treats it seriously in reasoning or uses it to generate philosophical problems. A full and satisfactory answer to the meta-problem therefore demands consideration of both these potential forms of variation concerning problem intuitions.

Variation in problem intuitions

This first issue is dealt with briefly by Chalmers: that there might be variation in problem intuitions about consciousness. Some people might only have some of them, and some people might not have problem intuitions at all. Chalmers states early on that "A fully adequate solution to the meta-problem should be able to explain not only why these intuitions are widely shared, if they are, but also why they are not universal, if indeed they are not" (*op cit*, p. 14). Even if it is found that problem intuitions are not universal, Chalmers notes that explaining the limited (non-universal) presence of problem intuitions "will still be of considerable interest" (*op cit,* p. 15).

Rightly pointed out by Chalmers, there is still a lot of empirical work to do to identify whether problem intuitions are indeed universal, or more specifically, which ones (if any). Within experimental philosophy and psychology, there is also work to do to design studies that elicit responses that accurately track intuitions about consciousness (as reviewed in e.g. Systma 2014). Other more linguistic and ethnographic methods are available too, which deserve further development and consideration (e.g. Wierzbicka 2010; Wilkes, 1988).

However, despite this, Chalmers takes it as a working assumption (as do many others) that problem intuitions of at least some kinds are universal. Much of the paper proceeds in light of this. Presumably, if it turns out that problem intuitions are not all universal, we can deal with that later: one has to start somewhere. However, the possibility that problem intuitions concerning phenomenal consciousness are not universal is I think worth taking just as seriously as a starting point. We have, after all, very little evidence either way. From the little evidence we do have, there is at least some (contested) support for the idea that people think very different things about consciousness (Systma 2014). This I think gives us enough reason to consider the possibility that some people just might not have problem intuitions about consciousness at all. As I argue next though, this does not sit well with the answers to the meta-problem currently on offer.

In the paper, Chalmers (2018) surveys a wide range of explanations for the existence of problem intuitions about consciousness, many (though not all) from the illusionist end of the spectrum. These explanations appear to be based on the same working assumption held by Chalmers, that problem intuitions are universal. To explain these intuitions, these accounts typically appeal to the nature of introspection and our access to our mental lives, and deployment of phenomenal and physical concepts. The apparent aim is to describe some deep-seated features of our cognitive machinery that makes the emergence of problem intuitions entirely unsurprising. Indeed, one of Chalmers' common criticisms of these accounts is that they do not show that the emergence of problem intuitions is 'inevitable' or 'automatic' or otherwise obviously likely.

If one seriously considers the possibility that problem intuitions are *not* universal, this approach to the meta-problem starts to look problematic. To see this in more detail, it is worth quoting Chalmers' summary of what he sees as the most promising approach in full:

"We have introspective models deploying introspective concepts of our internal states that are largely independent of our physical concepts. These concepts are introspectively opaque, not revealing any of the underlying physical or computational mechanisms. Our perceptual models perceptually attribute primitive perceptual qualities to the world, and our introspective models attribute primitive mental relations to those qualities. We seem to have immediate knowledge that we stand in these primitive mental relations to primitive qualities, and we have the sense of being acquainted with them." (*op cit, p*. 34)

I take it that the introspective and perceptual models described here, the relationships between the concepts described, and the 'seemings' and 'sensings' are supposed to be universal (via the 'we').

Now the question is: what about this cognitive machinery would be different between people who have problem intuitions and those who don't? Presumably cognitively 'normal' humans all share the same perceptual 'model' mentioned here, which is related to the idea that we attribute apparently irreducible qualities (colours) to objects. And presumably introspective concepts are generally opaque with respect to the physical or computational mechanisms behind them, if we think that introspection always works in a certain way.

One possibility is that people without problem intuitions just have different introspective concepts entirely, that are perhaps somehow linked with physical concepts, or that otherwise somehow don't generate problem intuitions. Another possibility is that introspection somehow works differently for them, perhaps with more access to the mechanisms that generate the states that they are focused on. Or perhaps it is something else entirely. In either case, we would be owed an explanation of this surprising variation in our cognitive machinery, and of how exactly it works in these cases.

The problem here is that the deeper you go into basic and widely shared cognitive machinery in order to explain cases where people *do* have problem intuitions, and have them inevitably, the more difficult it becomes to explain possible cases where people *do not* have them. On the face of it, I take it that this should be avoided. It might be the case that the reason why people without problem intuitions don't have them is that they just have a radically different system of perception and/or introspection, but this seems unlikely and a little ad hoc. This is particularly true if one talks about perception (e.g. of colours) and introspection in computational or systems terms: colour representations provide short-cut ways of identifying and comparing objects, and introspection does something similar at a higher level. I take it that we should avoid positing that some people run on radically different computational systems to others.

The difference between those who have problem intuitions and those that don't is then presumably more shallow, i.e. not related to very basic cognitive structure, and instead related to something more naturally variable. One possibility is that, in contrast to an implicit assumption built into the model quoted above, introspective processes are actually pretty variable in general and are open to all sorts of inputs and effects, and so not always very structurally similar across time and people anyway (e.g. Schwitzgebel 2012). This might mean in turn that introspective concepts vary across people in how they are developed and applied, and what their core properties are (e.g. to what extent they are opaque and independent of physical concepts). A lot more detail needs to be provided here, but it is at least a lot easier and a lot more plausible to explain variation in problem intuitions in terms of more shallow (and less universal) cognitive factors, rather than in deep differences in computational systems.

In turn, this has interesting implications for how answers to the meta-problem link to the hard problem, particularly for realists. For realists, consciousness should (ideally) be closely connected with the mechanisms that drive the generation of intuitions about it. As Chalmers writes, "…a realist should expect that our judgments about consciousness are the way they are *because* consciousness is the way it is, or at least because the basis of consciousness is the way it is" (Chalmers 2018, p. 36).

The more appealing realist possibilities are cases where properties of phenomenal states are somehow directly linked to the generation of an (accurate) intuition about those properties. As Chalmers outlines in Section 6, the way to get a tight connection here is for consciousness to realise (rather than somehow inform, or correlate with) some part of the process that generates problem intuitions. In this case, consciousness will be a 'primary cause' of our problem intuitions.

Depending on exactly how this is supposed to work though, it may make it hard to see how it would be possible for someone to have phenomenal consciousness (as the full blown realist thinks of it), but not have problem intuitions about it. Having phenomenal consciousness, on this view, means you have some of the core machinery that generates problem intuitions. Of course, being a primary cause of problem intuitions is not the same as being a causal determinant of them, but it is worth noting a tension here.

Similar to the problem above, the tension here is that the more causal work phenomenal consciousness is supposed to do in generating problem intuitions, the closer the connection is between the hard problem and the meta-problem: the reason that we have problem intuitions is that consciousness is actually this way. A strong realist position demands a close connection. But the more causal work phenomenal consciousness is supposed to do in generating problem intuitions, the harder it is to account for potential variation in problem intuitions.

Again, in order to account for the possibility that problem intuitions are not universal, one must instead explain the existence of problem intuitions in terms of

more shallow and more naturally variable processes. But as you go more shallow, less explanatory work on the meta-problem is done in terms of cognitive machinery directly related to or realized by phenomenal consciousness. Clearly, this loosens the connection between solutions to the meta-problem and phenomenal consciousness, which is not a good move for the realist. And again, depending on exactly how this works, it may raise a problem outlined by Chalmers, that "One may still worry about whether [consciousness] plays a central enough role, not least because the structure of the processes may seem to explain our intuitions even without consciousness…" (*op cit,* p. 42). There may of course be a happy middle ground here between phenomenal consciousness playing a significant but not decisive role in generating problem intuitions (in cognitively 'normal' people), and in answering the meta-problem, but this needs work.

In response to this line of argument, one might object[1] that if there is variation across people in whether they have problem intuitions at all, and if this is best explained by shallow cognitive factors, we should also expect variation across a person's lifetime in whether they have them or not. That is, if problem intuitions are generated by shallow cognitive factors, then it seems that it should be easier to switch between having them and not. The problem is that some people at least seem to consistently have problem intuitions, no matter how many illusionist arguments they encounter. This could be taken as a reason to think both that deep cognitive explanations of problem intuitions are more satisfying, as they can deal with these cases, and perhaps further to question whether we really should expect to find genuine variation in problem intuitions across people.

However, it is important to note that appealing to 'shallow' cognitive factors to explain problem intuitions is relative. Chalmers' (and others') explanations of the source of problem intuitions appeal to fundamental features of perceptual processing and the structure of introspection; universal computational features of beings like us. In cognitive terms, there is a lot that is 'shallow' compared to this that is still pretty deep. 'Shallow' factors may, for example, include particular styles or structures of thinking, entrenched values or general academic or aesthetic commitments, systematic biases in information selection, weighting and reasoning, and more. Despite being 'shallow' compared to core features of universal computational processes, these may be very hard to change. The sense in which they are shallow is merely that they vary across a population. From this, it does not follow that finding variation in problem intuitions across a population means that we should expect to see variation within individuals across their lifetime. Indeed, the sources of variation across people may be sufficiently 'deep' that dispositions regarding problem intuitions may be fairly stable in individuals, at least from a certain point onwards.

In light of this then, there is a case to be made that accounting for variation in problem intuitions is more easily dealt with by some kind of illusionist view (either weak or strong). If there is no great link to be preserved between the hard problem

[1] Thanks to Francois Kammerer for raising this.

and the meta-problem, such that the content of problem intuitions is directly linked to properties of phenomenal consciousness, then variation across problem intuitions can be more easily explained in terms of naturally variable and more cognitively shallow factors. This is obviously very far from a knock-down argument. It does though, I hope, suggest that variation in problem intuitions is something that demands consideration, and may have substantial implications for what an adequate solution to the meta-problem, and the hard problem, would look like.

Another form of variation

There is another form of variation that needs to be considered in framing what we mean by the meta-problem. The meta-problem is set up as the question of why people have dispositions to generate phenomenal reports that express problem intuitions. But merely having problem intuitions does not automatically generate a (philosophically significant) problem of consciousness. This is because in order for problem intuitions to generate a genuine problem of consciousness, at least some people need to take them seriously, where these intuitions and the reasoning and judgements they lead to are not, as Chalmers puts it, 'psychologically outweighed by other forces' (*op cit,* p. 14). This is because people have intuitions about all sort of things, that may be commonly shared, that never see the light of day because they are quickly overridden by relevant knowledge or reasoning. The second type of variation that needs to be addressed then is variation in how psychologically weighty problem intuitions are to different people, providing they have them at all. The meta-problem then becomes the question of why people have dispositions to generate phenomenal reports that express problem intuitions, where these intuitions are at least sometimes treated as being philosophically significant.

This may tie into the particular sets of machinery we posit to deal with the meta-problem: is there within this machinery any variation in terms of how salient or how clearly presented problem intuitions are, or how easily generated they are? That is, perhaps there is a sense in which these intuitions are stronger in some people than in others. Alternatively, the variation could be traced elsewhere: perhaps for some people, intuitions are just generally more weighty in their (philosophical) reasoning. Or perhaps there is something about the generation of these intuitions, compared to the generation of other intuitions (e.g. about moral matters) that makes them particularly pressing for specific individuals.

I think this is an interesting question for all sides. If (full blown) realists are right, and problem intuitions are tightly connected to and driven by phenomenal consciousness, it would be good to know why some people who have these (accurate) intuitions were swayed by something else and became illusionists (what went wrong!). If non-realists (both weak and strong illusionists) are right, then it would be good to know what it is about the intuitions that we nevertheless have that mean that some people find them very significant, and others don't.

There is not much empirical literature that is obviously relevant to these questions. While there is a wealth of literature on 'intuition' in decision-making, particularly in

dual process models, much of this tends to treat intuition as a rather generic process (or set of processes) for producing judgments (e.g. Evans & Stanovich 2013). There has been some work identifying the different cognitive mechanisms that might underlie intuition, such as associative mechanisms, automatic evidence accumulation, comparison to prototypes, familiarity/ease of access from memory, and so on (e.g. Glöckner and Witteman 2010; Gigerenzer et al. 2011). These domain general mechanisms are very different to the model suggested by Chalmers above though, where intuitions about consciousness are generated by very specific and (apparently) deep structural features of our perceptual and introspective machinery. So, it's not clear how findings about other intuitive processes might generalize to the rather more specific case of interest here. For the same reason, one might worry about how to generalize other findings about individual differences in the use of intuitive judgments to the case here. In sum then, more work is required.

Conclusion

I have suggested that there are two aspects of the meta-problem that need exploration if we are to identify a satisfying explanation of why we think that there is a problem of consciousness. The first aspect is the possible variation in who has problem intuitions, and if so, which ones. I argued that this possible variation is worth taking seriously, and that if one does, then the kind of explanation we should expect to give for the generation of problem intuitions would appeal to much more cognitively shallow factors than those used in the explanations currently on offer. In turn, this makes it harder for the realist to maintain a tight connection between phenomenal consciousness and our intuitions about it. Second, I argued that merely having problem intuitions does not make it the case that 'we' would think there is a hard problem, or meta-problem, worth taking seriously. A full explanation of the meta-problem requires more detail on how and why these intuitions are psychologically weighty for some, such that the hard problem is a problem that philosophical and scientific communities treat as an important one.

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