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Robot pains and corporate feelings

EDOUARD MACHERY AND JUSTIN SYTSMA
ARGUE THAT EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS MIGHT
UNDERCUT THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Consider the last time you killed a spider in your house. Do you think that it felt pain? Was it the right kind of creature to feel pain? If not a spider, what about a lobster or a flounder, a toad or a bat? What about a human foetus? Can any or all of these feel pain? How do you decide? What makes a creature the sort of creature that

can feel pain? Suppose that you do ascribe feelings of pain to the spider. When you do so, what do you think you are ascribing to it? Is the spider’s pain like your pain? These are questions about your concept of feeling pain. And similar questions can be asked about other types of experience. How do you conceive of subjective experience in general? What is your concept of subjective experience?

Even if you are reluctant to ascribe feelings of pain to a spider, the spider surely sees, doesn’t it? Does it hear? When you ascribe perceptual experiences to a spider – when you say that it sees or hears – what are you

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ascribing to it? What is your concept of perceptual experience?

Does any of this matter for philosophy? Does how people actually conceive of states like feeling pain, seeing, hearing, and so on, have a bearing on the philosophical problems of consciousness, perception, and experience? A growing body of research at the intersection of philosophy and psychology attempts to answer these questions.

Let's begin with the first issue. How do ordinary people decide whether creatures have subjective experiences? One hypothesis is that we assume by default that the entities we think of as acting, as being agents, have subjective experiences. On this view, the perceptual cues that we use to decide whether something is an agent (such as spontaneous motion, reactive behaviour, the presence of eyes, and so on) are the very cues that we use to decide whether something can feel, see, hear, or smell. In a recent experiment, Adam Arico, Brian Fiala, Robert Goldberg, and Shaun Nichols asked subjects to decide whether various types of things (insects, vehicles, plants, and naturally moving objects like clouds) have different kinds of mental states, such as feeling happy or angry. They were instructed to do so as quickly as possible, and their reaction times were measured. It turns out that people were more likely to say that insects have subjective experiences than plants, vehicles, or clouds. They were also slower to deny that insects have subjective experiences. This might be due to the fact that people treat insects as agents and are thus disposed to ascribe subjective experiences to them. As a consequence, people need to restrain



themselves from answering positively, which results in longer reaction times.

However, some findings suggest that the ascription of agency is distinct from the ascription of subjective experience. Joshua Knobe and Jesse Prinz showed that people find it more natural to ascribe mental states like deciding to corporations than to ascribe subjective experiences to them. Thus, people find “The Acme Corporation intends to release a new product this January” and “The Acme Corporation wants to change its corporate image” natural, but “The Acme Corporation is now experiencing great joy” weird.

While the nature of the cues used to ascribe subjective experiences remains unclear, there is little doubt that we do ascribe such experiences to various kinds of creatures. But how do ordinary people conceive of these states?

Contemporary philosophers of mind have developed a particular conception of the nature of subjective experiences. Most philosophers of mind follow Thomas Nagel and hold that subjective experiences are characterised by the fact that there is “something it is like” to have them. Such mental states are said to be “phenomenal”.

Naturally, according to these philosophers, what it is like to feel pain is distinct from what it is like to be hungry, which is distinct from what it is like to experience anger or to smell the scent of cinnamon. But what is allegedly common to feeling pain, being hungry, experiencing anger, and smelling the scent of cinnamon is that there is something it is like to have all of these subjective experiences. Let's



call this conception of subjective experiences “the philosophical conception”.

Philosophers of mind have also sometimes speculated that ordinary people endorse, perhaps implicitly, the philosophical conception of subjective experiences. That’s to say that ordinary people also think that what distinguishes subjective experiences from other mental states is that there is something it is like to be in the former, but not the latter.

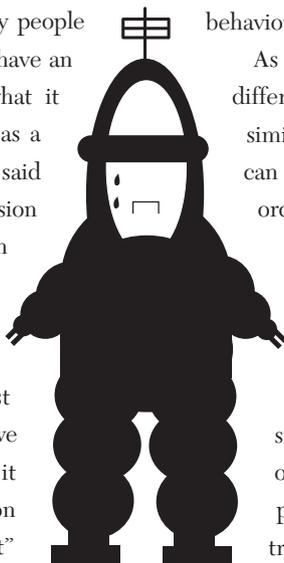
Some recent findings by Knobe and Prinz seem to support these speculations. Thus, ordinary people find it much more natural to say that “The Acme Corporation is upset about the court’s recent ruling” than to say that “The Acme Corporation is feeling upset.” Similarly, people find it more natural to say that “The Acme Corporation regrets its recent decision” than to say that “The Acme Corporation is feeling regret.” One might conclude from these findings that ordinary people distinguish the sheer possession of an emotion from the experience of what it is like to have that emotion. The idea is that ordinary people hold that while a corporation can have an emotion, it cannot experience what it is like to have that emotion, and as a consequence it cannot properly be said to feel the emotion. This conclusion is consistent with the speculation that ordinary people and philosophers conceive of subjective experience similarly.

Other recent work has cast doubt on this view. For example, we have shown that people find it natural to say that a corporation “feels regret” or “feels upset”

provided that the object of its regret or the reason for it being upset is specified. While “The Acme Corporation feels upset” does sound strange, “The Acme Corporation is feeling upset about the court’s recent ruling” sounds more natural. As such, it is at best unclear whether ordinary people distinguish the sheer possession of an emotion from the experience of what it is like to have that emotion.

One way to examine whether ordinary people implicitly endorse the philosophical conception of subjective experiences is to see whether they treat all subjective experiences similarly. If ordinary people treat subjective experiences as being alike in that there’s something it is like to experience them, then people should tend to treat different subjective experiences similarly when they ascribe them to different kinds of agents. We have conducted research investigating whether ordinary people and philosophers are willing to say that a simple robot feels pain or anger, sees red, or smells various scents when it exhibits relevant behavioural cues.

As expected, philosophers treat different kinds of sensory experiences similarly. They deny that a simple robot can feel pain and that it can see red. But ordinary people have very different intuitions about the question. While they deny that the robot can feel pain, they judge that it can in fact see red. Furthermore, people are unsure about whether a simple robot can smell and be angry or feel anger. Thus, in contrast to philosophers, ordinary people do not treat all subjective experiences as



being alike. This suggests that ordinary people do not share the philosophical conception of subjective experience.

If ordinary people do not share the philosophical conception, how do they conceive of subjective experience? Our findings suggest that whether or not a mental state is ascribed to a simple robot depends on whether the state is pleasurable or painful – whether it has a “hedonic value”. People treat mental states that hurt or feel good differently from states without such associations, such as seeing red. In particular, people are much more lenient with regard to ascribing states like seeing a colour, hearing a sound, and smelling a scent than they are when it comes to ascribing states with a hedonic value like pain. This raises a third kind of question: how do ordinary people conceive of perception, and do they conceive of it differently than they conceive of feeling pain?

Recent work by Sytsma suggests that people endorse, at least implicitly, some form of naïve realism. Roughly, naïve realism says that when we see or hear something, we are directly acquainted with mind-independent objects. Thus, for a naïve realist, colours are properties of mind-independent objects out there in the world, and sounds are mind-independent events. Naïve realism is contrasted with the view that during perception people are really acquainted with mental entities. On this latter view, colours and sounds are, so to speak, in the mind.

If people are naïve realists, then they should be willing to say that sounds and colours exist even when there is nobody around to perceive

them. As expected, people agree that “there is still red in a ripe tomato even when there is no one there to see it,” and they also deny that colours are “in the mind”.

What about pains, however? One might speculate that people will treat pains differently from colours on the grounds that pains more clearly seem to be in the mind. It turns out that people treat pains and colours rather similarly.

People deny that the robot feels pain, but they judge that it sees red

For example, they agree that “there is still pain in a badly injured leg even when the person is not aware of it,” and they deny that pains are “in the mind”. Thus, for ordinary people, in a sense pains, colours, and sounds are not mental. They exist outside the mind.

If people are naïve realists about pains, they should be willing to say that if two creatures were to share the same body, then they would share the same unique pains. To test this prediction, people were invited to consider the situation of conjoined twins, sharing the lower half of their body. Participants were then asked whether the twins would have the same pain if they were to hurt one of their shared feet. Surprisingly, people tend to think that the twins feel one and the same pain instead of two different pains.

At this point, some readers might wonder whether this work, though interesting, has any philosophical significance. In response, one could first insist that the issues we’ve been investigating



involve the same sorts of questions as philosophers such as Hume and James were interested in. As such, they are philosophical in their own right, although they are more empirical than the questions contemporary philosophers are typically interested in. Alternatively, one can argue that these findings – or at least some of them – bear on traditional issues in philosophy. In the remainder of this article, we'll elaborate on this second line of reply.

As we saw above, ordinary people do not seem to share the philosophers' conception of subjective experience. They do not conceive of subjective experiences as being phenomenal, as requiring something it's like to have them. This finding has important implications for the so-called "hard problem of consciousness".

Roughly, the hard problem of consciousness consists in three claims:

1. There is something it is like to have subjective experiences (to feel pain, see red, etc.).
2. Subjective experiences cannot be explained by means of the usual kinds of explanation that we have at our disposal (explanations in terms of function and neurochemistry).
3. We do not know how else to explain

why there is something it is like to have subjective experiences.

Thus the problem of consciousness is peculiarly hard. There are naturally various attempts to solve the hard problem. Interestingly, most of them take claim 1 for granted. However, one should ask how this claim is supposed to be justified.

How do we know that there is something it is like to have subjective experiences? Philosophers' typical answer is that it is obvious on looking within that subjective experiences are phenomenal. However, the finding that ordinary people conceive of subjective experiences differently from philosophers shows that this answer is not satisfactory. For if it were obvious that there is something it is like to have subjective experiences, ordinary people would surely have noticed. If they had taken notice of this fact, they would conceive of subjective experiences as phenomenal, exactly as philosophers do.

But, as we have seen earlier, they do not. They do not distinguish phenomenal from non-phenomenal mental states. Instead, ordinary people classify mental states into different kinds, depending on whether they are associated with pleasure or pain. If this empirical claim is correct, then it would seem that it is not obvious that subjective experiences are phenomenal. But if that is not obvious, then why should we grant that there is a hard problem to be solved? Naturally, this response to the hard problem of consciousness does not show that there is no hard problem of consciousness. What it does do, however, is cast doubt on the motivation for believing that there is such a problem.

