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Comments on Schier and Carruthers: Dissolving the hard problem of consciousness

Conscious mental states are those that there is something it is like to be in. Many have taken the problem of determining how and why there is something it is like to be in some mental states to be particularly difficult. Unlike other aspects of cognition, it does not seem that we can account for consciousness just by appealing to the structural or functional properties of mental or physical states. Schier and Carruthers aim to deflate this worry. In their paper, "Dissolving the Hard Problem of Consciousness", Schier and Carruthers argue that each of three popular a priori arguments for the view that the problem of consciousness constitutes a 'hard problem' (those involving zombies, Mary and bats) is question begging. I'm not convinced that these arguments are circular, at least not in any way that is particularly worrisome.

I will focus on Schier and Carruthers' discussion of the knowledge argument involving Mary. Mary is a neuroscientist with perfect knowledge of all facts about color and color perception. Schier and Carruthers describe her as ideally rational, someone who is able to deduce all facts that follow from these facts. Mary spends all of her life in a black and white room. When she is finally let out and encounters something red for the first time, intuitively, it seems Mary will learn something new. Many conclude that what Mary learns when she leaves the room is what it is like to

see red. If Mary knew everything there is to know about the structural and functional features of the visual system, it seems that what it is like to see red cannot be deduced from those structural or functional facts, so there is a hard problem. Schier and Carruthers argue that since the key intuition (that Mary will learn something new when she leaves her black and white room) can only be true if understanding all of the structural and functional facts about visual processing were insufficient to account for consciousness, it begs the question to use the intuition as a premise in argument to establish the hard problem.

To the contrary, I think that there are several constructive ways to understand the argument and how the intuition that it rests on functions, where it does not turn out to be question begging. The first is to regard the argument as an inference to the best explanation in which a novel case is imaginatively entertained for the sake of generating an intuition. In this case the intuition is that Mary learns something new when she first encounters a red object. We may conclude that this new knowledge concerns what it is like to see red. A hypothesis is then generated to explain the intuition. As a hypothesis for how Mary learns something new when she first experiences what it is like to see red, it is proposed that qualia or consciousness cannot be accounted for in terms of facts about the structure or function of physical or cognitive states. This argument would only be question begging if the intuition that Mary learns something new when she leaves the room were not consistent with other explanations that do not entail that there is a hard problem. But in fact other hypotheses have been offered that would explain the key intuition that Mary learns

something new upon seeing red that are also compatible with physicalism. For instance, Mary may gain a new ability (which does not rely on propositional knowledge and so could not have been deduced). Or, Mary may come to learn something that was already known but from a new perspective (perhaps through a new mode of presentation). It may be that we can only determine the correctness of the hypothesis that a full account of the structural and functional aspects of visual perception cannot account for what it is like to see red, after we have evaluated these and other competing hypotheses. In fact, one might interpret much of the fruitful debate about the knowledge argument as carrying out this directive.

We don't have to read the argument as an inference to the best explanation, however, to see it as not question begging. Consider the following reconstruction,

1. Mary knows all the physical and functional facts about color perception.
2. Mary seems to learn something new when she first sees red.
3. It seems that Mary's new knowledge concerns what it is like to see red.

C: So consciousness cannot be explained just by appeal to structure and function.

When reconstructed in this form the premises do not obviously suggest the conclusion. There may be explanations for how Mary could learn something new which could not have been deduced from her declarative knowledge about color perception. To complete the argument these possible explanations would have to be ruled out. And one might interpret much of the debate about the knowledge argument as carrying out that directive. For example, Chalmers (1996) discusses the

knowledge argument in reference to the hard problem and also engages various alternative physicalist-friendly accounts of what might have happened to Mary when she first saw red. Regardless of whether the argument is flawed or salvageable by the addition of a premise that rules out alternative views, the argument above isn't question begging.

Another constructive way of understanding thought experiments such as the one involving Mary is to see them as tools that help us to unpack implicit commitments, better understand the nature of our concepts, and flesh out the logical relations between our ideas and their entailments. In the context of considering novel scenarios we think about something that hadn't been previously considered (or something familiar but in a new way) and an intuition about it emerges from aspects of our conceptual framework that may not have been explicit to us. In considering the intuition we ask what must be true of the world in order for this intuition to be true. Doing this helps us to better appreciate our own commitments. In the end, we take what we have discovered as revealing some metaphysical truth that we understand our ideas and their logical relations to represent. Although there is a sense in which the reasoning involved here is circular, I think the circularity is benign rather than question begging. We should make a distinction between vicious circularity, which is a kind of circular reasoning that does not allow us to make any progress on a question, and circularity that is benign or even productive in the sense that it does allow us to make progress on a question. The Mary thought experiment may fall into this latter category.

I just addressed Schier and Carruthers' charge that the argument involving Mary is question begging because the truth of the key intuition depends on the truth of the conclusion. I think that Schier and Carruthers's paper also supports an argument for the charge that the a priori arguments they discuss are question begging in a different sense. I'm not sure whether the authors intended this argument, but I will address the issue in any case.

Schier and Carruthers charge that the intuitions prompted in the context of the zombie, Mary and bat cases differ across individuals. They note regarding the Mary case,

> Like the intuition that zombies are metaphysically possible, this intuition is not universally held or obviously true. (p. 7)

They then take the fact that Dennett (who believes that structure and function are sufficient to explain everything) does not have the intuition that Mary learns something new to be evidence that this intuition is necessarily theory-laden. They write,

> Dennett (1991) appears not to share the key intuition. He advocates an account on which certain functions of mental states constitute consciousness of that state…We see again that as well as not being universally held, the truth of the intuition that Mary learns a new fact is not theory neutral. (p. 7)

Schier and Carruthers reason that only people who accept a particular theory about the possibility of consciousness being accounted for by an understanding of

structural and functional facts about the mind have the compatible intuition that Mary learns something new when she leaves her room. They write,

> The advocate of the hard problem could attempt to convince those who don't have the intuition that they should by asking what must the world be like in order for Mary to learn something new when she enters the colored world, and then attempting to show that the world is, in fact, like that…For Mary to learn something new it must be the case that all of her knowledge of the structure and function of visual states is insufficient to provide knowledge of, allow her to deduce and perhaps even explain the phenomenal character of color experience. (p.7)

If it were true that one could only have the intuition about Mary if one already believes in the hard problem, then it would seem to follow that using the intuition as a premise in an argument for the hard problem is question begging. It would be question begging because the argument's premise is considered by the reasoner to be more questionable than the conclusion they are using it to derive. But I think that it would be hasty to make this charge as well. First of all, this objection would require that we assume that differences across individuals with respect to intuitions are evidence that Mary intuitions (regardless of which way they go) are contaminated by our theories. But there are other explanations for why intuitions about this case may fail to be uniform. It is possible that some intuitions are corrupted by a posteriori theories while others are not. Intuitions can also be corrupted if they are generated in the context of unfavorable circumstances or if one does not pay sufficient attention to the most relevant features of the described

scenario. There is a large literature exploring the reliability of intuitions and sources of corruption that one would do well to address before drawing the conclusions that Schier and Carruthers draw. One would be jumping the gun to assume that the fact that there are differences in intuitions across individuals about the Mary case entails that in order to have intuitions that support the hard problem, one would already have to be a believer in the theory.