ABSTRACT
MODELING, DESCRIBING, AND EXPLAINING SUBJECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS:
A GUIDE TO (AND FOR) THE PERPLEXED

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To explain subjective consciousness in physical terms, one must first describe what is subjective about consciousness. But such descriptions are experience-based or depend on authors’ intuitions. This is troubling because there are no empirical reasons to fix on any one description of subjectivity, and authors seem to have very different notions of what subjectivity is. Further, if subjectivity is to be physicalized somehow, it seems to need to be one type of physical thing and not many different sorts of physical things.

Taking a cue from the philosophy of science, I argue for a different methodology, one that mitigates these a priori troubles, by treating theories as models. Models are ways of working out explanations for empirically underdetermined, problematic phenomena. This allows a pluralistic and integrative approach to the literature. I offer a modified version of scientific realism as an alternative to empirically unwarranted atomistic metaphysical claims.

I then develop a different methodology that avoids the difficulties in the first place. If there is no good reason to choose one description, I locate what is common to all the descriptions. There is a particular relativity to qualia and a particular nominal perspective to awareness more generally. If subjectivity is not just one physical aspect of the brain, it seems that any certain neurological evidence is also too specific. I argue instead that the problematic particularities of subjective consciousness can be understood in the more general, non-problematic particularities of biological organisms.

From these non-controversial grounds, certain explanatory paths are generated. I argue for a dispositional view of qualia, one that retains both biological-functional evidences and neurological variation. This allows a more reasonable “moderate relativity” about qualia. I argue for a dispositional view of a subjective perspective more generally, one that includes the neuro-mechanisms of awareness but does more. Consciousness is (nominally) private so as to generate novel meanings, variable organism to organism. The actual aware perspective just is these non-conscious mental contents, which constitute the differences in how creatures “see the world”. Further, one’s perspective results in phenomenal valence, liking or disliking as a novel aspect of “what it is like”.