Title: Principled vs. practical subjectivity: a proposed solution to the meta-problem of consciousness

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The ‘meta-problem’ of consciousness is the problem of explaining the widespread sense that consciousness is especially challenging — perhaps even impossible — to explain. It has been suggested that we possess intuitive models of our own mental processes, and that some feature of these models may solve the meta-problem. According to one such argument, a lack of mechanistic detail in these models is responsible for our sense that consciousness cannot be explained. In contrast to this view, I argue that mechanistic underspecification cannot adequately account for the meta-problem, since our intuitive models in other domains often lack mechanistic specification, without giving rise to the sense that explanation is impossible. Instead, I argue that a solution to the meta-problem requires us to show how specific features of our intuitive psychological models lead to the sense that consciousness is uniquely difficult to explain. Toward this end, I present an analysis focused on our intuitive notion of subjectivity. I operationalize subjectivity as the belief that the internal states of other minds cannot be directly observed, a notion that is critically important for adaptive social behavior. I then distinguish between two versions of this notion: principled and practical subjectivity. I define principled subjectivity as the view that it is impossible, even in principle, to directly observe the state of another mind. I argue that this view is untrue, but is at the heart of many of the most puzzling thought experiments concerning consciousness. I define practical subjectivity as the view that it is merely impractical to directly observe the state of another mind. I propose that our minds substitute the complicated, but arguably correct, notion of practical subjectivity with the simplified heuristic of principled subjectivity, and that this substitution is at least partially responsible for our sense that consciousness is uniquely difficult to explain.