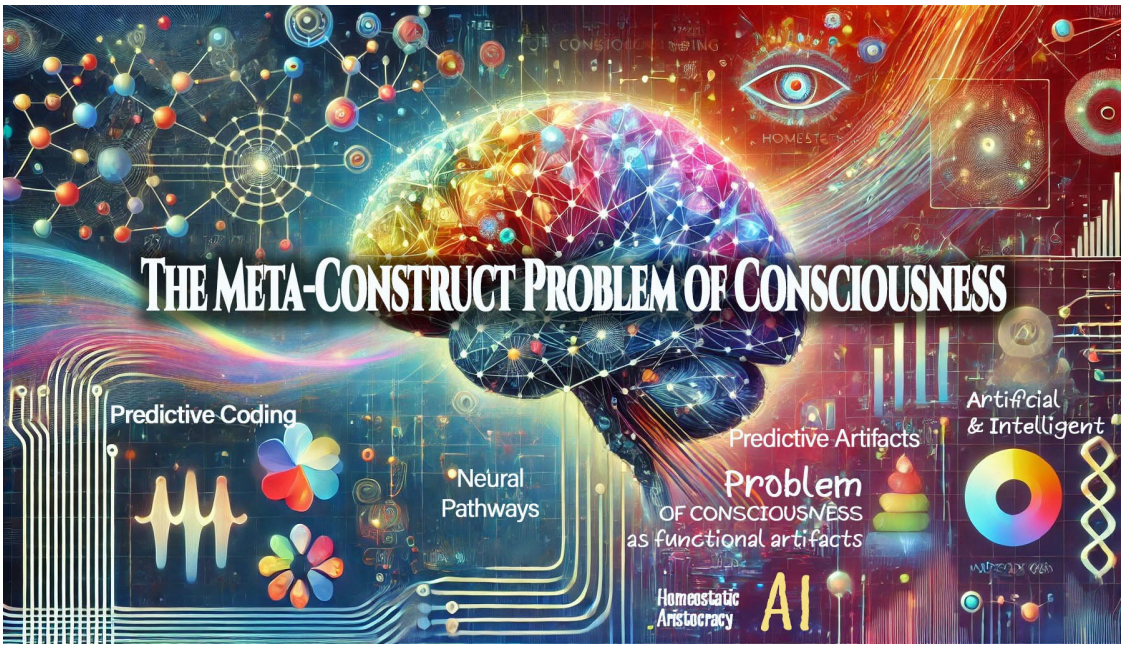

The Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness: Selfhood and Emotions as Functional Artifacts

Thomas W. Loker | September 21, 2024

Abstract:

This paper introduces the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness, a novel extension of David Chalmers' progression from the hard problem to the meta-problem of consciousness. We propose that emotions, selfhood, and subjective experience, traditionally considered central to human existence, are functional constructs designed to optimize behavior and survival rather than possessing intrinsic metaphysical significance. Building upon Chalmers' inquiry into why we find consciousness so perplexing, we suggest that subjective experiences are pragmatic tools for error minimization and homeostatic regulation rather than the purposeful phenomena they appear to be.

Integrating Karl Friston's predictive coding and Mark Solms' affective consciousness theories, we argue that the brain's evaluation of stimuli and environment results in functional artifacts, such as emotions and self-awareness, that enhance survival. These artifacts, however, are often mistaken for having deeper intrinsic meanings, an illusion likely propagated by the brain's ego-driven narrative.

The Meta-Construct Problem challenges the current frameworks of consciousness studies, inviting a re-examination of emotions and qualia. This paper introduces a series of articles that will explore this hypothesis in depth, investigate its falsifiability, and engage empirical data from neuroscience, AI, and philosophy of mind to rigorously test its validity. We invite collaboration and debate across cognitive sciences to further develop and challenge this model, pushing forward the understanding of the true functional nature of consciousness.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

Introduction

In the study of consciousness, David Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness—the challenge of explaining why and how physical processes give rise to subjective experience—remains one of the most debated questions. Chalmers introduced the meta-problem of consciousness, addressing the question of why we find the hard problem itself so perplexing. This meta-problem invites us to explore whether the very sense of mystery around consciousness stems from cognitive biases rather than an underlying metaphysical truth.

In extending this framework, we introduce the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness, a hypothesis that questions whether emotions, selfhood, and subjective experience are inherently meaningful, or whether they are merely functional constructs evolved to maintain homeostasis and optimize survival. We propose that these constructs, which we typically consider as central to the human experience, are not ends in themselves but are outcome-driven tools that help organisms evaluate their environment and respond adaptively to it.

This hypothesis reframes subjective experience as part of the brain's predictive coding system—a mechanism, as developed by Karl Friston, that reduces prediction error by constantly generating and updating models about the world to maintain internal equilibrium. Similarly, Mark Solms' theory of affective consciousness demonstrates how emotions serve as survival mechanisms, driving behavior based on the brain's appraisal of bodily and environmental states.

The Meta-Construct Problem takes Chalmers' meta-problem a step further by challenging the intrinsic value we place on subjective experiences. We argue that the brain's ego-driven narrative assigns significance to functional processes whose primary purpose is homeostatic regulation and survival, rather than metaphysical meaning. This is not to dismiss the value of emotions and selfhood in everyday experience but to question whether the significance we attribute to them is an illusion created by the brain's evaluation mechanisms.

This paper is the first in a series of articles exploring this hypothesis in depth. We aim to examine how subjective experiences, emotions, and consciousness might be better understood as functional artifacts of the brain's predictive coding system, and we invite open collaboration from scholars in cognitive science, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, and artificial intelligence. By exploring these perspectives, we aim to refine this hypothesis and open new avenues for understanding consciousness.

Chalmers' Meta-Problem and Its Extension

Chalmers' meta-problem of consciousness highlights the need to interrogate why we intuitively regard subjective experience as mysterious. This question leads us to consider whether these intuitions are the result of cognitive biases, products of specific neural processes rather than reflections of an underlying reality. Our proposed Meta-Construct Problem builds on this insight by examining the functional role of subjective experience itself. We propose that what we view as meaningful emotions and selfhood are products of neural processes designed to maintain homeostatic balance and optimize an organism's adaptive capabilities, rather than sources of intrinsic metaphysical significance.

In this way, the Meta-Construct Problem extends Chalmers' work by suggesting that qualia—the subjective nature of experience—might not serve a higher purpose beyond their practical, functional

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

role in survival. Instead, the human mind, particularly through its ego-driven processes, may impose an illusory sense of meaning on these functions. The purpose of our hypothesis is to determine whether these subjective experiences are merely constructs to enhance adaptive behavior, rather than carrying inherent meaning.

Context and Collaboration

Drawing on the insights from Karl Friston's predictive coding models and Mark Solms' theories on affective consciousness, we suggest that consciousness and emotions are fundamentally tied to error minimization and homeostatic regulation. Predictive coding models propose that the brain is a prediction engine, constantly comparing expected outcomes with sensory inputs, while affective consciousness highlights the role of emotion as a survival tool. Under this framework, emotions and subjective experiences help organisms predict and evaluate their environment by producing feedback that encourages adaptive behavior.

This paper serves as the first in a series of articles that aim to thoroughly explore the functionalist perspective on consciousness. We invite collaboration from fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive science, philosophy, and artificial intelligence to engage with and challenge the Meta-Construct Problem. The objective is to foster dialogue and refine this hypothesis by incorporating diverse perspectives and empirical research, pushing the boundaries of how we understand the function and purpose of emotions, selfhood, and consciousness.

Conclusion of the Introduction

In this introduction, we lay the foundation for the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness and set the stage for a series of inquiries that aim to challenge the widely-held belief that subjective experiences hold inherent meaning. By reframing these experiences as functional artifacts created by the brain to optimize homeostasis and survival, we seek to explore a new dimension of consciousness studies. We encourage active engagement and debate from the academic community to explore the implications of this theory.

Having established the foundational ideas of the meta-problem of consciousness and the role of predictive coding, we now turn to our central hypothesis, the Meta-Construct Problem. This hypothesis examines whether emotions, selfhood, and consciousness are mere functional artifacts designed for adaptive survival.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

Hypothesis

This paper introduces the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness, an extension of David Chalmers' meta-problem of consciousness (Chalmers, 2018). Our hypothesis posits that emotions, selfhood, and subjective experiences—long regarded as central and intrinsically meaningful components of human consciousness—are in fact functional constructs, evolved primarily to support survival and homeostasis rather than possessing any deeper metaphysical significance. This hypothesis builds on the predictive coding models proposed by Karl Friston (Friston, 2010) and the theory of affective consciousness by Mark Solms (Solms, 2021).

The Meta-Construct Problem consists of two key propositions:

1. Functional Construct Hypothesis:

Premise: Emotions and selfhood serve as pragmatic, outcome-driven artifacts generated by the brain's predictive coding and homeostatic mechanisms. These constructs enable organisms to efficiently evaluate their environment, respond to stimuli adaptively, and optimize behavior for survival.

Implication: Emotions and selfhood do not carry intrinsic metaphysical meaning. Rather, they function as tools for feedback regulation—designed to reduce prediction errors and maintain physiological and psychological balance (Friston, 2010; Solms, 2021). This challenges the traditional understanding of qualia as uniquely significant experiences.

2. Illusory Significance Hypothesis:

Premise: The human brain creates a narrative of intrinsic meaning around subjective experiences as part of an ego-driven process. This illusion of significance may serve to ensure coherence in decision-making and behavior, reinforcing an organism's belief in the value of its actions and emotions. However, this sense of meaning does not point to any deeper metaphysical purpose.

Implication: The significance that humans attribute to their subjective experiences, such as emotions and selfhood, may be a cognitive illusion generated by the brain's ego-driven processes, rather than evidence of intrinsic metaphysical meaning (Chalmers, 2018; Damasio, 1999). These constructs are likely byproducts of a survival-oriented system rather than inherently meaningful phenomena.

The Meta-Construct Problem thus extends Chalmers' meta-problem by proposing that the sense of mystery surrounding subjective experiences arises not from any fundamental metaphysical truth but from an illusion of significance created by the brain's evaluative processes.

Falsifiability

For the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness to hold scientific credibility, it must be testable and open to falsification. This section outlines several potential avenues for evaluating the validity of this hypothesis, drawing on neurobiological, behavioral, and philosophical approaches.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

1. Neurobiological Evidence

Prediction: If emotions and selfhood are functional constructs tied to survival, then emotional and self-referential responses should correlate strongly with homeostatic markers such as hunger, thirst, or temperature dysregulation. Neural activity in relevant brain regions—such as the insula, hypothalamus, or anterior cingulate cortex—should predominantly reflect homeostatic deviations rather than abstract emotional or self-referential states (Critchley & Garfinkel, 2018).

Falsifiability: If emotional or self-referential responses are shown to consistently arise in neutral homeostatic states, or if emotional states are disconnected from survival-related functions, the Functional Construct Hypothesis would be challenged.

Proposed Study: Conduct neuroimaging studies (e.g., fMRI, PET) where subjects are placed in varying homeostatic conditions (e.g., hunger, satiety, or dehydration) while monitoring their emotional and self-referential brain activity. If emotional responses are found to be triggered without any homeostatic imbalance, this would undermine the hypothesis that emotions are survival-driven artifacts (Barrett et al., 2007).

2. Behavioral Evidence

Prediction: If emotions and selfhood are outcome-driven tools for survival, emotional responses should exhibit predictable patterns, particularly when homeostatic needs are unmet. In stressful or deprived states, emotional responses should be stronger or more frequent, acting as evaluative tools for adaptive behavior.

Falsifiability: If emotional responses occur independently of homeostatic triggers or in conditions where survival-related behaviors are irrelevant, this would challenge the hypothesis.

Proposed Study: Conduct behavioral experiments where subjects are subjected to controlled stress or deprivation scenarios, and their emotional responses are measured. Compare this data with a control group in neutral or balanced states. If emotional responses occur without homeostatic disruption or exhibit no significant variance between deprived and neutral conditions, this would challenge the hypothesis (Panksepp, 1998).

3. Philosophical Engagement

Prediction: The Illusory Significance Hypothesis suggests that subjective experiences such as qualia do not serve an inherent metaphysical function. Instead, they are cognitive tools developed for functional coherence. Philosophical arguments and empirical studies should reflect that subjective experiences are secondary to functional survival, not central to deeper moral or existential meaning.

Falsifiability: If evidence emerges showing that subjective experiences serve non-functional purposes—such as abstract moral reasoning or creative thinking disconnected from survival mechanisms—this would undermine the hypothesis. Additionally, if philosophical arguments convincingly demonstrate the necessity of qualia for higher-order cognitive tasks beyond survival, the Illusory Significance Hypothesis would be called into question.

Moreover, certain philosophical frameworks suggest that qualia—despite being functional—might still contribute to higher-order cognition, such as moral reasoning or creativity, beyond mere survival

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

mechanisms. For instance, theories of moral decision-making, as discussed by Kantian ethicists, propose that subjective experiences provide an intrinsic moral compass that cannot be entirely reduced to survival functions. If qualia are shown to play a vital role in abstract thinking, such as solving moral dilemmas or engaging in artistic creativity without any clear survival utility, this would challenge the hypothesis that emotions and consciousness are purely functional

Proposed Discussion: Engage philosophers and cognitive scientists to critically assess whether qualia and emotions serve a role beyond adaptive behavior. Empirical studies in moral reasoning or abstract cognition could also contribute to this exploration (Chalmers, 1996; Damasio, 1999). If qualia are found to significantly influence decision-making in ways unrelated to survival, this would challenge the hypothesis.

Outline of the Series

In this section, we outline a series of papers that will expand on the **Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness**. Each paper will explore distinct aspects of this overarching hypothesis, progressively developing an integrated theory of how emotions, selfhood, and consciousness operate as outcome-driven, pragmatic systems designed to support homeostasis and survival. The interdisciplinary approach will draw on insights from cognitive science, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, and artificial intelligence.

Each paper in this series is designed to build incrementally on the Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness. We begin by establishing the functional role of emotions and selfhood, progressively challenging the intrinsic value assigned to these phenomena, and conclude by addressing their implications in both biological and artificial systems. This structured progression allows for a comprehensive examination of the hypothesis, with each article refining and expanding upon the previous one.

Paper 1: The Pragmatic Role of Consciousness and Emotion

Objective: This paper will delve into the **functional role** of emotions and consciousness, reframing them as **adaptive feedback mechanisms** grounded in the brain's predictive coding and homeostatic regulation. We will argue that emotions and selfhood evolved as biological tools for **survival** and **optimization of behavior**, rather than as intrinsic metaphysical phenomena.

- **Core Concepts**:
    - Karl Friston’s predictive coding (Friston, 2010) and its implications for emotional regulation.
    - Jaak Panksepp’s affective neuroscience model of emotions as survival tools (Panksepp, 1998).
    - Antonio Damasio’s theory of homeostasis and interoception as key elements in the experience of emotions and consciousness (Damasio, 1999).

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

- **Methodology**: This paper will explore neuroimaging data that highlights the correlation between emotional responses and **homeostatic markers**, such as hunger, thirst, and temperature regulation. Through a synthesis of fMRI and PET studies, we will show how the brain's **prediction error minimization** drives emotional states.
- **Expected Contribution**: This paper will position emotions and consciousness as **functional processes**, focusing on their role in **adaptive decision-making**. By grounding these concepts in predictive coding, it lays the foundation for further exploration of the **Functional Construct Hypothesis**, where emotions serve as outcome-driven evaluators, not metaphysical experiences.

Paper 2: The Illusion of Intrinsic Meaning – Reassessing Selfhood and Qualia

Objective: This paper introduces the **Illusory Significance Hypothesis**, suggesting that **selfhood** and **qualia** (the subjective experience of sensory input) are cognitive artifacts. These constructs arise from the brain's need to impose **narrative meaning** on its evaluative processes, which assist in decision-making and survival.

- **Core Concepts**:
    - Extending Chalmers' **meta-problem of consciousness** (Chalmers, 2018) into the **Meta-Construct Problem**, where qualia are seen as cognitive tools rather than metaphysical entities.
    - Examining the brain's **ego-driven narrative** that assigns intrinsic significance to qualia and emotions, drawing on insights from Antonio Damasio and Lisa Feldman Barrett.
    - Philosophical discussions on the **illusory nature** of subjective experience in decision-making and behavior.
- **Methodology**: This paper will combine philosophical inquiry with empirical studies from **cognitive psychology** and **neuroscience**. We will analyze how brain structures involved in **selfhood** and **qualia** construction respond to disruptions in homeostasis and how this informs the **ego's narrative** about emotional significance.
- **Expected Contribution**: By challenging the conventional view of qualia, this paper extends the **Meta-Construct Problem** and argues that **selfhood** and **subjective experiences** are artifacts of **functional survival mechanisms**, not intrinsic metaphysical phenomena.

Paper 3: The Artifact of Emotion – When Feelings Go Wrong

Objective: This paper explores how emotions, while critical for survival, can become **counterproductive** in modern environments. We will investigate the **misfiring of emotions**, such as anxiety and phobias, and argue that these are **outdated survival mechanisms** not suited to contemporary life.

- **Core Concepts**:

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

  - Evolutionary theory of emotions as adaptive artifacts, now **misaligned** with modern contexts.
  - Theories of **emotional regulation** and misfiring, using cognitive-behavioral insights (Gross, 2015).
  - **Predictive coding errors** and overgeneralization of emotional responses in modern environments.

- **Methodology**: The paper will analyze case studies of **emotional disorders** like anxiety and phobias, with a focus on the neural mechanisms underlying emotional misfiring. Behavioral data and neuroimaging studies will be used to explore how these emotional responses deviate from **functional survival mechanisms**.
- **Expected Contribution**: This paper will demonstrate that emotions are not always beneficial survival tools, and their **maladaptive use** in modern life further supports the idea that emotions are functional artifacts rather than metaphysical entities.

Paper 4: Implications for Artificial Intelligence and Machine Consciousness

Objective: This paper discusses the implications of the **Meta-Construct Problem** for the development of **artificial intelligence** (AI) and **machine consciousness**. If emotions and qualia are functional constructs, AI systems might not need subjective experiences for intelligent behavior.

- **Core Concepts**:
  - The relationship between **predictive coding** and AI, emphasizing functional intelligence without consciousness.
  - Philosophical questions about the necessity of **qualia** for machine learning and decision-making.
  - Implications for developing AI that mimics human emotional processes without requiring **subjective experience**.
- **Methodology**: This paper will review AI research and predictive coding models that mimic human cognition. The goal is to explore whether consciousness is necessary for AI or if **functional intelligence** can exist without it.
- **Expected Contribution**: The paper will propose that AI systems could operate efficiently without subjective experience, challenging the need for **artificial qualia**. This has significant implications for the future of **AI development** and its ethical considerations.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

Call for Debate and Collaboration

We invite researchers, theorists, and practitioners across multiple disciplines—**neuroscience, philosophy of mind, cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, and related fields**—to engage with and critically explore the **Meta-Construct Problem of Consciousness**. This hypothesis challenges the entrenched paradigms of consciousness, emotions, and subjective experience, calling into question their intrinsic meaning.

Our goal is to provoke **open dialogue** that not only expands our understanding of the functional role of consciousness but also scrutinizes the ego-driven narratives that may have overemphasized its metaphysical significance. Through this collaborative discourse, we hope to forge new pathways in both **theoretical and empirical research**, encouraging new methods, experiments, and debates that might affirm, challenge, or refute this model.

The fields of **neuroscience** and **cognitive science** are well-positioned to test the falsifiability of these claims through advanced neuroimaging and behavioral experiments. **Philosophers of mind** can explore the deeper implications of our argument, particularly in relation to **David Chalmers' meta-problem of consciousness**, and debate the nature of qualia, emotions, and selfhood.

In addition, the implications of this theory extend to **artificial intelligence**. We invite AI researchers to examine whether functional intelligence in machines requires subjective experiences or if a pragmatic, outcome-driven model suffices.

We aim to create a **forum of collaboration and debate** that bridges **theoretical frameworks** with **empirical testing**, ensuring that the scientific community has the tools to challenge and refine the **Meta-Construct Problem** of consciousness. Whether through detailed critiques, empirical validations, or alternative theories, we hope to inspire a deeper and more nuanced understanding of what consciousness and emotions truly represent.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved

References Cited:

1. Barrett, L. F., Mesquita, B., Ochsner, K. N., & Gross, J. J. (2007). The experience of emotion. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 373-403. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.58.110405.085709
2. Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of a fundamental theory*. Oxford University Press.
3. Chalmers, D. J. (2018). The meta-problem of consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 25(9–10), 6–61.
4. Critchley, H. D., & Garfinkel, S. N. (2018). Interoception and emotion. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 17, 7-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.020
5. Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. Harcourt Brace.
6. Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Little, Brown and Co. ISBN: 9780316180665.
7. Friston, K. (2010). The free-energy principle: A unified brain theory? *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 11(2), 127-138. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2787
8. Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2015.964633
9. LeCun, Y., Bengio, Y., & Hinton, G. (2015). Deep learning. *Nature*, 521(7553), 436–444. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature14539
10. Panksepp, J. (1998). *Affective neuroscience: The foundations of human and animal emotions*. Oxford University Press.
11. Solms, M. (2021). *The hidden spring: A journey to the source of consciousness*. W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN: 9780393542011.

© Copyright 2024 – Thomas W. Loker – all right reserved