Review of: "Hard problems in the philosophy of mind"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

In this business of consciousness studies people entertain very different theories that they nevertheless take to heart and since we don't even know what could possibly count as a physical explanation of consciousness and since this review is influenced by my own peculiar position I will interact with this manuscript in my own peculiar way. Worse, mine is a minority position but that's what makes it fun. The article is stimulating, courageous, including its fascinating eschatological flavor and well argued. I sympathize with some of its conclusions but critical of others. Overall, this review attempts to defend a certain sane physicalism.

On God and Infinity

Alexandros Syrakos' "Hard Problems in the Philosophy of mind" is a passionate attempt to defend mind and personhood from those that seek to demystify these concepts. Alexandros' response is not only to argue against the prospects of physicalism but to argue for a radical view of personhood that appeals to a personal God. I agree that the current state of consciousness studies is so problematic that appealing to a 'God based explanation' is a legitimate option. I am also sympathetic to the author's view of 'persons' which combines ethics with metaphysics, in the way that religion used to, and am distrustful of a philosophy whose ethics and metaphysics are completely independent as is customary today. I am therefore interested in Levinas' metaphysics in which our 'inner-infinity' derives from realizing the other's infinity first. Levinas' 'infinity', as part of his theoretical matrix, is different than the mathematician's infinity but could be relevant to the author's pursuit. Infinity in Levinas also represents rupture and irreducible losses in representation. In calculus functions can have two kinds of discontinuity, removable and irremovable. $F(x) = +1$ for $F(x) > 0$ and $F(x) = -1$ for $F(x) < 0$

Is removable (you can set $F(0) = 0$). However a function like $F(x) = \log(x)$ has an irremovable discontinuity at $F(0)$ referred to as pathological singularity. $F(0)$ is both $+$

and $-$

and cannot be set to zero. For a person to be as important as an inanimate universe she must harbor 'infinity'. Perhaps the realization that persons harbor infinity can be related to God based explanations. Here Alexandros may benefit from considering the connections between the claim that personhood is a 'simple substance' of sorts and claiming that this simple 'phenomenal space' is, in some way, also infinite. As a result, I am interested in theories of consciousness that view persons as 'island universes' of sorts (Pace David Lewis) and geometric structures that are finite from without but 'infinite on the inside' such as Anti de Sitter spaces (Juan Maldacena's 'Universe in a Bottle' or Escher's hyperbolic plates).

So, because I belong to a small minority that thinks that infinity has something to do with consciousness, I am willing to consider more esoteric approaches.

however unlike Alexandros I believe that physics is rich enough to discover, in its midst, facts that can explain away some of our anti-physicalist intuitions and since I agree that the hard problem is plural and should be 'the hard problems' I also see this as a strategic opportunity to identify the easier hard problems with the hope that solving those will help solve some of the harder ones. For example, I can conceive of an empirical discovery about the brain that will protect physicalism from the conceivability of zombies or, I can conceive of a mathematical Transform relating structural aspects of the phenomenal field (which it has) to the structure of the physical substrate that correlates with it. Say, in the way that the Gabor Transform relates the holograph to its associated hologram, however I cannot conceive of a physical explanation of the 'there is something it is like to be' aspect of consciousness or the deep reflexivity and absolute self-certainty peculiar to consciousness. The idea, which is commensurate with the 'neo-mechanistic' approach to the mind, is that physical explanation of some of the easier problem intuitions will constrain physical explanation of the harder ones.

On the Re-enchantment of the Physical

I am more of a 'naturalist' but a pre-Socratic one. This means that my view of physics is not an Apollonian view of an 'almost finished theory' but a more Dionysian, pre-Socratic, view of physics as an unfolding poietic source of simultaneous revealing and concealing. I am thinking of Lord Kelvin, who a few years prior to Planck's resolution of the black-body 'Ultra-Violet' catastrophe and the discovery of energy quantization, advised his physics students to switch fields because physics was more or less finished except for a couple of 'loose ends' such as the ultra-violet catastrophe and blackbody radiation, the rest is history. So, taking a big view on physics must include such potential 'delicious' highly counterintuitive discoveries that are the stuff that true naturalists live for. The poietic source is also a source of wonder.

Here Alexandros has a very different view which I have to admit is legitimate:

"Many people insist that the complexities of human behavior, the emotional, creative, and spiritual attributes, must be consequences of something 'greater' than physical laws. This is a wonderful concept. How much more wonderful it would be, however, if these very attributes ***were*** *consequences of physical laws. Far from demeaning humanity, this would elevate physics!"*

I agree! But the author does not. I think we just take 'Physics' to be very different things. See Stoljar's, 2010 book - "Physicalism" – for a thorough philosophical deconstruction of this concept .

Stoljar and type-C physicalism

The question for me is whether physics is rich enough to harbor physical facts that can explain away some of our anti-physicalist problem intuitions. When it comes to the 'big picture' I follow Daniel Stoljar''Epistemic View' arguing that one needs to consider two different problems of consciousness. One is a huge scientific project with no clear end in sight (similar to the pre-Socratic unfolding) that can meander in unexpected ways that may reshape the explanandum and that be connected to the beginning and end of the cosmos itself, the questions relevant to this project are 'how' and 'why

‘questions and not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions.

The other problem, which is a philosophical problem, is that of explaining the anti-physicalist problem intuitions that convince us that consciousness is not physical. Stoljar’s doesn’t just seek to explain these intuitions but to provide them with a physical explanation as we can see from his IH -Ignorance Hypothesis – holding that we are ignorant of relevant physical facts such that knowing them would dispel the anti-physicalist problem intuitions that convince us that consciousness is not physical. However, Stoljar’s definition of the ‘physical’ is more flexible than Alexandros’ and includes non-standard physical facts of the type that can be revealed during scientific revolutions. This more Pre-Socratic take is different than someone like Sean Carol who defends the sanctity of the standard model and our ‘immutable’ core theory that rejects possible radical changes in the structure of physics. While Alexandros target ‘physicalism which he wishes to undermine is similar to Carol’s I am more interested in Stoljar’s non-standard physicalism. To find a current example of non-standard physical facts one needs to find a ‘Scientific Revolution’, for example, some say that we are in the midst of a scientific revolution in physics that is as significant as the quantum mechanical revolution a century ago that is centered around duality in physics and the so called AdS/CFT correspondence. Elsewhere I explore the conditions under which this empirical discovery could be metaphysically relevant’. Again, I want to stress that today’s physics is literary stranger than the imagination.

Alexandros can argue against the significance of such novel physical facts by embracing David Chalmers’ SDA – Structure and Dynamics Argument:

a. Physical description is structural.
b. Structural descriptions can only generate more structure.
c. Consciousness is not structural.

Conclusion: physics, including futuristic physics cannot describe consciousness.

This conclusion is very much in the spirit of the article and can be used to undermine the prospects of ‘novel physics’ explanations (With Stoljar II agree that standard physics does not seem rich enough for the job). Here Alexandros is in good company (with Chalmers, Alter) but I happen to disagree with the SDA. The SDA is especially effective against so called type-C physicalism.

Chalmers divides physicalist theories of consciousness in three:

1. Type-A physicalism including Dennett’s Eliminativism and Frankish Strong Illusionism claiming that there is neither ontological nor epistemic explanatory gap.
2. Type- B physicalism, including non-reductive physicalism and the phenomenal concept strategy, accepting an epistemic gap but denying an ontological gap.
3. Type-C physicalism denies an ontological gap and takes the epistemic gap to be temporary. (At the very least provides a physical explanation for epistemic in-access).

It seems as though type-C physicalism is the only physicalism that actually bets on novel physics and the reason I am

talking about all this is that I agree with Alexandros that types-A and B fail but disagree on weaker versions of type-C. However, mines is a minority position that influences my thinking and this review. The reason that type-C is a minority position, despite the fact that historically betting against physics failed every time, is threefold:

a. The SDA argument.
b. Theoretical instability (upon reflection type-C collapses into one of the other positions or to versions of dualism and Monism).
c. Wittgenstein's insistence on philosophizing only with what's 'on the table' (and also Hempel's dilemma).

To clarify where I am coming from, I just happen to think that philosophers don't take enough time to appreciate the richness of physics. Modern Condensed Matter Theory keeps generating ever stranger exotic states of matter and the quantum complexity revolution is upon us. After all, a physicalist consciousness realist can claim:

a. Consciousness is a unique and peculiar state of matter.
b. The brain is a unique and peculiar physical system.
c. The two are exquisitely correlated.
d. The condensed matter theory of bulk matter keeps discovering ever stranger phases of matter.
e. Physics has never failed to explain anti-physicalist intuitions.

Conclusion: There is some relevant yet to be discovered brain physics that explains some of our anti-physicalist intuitions (beginning with the easier ones!).

All this was an attempt to defend a broader kind of physicalism from the author's charges.

On the 'other' hard problems

As I said, I like the title and the plurality of the problem of consciousness which brings us to what I see not only as a flaw in this paper but a general problem in current theories of mind.

In the introduction to their "Consciousness and Introspection" Smithies and Stoljar" claim that metaphysical theories of consciousness attempting to explain how matter gives rise to consciousness must include an essential chapter explaining how and whether consciousness acts back on the matter of the brain to cause what we say and know about it. Likewise, in his "The Meta Problem of Consciousness" Chalmers makes a similar demand. This means that epiphenomenal Dualism, which is an otherwise attractive theory, must explain how consciousness acts back on matter. When you declare that you are conscious you do so because you are certain that you are conscious, somehow your consciousness acts on the matter of your brain to generate the declaration. Dualists (including panpsychism) but also other consciousness realist must take a position on the next question (similar to the meta problem) – Is it possible to provide a consciousness independent explanation of such reports? - Here Chalmers explores more than 10 ways of doing that and argues that a smart enough AI is likely to generate similar declarations without being conscious. According to Chalmers one's solutions to both the hard problem and to the meta problem must cohere. This demand puts added pressure on our theories of consciousness. Dualism now must deal with the causal closure of the physical where events in space and time can only

be caused by other such events. Here some panpsychists (Hedda Morch) introduce ‘phenomenal powers’ that enable consciousness to act back on matter, similarly one can embrace Interactive Dualism (Eccles) but both are problematic moves. Not only is there a limit to the number of extravagant metaphysical commitments that a theory can take on, in both cases you need to establish the existence of such ‘extra-theoretic’ influences in the brain which is highly unlikely. It is however falsifiable and therefore scientific. Even if one introduces a God, that intervenes in our lives on a daily basis, into the fold one can still ask whether the introduction of God manages to explain such conscious reports with, or without, changing the rigid functional profile of the relevant microphysical constituents. Also, in both cases one needs to explain how a non-relational consciousness manages to act on microphysical constituents from the great beyond to announce itself, to us and to the world, relationally.

I think that our standard theories of mind cannot overcome these difficulties which Chalmers termed the Meta-challenge. I am currently exploring a strange radically parallelistic theory having to do with the principle of duality, however it is outside the scope of this review. Of course, Alexandros’ metaphysical theory of mind is not the only one that neglect to conjoin the hard problem with the meta problem or the problem of mental causation.

In this review I concentrated on some issues that are close to my heart but there are other ways to interact with this manuscript which I know less about. The author is likely to benefit from some of the existing work on cosmopsychism (Albahari, Shani, Nagasawa) but also from Chalmers’ simulation scenario and his work on the matrix scenario showing that the possibility that we are living in a simulation is philosophically coherent. Here one can compare these ‘God Explanations’. First there is the question of which of the three scenarios possesses the greatest explanatory benefits to our metaphysical questions including questions about the fine-tunning of our universe and then the question of which of these provides the smallest metaphysical commitment, and the most economic and least intrusive God.