

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

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HARD PROBLEMS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Alexandros Syrakos

In this short-book-length essay Alexandros Syrakos offers, 'a somewhat fresh perspective ... by someone who is not a professional philosopher but a physical scientist'. As an Anglican Christian priest, I bring to the discussion a further interdisciplinary perspective, that of theology and praxis.

I found the 'book' refreshing and thought-provoking, the arguments vigorously grounded in a clear philosophical grasp of ideas and professional familiarity with the science of matter. At the same time I sensed another level of writing, also very interesting but more personal and in its own way passionate, or at least highly purposeful. Especially in the latter part of the essay, I sometimes felt a slight awkwardness between these two levels, particularly when 'God' explicitly entered the argument. After the initial close analysis and criticism of different forms of physicalism and panpsychism, during which words such as 'mystery' and 'unexplainable' have prepared us for something other, the slightly abrupt introduction of 'God' was like the author deciding at last to show his hand. Given the essentially mysterious (to be 'hallowed') nature of the word 'God' on the one hand, and on the other hand the casual way it is commonly used, like a hammer to kickstart or close down a bit of intellectual machinery, not to mention the highly, often violently, contested claims made for and against the word – especially and very topically of course in its Arabic form, Allah – it perhaps requires more careful handling at the point of introduction. This might lengthen the essay, but if conceived as a short book rather than an 'article' that would not be a problem. Maybe the title of the essay also needs re-visiting, so that from the outset it is clear that it has a certain direction of travel.

'God' is, it feels to me, understood here in broadly Christian terms (the one or two scripture references are to the New Testament), although the concluding sentence, referring to 'the Existence that is God', also reflects the Judaeo-Christian Hebraic revelation to Moses in the burning bush, 'I am that I am'. At many points I felt that what was being discussed was at the extreme edge of what language is capable of – close to, even at times identical with, the concerns and insights of mystical theology and poetry, not only Christian. I would be most interested to know how the author might see this. The supremely first-person experiential reality of mystical vision might in particular shed a slightly different, and perhaps more positive, light on aspects of panpsychism.

Following on from this, I wondered whether there might be more direct consideration of the nature of language, or social conventions of interaction generally, as possibly formative of (and not merely peripheral to) mind, in the sense of that

which constitutes the irreducible self of a person, inaccessible to a third party – beginning with the primal relational communion between a pregnant woman's body and the 'miraculously' emerging foetus in her womb. From a Christian (Chalcedonian Orthodox) point of view it might be worth looking at the value of sensory experience, including language, in the light of the theology of the incarnate Logos, the Word made flesh, whereby the contingent, transient human nature of Jesus is wholly one with 'the Existence that is God', ultimately taking humanity, with and through its crude birth, wilderness hunger, wedding feast-celebrations, Lazarus-raising tears, Gethsemane fears, and experience of total abandonment, into the transcendent godhead. Reading the essay, it struck me that some of the arguments were essentially concerned with the same issues that underlay the Christological debates of the early Church, namely the nature of ultimate truth/reality, the ultimate nature, value, and destiny of the human person, and the dynamic reciprocal relationship or non-relationship of these 'ultimates'.

In terms of language (I should say I found the essay very readable, which is not always the case in such discussions), and in relation to the incarnational considerations I've just mentioned, George Steiner's book *The Poetry of Thought* could be of interest. It explores the inextricable relationship between the energies of poetic diction and the 'content' of philosophical thought, implying a conception of mind that has what one might call a performative dynamic, in which the unique 'inaccessible' self has an identity-transforming exchange with, if not full access to, another unique self. In a sense, I would say, that applies to all the arts, particularly music and architecture. The self is thereby actually changed. Most radically, transformation of the unique first-person self through a synthesis of introspective and external energies is most profoundly lived in religious metanoia or 'conversion', enlightenment or other experiential spiritual metamorphoses, or what Christians maintain to be the perfect realisation of this, death to self and re-birth to 'new life' in the Word made flesh. In this phenomenon, according to Christian understanding, the peripheral physical, in its broadest sense aesthetic, processes of the social human individual are wholly integrated with the primitive singularity of the self in its absolute uniqueness.

One or two specific points: I think it would be helpful to define what is meant in this context by 'mystery', 'value', and especially 'introspection', which is clearly crucial. I think also it would help to be clear about 'ego', which in some other contexts is very different from the 'self'. An area of the self that is not mentioned, I think, is that of sentience. My own view is that this is vital to the human self, as the border zone between mind (as consciousness in the broadest sense) and definitive otherness, the transcendent.

Finally, in Section 4, the focus turns to the concept of the person – here the essay broadens, and what I felt as different 'levels' of writing (one dispassionate, closely argued, the other, personal, 'in my opinion' etc.) flow into each other. This key theme could be flagged up more strongly at the start of the essay, and its importance perhaps stated even more positively at the start of the section, to help clarify the sense of structure of the essay overall. I find the argument altogether convincing, *pace* the need for a more 'courteous' manner in using God-speak, and eminently important. It might be interesting to look at Alexandru Popescu's book *Petre Țuțea: Between Sacrifice and Suicide*, which describes how crucial the concept of the human person was to dissident Romanian thinking in face of the imposed dialectical materialist view of human nature during the Communist era. Proceeding from this emphasis on the person, the section on Free Will read particularly well, I thought, raising acute issues of ethics and value in the 'real' world, to round off what might

otherwise have seemed a largely theoretical, albeit intensely interesting, discussion.

I'd like to finish by thanking Alexandros Syrakos very much for posting this stimulating, helpful, and timely essay.