

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

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One of the plusses of this paper is that it is written by a conscientious non-philosopher — a mechanical engineer, to be more exact, studying such things as computational fluid dynamics. Such authorship perhaps explains why the style is clear, efficient, and straightforward. Deep problems in the philosophy of mind involving consciousness are handled and explained clearly and simply, yet robustly, without making matters too simple. Because of this, parts of this paper from sections 1 and 2 would make a nice introduction to the philosophy of mind. At the end of this review, I raise a question about why accounts of consciousness vary so widely.

Primarily, the author, Syrakos, is concerned about the epistemic gap between the physical and the phenomenal. He explores the idea that the gap may be ontological, beyond merely being epistemic. This, it seems, is the one central, major hard problem he addresses: the physical explanation of consciousness and its continual failure to say anything remotely satisfying. Sections 1 to 3 discuss this problem from several different angles. Stratos's argument here is usually some form of the gap: we have no clue how a physical process like waves of neural firings could actually be conscious. And, in these dogmatic and philosophically anemic times, I find Syrakos's embrace of the self and personhood to be refreshing . . . and correct. Even in the abstract, Syrakos concludes that a person is a simple substance.

However, the hard problem that Syrakos is most interested in is the notion of persons. He laments that this problem doesn't receive the attention it deserves. He says:

"Introspection reveals to anyone that he/she is a centre of conscious existence, of first-person perspective, characterized by simplicity (non-compositeness) and uniqueness (non-duplicability), properties that are not consonant with the physical realm and which are not compatible with a physicalist view of persons as physical objects." (p. 28/82, beginning of section 4.)"

Syrakos has a nice signature move here. He says:

"Whether considered as a literal fact (by dualists) or as an illusion produced by biochemical processes (by physicalists),

we can say that each of us [at least seems to be] a centre of existence”

That is, Syrakos takes seriously the fruits of introspection, even though we may hallucinate them.

Another bold insight on which Syrakos spends considerable time is captured in this quote:

“Between [a] person and the rest of the world, there is the impenetrable barrier of privateness.”

There is much more to discuss about Syrakos’s paper (it is very long, perhaps a bit too long). I recommend the paper to the reader.

I do have one objection though: Within the entire philosophy of mind, *the diversity of introspective reports about consciousness and personhood is too high*. If we sum across all philosophers of mind (or even everyone one in the world), we have flatly contradictory, completely incompatible reports about what is experienced, why, and how, and about who or what is doing the experiencing. My question to Syrakos is this:

What if theories of consciousness vary as widely as they do because different philosophers (or even regular people) *feel their consciousness differently?*

Here is an example:

What if consciousness comes come in a bewilderingly large collection of types of consciousness. These types are distinguished, among other ways, by how tightly one is *tethered* to the physical. This tethering is itself a conscious experience, but not just or only a conscious experience. *Broadly and generally speaking, physicalists are tightly tethered to the physical while dualists are only loosely tether to the physical.*

My use of the notion of tethering is metaphorical here (because I don’t know how the tethering is implemented), but let’s suppose that such tethering — tight or loose — is a fact, a real property of the universe.

If we suppose all of this, then no theory of the conscious mind is going to appeal to everyone. Instead, there will be groups of people who feel and believe one thing about consciousness and other groups of people who feel the opposite way. More importantly, no one will be *right* — there really are different connections to the physical realm and these different connections determine what theory one is likely to embrace. Consider asking everyone in the world if they like chocolate. Some will say “Yes” and will say “No.” And the strengths of love or hate for chocolate will vary greatly.

So, the problem faced by philosophers of the conscious mind is that they all seek something that cannot be got: the one correct view of consciousness while ignoring tethering. If there is no one correct view, then we may view Syrakos’s paper as a description of *his* tethering. I found his work somewhat agreeable because I am (roughly) similarly tethered to the physical. But Dan Dennett, an arch physicalist, will find Syrakos’s paper to be completely wrong.

Humans differ profoundly across a myriad of properties, likes, dislikes, fears, hopes, etc. etc. The same must be true of consciousness, though this fact is ignored usually. No one theory of the type Syrakos develops here (or of the type Dennett developed in his infamous book *Consciousness Explained*) is going to appeal to everyone.

The truth of consciousness cannot be got at this time. We are all missing something crucial, something like tethering. And probably many many more such properties.

The correct theory of consciousness must say why we all differ so much in our introspective reports and feelings about our own consciousness.