

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

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Although I am not a philosopher, I am interested in the topics related to the Philosophy of Mind. Since it seemed to me that the essay proposed by Alexandros Syrakos also has a popularizing/educational purpose, I agreed to comment on it, thinking that it might be useful for the author to receive, among others, some not strictly professional feedback.

I found the paper thoughtful, interesting and even courageous (albeit a bit difficult to read, due to its length...). I appreciate the paper and look forward to reading more from the author in the next future !

It is impossible to comment on all the topics covered in the essay, as there are too many of them. So, I will focus on only two points, either because I disagree with the author or because his position is not completely clear to me.

I will directly skip any obvious consideration about the "editorial nature/purpose" of the essay. As other commentators have already pointed out, it is too long to be a paper, too broad to be a book chapter and probably too short to be a book. So, I'd rather regard it as a free expression of the author's thoughts.

1) Why is the debate on the relationship between the brain and the mind important?

Of course, the first reason is epistemological, since everybody wants to know as much as possible about reality, and certainly the mind is an important part of reality (especially from a human perspective). However, another reason also seems to emerge from the author's words, which to me seems more related to an emotional domain. Both in the introduction and in the final summary, the author expresses the idea that it would be very depressing if it was really/literally true that our minds are nothing but a bundle of neurons blindly obeying physical laws.

I don't think this is the right way to approach the issue, since even if we were to find that this is indeed the case, nothing would change in the way we experience our mental life.

As an example, let us imagine that the entire scientific community (philosophers included) gather at a global Conference at the end of which they unanimously come out to the conclusion that without any doubt, our mind is uniquely and exclusively made up of neural processes, and let us also imagine that this conclusion is broadcast live all over the world... At that same instant, would the intensity and quality of our feelings and our emotions suddenly begin to vanish?

I would say no, nothing would change in the phenomenal dimension of our mind (phenomenal consciousness). Consequently, I would see no reason to be worried. However, things might be different if we instead focused on the consequences that a physicalist conception of the mind might have on our social life.

If it were true that our mental life and our behavior were ruled by physical laws to the point that they could be entirely understood and predicted in terms of electrochemical procedures obeying the laws of physics and chemistry, then this would certainly have a great impact on our societies.

If concepts such as “freedom of choice” and “responsibility” were really replaced by equations and physical notions, then radical changes would occur. Perhaps the habit of praising people for good actions and blaming them for any misbehavior would survive but things such as our legal system would change dramatically. If freedom of choice and responsibility were literally shown to be false beliefs, then law courts wouldn’t send to jail people after committing horrible crimes for which, however, they could in no way be held responsible. In contrast, people who were induced to commit bad acts by virtue of physical laws that inevitably drive them to behave that way would be helped to amend such behaviors by means of some sort of corrective training which directly acts upon those physical laws.

No doubt we would be facing a real revolution and yet, once again, we should ask ourselves whether there is really anything to be concerned about.

If one day human beings were really convinced, beyond any reasonable doubt, that their behavior is actually ruled by physical laws, would they not be happy to change their judicial systems and social customs accordingly? Would they not feel a great sense of sorrow, sadness and shame at the thought of how cruel and unjust was a society that used to punish by inflicting unspeakable suffering people who were guilty of faults for which they should in no way have been held accountable?

Here again, I don’t think there is any reason to be concerned. After all, throughout history, human beings have already had to change their views about their origins and their position in the universe several times and yet I do not believe that nowadays we feel sad because we now tend to believe that the earth is not at the center of the universe, and that probably the ancestors from whom we descend were hominids very similar to apes. On the contrary, these cultural revolutions seem to have changed humanity for the better.

In my opinion, the only reason to be worried about the future of the debate concerning the nature of the human mind would be if one had the suspicion that one theoretical position (whatever it may be, either physicalistic or dualistic) might prevail over the others not on the basis of evidence and rational reasoning but on the basis of covert interests (i.e.: economic, political or ideological interests) passed off as scientific truths... But that would be a completely different matter.

2) The other topic I would like to comment on concerns the fourth section of the essay, which the author considers to be the most important.

Here is how I understood the issue.

Let’s start by considering one of the thought experiments proposed by the author, concerning the possibility of duplicating a physical body. In that case you would have two identical replicas of the same body and of the same brain and yet there will be two different persons and two different identities. When one of the two brains is involved in some activity, only the owner of that brain will experience his own self in the act of doing something. This thought experiment would immediately

show that the physical composition/constitution of the brain has little (if any) to do with the person's identity, since two **identical** brains are associated with two **different** identities.

The argument is almost compelling but perhaps not enough to postulate the existence of a non-physical substance.

Let us try to consider the same thought experiment from a different perspective. One might wonder what is essential to a person's identity. According to the author, at the foundation of the person's identity we should not find psychological characteristics such as our idiosyncratic aptitudes, skills, preferences etc. because these should be considered as peripheral/secondary qualities of identities. Instead, what seems to be crucial is the property of being endowed with a first-person perspective of our existence, which is private in that only the owner of that identity can have direct access to it while everything else in the world (including other people) is strictly excluded.

If this first-person private perspective is the core of personal identity, then both copies of the same brain should have such a property in that whenever one is stimulated, it is only that brain that is involved in that particular activation, representing reality from that particular and subjective point of view.

If there are two identical brains in the universe, each one would give rise to a different person just because each brain would be endowed with the same property of having a first-person perspective of the world which is inaccessible to the others.

Because this point is important, I would like to briefly report two more examples that confirm the idea that the foundation of identity is not peripheral/secondary qualities but the minimal and basic principle of first-person perspective.

Imagine a man who is getting old. As we know, unfortunately sometimes it happens that our cognitive functions deteriorate as time passes. This man will gradually lose his memories, he won't be able to turn his attention to the world around him, his comprehension skills will fade away to the point where he will not be able to recognize his relatives and eventually, he won't even remember his own name... Yet until he is alive, we would say that this man still retains the first-person perspective of his own existence, albeit at the lowest level we can conceive...

We could also imagine a man floating in a vacuum, whose brain is completely disconnected from the outside world: no experiences coming from his senses, and no thoughts too. According to the Avicenna's "flying man argument", we may consider the possibility that as long as this man is alive, he still has some experience of the self which is based on a first-person perspective.

These examples seem to confirm the idea that our identity is mainly based on some minimal first-person experience of the self while other peripheral qualities such as autobiographical memory, semantic knowledge, psychological traits etc. are less important.

If, according to the author, the first-person, private perspective of one's own existence is at the core of our identities, then such a private perspective of our existence seems to be a property of each individual brain and not necessarily the mark of some non-physical substance since each individual brain seems to possess the prerequisites to implement this first-person perspective of the reality around us and our existence.

By this I do not mean to argue that the problem of personal identity does not exist but rather that it does not represent a truly special and unique case to the extent that it requires the introduction of new entities into the ontology of the world. If the basis of personal identity is the experience of the self from a first-person perspective, then this would be yet another instance of a more general problem, famously labelled "the hard problem.". Having a mind means, among other things, being able to have experiences. The experience of the self seems no different from any other experience we can have in our lives. Consequently, the problem is to understand the nature of these phenomenal experiences. Physicalism takes it for granted that they are nothing more than the activity of neural circuits in our brains and yet it is not at all clear how this could be possible.

However, perhaps the supposed link between the experience of self and the identity of the person is not essential to the author and is not exactly what he had in mind.

Sometimes he seems to associate the first-person perspective of one's existence with being alive and experiencing the self, while at other times this does not seem to be the case, as when he claims that *"My first-person identity, I myself, is a unique place in the universe, in all of reality, reserved only for me no matter whether I am alive and conscious or not"*.

There is only one "me" in the history of the universe, either before I was born or after the end of my life. The absolute uniqueness of this event might actually lead us to think about the existence of some kind of absolute and metaphysical principle.

This argument is interesting and intriguing, but once again not strong enough to justify the introduction of another metaphysical, irreducible substance. After all, even the existence of such a metaphysical entity would deserve an explanation, and so it might be more parsimonious to think that when we are born we are given brains that are capable of producing experiences, albeit in ways that are still unexplained. The physical similarity of the brains is completely irrelevant at this point (the brains can be identical or completely dissimilar), since the only thing that matters is the fact that each brain can only have its own first-person perspective of things, accessible only to the owner of that brain. When a particular brain is stimulated, it is that particular brain which is involved in that activity, not the other brains. How the physical processes taking place in that brain translate that first-person perspective into the experience of self remains to be explained, but it seems no different from the brain's alleged ability to translate similar physical activity into the experience of colors, sounds, emotions etc. Perhaps the problem of our personal identity is not a special case, requiring special interpretations and the introduction of new special non-physical substances...

...As I continue to think about this, two other extreme examples come to mind, one of which might reinforce what I have just said while the other might challenge it.

First, consider the possibility that we can travel in time, so that it is possible for me to meet myself in another time. In this case it is clear that I am exactly the same person as I am now, and yet we must be two different persons, because we have two different bodies and two different brains, which give rise to two different first-person perspectives of the world and of my own existence.

But now imagine that it is literally possible for a single mind to host multiple personalities (of course such a question is debated in psychiatry, but for the sake of simplicity let us assume that it is literally possible). Depending on how far we want to go in ascribing separate identities to these different personalities, this might be a case where the existence of different identities is supposedly independent of the existence of different brains...

I don't know... perhaps the author would like to think more deeply about the possible implications of this example.

Other possible ways of explaining the important (probably special) role that our identity plays in our mental lives, have been suggested in the literature. Concepts such as “I” and “ME” can be interpreted in terms of the development of our social and linguistic skills. They can be seen as emergent properties or by-products of our interactions with others (not necessarily nor obviously reducible to the physical processes in our brains). However, this would be a completely different way of looking at the issue which has nothing to do with the existence of metaphysical substances, and so I won't go into it any further.