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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

This is a very interesting, utterly fascinating and impressive contribution to the (hard) problem of consciousness. The paper is very well written and beautifully argued. It is also very ambitious in the topics it deals with – it is practically a whole philosophy course concentrated in a single paper, from philosophy of science, of mind, ethics and even theology. In this brief comment, I will only deal with some specific themes that I found particularly confusing or simply incorrect. The first is has to do with Syrakos's understanding of the 'design' instance – in Dennett's conceptualization. According to Syrakos, the design instance requires some sort of 'mind' causally responsible for the functionality of the objects of this design instance. This is clearly an incorrect interpretation of the design instance. Dennett is very explicit when he argues that the design instance gives the appearance of a kind of mental causation. But that is totally false, since it is the mindless process of evolution by natural selection what accounts for the existence of the design objects, such as living things and their organs. However, the account produced by evolution by natural selection is not a 'causal' account, like the one we find in the 'physical instance'. It is not physical causes what we get from evolution by natural selection, but *functions*. Again, these are mindless functions, but functions nonetheless, for this is how the science of biology accounts for the existence of all characteristics of living organisms. Consequently, against what Syrakos states, objectively speaking the heart *has a function*: to pump the blood, and this is how we account for its existence in living beings who do have one. But what kind of function is that? How could there be 'mindless' functions? The comparison between the heart and the rock on top of the earth pillar (p. 25) is misleading because it misses the key difference between the heart and the rock: the first belongs to an organism that produces copies of itself (under certain conditions) whereas the rock doesn't. Consequently, the explanation as to why the rock is on top of the pillar cannot be the same as the explanation of why certain living organisms have a heart: one is a causal explanation – the rock is on top of the pillar because of erosion, flooding, etc. – the other is functional – the heart exists because, by pumping the blood, etc. it enables the organism to survive and, crucially, produce copies of itself.

My second objection has to do with the principle of causal closure in scientific explanations, which Syrakos dismisses as being the result of the physicalist approach that he equally derides. It might be worth drawing a distinction between what we might call causal closure sensu lato and sensu stricto. The first would refer to the exclusion of supernatural or non-natural causation in scientific explanations. I am not dismissing the existence of the supernatural as such, I am simply arguing that in a scientific explanation any form of supernatural causation or intervention should be rejected out of principle. The principle of causal closure sensu stricto, on the other hand, can also be defined as the principle of *physical* causal closure. This means that in the physical sciences (the physical instance, in Dennett's terms) only physical causes shall be accepted as explanations for physical effects. I agree with Syrakos that this entails that consciousness cannot be

accounted for in terms of physics. But more than that: lots of other things that we can *scientifically* explain by other means cannot be accounted for in terms of physics either. Evolution by natural selection would be an instance of this (design instance). I think it is Dennett himself who produces this example: I can explain by evolution by natural selection why the giraffes have such a long neck, but I cannot produce the same explanation in causal terms. Another clear instance would be human behaviour (intentional instance this time). Human behaviour has purposes, but it does not have 'causes' in physical terms, for human behaviour is not a physical entity. It certainly *emerges from* physical entities, such as the atoms and molecules that make up the human body, or from design entities, such as the human body as a living organism. Syrakos dismisses, too harshly to my mind, the concept of emergence (note 5, p. 71). But this concept is fundamental, not only to account for the existence of consciousness itself (something that I will not try to do here), but simply to account for the existence of non-physical phenomena, such as evolution by natural selection or human behaviour. Syrakos rejects the concept of emergence and he equally dismisses the principle of causal closure, both in its broad and narrow sense (if I understood him correctly), hence he is obliged to account for human behaviour as a 'violation of the laws of physics': 'If agent-causality is true, then the laws of physics are routinely violated somewhere in our brains, or, to be more precise, physical causal closure does not hold somewhere in our brains, at the mind-brain interface' (p. 46). I find this statement highly implausible. There is no evidence that the laws of physics as we currently understand them now are violated anywhere in the known universe. But let me make this clear: the laws of physics apply *only* to physical things, i.e. atoms, molecules, planets, galaxies, etc. They do not apply to non-physical things, such as human behaviour.

And this leads me to the third topic I would like to comment upon: free will. I agree with Syrakos in his critique of physicalist determinism. Human behaviour is indeterminate by definition. This does not mean that it is unpredictable or random: social life would be impossible if that were the case. It means that our predictions about human behaviour are merely probabilistic and, certainly, do not originate in the application of the laws of physics. This is so not because the laws of physics are violated somewhere in our brains, as Syrakos maintains, but because human behaviour *is not* a physical entity. To try to explain human behaviour by means of the laws of physics would be equivalent to trying to account for the meaning of a written word by analysing the chemical composition of the ink with which it has been written. Meaning is not physical, though it emerges from physical stuff, such as the marks on a paper or the sound waves produced by my vocal chords.

These are just some brief comments on an excellent, if controversial, paper that I am sure will generate a very productive debate.