

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

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This article is a long winding defense of dualism and the existence of God. Thus, even if many difficult problems in the philosophy of mind are dealt with, the title is somewhat misleading.

The article is not only very long but also quite unfocused, treating a diversity of issues as well as forwarding a number of propositions without convincing argumentation. There are few, if any, novel assertions that are defended. The lack of a common thread, which could have tied together the various topics, is disturbing and confusing for the reader. This is more of a review paper than a research article.

This being said, the author is well acquainted with the main problems in philosophy of mind and provides well versed and occasionally interesting discussions and arguments. Anyone new to the topics of philosophy of mind, and interested in the deep and existential questions that lies therein, could benefit from a critical reading of the text.

Critical reading is indeed essential, since it becomes obvious that the author also has an agenda. It takes quite some reading, though, before it is made clear that the author wishes to disclaim physicalism in order to favour dualism and the existence of God. The abstract says nothing about this.

A thorough review would take many pages. I will in the following refrain myself to discuss some of the propositions and arguments put forth.

First, frequently the author speaks of his "opinion" in various matters rather than proposing arguments. Neither a research paper nor a review does well with opinions in place of facts or arguments.

The author claims that physicalism is the "prevalent worldview", but does not discuss variants like naturalism, which many would claim is the prevalent worldview. Furthermore, on page 10 the author claims that "if consciousness is to fit into the physicalistic framework, it must be deducible from physical principles...". This is, of course, outright wrong since non-reductive physicalism is a solution to the dilemma, and favoured by many, sometimes in the form of property dualism.

It is said that "Physics does not, and can not, provide a complete description of reality." In connection with this statement, emergentism is dismissed. It is even said that "...strong emergentism would entail that the fundamental physical laws at the microscopic level are violated." This is much in line with Kim's argumentation against downward, or mental, causation. But this argument is weak, and it is not hard to find emergent properties in nature, and thought experiments that motivate emergent properties of consciousness can be constructed. The neglect of arguments that support ontological emergence illegitimately reduces the physicalist view. This of course paves the way for the author's argument in favour of dualism.

On page 25 the author speaks of “biological technology” – there is no such thing; the concept of technology assumes a purpose and is a result of human activity only.

Section 4.1, discussing the pairing problem, is problematic. It is hard to make sense to the question “Why am I paired to this body and not to some other”; it is a non-problem at best. The discussion concerning that “selves are not reducible to bodies” is sloppy, if not desperate in defending dualism. To conclude that an exact duplicate of my brain should also give rise to me is surprising and wrong. It will be associated with a person that thinks like me, but with different external boundary conditions, positioned elsewhere in space. There is no confusion between the two brains.

When the author comes to the “creation problem” we are supposed to “grant that a self is a simple identity” and “it is impossible for an ego to be brought into existence solely by factors/agents outside of it”. This is far from evident and the argumentation in favour is meagre.

On page 38 the arguments are fading and we are to hear that the author has a “preferred solution” which is that “... egos are created by an omnipotent Mind, for whom nothing is impossible.” At this point the author tells us that “... my belief is that God has direct access to each of us, in a mysterious way...” I can only add here that it is not “beliefs” that philosophical papers ought to be made of. Here there are still 44 pages of the paper left – many readers are supposedly lost here, now expecting to meet opinions and beliefs rather than discussions and arguments.

Nevertheless continuing, I am sorry to say that I somewhat lose patience when the introduction to free will starts with the assertion that “in Sections 2 and 3, we saw that physics cannot account for all of reality but that mentality exists fundamentally”. Since the author has missed non-reductive physicalism and dismissed emergentism, the reader should perhaps not be astonished by this assertion.

If interested in learning more what the author has to say about free will, it is somewhat discouraging that the author on the one side correctly asserts that “ability to do otherwise” is a poor definition, he on the other forgets the cognitive denotation of “ability” and discusses the potentially free behaviour of fundamental particles.

So what praise of the article can be given, apart from being an entertaining introduction to current difficult problems in the philosophy of mind?

Well, I would say that the author occasionally brings about sound and fresh arguments related to the topics, or problems, discussed. One example concerns the paradox of predictability. If these were carried all the way, much would be gained.