

James, Epiphenomenalism, and the Hard Problem

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October 4, 2024

1. Consciousness ... has been slowly evolved in the animal series, and resembles in this all organs that have a use. Since the mere supernumerary depicted by the Conscious-Automaton-theory would be useless, it follows that if we can discover the utility of consciousness we shall overthrow that theory. (AWA 1879, 41)
2. [C]onsciousness ... seems an organ, super-added to the other organs which maintain the animal in the struggle for existence; and the presumption of course is that it helps him in some way in the struggle, just as they do. But it cannot help him without being in some way efficacious and influencing the course of his bodily history. (PP 1890, 142)

3. CLASSIC PASSAGE:

It is a well-known fact that pleasures are generally associated with beneficial, pains with detrimental, experiences. All the fundamental vital processes illustrate this law. Starvation, suffocation, privation of food, drink and sleep, work when exhausted, burns, wounds, inflammation, the effects of poison, are as disagreeable as filling the hungry stomach, enjoying rest and sleep after fatigue, exercise after rest, and a sound skin and unbroken bones at all times, are pleasant. Mr. Spencer and others have suggested that these coincidences are due, not to any pre-established harmony, but to the mere action of natural selection which would certainly kill off in the long-run any breed of creatures to whom the fundamentally noxious experience seemed enjoyable. An animal that should take pleasure in a feeling of suffocation would, if that pleasure were efficacious enough to make him immerse his head in water, enjoy a longevity of four or five minutes. But if pleasures and pains have no efficacy, one does not see (without some such *a priori* rational harmony as would be scouted by the 'scientific' champions of the automaton-theory) why the most noxious acts, such as burning, might not give thrills of delight, and the most necessary ones, such as breathing, cause agony. The exceptions to the law are, it is true, numerous, but relate to experiences that are either not vital or not universal. ... The only considerable attempt, in fact, that has been made to explain the *distribution* of our feelings is that of Mr. Grant Allen in his suggestive little work *Physiological Aesthetics*; and his reasoning is based exclusively on [the] causal efficacy of pleasures and pains.... (PP 1890, 146 – 147, italics original)

4. High places cause fear of a peculiarly sickening sort, though here, again, individuals differ enormously. ... That they [i.e., fears of high places] are a mere incidental peculiarity of the nervous system, like liability to sea-sickness, or love of music, with no teleological significance, seems more than probable. *The fear in question varies so much from one person to another, and its detrimental effects are so much more obvious than its uses, that it is hard to see how it could be a selected instinct.* Man is anatomically one of the best fitted of animals for climbing about high places. *The best psychical complement to this equipment would seem to be a 'level head' when there, not a dread of*

going there at all. ... A certain amount of timidity obviously adapts us to the world we live in, but the fear-paroxysm is surely altogether harmful to him who is its prey. (PP 1890, 1036 – 1037, italics mine)

5. Allen's classification of pains finds a place for discomfort associated with "the amputation of a limb, the excision of an ulcer, ... the removal of a scalp," "wounds, cuts, pricks, and scratches," "burning off a finger, having the feet frozen so that the joints drop off, destroying the skin and muscles with a corrosive acid," "par[ing] or break[ing] the nails below the quick, ... pull[ing] open a sore, ... hav[ing] the face or lips chapped," cases where "portions of the body waste away in eating sores, such as abscesses, cancers, ulcers, whitlows, &c," "corns, bunions, bedsores, and lacerations," "[i]ntestinal pain ..., [t]he passage of renal calculi, gall stones, or clotted catamenial discharges," "[s]prains, cramps, and spasms," rubbing "salt or pepper" on "a wound or burns," attempts to "to tear off the nails, to flay alive, to pull out the hair, to draw a tooth," "mustard and cayenne pepper in excess," "very loud sounds," "fatigue after muscular exertion; mental weariness; inanition from want of food; faintness from anæmia, loss of blood, sleeplessness, or over-exertion; weakness from fever or other depressing disease; nervous debility; and those undefinable organic feelings which result from general ill-health," among others (Allen, 1877, 6 – 9, 11 – 15).
6. "the consciousness of Pain or Discomfort bears somewhat the same relation to other conscious states as the physical fact which underlies it bears to other conditions of the system." (Allen 1877, 20)
7. The process of natural selection cannot distinguish between me and my zombie twin. Evolution selects properties according to their functional role, and my zombie twin performs all the functions that I perform just as well as I do; in particular he leaves around just as many copies of his genes. It follows that evolution alone cannot explain why conscious creatures rather than zombies evolved. (Chalmers 1996, 120)

Domain-General Objection

- I. If epiphenomenalism is true, then consciousness can't have evolved through natural selection (because it can't have differentially affected reproductive success)
- II. Consciousness *did* evolve through natural selection.
- III. Epiphenomenalism is false.

Domain-Specific Objection (in the Classic Passage)

- Epiphenomenalists accept that these Life-Essential, Phenomenal Pleasures and Pains (henceforth LEPPPs) are *effects* of the Beneficial and Harmful Brain States (BeHaBS) with which they're natively associated.
- But epiphenomenalists can't consistently say that they are *adapted* effects, or in other words proper etiological functions, of those BeHaBS. Why?
- Because if epiphenomenalism were true, LEPPPs could have no "efficacy" and so (recall James's uncontroversial argument) could have made no difference to reproductive success.
- But LEPPPs have three features that *do* suggest they were shaped by selection: our LEPPPs are:
 - a. natively-patterned (they have a characteristic "*distribution*");

- b. those patterns are systematically linked with antecedent BeHaBS (this is the “*well-known fact*”); and
 - c. the patterns are “universal” among humans.
- James concludes that epiphenomenalism cannot make sense of how our native LEPPP (pleasure/pain) patterns, with their systematic connections to antecedent BeHaBS (brain states), could have evolved.
- Crucial but suppressed premise: *if* features a – c of our pleasures/pains can’t be explained by appeal to selection, then their evolution can’t be explained at all.

Works Cited

AWA = (James 1879/1983), originally (James 1879)

PP = (James 1890/1981)

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