

Mind/body “hard problem” is not a category error

Commentary on [Reber](#) on *Origins of Mind*

Linda A. W. Brakel

Psychiatry and Philosophy
University of Michigan

Abstract: Reber’s Cellular Basis of Consciousness (CBC) has much to recommend it. However, while the CBC effectively renders null any ontological gap between mind and body, it leaves two important remaining gaps unaddressed: the epistemologic and the causal gap. Brakel’s (2013) Diachronic Conjunctive Token Physicalism (DiCoToP) is briefly introduced as a beginning remedy for the epistemologic, but unfortunately not the causal, gap. Thus the “hard problem” remains both hard and problematic.

[Linda A.W. Brakel](#) is a psychoanalyst and an adjunct faculty member in Psychiatry and Philosophy at the University of Michigan. Her work is interdisciplinary, at the intersection of philosophy of action, philosophy of mind, and psychoanalysis. Brakel is the author of three (and co-author/co-editor of three more) books and about 50 academic articles.



<https://lsa.umich.edu/philosophy/people/affiliated-scholars/brakel.html>

My basic agreement with Reber’s (2016) target article far outweighs my disagreements. I agree, for example, with his taking issue with any form of mind/body dualism, which I assume includes property as well as substance dualism. I agree with his biological reductionism based on evolutionary principles, allowing that subjectivity, mental goings-on, and (let me add) agency (Brakel 2016) — such as choices to move this way or that, and to ingest, avoid or approach — are ever-present throughout the living locomoting world. (I also agree that plants are another matter, warranting serious attention, but not in his target article, nor my commentary.)

The one area in which I disagree concerns Reber’s assertion that the so-called “hard problem” is actually a category error, one that can be resolved by his Cellular Basis of Consciousness (CBC). I concur with Reber that there is no ontological gap between the mental and physical (mind and body) for any theorist embracing physicalism. Mental processes, including consciousness with qualia, are identical with their underlying brain structures — neuronal assemblies, neurochemicals, etc. However, I hold that the ontologic gap is not the only one. There are two more gaps to bridge. One is epistemological: What knowledge can we bring to bear about the relation between the physical (cellular) brain and subjective mental outcomes? The second gap is causal and even more vexing: How can these physical processes *cause* the mental ones? Even with no doubt that they are the causes — they must be, given that physical stuff is all there is ontologically — it is not a category mistake to ask this “how”

question.

Now I am no “New Mysterian” (McGinn 1989). Just as other formerly vexing questions can now be answered — e.g., how is it that multiple molecules of H₂O cause the emergent fluid properties of water, properties that are irrelevant to a single H₂O molecule — I believe that this causal question too will yield to the scientific answers. But views like Professor Reber’s give up too much and give out too soon on the causal and epistemological gaps. Like Galen Strawson (1994, 2009), who suggests that experience is an essential (perhaps *the* essential) aspect of any physical matter that we can know,¹ Reber’s is a non-reductive physicalist account rather than a reductive one. As attractive as these sorts of views are — deeming the hard question as unanswerable and thereby a wrong question does have considerable appeal — the epistemological and causal gaps are finessed and/or dismissed.

With this criticism registered, I hereby admit that my own mind/body reductive physicalist account, Diachronic Conjunctive Token Physicalism (DiCoToP) does absolutely no better on the causal gap question. (See Brakel 2013, Chapter 3, for a full and lengthy development of this view.) It does begin to address the epistemologic gap, however, proposing that a biologically informed token physicalism (rather than the more popular type physicalism) can use the normal degeneracy² of neuronal assemblies along with the capacity for multiple “different” physical realizations of the “same” mental processes to begin to understand mind/body relations.

Again, I have no quarrel with Reber’s (2016) conclusion as far as it goes: “Reactivity, consciousness, intentionality, memorial representation, creativity and all the rest are manifestations of particular kinds of organic stuff....No new ingredients are needed: simply an understanding of how the old ones function and permit the evolution of the newer” (p. 10). However, merely understanding that there has been an evolution does not tell the story of *how* it took place. And there is a story. Consider this analogy: There is no new ingredient when Superman becomes the physically identical Clark Kent (or vice versa), and yet there is a big and revealing causal story! We don’t know the causal mind/body story yet. Here’s hoping we will.

References

Brakel, L.A.W. (2013). *The Ontology of Psychology: Questioning Foundations in the Philosophy of Mind*. New York and London: Routledge

Brakel, L.A.W. (2016). [Animals are agents](#). *Animal Sentience* 2016.103

Edelman, G. & Gally, J. (2001). Degeneracy and complexity in biological systems.

¹ Strawson (1994): “1. All reality is physical (the basic materialist premise). 2. There are experiential and nonexperiential phenomena (unavoidable realism about the experiential plus the assumption [!] that there is more to physical reality than experiential reality.) 3. Among physical phenomena, experiential physical phenomena do not depend on nonexperiential phenomena” (p. 74).

² Biologic degeneracy as defined by Edelman and Gally (2001) is “...the ability of elements that are structurally different to perform the same function or yield the same [contentful] output” (p. 13763).

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 98: 12763-13768.

McGinn, C. (1989). Can we solve the mind-body problem? *Mind*, 98:349-366.

Reber, A. (2016). [Caterpillars, consciousness and the origins of mind](#). *Animal Sentience* 2016.106

Strawson, G. (1994). *Mental Reality*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

Strawson, G. (2009). *Selves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press