Mental Decisions and Physical Effects

[In February 2010 I sent out a letter to friends criticizing Susan Jacoby for not using the best argument against the existence of God, namely that the notion of a disembodied mind is scientifically incoherent. My friend Larry raised some objections to that, and I responded to those objections on Feb. 9, 2010. –S.H.]

Hi Larry,

I'll address the specific point you raised in your letter in a moment, but first let me suggest that you also check out the following fairly long essay I wrote some years back, "On the Analogy between Mind/Brain and Software/Hardware", which gets into a number of these issues more thoroughly: http://www.massline.org/Philosophy/ScottH/mindsoft.htm

You wrote:

> Your disembodied God argument was interesting but you have not considered the recent evidence of a person effecting the function of a television set by using brain waves. I don't have the link off the top of my head but the gist of the report was about a person mentally acting as the remote control on/off button. This is sort of the reverse of what you were suggesting and quite primitive but does indicate that physical phenomena radiate outside of our brains and can be harnessed to perform useful or perhaps useless functions. If the existence of a far more intelligent being/force/deity is postulated, one can envision a multitude of interactions with our conscious and subconscious minds.

This is conceptually not really any different than a person simply deciding to raise their arm (which we view as a mental process) and then raising it (an obvious physical process). The normal way this is done is that certain neural circuits in the brain are activated (i.e., the neurons fire in the appropriate sequence) and have two results: one, the inner mental feeling of the decision being made, and two, the neural chain of events leading to activation of the muscles in the arm that results in the actual raising of the arm. The entire thing is actually a physical process involving brain circuits, other nerve cells leading to the arm, and muscle cells. But part of the process (in the brain) is viewed in an abstract functional way as "a decision" (i.e., as something mental). The "mental aspect" of all this is really just a special functional view we have of part of the physical functioning of the brain.

In the case of someone with a spinal cord injury (for example), the activation of the neural circuits we describe as "making the decision" to move the arm do not lead to the actual movement of the arm because the signal from the brain cannot reach the appropriate muscle cells. However, if some means is found to detect the physical activation of that particular "decision routine" in the brain, and if this signal is then sent in the form of an electrical impulse through a wire to the appropriate nerves in the arm, then the person might be able to raise the arm after all! (Methods like this have already been demonstrated.)

Moreover, suppose the problem is not with the spinal cord, but rather that the person has had the arm amputated. In that case the appropriate signal from the brain can be physically recognized either in the brain itself, or else at the stub of the arm, and can be used to move an artificial arm. (This method has also already been demonstrated to work!)

But note that in all cases such as this, we are merely *replacing* part of the normal physical process with an artificial mechanism that (more or less) does the same thing.

In cases such as you describe (such as the movement of a cursor on a computer screen via "mental power"), a further step is taken which allows a human to do something no human could do normally. Some means of detecting the activation of various specific regions of the brain is still necessary. (Possibly through the detection of brain waves, possibly in some more direct way.) And then an artificial device is used to appropriately connect that signal to the portions of the computer system that control the cursor.

There is of course nothing mysterious at all about any of this. It is also *entirely* a physical process. Certain neural circuits are activated in the brain, this activation is physically detected by some sort of sensors, and then a signal is sent to the computer mechanism which controls the cursor. The only *mental* aspect of this overall physical process is that the person views the activation of the decision circuits in a high level abstract way as a *mental decision*.

There is no actual difference in how the mental aspect of the process of moving the cursor on the computer screen arises, than there is in how the mental aspect arises in the whole physical process that our brain-body system executes when we move our arms. It seems more impressive now because ordinary people cannot move a computer cursor by "willing it". (Because there is no direct physical connection for ordinary people between their physical brain circuits and the mechanisms of the computer which control the cursor.)

Similar means could be used to allow a human being to will any physical result (or series of results) in the world, such as driving a car without using your hands and entirely "with your mind"! But, once again, this would only be possible because the mental decisions being made (to turn the steering wheel, etc.) are merely high level abstract ways of looking at the operation of an entirely physical system that includes neural circuits, the standard means of controlling an automobile, and physical adapters connecting the two.

In short, what we *view* as mentally willing something is *always* merely a special abstract way of viewing (a portion of) the operation of an entirely physical system.

If the physical system does not exist, then there is nothing to *have* this internal abstract view of the "decision process". Mind exists *only* as an abstract functional view of the operation of certain portions of highly complex physical systems (processes in brains or their equivalent).

Human beings need this abstract functional view ("the mental world") because we need to monitor ourselves, and because being constantly aware of every single aspect of the precise operation of the enormously complex neural networks in the brain is simply impossible. Our

mental life is *necessary* to our successful existence, but it is still only a way of looking at a part of our overall functioning brain system. It is wrong to deny the existence of minds (as behaviorists, for example, do), but also wrong to reify minds, to imagine that they have an independent existence from brains (as Descartes did, and many ordinary people today still do).

So it is indeed possible to understand the interaction between two minds, but *only* as a high level, abstract functional view, of the interaction of two complex physical systems. Two minds cannot interact *unless* there is some physical connection between the two physical systems that underlie each of them. (Normally this is just through sound waves, vision, etc.)

Most of the rest of your letter is based on not fully understanding the above description of how the brain and mind are related. But just one thing more:

You wrote:

> Why do bad thing happen to good people?
> The question has obvious and not so obvious implications.
> To an atheist it is obvious that all is random and the "bad luck" is just the result of being in the wrong place at the appointed time.
> To the theist it is obvious that God's ways are higher than our ways and we don't see the big picture.

I would never say that "all is random" in the world! On the contrary, at least at the level of the macro world (purposely ignoring quantum mechanics!), everything has causes. What we call "random" in ordinary life really refers to things which are caused, but at levels we don't (or can't) consider because of their complexity, etc. If a meteor slices down through the ceiling and kills me, that might be "random bad luck". But if a robber shoots and kills me, that is not simply random bad luck, but also a result of the absurd society people are presently content to live in. (A society that could be different and without any robbers if people collectively decided to make it that way.)

However, just considering "random" things, how does it help in any way to say that these are the will of God? To say that God caused something is usually to deny that ordinary physical causes were at work. I.e., it denies that physics and science are correct. It directly opposes religion to science.

I suppose we could say that God created the universe billions of years ago with the precise characteristics so that 15 billion years later a meteor would crash through my ceiling and kill me! But damn! That's a lot of planning in order to result in such a puny result! Hasn't God got something better to do??

Scott

----- Original Message -----
From: Larry …
Sent: Sunday, February 7, 2010 1:54:09 PM GMT -08:00 US/Canada Pacific
Subject: Re: Fwd: Jacoby's article and proofs of God's nonexistence

Good afternoon Scott,

Your disembodied God argument was interesting but you have not considered the recent evidence of a person effecting the function of a television set by using brain waves. I don't have the link off the top of my head but the gist of the report was about a person mentally acting as the remote control on/off button. This is sort of the reverse of what you were suggesting and quite primitive but does indicate that physical phenomena radiate outside of our brains and can be harnessed to perform useful or perhaps useless functions. If the existence of a far more intelligent being/force/deity is postulated, one can envision a multitude of interactions with our conscious and subconscious minds.

The degree to which a person assigns a causal relationship between their life experiences and supernatural/divine interactions IMO is inversely proportional to the amount of and understanding of science that thatastrophey have encountered.

But that does not rule out the possibility of that phenomena occurring.

Some people live their lives with with fatalistic clarity about how they are controlled by God. Others leave Him out of the equation completely and run their lives as if they are the "captain of their own soul".

The success of each choice is probably immaterial in good times. How a person accepts the bitter pills of reality during catastrophic events is when the question comes front and center. Why do bad thing happen to good people?

The question has obvious and not so obvious implications.

To an atheist it is obvious that all is random and the "bad luck" is just the result of being in the wrong place at the appointed time.

To the theist it is obvious that God's ways are higher than our ways and we don't see the big picture.

The part that is not so obvious is how both atheists and theists can abandon their original logic and switch horses in mid (or late) stream.

While I am not an expert on Sartre and existentialism, I gather that he supported some noble honor in being able to act honorably for no moral reason. So, an atheist should be able to face nasty circumstances and rise above them somehow.

Man can pull himself up by his own bootstraps. This is not necessarily how all/many/some atheists leave this world. Some are very bitter.

Of course a Christian can be very bitter in death also but I choose to look at the numbers of individuals that I have known that have departed. I have been to many happy funerals of people had peace with their maker and very few funerals of atheists where there was any celebration. I look at it pragmatically and see the path I will take.

JMO
Larry