

'You say you are an "epiphenomenalist", but your zombie double would say that too!' – Is that a valid refutation of epiphenomenalism?

What if our thoughts, beliefs, desires, and unique sensual experiences are nothing more than by-products of physical processes? Can it be that 'we' are mere effects of physical processes? If that is the case, the idea of human agency would be eradicated, silenced and consequently, an immaterial 'I' would be insignificant, redundant, and have absolutely no effective function.

Epiphenomenalism, a form of property dualism, claims just that. We can simply dismiss such a claim as absurd and move on, but it would also be as absurd to simply take our common sense beliefs at face value without critical scrutiny. Prior to expounding on how the statement, 'you say you are an "epiphenomenalist", but your zombie double would say that too!' presents a valid refutation of epiphenomenalism, it is sensible to define and address three key terms, property dualism, epiphenomenalism, and the idea of a philosophical zombie. Next, the statement itself will be scrutinized. Finally, other problems with an epiphenomenalist outlook on consciousness will be addressed.

Generally, epiphenomenalism may be considered a form of property dualism. Property dualism maintains the distinction between the mental and the physical, but claims that mental states are non-physical properties of physical substances. They are irreducible attributes of brain processes. Consequently, there is only one substance with different attributes. This is at odds with substance dualism (usually associated with Cartesian dualism), which posits that there are two different substances, the physical and the non-physical, with different properties and attributes.

Epiphenomenalism claims that mental events are by-products of the physical processes of the brain. Nonetheless, there is no interaction between the mental and the physical. Furthermore, the subjective awareness that each individual has cannot be described in purely physical terms as it is not a 'physical' thing and thus cannot be identified with brain processes even though brain processes account for its existence. Such an outlook avoids opposing the scientific law of conservation, but this is at the expense of human reason.

More specifically, bodily activities, words uttered, decisions made and acted upon are a result of brain processes. Everything that happens in the physical world is contingent on physical causes. There is no room for an immaterial soul, a substantial Cartesian soul or a Humean bundle, but this does not mean that epiphenomenalism is a form of materialism. We are not just physical stuff, atoms, and brain processes. 'Inside' there is a consciousness 'I' experience. Even if this sense of 'I' is incapable of spurring us into action or of making life changing decisions and even if it only serves to differentiate me, a person with thoughts, and feelings from a zombie, it still is a form of consciousness.

Philosophical zombies are not akin to the zombies we see on TV. Physically they are like us. If one were to encounter a philosophical zombie, he/she would not be able to tell if who he/she was speaking to was a zombie or not. The only difference between persons with conscious experiences and philosophical zombies is that philosophical zombies are void of any conscious experience. Philosophical zombies are used as analytical tools in an attempt to better understand philosophical

concepts, including the role of consciousness in human experience and its relation or lack thereof to the physical.

In our case, the philosophical zombie is used to determine whether or not epiphenomenalism can be validated. When one states that he/she is an epiphenomenalist it is his/her physical brain, which causes his/her vocal chords to utter these words as according to the theory, conscious experience is incapable of causing vocal chords to utter words. Therefore, the zombie and I would utter the same words due to consciousness being superfluous.

Furthermore, the fact that mental events cannot affect physical events or processes, including speech, expressing mental states would not be possible. The nature of subjective awareness is private and thus cannot be communicated to any other subject. Everyday language can only grasp the world using our capacity to perceive and process information in order to act in a manner we 'normally' behave in. The private inner has no role to play in everyday speech.

Hence, if nothing occurs 'inside', the physical movements and words uttered would not differ if I performed/said them or they were performed/uttered by a zombie. I also would neither be able to express my subjective awareness nor be able to know if others possess these subjective states or not. The claim that a zombie's words are void of meaning and mine are not does not represent a strong justification for epiphenomenalism on its own as, at best, it represents a form of solipsism. In other words, the subjective states to whose existence the theory is meant to call attention to cannot be validated.

Moreover, if epiphenomenalism is validated there are a number of other philosophical and sociological matters which need to be explained. Such matters include questions on moral responsibility, freedom to act and responsibility for actions. If our actions are a result of blind brain processes, how could we hold a person responsible for a crime, for example? Do the by-products of physical processes hold the key to making us believe that we willingly committed a crime? Is a lie a result of blind brain processes, conjured by the intricacies of the mind? Since we do not have the freedom to choose does holding someone responsible for their actions become meaningless? If our subjective awareness is a mere by-product incapable of affecting anything we do, then how can we be held responsible for our actions? Do blind brain processes kill, rob, and lie?

A refutation of epiphenomenalism is just that, a refutation, and does not represent a confirmation of our common sense beliefs of the 'soul' nor other forms of dualism such as substance dualism. On the contrary, it represents a further challenge to dualism as a whole especially if we take into consideration that epiphenomenalism does not refute the mastery of the physical, but tries to find a role for dualism by presenting the immaterial as a by-product that cannot be explained in physical terms. Yet the fact that the immaterial is redundant, and as shown above its redundancy is a strong part of refuting epiphenomenalism, relegates it to possible non-existence.