A Critique of the Argument for Panpsychism through Refutation of the Emergence of Consciousness

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Abstract

Panpsychism, as opposed to physicalism and dualism, offers a third way to explain consciousness. According to panpsychism, some fundamental physical entities have conscious states. One of the important arguments for this view is the refutation of the emergence of consciousness. According to emergentism about consciousness, the consciousness of human beings and other beings is a property that emerges at the non-fundamental physical level from the fundamental physical nonconscious level. In the contemporary era, Galen Strawson first argued in detail for panpsychism through the refutation of the emergence of consciousness. Strawson divides emergentism into two types, true and inexplicable emergentism; he takes the true emergence of consciousness to be impossible, and inexplicable emergence to be fundamentally incoherent. The claim of this paper is that according to the historical background of emergentism, it turns out that a third type of emergentism can be assumed, which is, firstly, coherent and, secondly, the emergence of consciousness based on it is possible. In this type, the emergent property is only partially dependent upon the fundamental level. The dependence of the emergent property upon the fundamental level is nomological, and the laws of nature are fundamental (nomism), not reducible to powers (powerism).

Keywords: phenomenal consciousness, physicalism, emergence, panpsychism, Galen Strawson.

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Introduction

According to emergentism, the consciousness is a property that emerges at the non-fundamental physical level from the fundamental physical nonconscious level. In the contemporary era, Galen Strawson first argued in detail for panpsychism through the refutation of the emergence of consciousness. His argument is a dilemma. According to it, emergence is either true or brute. The aim of this paper is to critically assess Strawson's argument. We show that according to the historical background of emergentism, it turns out that a third type of emergentism can be assumed, which is, firstly, coherent and, secondly, the emergence of consciousness based on it is possible. We conclude that Strawson's argument does not work.

Strawson's argument

Strawson argues that the emergence of consciousness is either true or brute. In true emergence, the emergent property is wholly dependent upon the fundamental level and is explainable by it (in other words, knowledge of the emergent property is deducible from complete knowledge of the fundamental level). In brute emergence, although the emergent property is wholly dependent upon the fundamental level, it is unexplainable by it. Therefore, the main feature of the emergence in Strawson's definition is the whole dependence of the emergent property upon the fundamental level. Because of this feature, Strawson considers brute emergence in general (it doesn't matter whether it is about consciousness or not) as impossible, for the assumption of the whole dependence of the emergent property upon the fundamental level is inconsistent with the assumption that it is not deducible from the fundamental level (even in the case of complete knowledge of the fundamental level). Strawson also takes the true emergence of consciousness to be impossible; because if the emergence of consciousness is true emergence, then the existence of consciousness must be explainable in terms of the fundamental nonconscious level. But this explanation intuitively is as impossible as an explanation of extended things in terms of non-extended things. Therefore, neither true emergence of consciousness from the nonconscious fundamental level nor the brute one is possible. So, Strawson concludes that the only reasonable and naturalistic explanation of the existence of consciousness at the non-fundamental physical level (such as in humans) is panpsychism.

Ontological emergence

We offer a comprehensive conceptual framework for emergentism that includes the views of most contemporary emergentists. The main features of emergentism are hierarchical ontology, supervenience of higher levels on lower levels, the novelty and unpredictability of the emergent, and inexplicability and irreducibility of the emergent. So, one may consider a version of emergentism in which the emergent mental properties are nomically supervenient on the basic properties and thus are wholly dependent on the basic biological bases according to the laws of the current world.

Why Strawson's argument does not work

The offered conceptual framework for emergentism shows that one can assume another type of emergence besides the true and brute types. In this type, the emergent property is only partially dependent upon the fundamental level. In other words, the dependence of the emergent property upon the fundamental level is nomological. So, in a world with different relevant laws of nature, the emergent property does not exist, even if exactly the same fundamental level exists. This

third type of emergence can be found in Broad's view, the most famous British emergentist. Broad divides laws of nature into intra-ordinal laws and trans-ordinal laws. He believes that the existence of a fundamental level with the laws of nature within it (intra-order laws) is not enough for emergence unless the relevant trans-ordinal law also holds. Then, to avoid Strawson's dilemma, we need to determine the ontological status of laws of nature (specifically, trans-ordinal laws). In other words, we need to decide whether the laws of nature are fundamental (nomism) or reducible to powers, counterfactual conditionals, or the Humean Mosaic. It seems that Strawson's argument presumes a certain ontological status of laws of nature, i.e., powerism. According to powerism, the truths of powers are fundamental and truths of laws of nature are reducible to them. So, the trans-ordinal laws of nature are reducible the to truths of powers at the fundamental level. It concludes that the emergent property is wholly dependent upon the fundamental level. But on the contrary, Broad avoids Strawson's dilemma by assuming a different ontological status of trans-ordinal laws, i.e., nomism.

Conclusion

The historical background of emergentism (Broad's view) shows that Strawson's dilemma is not enough to deny the emergence of consciousness and to defend panpsychism; Because, by assuming the whole dependence of the emergent only on its base, Strawson has assumed only two types of correct and brute emergence. On the one hand, he has considered brute emergence to be incoherent, and on the other hand, he has considered correct emergence to be impossible. But according to an emergentist such as Broad, the dependence of emergent properties, including mental properties, on the basic properties is not whole dependence, even considering intra-order laws of the basic level; On the contrary, the emergent properties are totally dependent on the basic level (basic level properties and intra-order laws), considering trans-ordinal laws.

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