

HANDOUT TO ACCOMPANY THE ESSAY:

“Resources for Opposing Physicalism”

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EXTRACTS FROM PRESENTATION

Has humanism come to identify too closely with science? When science contradicts human experience, should humanists meekly submit to the authority of science? Or should we continue to defend what we believe in, as humanists in centuries past defended Platonism and skepticism in the face of Church doctrines based on Aristotle?

Traditional humanism involved the assumption that we do have free will. But physicalism, representing science, says “Free will can’t exist. That would defy physics. Our conscious experience is just a passive reflection of brain chemistry, which like all physical matter is either determined or truly indeterminate.”

Giving life different meanings: [For the physicalist] the point of your life is what your brain chemistry makes you do; what you experience is no more than a by-product of that. If you do have free will the opposite is true; the point of life isn’t your behavior, it’s what you experience; you direct your behavior to enhance the quality of what you experience.

The agenda of humanism may be incompatible with the agenda of physicalism.

Humanism stands for human nature, physicalism stands for physics’ monopoly on accounting for physical causation, hence its denial of free will and an independent conscious self.

I propose the following strategy: arrive at core values in human nature that humanism must defend, then pursue through reason the natural philosophy appropriate to those values. Then, turn that natural philosophy into a system of wisdom that can help people live better. This would restore to humanism its traditional role of offering people wisdom about human nature supplementing that of science.

I propose free will be sought in the processes that link trains of thoughts, rather than in the contents of the thoughts themselves.

I recommend avoiding existing discourses on mind and free will where determinism is the default, involving terms such as compatibilism for example. And I recommend keeping the focus not on responsibility, which involves behavior, but on the control of consciousness. Are we free to seek out experiences that will deepen our wisdom and capacity for satisfaction? Freedom to control our attention is, for me, the basis of humanism.

PARADOXES PROBING PHYSICALISM

Paradoxes can help us find where our thinking is faulty and where we need to change our assumptions or come up with new terms.

Paradox of matter being conscious

I'm not aware of any aspect of conscious experience that I can't refer to in speech or writing. Since, according to physicalism consciousness is not physical and only physical things can direct physical processes, consciousness can't direct physical behaviors such as speaking and writing; all speaking and writing about consciousness must be driven directly by brain chemistry. But that means the brain knows everything about how conscious experience feels, that chemicals have access to conscious experience, maybe are actually conscious.

Paradox of judgment

You ask me whether I have free will. I say, no, I don't have free will. If I'm wrong—I actually do have free will—then I had free will available but used it to come to the wrong conclusion. If I'm right, I was not free to weigh the alternatives and arrive at a judgment. What do you think, was I right or wrong? Oh, sorry, I've changed my mind, now I say I do have free will. If I really do have free will then I'm right. If I don't have free will, my choice would have been determined, no better than a coin toss, and it happened to be wrong. Under what conditions can you trust someone's answer to the question, do they have free will?

The fatalism paradox

"You're determined but you mustn't give in to fatalism. You won't fall into fatalism as long as you accept that the world's so complicated you can't tell being determined from having free will. Unfortunately you're not free to choose to accept that, since you're determined, but then being determined means you're not free to choose to fall into fatalism, either. So forget it! Except you can't choose to forget it. I'm sorry I brought it up. Except I'm determined too, so I couldn't not have brought it up, so I'm not sorry. Or at least I'm not sorry now that I remember I'm determined. For a moment I forgot that I was determined. If I'd stayed that way I might have chosen not to tell you you were determined, and you'd not have been at risk of giving in to fatalism. Except whether you're determined to give in to fatalism wouldn't depend on what I think about whether I'm determined or not. And whether I'm determined wouldn't depend on whether I thought I was or not. And I suppose the same is true of free will. I could have it even if I thought I was determined. And I could be determined to believe I had it even if I didn't."

Paradox for physicalists

I give you two bins, one for things that are determined, the other for things that have free will. You are to put everything in the world into the appropriate bin. When you've finished, in which bin do you put yourself?

CLASH OVER EVOLUTION'S MECHANISM

The leading edge of physicalism is Darwinism, a purely physical account of evolution. Physicalists beg us to be loyal to Darwinism else, they threaten, we'll be aiding the creationists. But that's not necessarily humanists' main interest in what drives evolution. Humanists may be more inclined to favor a mechanism involving consciousness that more plausibly accounts for how consciousness evolved.

Argument against mutation / natural selection being a mechanism of evolution

1. The great majority of mutations are harmful*. Without natural selection, in every generation harmful mutations predominate, and generation after generation will accumulate, leading eventually to disorder and extinction.
2. Now introduce natural selection. An efficiency for natural selection of 1% may be assumed.* A 1% reduction in harmful mutations still leaves the great majority harmful (eg a reduction from 90% to 89% harmful). For natural selection to drive evolution by favoring occasional beneficial mutations over harmful ones it would have to be close to 100% efficient, and for that you'd have to invoke the supernatural.

* From *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis* by Julian Huxley.

Argument for consciousness becoming the primary mechanism of evolution

1. Intelligence and consciousness appear to progress over the course of evolution.
2. For them to evolve they must support some operations better than matter.
3. Those operations must generate physical effects, else there'd be no feedback to guide the evolutionary process.
4. If conscious operations can drive the evolution of their own physical support they could drive the evolution of anything else physical.
5. If conscious operations can drive their own evolution they're likely to be self-catalyzing, and increase in effectiveness as it progresses.
6. If the evolutionary mechanism driving the evolution of conscious operations is self-catalysing the balance of effectiveness is likely to have increasingly shifted towards evolution through conscious operations.
7. This is borne out by how living creatures changed over time, favoring the evolution of conscious operations at the expense of natural selection:
 - a. As living creatures became larger the populations available to natural selection shrank but larger individuals could support bigger brains,
 - b. As time between generations increased natural selection had fewer opportunities to operate but individual consciousnesses has more time to develop,
 - c. Creatures becoming more highly structured made mutations more likely to be harmful, but allowed for the development of more elaborate brains.

WARRING CONSILIENCES

In his 1998 book *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge*, Edward O Wilson proposed that the humanities join the sciences in a shared consilience by re-establishing themselves on a platform based on Darwinism. This offer has been under serious consideration by the National Humanities Center.

But Darwinism shows little promise of accounting for what's distinctive about the humanities: a concern for conscious volition. Perhaps it is the humanities which should be offering the science a consilience by coming up with new mechanisms for evolution capable of accounting for the evolution of conscious experience and free will.

TAKEONDARWIN.COM

At the time they came up with their theories, early pioneers in evolutionary theory were primarily from the humanities; only Lamarck was a professional biologist. To help humanists and members of the humanities come up with new theories of evolution capable of accounting for consciousness I've launched the website takeondarwin.com. I provide critiques of Darwinism by such authorities as Gertrude Himmelfarb and John Maynard Smith, reviews of existing theories of evolution, articles on the implications of evolutionary theory for the self, class resources and models for creative writing.

The contents come divided among three sections:

- **Evolution of a conscious self**, to explore the implications of evolution for our experience of self, and vice versa.

- **Theories of evolution** to serve as an annotated library of existing and new theories.

- **Resources**, suggestions for what humanities students need in order to get up to speed, including ways of casting insights into evolution into genres special to the humanities.

Educational opportunities for students—this site's materials provide stimulating challenges to students in both the sciences and the humanities. In Resources: Technique is the suggestion that students in the two arenas draw on the site's materials to engage each other in debate on the issues raised by the discovery that we evolved.

***Shaun Johnston:** After studying biochemistry at University College London, Shaun Johnston became a medical and science writer. He is the author of four books on the impact of evolutionary theory on our sense of self, issued under the Evolved Self Publishing imprint (www.evolvedself.com). At www.takeondarwin.com he tries to formulate the questions that could lead to new theories of evolution favorable to the humanities. Contact Shaun at 845-658-3129, or shaun@evolvedself.com.*