Psychiatry with Philosophy in Mind: A Comment on Moreira-Almeida and Araujo

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In “The Mind-Brain Problem in Psychiatry” (2017), Moreira-Almeida and Araujo argue that the assumption of physicalism in psychiatry has negative implications for the field. They recommend psychiatrists to consider alternative approaches to the mind-brain problem and endorse theoretical pluralism in their practices. Here, I offer a philosophical perspective on some of the points and highlight where caution might be warranted.

The authors argue that the assumption of physicalism is underdetermined by the empirical data in contemporary neuroscience and that dismissing alternative approaches to the mind-brain problem is unjustified. Indeed, this view is shared by notable contemporary philosophers. For example, Chalmers (1996, p.168) states that the attachment to physicalism is “not grounded in anything more solid than contemporary dogma”, while BonJour (2010, p.4) calls it “one of those unfortunate intellectual bandwagons”.

One alternative position mentioned is dualism, which states that mind and brain are metaphysically distinct. As noted by Cooper (2007, p.105), neuroscientific findings at most suggest reliable correlations between mental states and brain states, but “no matter how cutting edge, do not show that dualism is false”. The dualist can maintain that minds and brains are ontologically distinct while accepting that they are robustly correlated. Of course, Descartes’ (1641) traditional dualism faces other challenges, including mental causation and the exclusion problem. However, Chalmers’ (1996) modern dualism, which understands consciousness to be a fundamental feature that is metaphysically separate from the physical, overcomes these challenges by proposing that phenomenality and physicality are nomologically related. This modern dualism is both entirely nontheistic and wholly compatible with scientific data. Moreover, Chalmers proposes that the failure of physicalism with respect to the “hard problem” gives reason to believe that this sort of dualism is true.

Another neglected position mentioned is panpsychism, which claims that mentality is a ubiquitous feature of the physical world. Admittedly, there are problems with this view, including the combination problem and the untenability of physicality’s supposed necessary connection with phenomenality. Given a subjective quality associated with a certain causal disposition, we can conceive of possible worlds where the subjective quality is associated with a different causal disposition or vice versa, hence suggesting that panpsychism in its necessitarian neutral monist variety is false, or at least undermined by a key reason for rejecting physicalism in the first place (Howell, 2015). A position that rejects the necessary connection may be more plausible, but this is essentially just a liberal sort of dualism, whereby minds are ubiquitously associated with physical properties via contingent laws.

Moreira-Almeida and Araujo are to be commended for criticizing the hasty assumptions about the mind-brain problem. I also support their call for theoretical pluralism in psychiatry. However, I am not so confident that the latter
methodological conclusion follows from the former metaphysical discussion. Ontological claims about fundamental metaphysics do not necessarily translate into methodological considerations at the level of practice. Moreira-Almeida and Araujo (2017, p.23) themselves note that the mind-brain problem is “beyond the empirical dimension of scientific research”, which calls into question its practical relevance to scientific research. One could, for example, consider a biopsychosocial explanation of a disorder to be instrumentally preferable to a neuroreductive explanation, while maintaining that biopsychosocial processes are grounded in physical processes. Alternatively, one could consider a neuroreductive approach adequate for capturing the causal process associated with a certain subjective state, while accepting that subjective states and their associated causal processes are metaphysically distinct. Therefore, even if physicalism is false at the level of fundamental metaphysics, this does not necessarily justify explanatory pluralism at the level of practice. The choice of theoretical approach is better informed by the considerations of empirical adequacy, explanatory relevance, predictive strength, and therapeutic utility than by the metaphysics of the mind-brain problem.

REFERENCES