

The Land of the Epiphens

Epiphenia was a remarkable planet. So like the Earth in appearance, and yet its inhabitants were different in one remarkable way.

As one of them, Huxley, explained to the visiting Earthling Dirk, the Epiphens had long ago 'discovered' that their thoughts did not affect their actions. Thoughts were the effects of bodily processes, not the other way around. Dirk found this baffling.

"You can't really believe this," he protested to Huxley. "For instance, when we met in this bar, you said, 'Gee, I could kill for a beer,'" and ordered one. Are you saying that the thought "I want a beer," had no effect on your actions?"

'Of course it didn't,' replied Huxley, as though the question were idiotic. 'We have thoughts and these often precede actions. But we know full well that these thoughts aren't *causing* the actions. My body and brain were already gearing up to order a beer. The thought "I could kill for a beer" was just something that popped into my head as a result of what was happening in the physical brain and body. Thoughts don't cause actions.'

'For Epiphens, maybe,' replied Dirk.

'Well I can't see what's different about human,' said Huxley, and for a while at least, nor could Dirk.

Source: Although he didn't use the term, 'epiphenomenalism' was championed by T. H. Huxley, notably in an 1874 paper called 'On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and its History', republished in Method and results: Essays by Thomas H. Huxley (D. Appleton and Company, 1898).

The American philosopher Jerry Fodor once said that if epiphenomenalism were true, it would be the end of the world. Epiphenomenalism is the view that the thoughts and other mental events do not cause anything in the physical world, including our actions. Rather, the brain and the body work like some kind of purely physical machine, and our conscious experience is a by-product, caused by the machine but not affecting it.

The reason why this would be the end of the world is that everything we seem to believe about what we are apparently depends on the idea that thoughts do cause actions. If what goes on in our minds has no impact on what we actually do, the world as we think of it is just an illusion.

But is this really the consequence of accepting epiphenomenalism? The imaginary land of Epiphenia is designed to test the idea that no one can live with the truth of epiphenomenalism. The suggestion is that people could come to see epiphenomenalism as some banal truth which does not affect the way they live their lives. The crucial point is that how it feels to be an Epiphens exactly the same as what

feels like to be a human being. In both cases, thought accompanies action in just the same way. The only difference is that Epiphens do not believe their thoughts are doing any causing.

Is it really possible, however, to divorce what we believe about the link between thought and action and how we actually live? People such as Fodor think not, but it is far from obvious why this separation can't be achieved. For example, take a situation where the thinking does seem to be crucial. Let's say you're trying to work out a solution to a tricky logical or mathematical problem. Eventually, the eureka moment comes. In this case, surely the actual thinking has to play a part in the explanation for your actions?

Well, no. Why can't I believe that the conscious experience of thinking is just a byproduct of the computing that is going on at brain level? It may be the *necessary* byproduct. But just as the noise that a boiling pot of water makes is an inevitable byproduct of the heating without that meaning it is the noise which cooks the egg, so thought could be the necessary byproduct of neural computation that doesn't itself produce the solution to the problem.

Indeed, if you think about thinking, there does seem to be something almost involuntary about it. Solutions 'come to us', for example, not we to them. Reflect on what it really feels like to think, and the idea that it is a byproduct of a process you are not conscious of may not seem quite so fanciful.