

Does Emergence Transform Traditional Metaphysics?

Abstract

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It is undeniable that one of the possible solutions to the mind-brain problem in the philosophy is the so-called emergentism. It is characterized as a middle way between positions: substance dualism and reductive physicalism. There is a general agreement that emergent properties are entities which are based on lower physical particles, but they have properties which go beyond of their physical parts. The most important question among philosophers is whether all the non-physical properties of worldly phenomena are determined their physical properties, even if they cannot be explained in terms of them. It is commonly believed that the properties of many phenomena are somehow grounded in other phenomena despite having properties significantly different from them. The intuitive idea is that somehow ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’. That concept of emergence is what I want to study here. Since there are many possible metaphysical theories which fit to this characterization, it seems to me that philosophers have the responsibility to provide a better understanding of “emergence”.

Currently although many phenomena of different kinds are said to be ‘emergent’, whether emergence in any metaphysically significant sense occurs is also a topic of intense philosophical debate. More recently, what is so controversial is the metaphysical status of these allegedly ‘emergent’ phenomena. When these debates are

viewed from the perspective of the alternative metaphysics being articulated here, it becomes clear that much of the discussion is vitiated by assumptions which belong to the traditional entity-based metaphysics we have found to be so deficient. It is urgent that the entire topic needs to be rethought.

Does “emergence” mean the same in all the different contexts in which it is used? What is it that emerges: entities, or properties, or behavior, or laws, or all or some of these categories? It is often said that emergence means that something has properties, or behavior, which are novel in the sense that its parts are not able to manifest this novel behavior. But what does it mean to speak of ‘novel’ properties here: that their description requires new concepts, or that they would not exist unless they had emerged?

Various philosophers claim that emergence means that the properties of the whole cannot be reduced to the properties of its parts. But again, what does “reduced” mean? Are they claiming that what has emerged is not identical to anything more basic? If so, does emergence necessarily imply a hierarchy of ontological ‘levels’? Or does reduction mean that emergent properties and behavior can be explained in terms of the properties or behavior of something more basic? It shows that the concept of emergence is unclear. In this project, I will seek to clarify the various conceptions articulated by this word and will address objections brought against its coherence.