

ALL MINDS GREAT AND SMALL: A DEFENSE OF PANPSYCHISM

by Craig Skinner

“If thou shouldst plant these things in thy firm understanding and contemplate them with good will and unclouded attention, they will stand by thee for ever every one, and thou shalt gain many other things from them....for know that all things have wisdom and a portion of thought”

Empedocles (DK fragment 110)

Anna Littick (AL) and Daph Tazabrusch (DT) are in discussion:

AL: I think you’re losing your marbles in your old age Daph, you’ll be talking to the rocks next and expecting a reply. This panpsychism nonsense is incredible.

DT: Don’t try the tired old “argument” from personal incredulity on me. It doesn’t work when creationists use it against evolutionists, setting up a straw man to demolish, such as assembly of a gene by chance being as likely as a tornado in a junkyard producing a working Boeing 707. I’m not saying rocks have a rich inner life or that an orbiting electron longs to be free, coursing through a wire with its fellows as an electric current.

AL: Well, what are you saying?

DT: I’m saying that the best explanation of mind and matter is that both are features of all things from quarks to rocks and humans. So yes, an electron has a touch of mind as well as a smidgeon of mass. The rock has rather more of each, but neither is organized into a unity as in, say, a dolphin.

AL: Look, don’t you think science is hugely successful in explaining things, and in due time will explain how mind emerges from dumb matter (physicalism), just as it explains how life is constituted by dumb matter without invoking any mysterious vital force.

DT: Let me say something of science’s limitations, then criticise the analogy you suggest between life and mind. Physics is hugely successful, yes, but it is designed to deal with the physical, and expressly excludes the mental. Galileo made this clear when he started it, saying that sounds, smells, colours and feelings were in the mind and not within science’s remit. Were he to return today he would be surprised by the notion that science might explain mind since he expressly excluded sensory qualities to make mathematical physics possible. A useful way of putting it is that physics deals

with the relational, dispositional, extrinsic properties of things, such as the charge of an electron, but says nothing of their intrinsic properties, such as the mentality of that electron. As for life and mind, yes once upon a time, life was thought to require a vital force not found in ordinary matter, but now we know better, and similarly, so your argument goes, consciousness is presently thought to need a non-physical explanation, but in time we will grasp how it arises from the physical. The analogy is flawed. We can grasp how life emerges because it is a complex physical process, whereas emergence of mind would produce something new, non-physical, utterly inexplicable. “The hard problem”, as Chalmers terms it. The emergence of mind from the physical would be simply miraculous. No, physicalism is out.

AL: I’m not convinced, but it suggests a way forward, Can we agree which other candidates for explaining mind are out, so that we can narrow discussion to where we disagree.

DT: Good idea

AL: (*chuckling*) I suggest we eliminate eliminativism. This is the idea that consciousness is an illusion (although, if true, there would be nobody to experience the illusion!). When you look into it, it turns out that its advocates don’t say consciousness doesn’t exist, they say it isn’t as we naively think it to be. For instance, we think we see a rich, detailed picture of the room in front of us, whereas really our eyes continually move over the scene so we are conscious of only one bit at a time, and the whole-picture view is an illusion.

DT: I’m happy to dismiss eliminativism.

AL: Good. And idealism? The view that only minds and their ideas exist, material things being ideas in God’s and our minds. Wonderfully defended by Berkeley, but as Hume says, these views “admit of no answer and produce no conviction”.

DT: Right, let’s dismiss idealism too.

AL: Good. Now, what about dualism? By that I mean substance dualism as suggested by Descartes, the body and other stuff made of extended substance (*res extensa*), the mind of immaterial thinking stuff (*res cogitans*).

DT: As you know, the difficulty here is to explain how an immaterial mind could possibly interact with a physical body making it move - the problem of “the ghost in the machine” as Gilbert Ryle termed it. Descartes failed. He suggested interaction in the pineal gland, so chosen because he (falsely) thought the pineal didn’t occur in nonhuman animals. But he didn’t explain how, or why it should be easier in one bit of the body rather than in the whole body. Modern attempts at explanation invoke chaos

theory, stochastic processes, quantum effects in dendrites and so forth, but none succeeds, or indeed can succeed in my view.

AL: I agree the interaction problem is intractable. Is dualism out, then?

DT: Yes, I'd say so.

AT: Just to be clear, I take it we also dismiss dualism without interaction i.e. psychophysical parallelism, where a mind and its body proceed independently but the two are synchronized, either from Leibniz's pre-established harmony or by Malebranche's occasionalism where God continually acts to keep the two in synch.

AL: Agreed. So, having excluded eliminativism, idealism (mind monism) and dualism (with and without interaction), we're left with physicalism (matter monism), my preferred view, and panpsychism, yours.

DT: That's about the size of it.

AL: You told me off for playing the personal incredulity card against your view, fair enough, and you've suggested that the weakness of physicalism is that emergence of mind would be a miracle. Can we now focus on the difficulties with the panpsychism view?

DT: Of course. But before that, it might help if we deal with terminology. First, let's not get bogged down in whether we call the mind aspect of things "mind", "consciousness", awareness", "mentality", "experience" or "qualia". Obviously the only mind I know directly is my own, and we struggle to best say what a minimalist portion of mind should best be called let alone how it feels (if anything) for its subject.
AL: of course, let's just say mind and matter, mental and physical, then.

DT: Fine. Secondly, let's not get bogged down in fancy names and fine distinctions within panpsychism: neutral- and Russellian- monism, panprotopsychism, constitutive panpsychism, and so forth. The basic view is that the fundamental elements of the world have physical attributes which aggregate to make matter, and mental attributes which aggregate to make minds.

AL: Yes, let's keep it as simple as possible but no simpler, as one Great Man said. So, do you agree that the problem is how the micromentals combine to make a unity.

DT: Yes, the combination problem as it's called, or problems, by those who think we need to distinguish subject-, quality-, and structure- combinations. How can micromentals combine to yield a macromental like myself, how can a limited range of

microqualia produce the vast array of macroqualities I experience, how can microexperiential structure sum to give the structure of my experience?

AL: Some say these problems may be unsolvable.

DT: On the contrary, I think that philosophically, the problem is no big deal. After all, we're familiar with microphysicals combining, sometimes making just a heap, in other cases making an integrated, highly structured unity such as a living body or a Bose-Einstein condensate, and we have some grasp of the rules governing this – quantum effects, electrostatic forces, chemical bonding, catalysis, genetic coding, and so forth. So why can't the combination problem for mindlets also yield to science, if we now include them in its scope. Field theory, chaos theory and quantum theory hold promise. As for microqualia combining, maybe we have it the wrong way round: instead of combining microqualia, the different sensory modalities, such as vision and hearing, may differentiate from simple microqualia rather as all the colours of the rainbow do from simple white light, and music can from white noise. Anyway, I predict that while dualists and physicalists continue with their intractable interaction and emergence problems, philosophical analysis and empirical study will establish panpsychism as the standard view.

AL: Nice try, but you skate over the problem as if subject summing was just like object summing. It's not. We easily see that objects can be pooled to make a bigger object, as when carbon atoms make a grain of soot. But subjects don't pool to make a bigger subject. As William James said: give each of a dozen men a different word from a sentence, combine the men as you wish, you get a bigger object – row, column, pyramid, whatever - but there is no new subject who knows the whole sentence. Also, how come only some aggregates, such as you and me, become unified subject and others, such as rocks, don't? No, I think that just as dualists and physicalists will fail to solve the interaction and emergence problems, you will fail with subject summing, and we best join hands as mysterians, acknowledging that the puzzle of consciousness is beyond human cognitive capacity, just as relativity theory is beyond that of a dog.

DT: Maybe quantum entanglement and coherence do the combining trick, and collapse yields the flashes of awareness. As for cognitive limitation, serious cognitive enhancement is just round the corner, can we talk about that?

AL: Some other time, perhaps, Daph.

Suggested reading

Since David Chalmers' *The Conscious Mind* (1996), debates on panpsychism have become mainstream. The following texts are not for the beginner in consciousness studies but will bring the reader up to speed on modern panpsychic views.

1. Skrbina D (2017) *Panpsychism in the West*, revised edition. The MIT Press.
A standard work. Historical tour from preSocratics to poststructuralists, survey of the arguments and current debates.
2. Brüntrup G, Jaskolla L, ed.(2017) *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*. OUP
Proponents and critics, including Chalmers, Goff, Seager and Strawson, provide 16 scholarly essays.

The idea of specific sensory modalities differentiating from the “whiteout” of microqualia, and reversal of the process near death, is dealt with in *Picturing Panpsychism: New approaches to the Combination Problem* by K E Turausky. Unpublished, accessible online from link at the end of the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy entry on “Panpsychism” (2017) under “Other Internet Resources”.

For all you could wish to know about illusionism, try

Frankish K ed. (2016) *Illusionism*. Journal of Consciousness Studies, **23** (11-12).
Special issue on the topic.

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