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**Reflections on Panpsychism, Pantheism, Panentheism
and The Hard Problem of Consciousness**

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Abstract

This article discusses the concepts of panpsychism, pantheism, and panentheism with the intention of formulating a theory and response to what is referred to as the Hard Problem of Consciousness, the question put forth in the latter 20th century by the philosopher David Chalmers (and by many others historically) concerning why and how we have phenomenal experiences. Panpsychism is the view that the ubiquitous presence of consciousness is an elemental principium of the natural world. Pantheism is defined as a philosophy which equates divinity with all reality. Panentheism asserts that God is intrinsic in all things in the known universe, yet is also separate and autonomous across time and space. The Hard Problem of Consciousness is addressed here in panpsychistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, psychodynamic, spiritual, and religious terms.

Keywords: panpsychism, pantheism, panentheism, divinity, the Hard Problem of Consciousness, psychodynamic, spiritual, religious

Reflections on Panpsychism, Pantheism, Panentheism and the Hard Problem of Consciousness

Consciousness studies have since their inception considered deep and varied philosophical questions regarding the nature of existence as we know it. Amongst the topics of interest to those who study apperceptive experience is the esoteric question of whether and to what degree consciousness exists ubiquitously across species of living things, or even within the noncorporeal realm in the world and the known universe.

The typical Western mind conceptualizes reality in terms of thought systems that are defined by the rationalism that took hold and dominated the Western secular scientific establishment, as well as Western academia with its logical positivism movement, from the mid- to latter 20th century until approximately present time (Blanshard, 2020). In Western philosophical thinking, this rationalism is based on the notion that reason and knowledge are the indicators of truth, and that truth should be grounded in physicalism and predicated solely upon mental and deductive justification. The architects of this rationalist philosophy envisioned a world wherein scientific evidence is based on intellectual reasoning and is not particularly expansive conceptually. “The rationalists’ confidence in reason and proof tends, therefore, to detract from respect for other ways of knowing” (Blanshard, 2020, p. 1).

Rationalism was criticized by the American psychologist William James for representing a limiting and inaccurate view of reality and characterizing the universe as a closed and reductionistically conceived system, in contrast to his opinion that the universe more closely resembles an open and expansive system (Kaag & van Belle, 2023). His cosmology was philosophically pragmatic; he believed that, “Spinoza’s unity of all things in one substance is “barren,” as is Hume’s, “‘looseness and separateness’ of everything”, and that, “Sentiments of rationality operate not just in logic or science, but in ordinary life” (Goodman, 2000, p. 4). Thinkers such as James began to pave the way for the burgeoning focus on consciousness studies from the mid-20th century until the present time. In the late

20th century, theorists such as Crick and Koch (1990, 1998) took up the banner and began to publish widely their conjectures about the nature of conscious awareness.

In this climate of philosophical reimagining, a young, long-haired Australian academic named David Chalmers took the stage at a conference on consciousness in the year 1994 at the University of Arizona and began to speak about what later became referred to as the Hard Problem of Consciousness, which essentially asks the question, “why on earth should all those complicated brain processes feel like anything from the inside?” (Burkeman, 2015, p. 3). Twenty nine years later, although there have been myriad advances in our understanding of brain structure, neurology and biochemistry, we still have no definitive answer to this question. We do have theories that address it, however; one of these being panpsychism.

Panpsychism

Panpsychism is a broad and amorphous term which may mean different things to different people. The focus here is on the panpsychistic ideation that some level of consciousness exists in most or perhaps even all animate beings, and quite possibly in some or all inanimate entities as well. According to Chalmers (2011), panpsychism, “is the doctrine that everything has a mind”, or stated differently, panpsychism is the thesis that, “some fundamental physical entities have mental states”, and that, “the relevant sorts of mental states are conscious experiences” (p. 1). It could also be defined as the view that, “mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world” (Goff et al., 2021, p. 5). In other words, panpsychism posits that a mind-like aspect is a definitive feature of reality.

As described, the modern Western mind would likely dismiss such a notion without much forethought due to the dominance of physicalism, the belief that the physical is all there is, and the resultant antipathy toward metaphysics which prevailed in most philosophical scholarship throughout much of the 20th century. However, this was not always the case; Chalmers (2011) states of

panpsychism that, “The view has a long history in both Eastern and Western philosophy, and many of the greatest philosophers have taken it seriously” (p. 2).

There are practically innumerable permutations of the theory of panpsychism, as stated. Essentially, however, these break down into three broad categories which can be described as either materialist, dualist or a somewhat integrated cosmology involving various panpsychistic postulates and assertions about the nature of the mindful aspects of all of existence.

The materialist argument for panpsychism is predicated on the premise that ubiquitous consciousness is grounded in physicality, and that essentially, “once God created the entities of physics, consciousness came along for free” (Chalmers, 2011, p. 3). This would also obliquely support the existence of panprotopsyism, the view that there exist certain special precursor properties in fundamental physical entities that can constitute consciousness when aggregated into larger systems, such as in the case of superposition amongst entangled wavicles (quantumly entangled electrons) to engender qualia (subjective, conscious experience). Further, if macroexperience is in part based upon and constituted by or at least emergent from microexperience, then a form of consciousness in microphysical elements could be implied and would be attributed to and explained in terms of physicality. The various materialist theories of panpsychism use these types of arguments to explain and defend the notion that consciousness is pervasive and omnipresent to at least some degree in all levels of existence, and that this consciousness is a physical phenomenon.

The dualist view of panpsychism is characterized by the idea that truths about consciousness are not fundamentally grounded solely in the properties of physics, but rather also in mental and spiritual terms that are essentially separate and nonquantifiable, and in essence thus defy materialistic interpretation. These views postulate that there are phenomenal properties of beingness that, “are ontologically independent of physical properties” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 125). A dualistic panpsychism

would then imply that mind and/or spirit are separate from the corporeal, and are elemental features of and intrinsic to existence in the world. Focusing more on the mental aspect, dualistic panpsychism proposes that, “the primary motivation for the ascription of mental attributes to matter is that matter is, in essence, a “form” of mind, and thus panpsychism is a kind of theorem that follows from this more fundamental philosophical view” (Goff et al., 2021, p. 3). A more spiritual dualistic emphasis would assert that there is a, “sharp metaphysical division between souls with their secondary qualities and bodies with their primary qualities”, the former being equally intrinsic in existence (Goff et al., 2021, p. 3).

In his consideration of the consciousness in all things, Spinoza in particular attempted to cosmologically integrate the realities of mind/spirit with conceptions regarding the material world by postulating that they were each, “simply aspects (or attributes) of the eternal, infinite and unique *substance* he identified with God Himself” and that, “There is nothing in nature that does not have a mental aspect” (Goff et al., 2021, p. 3). Royce and Lotze similarly amalgamated the mental and the physical, contending that the theory of panpsychism emanates from the fundamental philosophical view that matter is a category of mind, and thus they are one (as cited in Goff et al., 2021). Fechner and Royce further elucidated this concept of mind-spirit imbued integratively in matter in proffering the idea that, “the ontological foundation of reality is the “world-soul” or “world-mind” of which everything is a part”, a conceptualization echoed by William James, whose views incorporated, “mind-like elements into the basic structure of reality” (Goff et al., 2021, p. 3).

Within these three broad categories of panpsychism there are a great many theoretical variants, a few of which I have already described. Several other theoretical imaginings will also be mentioned here simply as a way to represent the breadth and depth of ideology within the construct of panpsychism.

Panexperientialism is the view that the idea of conscious experience is the universal precept, while pancognitism identifies actual thought and thought processes as the ubiquitous aspects (Chalmers, 2011). Constitutive panpsychism proffers that, “macroexperience is (wholly or partially) grounded in microexperience”, while nonconstitutive or emergent panpsychism suggests that, though macroexperience is strongly dependent on and connected to microexperience, “microexperience does not ground the macroexperience” (Chalmers, 2011, p. 8). Within the category of nonconstitutive panpsychism, there is layered emergentism, suggesting that micro-level entities coexist with the human mind, and nonlayered emergentism, wherein microelements fuse into the mind and cease to exist independently from it (Chalmers, 2011). Micropsychism contends that all facts, including facts about organic consciousness in macroentities, are grounded in consciousness-based facts about microentities (Chalmers, 2011). Constitutive cosmopsychism suggests that all facts are grounded in consciousness-based facts at the cosmic level, while nonconstitutive cosmopsychism states that minds are, “casually dependent on the conscious cosmos whilst being fundamental entities in their own right” (Goff et al., 2021, p. 9).

Russellian panpsychism is based on a premise that classical physics predicts how physical matter behaves, yet does not really define or identify what physical matter is, and thus does not explain the nature of consciousness. Russellian panpsychism frames this dilemma by locating phenomenal experience at the ontological level, while at the same time remaining compatible with the causal closure of the physical (Alter, 2012). It thereby provides a potential philosophical bridge between material and dualist panpsychist cosmology by offering a relationship between phenomenal consciousness and the physical world. It also creates an oblique connection to a consideration of the theory of pantheism.

Pantheism

Pantheism brings the idea of God more directly into the equation, contending that God and everything contained in the universe are one in the same. Stenmark (2018) explains that the pantheist believes that God is ontologically identical with the world, and that, “all things in the world are parts or aspects of God, and there is no part or aspect of God which is not a part or aspect of the world” (p. 28). Pantheists also maintain that God and the known cosmos are all that exist, that the world is identical to God, and that divinity and reality are unified and all-encompassing. Spinoza’s theories (as cited in Copleston, 1946) are overall consistent with the tenets of pantheism, expressed in terms of God as being in unity with all substance. Albert Einstein was another pantheistic thinker, being in relative alignment with Spinoza in believing that God and nature were equivalent realities (as cited in Dewey, 1882; Franquiz, 1964). The basic premise of pantheism, then, is that, “God is the soul of the world as a whole or the universal spirit present everywhere in the world...God is not a partially embodied deity...but a totally embodied deity”, with the embodiment being in and of this world and also of the known universe (Stenmark, 2018, p. 28).

Panentheism

Panentheism is the belief that the universe subsists within God, though God also exists transcendentally and separately from the universe. Panentheism is more resembling of deism in nature than pantheism, in that panentheism contends that God is both embodied in the world and a separate omnipresent entity extending beyond space and time. Nevertheless, most panentheists believe that the world is intrinsic to God’s nature. Thus, “Panentheists, like deists and traditional theists, believe in a personal and personal-like God, but reject the idea that God is ontologically distinct from the world”, such that, “God is within, but not totally confined by, the temporal order and nothing comes into being except through God” (Stenmark, 2018, p. 26). Panentheism thus contends that everything that exists in the universe is contained within and equated with the beingness of the supreme and infinite divine

presence of God, yet God is also distinct from and greater than everything that exists within that universe.

Nonsecular Interfaces

Religious and spiritual theorists regard the subject of consciousness from a somewhat different perspective than that of most secular thinkers. A general theological belief is that consciousness is the expression of the eternal soul, which is housed in the corporeal firmament of the physical body (Fuller, 2014). This viewpoint is predicated on the simple precept of faith, in things both seen and unseen.

In general, religious thinkers do not cogitate overly about the precise physical or metaphysical nature of consciousness, nor are they troubled when confronted with the contention that their belief system is plebeian and intellectually or psychologically unsophisticated. On the contrary, as Lombard (2018) states:

the perceived gaps between flesh and spirit, mind and brain, hide a deeper, intrinsic, and fascinating reality. This reality is an experience of something ineffable – a mind, soul, spirit, or even energy – that which is irreducibly complex and fundamental to our being. (pp. 7-8)

As an aside, many people of faith would contend that, should they go to their graves, turn to dust, and cease to exist in any recognizable form – if all traces of their individual selves as beings were to disappear from the cosmos with the advent of their physical deaths – they would not regret having lived their lives sustained by faith, as their lives were enriched thereby (Pew Research Center, 2016).

A pantheistic or panentheistic spirituality might assert that all religions are simply delineating different versions of the same transcendent supernatural reality, and are representing alternatives that are based on the peculiarities of the regional cultures in which they developed. To amalgamate these precepts somewhat might result in a view that, for instance, all the gods and goddesses of pagan religions correspond to the angels of the monotheistic religions, or perhaps even simply as different

archetypal expressions of the One (or the One in Three). If one were to question whether the gods and goddesses weren't simply archetypal expressions of the human experience, the response might be that this is essentially saying the same thing in a different way, for as Genesis states, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them" (King James Bible, 1975, Genesis 1:27). And if one were to further query about how the darker gods and goddesses could be consistent with the monotheistic idea of a loving God, one could say that their mere existence does not preclude an ultimate expression of God as the embodiment of infinite love, but merely of the existence of polarities.

The Hard Problem

This spiritually esoteric line of inquiry sets the stage and establishes a foundation for consideration of a subject within the field of consciousness studies, which is the question of the Hard Problem of Consciousness. To reiterate, the Hard Problem of Consciousness asks why neural mechanisms would be accompanied by any felt experience or transcendent sense of self. Consideration of this question is controversial and somewhat provocative amongst philosophers, having its share of detractors, notable amongst them being Daniel Dennett and Patricia Churchland (Burkeman, 2015).

Dennett and Churchland maintain that the idea of consciousness is merely "an illusion", and that neurobiology and other cognitive mechanisms describe all aspects of inner experience (Burkeman, 2015, p. 12). It could be asserted that, in their adiamorphic considerations of and reductionistic pontifications regarding the nature of consciousness, philosophers such as Dennett and Churchland are perhaps exhibiting a certain amount of intellectual hubris. The question is whether in attempting to understand the topic of consciousness by removing the concept of a Supreme Being and spirituality, one is perhaps in some circumstances aspiring to play God. If one might have few reservations about

playing God in this way, and if one were to deny that there actually is a Supreme Being, might it follow that some consciousness theorists are elevating themselves instead into that lofty position?

Alternatively, if all conceptualizations of consciousness and all permutations thereof do actually come from an omnipotent, omniscient Divine Being, then could it be asserted that God's cognizance of the contextual meaning of all that is in existence is far advanced beyond what any mere human mind could even envision comprehending?

Philosophers such as the aforementioned Dennett and Churchland are presumably unwilling to consider Colin McGinn's supposition that, "human beings are constitutively incapable of grasping the nature of the properties underlying consciousness; it could be that the emergence of consciousness from non-consciousness is intelligible to God if not to us" (as cited in Goff et al., 2021, p. 12). As alluded to earlier, these same philosophical thinkers would likely consider the somewhat mystical line of inquiry presented here as small-minded and superstitious. Yet with all of their imperious knowledge and intellectual sophistication, they cannot solve the Hard Problem of Consciousness without dismissing it, whereas the infinitely sensible deific cosmology described here addresses it handily.

Integrating Psychodynamic Considerations

At this juncture it would be useful to reintroduce some psychological conceptualizations about consciousness as viewed through the lens of psychoanalytic psychology and in particular, the perspective of object relations theory. This template defines consciousness as a state of being in which a person is fully aware and accountable in the present moment and is operating from an individuated and actualized mindset. By contrast, an unconscious individual is in denial and defended against their own psychological and emotional reality, is operating from a false self, and is dissociated in any given moment (Kohut, 1978). Does this not somewhat resemble the "zombie" scenario of animated corpses that Chalmers alludes to in discussing unconsciousness versus consciousness (Burkeman, 2015, p. 7)?

The psychodynamic paradigm suggests that one's level of consciousness is a function of one's willingness and ability to perceive and embrace all of what one is and all that has made and continues to make one so, and to be present with this awareness (Kohut, 1971). A highly intelligent human who has blocked or split off whole parts of themselves in the service of avoiding emotional pain from past trauma and emotional injury, and thus is precluded from functioning as a fully actuated and individuated self, might thus be considered less conscious than a non-humanoid life form that presumably embraces all of its experience of beingness wholly. According to this line of thinking, a dog, or perhaps even the snails in the garden, might actually potentially function more consciously and holistically than an intellectually gifted person, perhaps even including some philosophers.

Christ Consciousness

This idea of wholeness could be taken a step further by conjecturing that a fully conscious being is one in tune with the divine, or Christ consciousness. From an esoteric standpoint, the psychological unconsciousness described above corresponds to living in one's lower nature, where pain avoidance, instant gratification and the idolatries of the egoistic mind take precedence over living in the mindfulness of Christ consciousness, one's higher nature of conscious and loving awareness. Using this frame of reference, panpsychism begins to make even more sense. Could everything in the universe potentially be conscious? According to the definitions proffered, a tree is not acting from the unconscious, nor is a dog. Could Christ consciousness or higher consciousness exist in any living being that is existing positively and constructively in the present moment and is in harmony with themselves and their environment? For that matter, could it even exist in a rock, a stream, or a mountain?

As discussed, philosophers such as Koch, Tononi and Chalmers argue that consciousness is ubiquitous and is present wherever the information contained in an entity is "...sufficiently interconnected and organized" (Burkeman, 2015, p. 15). The contention is that:

physicists have no problem accepting that certain fundamental aspects of reality – such as space, mass, or electrical charge – just do exist. That can't be explained as being the result of anything else. Explanations have to stop somewhere. The panpsychic hunch is that consciousness could be like that, too – and that if it is, there is no particular reason to assume that it only occurs in certain kinds of matter. (Burkeman, 2015, p 15)

Koch states that he, “tries to avoid stepping on insects as he walks” (as cited in Burkeman, 2015, p. 15). This is something that all those who save earthworms on the pavement, feed families of crows, and make certain their plants are well-watered and in a comfortable physical environment would understand. For many these things have been done instinctively since childhood, and are based on that same intuitive hunch about consciousness espoused by some of the esteemed philosophers mentioned here (Libbert, 2019). And according to Piaget, individuals with this kind of empathetic awareness are far from alone in such. He contends that, “A child can happily talk to a grasshopper and...think a flower might feel the sunlight and perhaps even enjoy it” (as cited in Zadeh, 2021, pp. 6-7).

Zadeh (2021) further states that, “Most of us dismiss these notions as we mature. Gradually, we rein in the concept of consciousness closer and closer in, until at least in the West, we usually settle on the traditional view that consciousness is present only in the brains of humans and higher animals” (p. 7). Zadeh (2021) also states that:

in the last ten years or so, this understanding has been repeatedly disrupted by new scientific breakthroughs. We are now well versed in the playfulness and creativity of cephalopods, the intelligent communication between fungi, and the interspecies sharing economy in forests. Honeybees recognize faces, use tools, make collective decisions, dance to communicate, and appear to understand higher-order concepts like zero. Plants can feel you touching them....learn behavior, identify the sound of running water and grow towards it and communicate via clicking

sounds...Recent research into slime mold – a single-celled eukaryotic organism that has no brain, no nervous system and looks like a yellow puddle – found that it makes decisions, perceives its surroundings and can choose the most nutritious food from numerous options. (pp. 7-8)

Burkeman (2015) further maintains that, “anything at all that matters, in life, only does so as a consequence of its impact on conscious brains” (p. 18). This might be amended to say that anything at all that matters in life does so as a consequence of its impact on conscious systems. In this light, a conscious system would be described as an amalgamation of aspects as defined previously; namely, an interconnected and organized entity that is fully aware of its beingness in the present moment by virtue of being in concert with and in a harmonious relationship with itself and its environment. And while, “physical science might appear to give us a nearly complete account of the nature of matter – what everything is made of – it really only provides a description of mathematical structures: the “causal skeleton” of reality” (Zadeh, 2021, p. 12).

How does one account for the rest of existence in terms of the Hard Problem of Consciousness? Stephen Hawking said, “Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe to describe?” (as cited in Zadeh, 2021, p. 13). The panpsychists believe that the mystery of consciousness can be explained by accepting that consciousness is the intrinsic nature of matter. Or as Zadeh proposes, “Consciousness didn’t emerge or flicker into existence; it has always been there – the intrinsic nature of us and everything around us. This is what breathes fire into the equations” (Zadeh, 2021, p. 15). In fact, “Consciousnesses is exactly what the physicists have been studying the structure and behavior of all along” (Zadeh, 2021, p. 17).

This leads right back to the tenets of pantheism and panentheism, which basically theorize that God is in all matter. And it also leads back to the Hard Problem of Consciousness in asking, “why on earth should all of these complicated brain processes *feel* like anything from the inside? Why aren't we just brilliant robots, capable of retaining information, of responding to noises and smells and hot saucepans, but dark inside, lacking an inner life?” (Burkeman, 2015, p. 3). The answer lies in the recognition that a ubiquitous consciousness exists in all things, and that in humans especially it expresses as an essence of awareness, or soul, that leads us to contemplate and sanctify the divine nature of our existence.

Summary

A reasonable contention about the Hard Problem of Consciousness is that matter is the physical substrate, mind is the actuary vehicle, and soul is the essential element (Barker, 1995). Body provides the articulation for mind as the adjuvant, yet soul is the psychologically and spiritually animating principle and the true essence that provides the entire context for the where and wherefore of the journey. If a being is out of balance or out of touch with their spiritual elan vital, they function in a manner that is rote and reductionistic, and often destructive to themselves and others. The level of consciousness of any being or elemental is dependent upon the extent to which said entity is in tune with their own higher truth, as well as with the unifying influence of the infinite divine which breathes life and vitality into all that is. Good psychology is psychology that facilitates a reconnection with one's natural and intrinsic knowing, one's essential goodness which is predicated on an instinctive connection with the divine, and with divine providence. And good living is finding a balance and harmonious relationship with self and others that is principally informed by the divine consciousness in

all things in existence. It requires a leap of faith, yet it is a leap worth taking if the goal is an enlightened and balanced principium for conscious living.

Conclusion

The Hard Problem of Consciousness, the question of why and how consciousness exists, has been considered throughout human history in one manner or another going back millennia. It has been explored religiously, philosophically, metaphysically and scientifically, with myriad theories and cosmologies being inaugurated over time to address it.

In this article, the question of the intrinsic nature of consciousness is considered essentially by means of an exploration into the theories of panpsychism, pantheism, and panentheism, and ultimately framed in terms of psychodynamic and religious sensibilities. The conclusion is that consciousness is a function of the presence of an animating principle of beingness in the body, mind and/or physical form of any entity in the known universe, and that it is informed by the divine essence of same.

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