Putting Minds Together and Pulling Minds Apart:

The Relatively Mild Impact of Cosmopsychism on Panpsychism's Combination Problem

Goals of this talk

Panpsychism faces the 'combination problem', and some claim that 'cosmopsychist' forms of panpsychism have a major advantage over 'micropsychist' forms in addressing this problem.

I think cosmospychism, for the most part, has the same prospects for addressing the combination problem as micropsychism. (I think those prospects are good, but that's not my focus here.)

The only way that cosmopsychism makes a difference is in its 'identifying' form, which identifies each of us with the cosmic subject. Since this denies the existence of a plurality of subjects, it is more radical than most cosmopsychists are willing to be.

Plan of this Talk:

1. The players (panpsychism, micropsychism, and cosmopsychism)
2. The backdrop (physicalism, the explanatory gap, and the combination problem)
3. Cosmopsychism to the rescue? (not really)
   a. The mismatch problem
   b. The unity problem
   c. The subject-summing problem
4. What cosmopsychism *does* do (opens up a distinctive, but very radical, option)

Section 1: The Players

This talk is about the relations among the following theses:

Panpsychism: The fundamental physical entities are conscious.

Atomism: The only fundamental physical entities are particles (or other very small things).

Monism: The only fundamental physical entity is the cosmos as a whole.

Micropsychism: Particles are the only fundamental physical entities, and are conscious.

Cosmopsychism: The cosmos is the only fundamental physical entity, and is conscious.

Section 1: The Players

For several of these theses, it's common to distinguish 'priority' and 'existence' forms:

Priority Atomism: Particles are fundamental, but other things exist and are grounded in particles.
Existence Atomism (= mereological nihilism)**:** Nothing really exists except particles.

Priority Monism: The cosmos is fundamental, but other things exist and are grounded in the cosmos.
Existence Monism: Nothing really exists except the cosmos (aka 'blobject').

Priority Micropsychism: Particles are fundamental and conscious, but other things exist and are grounded in them.
Existence Micropsychism (= panpsychist mereological nihilism)**:** Nothing really exists except conscious particles.

Priority Cosmopsychism: The cosmos is fundamental and conscious, but other things exist and are grounded in it.
Existence Cosmopsychism: Nothing really exists except the conscious cosmos.

Section 2: The Backdrop

In the background of this discussion is something like the following simplified narrative:

- ➔ Physicalism has many theoretical virtues…
- ➔ ...but is threatened by the explanatory gap between the physical and the experiential.
- ➔ Yet most forms of dualism are theoretically vicious…
- ➔ ...except panpsychism, which combines physicalism's theoretical elegance with property dualism.

Section 2: The Backdrop

Against this backdrop, panpsychists have a two-sided explanatory burden:

- Provide the transparent explanation of human consciousness that physicalism can't…
- ...without sacrificing the theoretical elegance of the scientific worldview, as that substance dualism or emergentism would.

This is not so easy, especially because of...

Section 2: The Backdrop

...the 'combination problem':

"...while it is manifest that the basic physical elements combine in a multitude of ways to produce molecules, proteins and people, it is far from clear that it even makes sense to speak of the combination of basic mental elements, even granting they are in some sense conscious, into distinct and more complex conscious experiences."

(Seager 1995, 'Consciousness, Information and Panpsychism', p.283)

Section 2: The Backdrop

The combination problem comprises many distinct sub-problems. I'll focus on three:

- **The Subject-Summing Problem:** Facts about one set of subjects don't seem to entail facts about other subjects.

- **The Incompatible Contexts Problem:** Elements of a subject's consciousness are conditioned by each other, so any element that belonged to the consciousness of two subjects (e.g. part and whole) would be rendered incoherent.

- **The Mismatch Problem:** The structure of the physical brain seems very different from the structure of human consciousness.

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Proponents of cosmopsychism have claimed that it can radically transform all of these problems of combination. I scrutinise these claims, focusing particularly on:

- Nagasawa & Wager on the mismatch problem.
- Shani on the unity problem.
- Nagasawa & Wager, Goff, and Jaskolla & Buck on the subject-summing problem.

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Let's start with Nagasawa and Wager on the mismatch problem:

"Ordinary phenomenal experiences present themselves as smooth, continuous, and unified. They do have distinct aspects but they have an underlying homogeneity… It is hard to see, however, how phenomenal… properties of microphysical entities could add up to the homogeneous character of phenomenal experiences that we have.

…

Priority cosmopsychism, however, does not face the [this problem, because] it denies that phenomenal experiences are constituted by phenomenal properties of physical ultimates.

…

Here is an analogy to illustrate this point. Suppose, per impossibile, there is an absolutely perfectly smooth painting, which is analogous to a smooth, homogeneous phenomenal experience. Such a painting cannot be an aggregate of small dots, which are analogous to phenomenal or protophenomenal properties of physical ultimates, but it can be a segment of a larger painting that is equally smooth and homogeneous, which is analogous to the cosmic consciousness."

(Nagasawa & Wager 2017, pp.120-121)

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

What are the painting analogies actually getting at?

Considered as a mass of particles, the physical brain is

A. Hugely detailed
B. Qualitatively austere

If micropsychism were true, wouldn't we expect human experience to be the same? But in fact, it is

C. Relatively coarse-grained
D. Qualitatively diverse

(Sometimes the conflict between A and C is called the 'revelation problem', and the conflict between B and D is called the 'palette' problem.)

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Does cosmopsychism really help? No.

To be plausible, monists need to do justice to the detailed explanatory structure of science. This means that:

- If scientific investigation supports the explanatory sufficiency of a qualitatively austere description of the universe, they need to find a way to re-frame that in monistic terms.
- If scientific investigation reveals bewildering detail in the brain, they need to find a way to re-frame that in monistic terms.

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

As best I can see, any successful attempt to re-frame the brain's apparent qualitative austerity and bewildering detail in monism-friendly terms will pose the mismatch problem anew.

E.g. rather than the brain being made of a trillion trillion trillion particles, it's just that the universe is modified in a trillion trillion trillion ways, and it constitutes the brain's observable behaviour *via* these many minute modifications.

But those modifications should have some phenomenal aspect, so we still seem to face the mismatch problem.

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Do cosmospsychists have options? Yes.

- Deny that particles (/particle-like modifications of the cosmos) even proximally constitute the whole brain: maybe the brain somehow constitutes the particles, and we've misunderstood all the apparent scientific evidence to the contrary.
- Make constitution opaque: maybe human consciousness can be constituted by something hugely detailed, without that detail being phenomenally manifest.
- Allow phenomenal blending: maybe the microscopic details *are* phenomenally manifest, but qualitatively rather than as numerically distinguishable elements.
- Expand the palette: Maybe the number of fundamental types of phenomenal quality exceeds the number of fundamental types of particle (/particle-like modifications).

But these options are all equally available to micropsychists, with all the attendant costs and benefits (e.g. Lewtas 2013, Roelofs 2014, Chalmers 2017).

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Next, here's Coleman on (what I call) the Incompatible Contexts Problem:

"Consider two micro-subjects, eager for combination into a higher-level individual… Consider [their] points of view. One—Blue's—is pervaded by a unitary blueness, the other—Red's—by redness, and that is all they experience, respectively. To say these points of view were present as components in the experiential perspective of the uber-subject ('Ub') would therefore be to say that Ub experienced a unitary phenomenal blueness and a unitary phenomenal redness, i.e. had synchronous experiences as of each of these qualities alone, to the exclusion of all others. For it is these qualities each on their own that characterise, respectively, the perspectives of the original duo. Experience excludes, as well as includes."

(Coleman 2013, pp.32-33)

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

But this problem applies as much to cosmopsychism as to micropsychism. To illustrate, consider James's critique of Hegelianism, which he construes as in effect cosmopsychist:

"…[we cannot be components of an infinite cosmic mind because] we experience ourselves ignorantly and in division. We indeed differ from the absolute not only by defect, but by excess. Our ignorances, for example, bring curiosities and doubts by which it cannot be troubled, for it owns eternally the solution of every problem. Our impotence entails pains, our imperfection sins, which its perfection keeps at a distance."

(James 1909, Lecture V, quoted in Albahari Forthcoming)

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Shani recognises that just flipping priority doesn't help, and so offers a different way to solve this problem:

"The relation between the subjectivity of ultimates and the subjectivity of macro-phenomenal subjects is neither that of combinatorial constitution... nor of complete irrelevance... but, rather, of partial grounding... If A is but one among various facts which, individually, do not suffice to ground B but which do so collectively then it is said to be a partial ground for B."

"...all perspectives can be said to inherit their generic character from the subjectival nature of the absolute. At the same time... each perspective possesses a specific character [in virtue of self-maintaining organisation] *which cannot be derived from any other perspective (or a combination thereof)."*

(Shani 2015, p.18, pp.46-47)

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Is cosmopsychism really what's doing the work here? No.

If 'partial grounding' works, micropsychists can use it too. They can say:
>   'Composites inherit their generic character from the subjectival nature of their microscopic parts, but also possess a specific character (in virtue of self-maintaining organisation) which cannot be derived from any other perspective (or a combination thereof).'

Alternatively, cosmopsychists could deny that all perspectives are both strongly integrated and sharply bounded (perhaps some perspectives are either internally incoherent or externally open-ended).

But micropsychists can do this just as easily (cf. Roelofs 2016).

Section 3: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

The Subject-Summing Problem is nicely illustrated by the following thought-experiment:

> **The Micropsychic Zombie:** Imagine a being physically and functionally identical to one of us, made entirely out of phenomenally conscious parts, but lacking any consciousness of its own.

If this being is *conceivable*, then positing consciousness in a thing's parts fails to transparently explain consciousness in the thing itself (just as if the classic philosophical zombie is conceivable, then physical facts fail to transparently explain consciousness).

Section 4: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

"...cosmic consciousness is somewhat comparable to the consciousness of an ordinary individual... If we can then show that the consciousness of an ordinary individual can be divided into smaller, less fundamental segments, then we have reason to think that the cosmic consciousness can also be divided into smaller, less fundamental segments.

And it seems indeed possible to divide the consciousness of an ordinary individual into smaller segments... A visual experience can be... segmented into distinguishable colour experiences (e.g., experiences corresponding to red and green hues) or experiences of separable regions in space (e.g., experiences corresponding to the right-hand side and the left-hand side of the visual field). Yet the whole visual experience is... a unity that is more fundamental than the segments."

(Nagasawa & Wager 2017, pp.121-122; cf. Goff 2017, pp.184-187)

Section 4: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

However, this approach runs headlong into a 'cosmopsychic zombie' objection:

> **The Cosmopsychic Zombie:** Imagine a being physically and functionally identical to one of us, existing purely as an abstracted segment of a phenomenally conscious whole, but lacking any consciousness of its own.

This being is clearly conceivable, because it's analogous to what we unreflectively assume our own brain parts to be. The 'less fundamental segments' that we can intuitively divide our visual experience into are *not themselves subjects*.

Section 4: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

Do cosmopsychists have options? Yes.

- They might reject conceivability arguments, or assign them only a limited role (but so can micropsychists).
- They might say that the apparent conceivability of the cosmopsychic zombie is an illusion, stemming from our tendency to think of parts and wholes as independent things, when actually they are just different 'ways of slicing' the same reality (but so can micropsychists).
- Or, they might say something like the following:

Section 4: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

"is it conceivable that the universe is experiential, but that there are zombies without [human-like] experience? We argue that this is indeed inconceivable...let us start with an experientially heterogeneous universe — i.e. a big experiential subject that is experientially structured. We are now able to discern various diachronic equivalence-relations holding between different regional patterns of the universe at different times.

These diachronic equivalence relations allow for the designation of certain quasi-abstract entities describing the processes of change that one particular experiential pattern of the universe undergoes. These quasi-abstract entities are what we refer to when talking about the persisting self of humans."

(Jaskolla & Buck 2012, pp.197-198)

Section 4: Cosmopsychism to the Rescue?

This amounts to saying that cosmopsychic zombies are inconceivable because subjects are reducible to patterns among experiences.

This idea
- is echoed by Shani's talk of 'perspectives' being grounded in self-maintaining organisation;
- has non-panpsychist forebears in Parfit, Hume, and Buddha,
- has panpsychist forebears in Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and Advaita Vedanta.
- has *no special relation* to cosmopsychism.

If that is all that subjects are, they are explained by any theory that can get the right relations among experiences - cosmopsychist or micropsychist.

Section 4: The Maddest Option of All

There *is* one way cosmopsychism genuinely transforms the combination problem.

But it is not available to to *priority*-cosmopsychists (which all the so-far quoted authors have been considering).

Recall the priority/existence distinction:

Section 4: The Maddest Option of All

Cosmopsychism: The cosmos is the only fundamental physical entity, and is conscious.
    Priority Cosmopsychism: The cosmos is fundamental and conscious, but other things exist and are grounded in it.
    Existence Cosmopsychism: Nothing really exists except the conscious cosmos.

Existence-cosmopsychists need not show cosmopsychic zombies to be inconceivable: they can say that they are *actual*.

This removes any need to be reductionist about subjects: we can endorse 'Cartesian' intuitions about the fundamentality of 'the I'.

Section 4: The Maddest Option of All

Can existence micropsychism do the same? No. Any scientifically respectable version of existence micropsychism is eliminativist about you and me: there's just conscious particles, I don't exist, neither do you.

But existence cosmopsychism has both eliminativist and identifying forms.

Identifying Existence Cosmopsychism:

> 'Nothing exists except a single conscious entity with an incredibly variegated set of properties. All of our personal pronouns in fact refer to this thing, which is constantly making the mistake of thinking that it is only one small part of reality.'

Section 5: The Maddest Option of All

Identifying existence cosmopsychism (IEC) is eliminative about 'Luke Roelofs' and 'Miri Albahari' but not about 'me' or 'you'. Each of us is the universe; all of us are identical.

This requires a massive error theory:

> 'I'm having all of your experiences but I wrongly think I'm not because they're not jointly accessible with these ones.'

But the error theory it requires is exactly complementary to that required by the reductionist about subjects.

Section 5: The Maddest Option of All

Reductionism and IEC make a good team for a dialectical 'pincer movement':

- If subjects are just patterns in experience, there are lots of us but we can be explained by reference to more fundamental consciousness.
- If subjects are special fundamentally distinct soul-substances, there's just one, and I'm it and so are you.
- If 'subject' is an ambiguous or confused term, then both of the above are true, but for different senses of 'subject'.

For the record, I think this is probably the closest thing to the truth. But it doesn't seem to be what self-described cosmopsychists usually argue for.

Conclusion

Identifying existence cosmopsychism provides a useful claw for a dialectical pincer movement.

But priority cosmopsychism simply 'moves the bump around under the rug'.

Unless panpsychists want to go all-out for one of the most counter-intuitive views available, cosmopsychism does not 'solve the combination problem.'

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