

Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives

GODEHARD BRÜNTRUP AND LUDWIG JASKOLLA, Eds.

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“Panpsychism is as old as philosophy itself” write Godehard Brüntrup and Ludwig Jaskolla to open this volume. Old it may be, but it is also new: in the last two decades, it has received an unexpected upsurge in serious attention from analytic philosophers, and this collection of essays provides an excellent overview of what drives this resurgence and what philosophers interested in panpsychism are currently talking about.

Sections 1 (“The Logical Place of Panpsychism”) and 4 (“Panpsychism and its Alternatives”) focus on situating panpsychism relative to rival views. Here an interesting tension emerges between two ways of defining the term, one reflecting the sort of panpsychism that is ‘as old as philosophy itself,’ and one reflecting specific contemporary interests. Consider, for example, the illuminating papers contrasting panpsychism with other views: panprotopsychism (David Chalmers’ paper), physicalism (Brian McLaughlin’s paper), emergentism (Achim Stephan’s paper), neutral monism (Leopold Steubenberg’s paper), dualism (Charles Taliaferro’s paper), and idealism (Uwe Meixner’s paper).

This roster of alternatives, however, is odd given the way most authors define panpsychism: as something like ‘some or all fundamental physical entities are conscious’ (Chalmers on p. 19, Nagasawa and Wager on p. 113, Brogaard on p. 130, Montero on p. 215, Goff on p. 283, and others). Physicalism, dualism, and their ilk are primarily claims about which properties ground which others. Panpsychism looks like a claim about *where* certain properties are instantiated. Shouldn’t its rivals be other answers to that same question, like ‘only human beings are conscious,’ or ‘only animals with brains are conscious,’ or ‘only living organisms are conscious’? Although these views

do not have familiar names (though perhaps a neologism-happy philosopher might toy with ‘anthropopsychism,’ ‘neuropsychism,’ and ‘biopsychism’), they are not unfamiliar ideas—Descartes is sometimes castigated for his ‘anthropopsychism,’ and autopoietic enactivism sometimes accused of leading to ‘biopsychism.’ But they aren’t much discussed in this volume.

The explanation, of course, is that in contemporary discussions ‘panpsychism’ denotes a specific dialectical constellation of motives and assumptions: accepting anti-physicalist arguments like the conceivability argument and the knowledge argument, concluding that consciousness must be a fundamental ingredient of nature, but trying to preserve a ‘naturalism broadly conceived’ by modelling this extra ingredient after the fundamental physical ingredients, which are spread pervasively through nature and governed by a few elegant laws. It is less about which entities are conscious than about what explains human consciousness—we are conscious because matter is conscious.

But when classifying historical figures as panpsychists (examples in this volume include Bruno, Cavendish, Schopenhauer, Leibniz, Spinoza, and others) a simpler definition of panpsychism as ‘everything is conscious’ is needed—after all, some of them are most naturally read as idealists, some as dualists, some as materialists, some as not fitting into any such category. What unites them is that they think mind is everywhere.

(That these two approaches are not simply equivalent can be brought out by considering two views: ‘consciousness is reducible to a certain physical state, but one which happens to be more or less everywhere’ counts as panpsychism by the historical definition, but by contemporary standards would be called ‘physicalism’ instead; ‘humans inherit their consciousness from down-quarks, which alone among fundamental particles are conscious’ doesn’t count as panpsychism by the historical definition, but does count by contemporary standards.)

Of course, definitional tensions are probably inevitable when the same term is applied across varied historical contexts (certainly ‘idealism,’ ‘dualism,’ and ‘materialism’ fare no better). The malleability of the ‘panpsychist’ label is further displayed in Section 2 (“Varieties of Panpsychism”). Yujin Nagasawa defends ‘cosmopsychism’ (on which the universe itself is the only fundamental conscious thing) as an alternative to panpsychism, though it could equally be seen as a version of it. Galen Strawson ties panpsychism to fundamental ontology in such a way that it may become a necessary truth, while Berit Brogaard and Gregg Rosenberg tie it to concrete empirical features of physics and neuroscience.

Section 3 (“Panpsychism and the Combination Problem”) addresses the major argument against panpsychism: do the fundamental minds postulated by panpsychism actually help with explaining human minds? That this problem is itself a combination of many sub-problems is clear from the first paper, in which David Chalmers enumerates (by my count) 10 problems and seven arguments for panpsychists to wrestle with—some focused on relations among subjects, some on phenomenal unity, some on the structure of consciousness, and some on other topics. Subsequent papers by Barbara Montero, William Seager, Samuel Coleman, and Philip Goff examine these various problems, and others, and responses to them.

One interesting cleavage that emerges here concerns whether panpsychist microsubjects do *too much* or *too little*. Coleman’s work, arguing that panpsychists should embrace subjectless qualities as their phenomenal base level, aims to show that microsubjects ‘do too much’: their positive nature, as beings with their own perspectives, makes it contradictory for many subjects to compose one. Montero’s paper is largely a response

to this kind of argument, casting doubt on the premises needed for such a definite conclusion. Goff's work, by contrast, focuses on 'explanatory gaps' facing panpsychism: even if there *are* microsubjects, that still leaves it open whether there is a subject at the macro level. This difference drives different styles of response: Coleman thinks the solution is for panpsychists to *remove* something (subjects) from their base level, while Goff thinks the solution is to *add* something (a somewhat mysterious 'phenomenal bonding' relation).

Overall, this volume provides an excellent synthesis of the main strands in the contemporary literature on panpsychism—the debates on its definition and details, its possible advantages over and distinctions from other theories, and its difficulties with and explorations of mental combination. I have been unable to do justice to all of the ideas developed therein, but can enthusiastically recommend it for anyone interested in a contemporary perspective on this very old but very new approach.

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