

In Defense of Panpsychism

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Panpsychism, the idea that everything has an aspect of *psyche* or mind to it, seems nutty to most people. In our everyday experience some things are alive and some aren't, and the difference is obvious even if there are some grey areas. Living things have minds. At least we ourselves do, as we know from direct experience, and it is not too much of a stretch to say that all living things do. But what sense does it make to say that dead things have minds?

I have written about panpsychism a couple of times before¹, and some readers have asked for a more rigorous defense of the theory than I have given in those articles. It is all very well to say that Panpsychism is a more coherent metaphysics than others, but what does that actually mean? OK, here goes. This is a bit more technical than usual, and longer, so please bear with me.

First, some context. This is all about the mind-body problem. Mental objects, such as thoughts and feelings, have no extension in space and are directly perceivable only by the person thinking or feeling them. Physical (bodily) objects have extension in space and are perceivable by more than one person. The question is, how are they related?

Here is the argument in its bare logical form as adapted from contemporary philosopher Galen Strawson:²

0. Reality is made of only one type of stuff. There is only one ultimate category that applies to everything. We call this view Monism. assumption
1. Everything real has a material aspect. That is, every instance of the one type of stuff of which reality is made is observable from an external, publicly-available point of view. premise
2. Our own experience, directly observable only from the point of view of the one who is having it, is indisputably real. premise

¹ Meacham, William, "Dead or Alive?", URL = <http://www.bmeacham.com/blog/?p=320> and "Mental Causation", URL = <http://www.bmeacham.com/blog/?p=510>.

² Presented at a colloquium for the Department of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin on 20 October 2011. I am paraphrasing Strawson's terminology. Strawson starts by agreeing with materialists that concrete reality is entirely physical in nature and then argues for a meaning of "physical" that includes both the material and the mental. I prefer to use the term "physical" as most people do, to mean material only.

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| 3. Hence, at least some of reality has an experiential aspect as well as a material aspect. | lemma (1,2) (A lemma is a conclusion that is then used as a premise in a further chain of argument.) |
| 4. There is no radical emergence of experience from non-experiential stuff. The experiential aspect of something does not radically emerge from the material aspect. (By "radical" I mean strong, as opposed to weak, emergence. See discussion below.) | premise |
| 5. Hence, experience is as fundamental to reality as matter. | conclusion (3,4) |
| 5. Experience is fundamental to reality. | lemma |
| 6. What is real is ultimately made up of very tiny elements; these are its fundamental constituents. | premise |
| 7. Hence, at least some fundamental constituents of reality are intrinsically and irreducibly experiential as well as material in nature. For short, we call this idea "micropsychism." | conclusion (5,6) |
| 7. Micropsychism is true. | lemma |
| 8. The assertion that all fundamental constituents of reality are experiential as well as material is simpler than and preferable to the assertion some are and some are not. | premise |
| 9. Hence, all fundamental constituents of reality are intrinsically and irreducibly experiential in nature as well as material. For short, we call this "panpsychism." | conclusion (7,8) |

Well that is terse, but it shows the logical structure of the argument. As in all logical arguments, the final conclusion is demonstrated to be true only if the logic is sound and all the premises are true. There is a surprisingly large body of recent work on this subject examining each of the premises in detail. I am certainly not going to reproduce it all, but I will go over the premises and give some reasons why I think each of them makes sense.

We start off by assuming *monism*, the view that everything is made of the same kind of stuff. Depending on whom you ask, that might be matter (wholly non-experiential), the view known as materialism; mind (wholly non-material), the view known as idealism; or something in between that takes on aspects of both matter and mind. The alternative is dualism, which says that matter and mind

are two entirely distinct kinds of stuff. The problem with dualism, of course, is how to explain the interaction between the two. I take it that monism is not a controversial assumption.

The first premise says that everything has a material, or physical, aspect; so the argument starts off agreeing with the materialists. I am giving an operational definition of "material": what is material is detectable or observable by more than one person. The first premise says that what is real is objectively there, and can be discerned by anyone with suitable training and instruments.

You would think that the second premise, that our own experience is indisputably real, would be equally uncontroversial, but that is not the case. Surprisingly, some people say that experience isn't really real. Most notoriously, Daniel Dennett, a materialist, makes the following assertion, where "phenomenology" means the various items in conscious experience:³ "There seems to be phenomenology. That is a fact But it does not follow ... that there really is phenomenology."⁴

As Strawson points out, seeming itself is a type of experience, so the argument fails on the face of it.⁵ Dennett's claim is not so absurd as it sounds, because Dennett is arguing that what is really real is the brain activity that creates our experience. He says, for instance, that our experience seems smooth and continuous, but the physiology behind it is discontinuous and full of gaps. Hence, our experience is not really continuous at all.⁶ But that just begs the question. In order to know anything about brain activity we have to see readings on dials, squiggles on paper, etc., and seeing is a kind of experience. The one thing we cannot doubt, when we are experiencing something, is that experience is going on. We can find out that we are mistaken about the objects of our experience, as when we see a hallucination or an optical illusion, but that we are experiencing is the bedrock of everything.

The conclusion from the first two premises is that experience is an undeniable aspect of whatever the universe is made of. And so is matter, of course. Now the question is, what is the relationship between experience and matter? A common claim is that experience emerges from non-experiential matter when matter reaches a certain degree of complexity. Premise 4 denies this claim.

The basic idea of emergence is that new properties arise in systems as a result of interactions at an elemental level.⁷ A case in point is liquidity. A single molecule of water is not liquid, nor are its constituent atoms. But when you put several molecules of water together, you have a liquid (at certain temperatures). Liquidity is an emergent property, specifically a form of "weak" emergence: the

³ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

⁵ Strawson, "Realistic Monism," p. 6, footnote 7.

⁶ Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 356.

⁷ Wikipedia, "Emergence."

emergent quality is directly traceable to characteristics of the system's components. Water molecules do not bind together in a tight lattice but slide past each other; that's just part of their physical make-up.

Some say that consciousness is an emergent property as well, that it arises when constituent parts – neurons, sense organs and the like – are organized with sufficient complexity. If so, the emergence of consciousness would be a “strong” emergence. The new quality, consciousness, would not be reducible to the system's constituent parts; the whole would be greater than the sum of its parts.

Strawson denies the possibility of such strong emergence. He says “there must be something about the nature of the emerged-from (and nothing else) in virtue of which the emerger emerges as it does and is what it is. You can get liquidity from non-liquid molecules as easily as you can get a cricket team from eleven things that are not cricket teams.”⁸ We can do so because in those cases “we move wholly within a completely conceptually homogeneous ... set of notions.”⁹ But there is nothing about the nature of inert, non-experiential matter that would lead to the emergence of conscious experience. The two notions are not homogenous, but radically different. So consciousness does not emerge from non-conscious matter.

That, at least, is the argument in favor of premise 4. If you want to dispute it (and philosophers certainly have done so), you know where to take aim. But if we assume that it is true, then conclusion 5 follows: Experience is as fundamental to reality as matter; it is not something additional that emerges from what is primitive or more fundamental. In Strawson's argument this is a stopping place; the rest is elaboration.

The next premise, 6, is that the ultimate constituents of reality are quite tiny: electrons, protons, quarks, muons and the like. This reflects the current findings of the physical sciences, and there is no reason to doubt it.

Hence (conclusion 7), at least some fundamental constituents of reality are intrinsically and irreducibly experiential in nature as well as material. For short, we call this idea “micropsychism.”

Micropsychism should make the idea of panpsychism a bit more palatable. The theory does not assert that inert substances such as rocks and concrete walls are conscious or have any kind of experience. It does assert that the ultimate components of such materials do have a kind of experience, some way of taking into account of their surroundings in a manner that, were it expanded and amplified quite a bit, would be like our waking consciousness of our world.

⁸ Strawson, “Realistic Monism,” p. 15.

⁹ Idem.

Premise 8 is an application of Occam's Razor, which advises us to adopt the simplest theory that adequately explains all the facts. Conclusion 7 says we have reason to think that at least some elemental parts of reality are experiential as well as material. We have no positive reason not to think that they all are. So it makes the theory simpler and more elegant to apply it to everything. Hence we end up with full-blown panpsychism (conclusion 9): all fundamental constituents of reality are intrinsically and irreducibly experiential, as well as material, in nature.

There is no way to tell for sure, of course. We cannot perform a scientific experiment to demonstrate that tiny particles or waves or whatever they are have some kind of experience of their surroundings. Physics tells us, with mathematical precision, how they interact, but physics tells us nothing of their internality. It's just that it makes a more coherent and refined theory to assume that every element, rather than only some of them, has some sort of experience. As I like to say, everything has an inside and an outside, the inside being the world as experienced by the entity itself and the outside being the way that the entity is experienced by other entities.

That's the argument in a nutshell. The whole thing hinges on premise 4, the denial of strong emergence. Materialism requires strong emergence to account for human consciousness. Panpsychism requires emergence as well, but only of a weak sort. If the fundamental units of reality are experiential as well as material, then it makes sense in principle that elaborate combinations of them would result in the vivid consciousness that we all enjoy while awake. But what is the nature of that combination? Without an account of that, panpsychism has little more explanatory plausibility than materialism.

If everything has both an inside, as panpsychism suggests, and an outside, as both panpsychism and materialism agree, then the organization of the outside should have some bearing on the richness of the inside. Let's go back to the initial conundrum, the difference between what is living and what is not. Is there something unique about how matter is organized in living beings that would account for the emergence of the complex and vivid form of experience that we know as waking consciousness? The answer is yes; it is what persists through time. The physical matter of non-living things persists through time, and their form changes through the impact of external forces. Living beings are the opposite: their physical matter is constantly changing through time, and only their form persists.

The physical matter of dead things just persists from moment to moment without changing, or changing only through external forces. In any given slice of time, the substance of a dead thing is the same as it is in any other slice of time. The totality of what it is can be encompassed in a single instant.

Living things are strikingly different. The physical matter that composes living things is constantly changing through *metabolism*, the process by which matter

is ingested, transformed and excreted. What persists is not the matter itself but the form in which that matter is organized. A single slice of time does not encompass the unity of the living being at all. Only across time can we grasp its functional wholeness. I follow Hans Jonas here.¹⁰ The sense of being a whole conscious entity emerges with metabolism, the ability of a simple organism to maintain its structure through time by exchanging physical matter with its environment. The physical matter changes, but the organizational form doesn't. (Or, it does, but it evolves so there is a continuity.) The structure of the material aspect – a changing material process that has a unity of form over time – gives rise to a unity of experience over time, a macroexperience, which is of a higher order than the microexperiences of the constituent elements.

Jonas' insights map nicely to those of other panpsychists, the process philosophers. Charles Hartshorne has made the distinction between "compound" and "composite" individuals, which is roughly the distinction between what is living and what is not.¹¹ A compound individual is one which (or who), on a macro level, has a "dominating unit," an inclusive locus of experience, a single subject that unifies the experiences of its components into a coherent whole. Non-living things, although made up of actual ultimates that each have a mental or experiential aspect, have no such unification of experience. Hartshorne calls them "composite" rather than "compound." David Ray Griffin calls them "aggregate."¹² In compound (living) individuals the experiences of the components bind together and reinforce each other, giving birth to a higher-level experience, a dominant subjectivity among the micropsychic components, which is in some ways superior to and capable of directing them. In composite (dead) things, or aggregations, the experiences of all the component simple individuals remain separate, and no higher-level inclusive experience arises. It is the persistence of form in compound individuals that enables the merging of the mentality of the micropsychic units into an inclusive subjectivity that, in its most developed instantiation, includes all the richness of human mental life, including a sense of freedom and a knowledge of its own mortality.

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¹⁰ Jonas, "Evolution and Freedom," pp. 64-67. (Jonas, by the way, is fascinating. A student under Heidegger, he is rooted in both existential phenomenology and in biology, so his language is quite a bit different from Strawson's. He is germane because he takes seriously the possibility that other beings besides the human have subjective experience, what he, along with many existentialists and phenomenologists, calls "interiority." The germ of many aspects of human interiority is found in the simplest of living beings: a sense of freedom, of independence from the givenness of the material, along with a sense of necessity, of dependence on the material for one's existence; a sense of Being, of life, in opposition to the ever-present possibility of Non-being, of death; a sense of value, of the attractiveness of what is nourishing and repulsiveness of what is dangerous; a sense of selfhood, of inner identity that transcends the collective identity of the always-changing components, and a sense of the world that is other than oneself. Delicious stuff, but too much to cover in any depth in this essay.)

¹¹ Hartshorne, "The Compound Individual," pp. 215-217.

¹² Griffin, *Whitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy*, pp. 58-61.

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