

Consciousness all over the place.

Philip Goff: *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2017, 290 pp.

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It is a common view that a good philosophical argument takes you from obvious premises and compels you, by a series of rigorous logical steps, to accept a much less obvious conclusion. By these lights, the project undertaken by Philip Goff in his book “*Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*” promises to offer a paradigmatic instance of this sort of philosophical argument, for it meticulously argues, on the basis of the obvious fact that we are conscious and a sequence of carefully justified inferences, for no less than the highly non-obvious claim---to say the least---that the *cosmos as a whole* is a conscious entity.

The view advocated by the author will probably prompt an incredulous stare on the face of many a reader. But unbelievability is no reliable sign of error, in science and philosophy alike. And when counter-intuitive views are defended from first principles, with logical rigor, there may be a lot to learn by watching the argument unfold, even though the incredulity persists until the end. There is for sure a lot to be learned from Goff’s remarkable work.

The project of the book can be seen as an attempt at systematic analytic metaphysics that takes consciousness seriously as much as an essay in the philosophy of mind with a special attention to metaphysical foundations. The view advocated in the book, dubbed “*Cosmopsychism*”, is a variety of “*Russellian Monism*”, an approach to the metaphysics of consciousness taking inspiration from (Russell 1927) that attracted recently a renewed attention. *Russellian Monism* holds that while physical theories only capture dispositional properties of matter, the intrinsic properties that constitute their categorical bases are the ones responsible for consciousness. It thus provides an alternative both to Dualism and Physicalism and has recently generated some interesting debates between enthusiasts and skeptics, as well as about the best way to formulate it precisely and solve the problems it faces (Alter & Nagasiwa 2015). Goff’s book proposes both a systematic and original contribution to this literature and, more generally, to the fields of metaphysics and philosophy of mind.

The book is structured in two parts. The first is dedicated to the demise of Physicalism. Not wholly satisfied by the Knowledge and Conceivability Arguments, Goff proposes a new *Transparency* argument against Physicalism that is meant to get closer to “the heart of the

intuition that physicalism cannot account for consciousness” (125). A concept C of entity E is defined to be transparent “just in case C reveals the nature of E” (74). Goff claims that direct phenomenal concepts, i.e. concepts of occurrent conscious states, are transparent in this sense. This Direct Phenomenal Transparency Thesis plays a key role in his rejection of Physicalism. Passing over many interesting and subtle details, the argument may be summed up as follows: if consciousness had a physical nature, it would be revealed as such by our direct phenomenal concepts, according to the Direct Phenomenal Transparency Thesis. If this were so, there would be no epistemic gap between the physical and the experiential. Since there *is* such a gap, we have to conclude that consciousness cannot be physical. This argument is patiently developed and shown to bear on the main varieties of Physicalism.

The second part of the book expounds the case for Cosmopsychism. It starts with the installment of Russellian Monism as a serious alternative to Physicalism, relying on the argument usually offered by its sympathizers. Now Russellian Monism can be refined in many ways and Goff builds a case in favor the *Constitutive Panpsychism* version of Russellian Monism, i.e. the view that the intrinsic nature of physical entities are phenomenal properties that constitute the phenomenal properties of our mental states. This being said, Constitutive Panpsychism is not without its own problems and Goff addresses them relentlessly. First, there is the well-known problem of explaining, from the bottom up, how fundamental phenomenal subjects can combine to yield the derivative subject of consciousness that I am. On Goff’s analysis, all available solutions fail to explain fully the summation of subjects of consciousness, so that Constitutive Panpsychism cannot claim to provide a fully intelligible picture of the way our conscious states are grounded on the states of more fundamental conscious subjects, but only one that reduces the mystery to a minimum. Even more pressing is the problem of explaining, from the top down, how the conscious subjects that we are can be grounded on more fundamental conscious entities. The core of the difficulty stems here from what Goff calls the “subject-irreducibility problem”: “what it is, for there to be a conscious subject S cannot be analysed into facts not involving S” (209). If this is the case, then there is a problematic tension between the irreducibility of ordinary, macroscopic subjects of experience, just like you and me, and the non-fundamentality that Constitutive Panpsychism ascribes to them.

Now Goff proposes to relax this tension by reconsidering the link between grounding and reductive analysis. In some cases, a fact X is grounded in a fact Y because Y “logically entails what is essentially required for the entities contained in X to be part of reality” (45). But this grounding by analysis is by no means the only way for something to be grounded on

something else: there are also cases of grounding by subsumption, whereby X is grounded in Y because X is an aspect of the wider unity that Y constitutes (consider for example the way individuals and properties are grounded on states of affairs, at least on some metaphysical views that take states of affairs to be more fundamental than objects and properties). Goff's proposal, then, is to consider our consciousness to be an aspect of the wider unity consisting in the consciousness of the cosmos as a whole. On this view, the irreducibility of subjects of consciousness is perfectly compatible with their being grounded on cosmic consciousness, since grounding by subsumption does not require a reductive analysis of the groundee.

In this journey between the initial revelation of the nature of consciousness by direct phenomenal concepts and the final destination of Cosmopsychism, there are some places where an incredulous reader might want to leave the boat.

First, the Revelation Thesis, which serves as a bedrock commitment for the whole enterprise, is phrased in such strong terms that it may not be straightforwardly accepted by all. Although it seems hard to deny that direct phenomenal concepts give us a special knowledge of the type of conscious state we are in, it is a much stronger, and much less evident, claim to say that they make apparent the *complete* nature of that state (107). If so, how could philosophers disagree so much about the nature of those conscious states?

Second, the claim that Constitutive Panpsychism avoids the problems of phenomenal causation (153-158) may be questioned. If the physical world is causally closed, then the behavioral effects of pain are sufficiently caused by physical properties. Now these effects would be caused all the same if the intrinsic natures of those physical properties had been different, i.e. if they had been "colored" by different phenomenal properties or by no phenomenal property at all. So it seems that phenomenal properties, *qua* phenomenal properties, do not make any difference to the causation of behavior---see Howell (2015) for a similar point.

Third, the evaluation of the cost of some concessions may be open to discussion. For example, in response to a conceivability argument against the grounding by subsumption of my consciousness on the consciousness of the cosmos (229), Goff ends up adding "some nature beyond consciousness into the grounding base" (230). This means that the consciousness of the cosmos is one aspect of a more expansive property that "enfolds experiential and non-experiential aspects in a single unified property" (ibid.). Of course, how this could be so remains a deep mystery for us, which Goff concedes. But then it is unclear how illuminating the Cosmopsychist hypothesis is: to explain how experiential and non-

experiential aspects of our nature mesh together, one needs to accept an even more mysterious hypothesis about how they mesh in the cosmos as a whole.

More generally, there is a persistent tendency in the book to rely on inferences to the best explanation, where the superiority of the explanation is based primarily on theoretical virtues such as simplicity and elegance. But given that Cosmopsychism faces problems for which no fully intelligible solution is reached by the own lights of the author, it is hard to grant the premise that it *is* the most elegant view available, and perhaps that it is an elegant view at all, once all the details are taken into account.

This being said, a great virtue of the book is to identify all the basic assumptions and inferential steps of the overall argument and address practically all conceivable objections before making a new step. The combination of technicality and clarity of exposition in this endeavor is impressive on many counts. Goff's book thus provides an important contribution to the recent discussions on Russellian Monism and constitutes a valuable resource for anyone willing to understand the problems surrounding the metaphysical grounding of consciousness. Paraphrasing Giordano Bruno, another panpsychist, one may grant that if the view offered by the author is not true, it is at least remarkably well conceived.

References

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