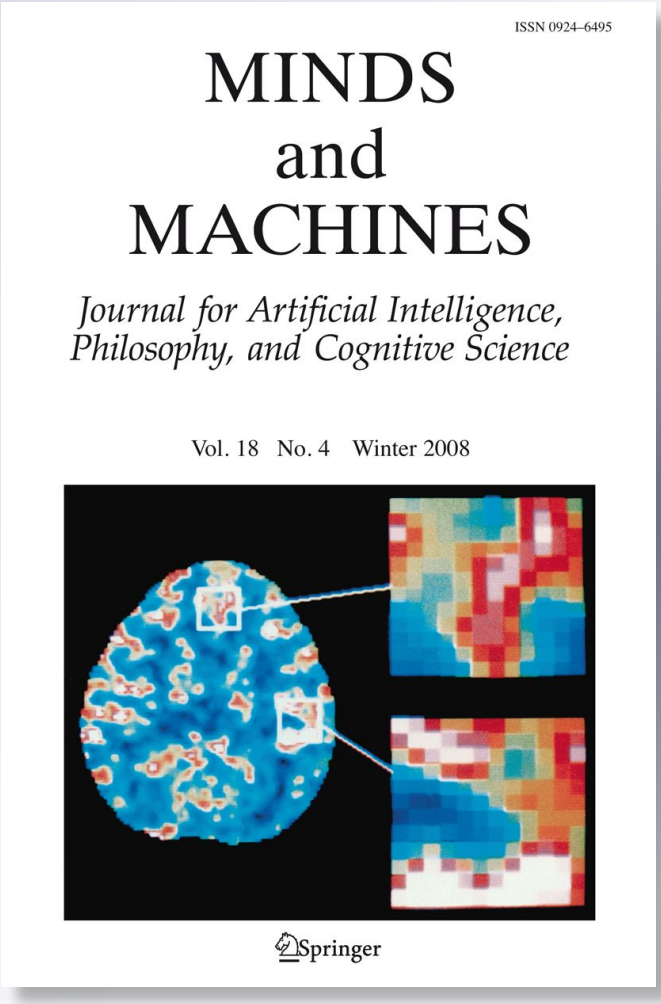
David Skrbina (ed.): Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium

Susan Stuart

Minds and Machines
Journal for Artificial Intelligence, Philosophy and Cognitive Science

ISSN 0924-6495
Volume 22
Number 3

Minds & Machines (2012) 22:271-275
DOI 10.1007/s11023-011-9268-5



Springer

Minds & Machines (2012) 22:271–275
DOI 10.1007/s11023-011-9268-5

BOOK REVIEW

David Skrbina (ed.): Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium

John Benjamins, 2009, xiv+401, $165.00, ISBN 978-90-272-5211-1

Susan Stuart

Published online: 4 January 2012

David Skrbina opens this timely and intriguing text with a suitably puzzling line from the Diamond Sutra: "Mind that abides nowhere must come forth.", and he urges us to "de-emphasise the quest for the specifically human embodiment of mind" and follow Empedocles, progressing "with good will and unclouded attention" into the text which he has drawn together as editor. If we do, we are assured that it will "yield great things" (p. xi). This, I am pleased to say, is not an exercise in hyperbole.

In clearing the foreground we are first introduced to what panpsychism is not: it is not idealism, dualism, or supernaturalism; then to what it is: a claim that "the components of the world have some inherent experiential or mind-like qualities"; and finally to the structure that the book takes: Part I examines analytical and scientific approaches to the topic, Part II focuses on the process philosophy of, for example, Whitehead, Russell, Hartshorne, and Griffin, and Part III presents a range of metaphysical approaches from phenomenological, eco-philosophical, Eastern, and classical dual-aspect perspectives.

In his Introduction Skrbina sketches an overview of the philosophical exponents and expressions of panpsychism. It's a lively and well-informed jaunt from West to East and back again, from the pre-Socratics to the present day, from the animism of Thales to the Shintoism still present and practiced in Japan today. The chapter teems with wonderful quotations, but my own favourite unites the ancient with the present and carries forward the animistic tone. It's from Leibniz' *A New System of Nature* (1695) and links us at once to the mathematical metaphysics of an ancient, Pythagoras (number is "the principle, source, and root of all things") and a contemporary, Marcus du Sautoy (who speaks of numbers as "a hidden code that has the power to unlock the laws that govern the universe"):

S. Stuart (✉)
University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK
e-mail: susan.stuart@glasgow.ac.uk

> I found that nature consists in force, and that from this there follows something analogous to sensation [perception] and appetite, so that we must conceive of them on the model of souls … We could call them metaphysical points: they have something vital, a kind of perception, and [as] mathematical points are the points of view from which they express the universe (1695/1989, pp. 139–142).

It is Leibniz who lays the groundwork for the influential German panpsychism of, especially, Schopenhauer, but also, Goethe Lotze, Fechner, Hartmann, Mach, Haeckel, and, of course, Nietzsche. The summary of each philosopher's work is excellent, enough information to take hold of the reader's attention, and intriguing enough to make one seek out the real thing in the original texts. From here we move to Anglo-American thinkers, in truth mainly William James, and probably rightly so, but with some little mention of William Kingdon Clifford, Charles Sanders Peirce, Josiah Royce, Samuel Butler and Paul Carus. The significant step then is to the process philosophy, as Skrbina notes, which draws from Leibniz, James, and Peirce, and which really drives forward a metaphysical revision. Most notably here are summaries of Bergson, Whiteheard, Russell, and Hartshorne, and all a delight for the seasoned reader and a source of rich information and interest for the newcomer.

A great deal has already been said in response to the opening essay of Part I, "Realistic Monism: Why physicalism entails panpsychism" by Strawson (2006), where it was the target article, so, having given the full reference, I'll leave the reader to enjoy both it and its critics at their leisure.

In the third essay in Part I, "Mind Under Matter", Sam Coleman suggests that the problem with panpsychism isn't really metaphysical, rather it is one of public relations: "The difficulties panpsychism faces, then, are not metaphysical ones … [they are] of understanding and of acceptance by philosophers." (p. 84). If this is the case, let me encourage the reader to move straight from Strawson to Coleman, without stopping at Globus' essay "Halting the descent into panpsychism: A quantum thermofield theoretical perspective". There is surely something in this piece, and it is probably the overall claim that panpsychism cannot go all the way down because collective dynamics does not, but to get to grips with this it is first necessary to take for granted a great many unsupported claims, for example, that "qualia require cooperative dynamics" (p. 68), and then there is the assumption that the reader already understands 'Copenhagenism' and what it would mean to let "Planck's constant go to zero" where "quantum jumps disappear" (p. 72), and finally one must be able to parse the penultimate claim that "there is a reality: a holomovement with dual modes whose belonging-together in the between-two discloses ("explicates") world-thrownness" (p. 82).

As a delightful stylistic antithesis Coleman's essay works to counter the "unacceptably parochial" view of panpsychism by offering "a coherent, elegant and wholeheartedly realist account of our world" (p. 83). He provides an internalist metaphysics, not unlike Strawson's, with "consciousness at the heart of ontology", so that "the very idea of the absolutely intrinsic, absolutely qualitative being, is (the same as) the idea of the qualitative experiential" (p. 94). It's the lack of relations

that I find troubling in Coleman's essay, not because consciousness is necessarily transitive, though it might be, but because it is in relation that the experiencer, or Leibnizian 'point of view', mirrors or expresses the world from their perspective. Perhaps the grounds of the debate are now established between the relationists and the internalists, and both arguing their position to be absolute.

Philip Goff ("Can the panpsychist get around the combination problem?") and Stephen Deiss ("Universal correlates of consciousness") approach the combination problem, that is, how do non-mental combine to become mental. Goff's response is that there is no absolute internalism, that mind can emerge from non-mind, and that it is no more or less surprising than life emerging from non-life. This sets him apart as the only non-panpsychist in the whole book, though it's certainly arguable that Globus can't count as one either. Deiss, on the other hand, argues (I have to say beautifully because his sympathy lies with relations) that it is only through external entanglement that sensations arise, and it is only through consciousness, the interpretation of these sensations in terms of expectations and predictions, that an experiencer can emerge. Relations are absolute, for it is only through conscious relations that we are able to develop our associative memory and create meaning. His theory is, he claims, an epistemological position—based upon "qualitative sensory contrasts" (p. 137)—rather than a metaphysical one "based upon assumptions" (p. 138), but the underlying metaphysics is more closely aligned with the process metaphysics that is the focus of Part II.

Basile's essay "Back to Whitehead? Galen Strawson and the rediscovery of panpsychism" open Part II and, alongside Manzotti's "Does process externalism support panpsychism? The relational nature of the physical world as a foundation for the conscious mind", it emphasises the fundamental nature of relations. Basile's essay carries the earlier Strawson essay with it, referring to it frequently, drawing out points for clarity and discussion, and building his own ideas from it. Most notably this comes in Section 6 "A relational monadism: Strawson's approximation to Whitehead" where he presses home the similarity between Strawson and Whitehead in terms of their "Subject of Experience that is a Single Mental Thing" (sesmet) and "actual occasions", respectively, and these, in turn, are homologues of James' "specious present". Each of these notions stress their temporal duration constituted by a retention of past moments and an anticipation of future moments. It's all rather Husserlian, a note the author also makes and then takes the reader back further to Brentano's 1874 *Psychology From an Empirical Standpoint*. This is a chapter which works wonderfully well for someone already familiar with these ideas and debate, but for those unfamiliar with Whiteheadian process philosophy there will be a lot of extra work to be done filling in the philosophical back-story.

It's worth noting in this Part of the book that Carlson, in "Finite eventism", argues that "the reduction of physics to time sequence improves the prospects for panpsychism in general, over and against the default physicalistic view that predominates today" (p. 249). In his work, too, it is time and the relations that bind all occasions of experience which are significant, and although he admits privileging human moments he also acknowledges all the non-human moments—occasions of experience—which must be presupposed if his panpsychist contention is to be viable.

Part III presents a diverse collection of intriguing and stimulating writing. It is impossible not to enjoy Harman's reinstatement of 'occasionalism', a philosophical perspective that was blighted for me forever by a teacher who spoke mockingly of Malebranche's "raging occasionalism" where God acts as the divine agent in every instance of apparent interaction between mind and body. Harman's essay reveals a secular occasionalism, which he renames "vicarious causation", in the "body–body problem", that is, we don't really understand causality and the nature of causal interaction, yet we think we do and take refuge in scientific mechanism. It isn't at first clear what relevance this has to panpsychism, but all becomes clearer through Harman's examination of Heidegger's analysis of tool-use. "The point of Heidegger's analysis is not that Dasein and the hammer are one, but that they are fundamentally not one: their apparent unity is merely temporary illusion. … The point of the tool-analysis is … that the hammer itself is richer than both praxis and theory. To stare at a hammer is to reduce it to a limited set of surface-properties [theory], but to use the hammer creates a similar caricature of its genuine being [praxis]" (p. 258). And this is where relations, of hand to hammer, rock to hand, rock to rock, and so on, arise once more. "Relations per se are always a translating force" (p. 259), changing the things they relate. "No relation to a thing can exhaust it, whether it be theory, praxis or blind causal interaction" (ibid.). According to Harman entities must interact vicariously by way of a third entity, and any entity can act as an intermediary, not just the human mind or God, for all entities—'zero-persons' or 'essences' (pp. 261–262)—contain mind or experience. Harman's writing and thinking is well-crafted, and it is so engaging that it's possible to forgive him his long foray into Chalmers' *The Conscious Mind*. Actually it is possible to forgive him because he draws out some of the inconsistencies and weaknesses in Chalmers' position, not least the way his (relationalist) materialism implies a form of idealism. This is a very satisfying read that's well-worth the effort even if ultimately you don't agree with him.

Each of the other chapters in Part III has its merits. Solhdju writes beautifully for the claim that we must consider "each part of experience as a resource of mediation that precedes all later discrimination between subjects and objects" (p. 312). Subjects and objects are not the starting point of interaction and explanation, but "rather a common process of growing affinities that ends in their distinction" (ibid.). What we have here is a process or practice of knowing; that we end with a theory of knowledge is the result of separating ourselves falsely from the process and ceasing to treat knowledge as a relational practice. Having had our tendencies to dichotomize and rush to produce taxonomies criticized, very reasonably, by Harman and Solhdju, we encounter a curious essay by Parkes, "The awareness of rock: East-Asian understandings and implications", that challenges our preconceptions concerning rocks, concluding that "if we shift our conceptions, and direct out attention to the rocks in an exemplary East-Asian garden … we may even begin to hear them proclaim the tenets of panpsychism, or to see them as texts that attest to the pervasiveness of psychical significance" (p. 340).

This is a good note to end a review of a fascinating and challenging, though sometimes difficult read. The essays offer a diverse range of perspectives from a diverse range of disciplines; some assume background knowledge of the reader;

occasionally this assumption is too great and the terrain is impassible; but if this happens, move on and start afresh on another. This book contains some insightful and perceptive writing that might just change your mind, whatever that might be.

References

Chalmers, D. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search of fundamental theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Du Sautoy, M. (2011). *The code*. BBC Television, http://www.bbc.co.uk/tv/features/code.

Husserl, E. (1991). *On the phenomenology of the consciousness of internal time* (1893–1917; transl. John Barnett Brough). Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Leibniz, G.W.F. (1695). A new system of nature. In Ariew & Garber (Eds.), *Philosophical essays* (transl.). Indianapolis: Hackett (1989).

Strawson, G. (2006). Realistic monism: Why physicalism entails panpsychism. *Journal of consciousness studies, 13*, 10–11.