

## **David Skrbina, editor**

*Mind that Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*

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Is the great god Pan reborn? For a while there, it seemed every intellectual movement began with the prefix 'post', implying non-totality, but now there are indications that 'pan' (all) is returning to provide another answer to one of the most basic of ontological questions: What is the relationship of mind to matter? In this important book with 17 different authors, panpsychism is given its due.

From a previous widely-accepted dualism we have now mostly settled into the monistic worldview of what Skrbina calls *mechanistic physicalism* (p. 364), in which mind, if it exists at all, is somehow a derivative of the non-mental, deterministic physical universe of matter and energy. This book sets out to convince the reader that probably the most ancient of worldviews has been right all along: mind is ubiquitous in the physical universe, and psyche is everywhere in everything. Just like that, the hard problem is solved and no one need wonder how awareness could arise in a non-aware world. The exact form and nature of this *pan-psyche*, however, remain in question.

In the introductory chapter, Skrbina summarizes his earlier book on panpsychism in western philosophical thought, as well as mentioning more contemporary thinkers with panpsychist perspectives. He includes such recent

luminaries as Teilhard de Chardin, Bateson, Nagel, Bohm, and, more controversially, Chalmers. He also mentions two books that stand out, each in its own way, as more coherent and stirring panpsychist statements than the current collection – Abram’s (1996) wonderful paean to the earth, and Griffin’s (1998) process panexperientialism. On the other hand, he overlooks Velmans (2000, reviewed in *JCS* 7/10), who has significantly similar views to Strawson.

Strawson’s *realistic monism* or *real physicalism* is becoming the panpsychist standard position to judge by the number of citations it gets and the references to it in the other essays. Strawson’s contribution is the first essay in **Part I: Analysis and science**, though there is little science in it. His position is basically that consciousness can neither be accounted for by any known physical theory, nor can it sensibly be said to supervene or emerge from non-conscious matter. By default, it therefore appears that physical entities must each have been intrinsically conscious all along: ‘the existence of every real concrete thing involves experiential being even if it also involves non-experiential being’ (p. 37). The mistake that has been made, he avers (citing Eddington), is that our measuring devices tell us about things externally but not what they are in themselves. He avoids any suggestion that his monism is itself holistically aware, as a pantheist might, but focuses instead on the intrinsic experience of each entity to itself. This may be the reason he insists that (quoting Frege) “‘experience is impossible without an experiencer,’ a subject of experience’ (p. 53). This intrinsic internalizing may oppose the panrelationism (similar to what Skrbina proposes in the last chapter) and the panexperientialism of the process philosophers, each

of which see experience created through interactions and thus more participatory than privately subjective. For Strawson, *all* objects, not just quantum particles, are also *subjects* of experience, i.e., conscious. Panexperientialists understand experience qua experience to be taking place at all levels of being but experience that has become conscious of itself, i.e., conscious experience, as being much more rare. Both Skrbina and Strawson basically ignore unconscious experience, which surely is experience without an experiencer.

His tone-setting chapter brings up most of the questions with which theoretic panpsychism will continue to contend: the relational vs the internal, raw experience vs conscious experience, and experience with or without a subject of experience. The priority of space or time is a final question broached by process thinkers such as Solhdju: Do experiential processes in time create spatial objects or are already existing objects intrinsically possessed of inner subjectivity?

Goff is the only panpsychist skeptic represented in the collection. He argues that current panpsychism cannot get around the combination problem: How do little experiencers combine into big (or complex) experiencers? This seems to refer to the aforementioned *subjects of experience* and may be less of a problem if experience is conceived as participatory and pre-subjective. Goff further states that the emergence of mind is no more mysterious than the explainable emergence of life from non-life. The latter is scientific dogma, but most panpsychists would agree that lifelike qualities must pre-exist living manifestations just as experience pre-exists kingdom *animalia*; thus, neither life

nor experience is a 'brute' emergence from its opposite. To make his point that in the future the emergence of consciousness will be no more remarkable than that of life, Goff states that, though currently we may conceive of an unconscious zombie, we cannot conceive of a non-living human duplicate. Is this so?

Globus is a near-panpsychist who posits that panpsychism cannot go *all the way down*: 'The decisive point is that there is a size threshold in quantum field theory below which collective dynamics cannot emerge and so there can be no qualia there' (p. 79). We're talking Planck scale here, but these assumptions mean qualia would still be an emergent from matter-energy. Coleman, like Strawson, is a panpsychist internalist who argues that entities must experience in themselves independent of their relations to other entities. Without 'reality's intrinsic building blocks ... [w]e face nothingness' (pp. 92-93). Interesting that some mystical traditions take *dynamic nothingness* as the ultimate source, similar to our conception of dynamic process when it is pushed into the insubstantial, as in quantum field theory or the postulated zero-point field. Perhaps the nothingness abhorred by Coleman is as rich in potency as the long sought quantum vacuum.

In a refreshing chapter because of its clarity and depth, Deiss looks to systems changing in time as the source of sensations, also an effective approach to the combination problem. Consciousness he sees as the *interpretation* of sensations (qualia), which requires memory and reason. Sensible, so to speak, but what then are sensations in themselves – perhaps unconscious experience? With his nod to a systems approach, sensations themselves could arise within entities *as the*

*result of external entanglements (i.e., relations), implying that experiencers emerge from experience, contra Strawson. Strawson claims there can be no experience without a subject of experience. However unconscious sensations that have their basis in external relations would seem to be an example of how experiences can occur without a subject of experience. Strawson fails to see this because he fails to distinguish conscious from unconscious experience.*

Spät closes Part I with the appeal that panpsychism has moral corollaries such as vegetarianism and kindness to all objects, but I do not see this at all. It's always tough to get from an *is* to an *ought*, and for panpsychists vegetables feel too. Further, if the experience of tribal peoples within an animistic worldview (the precursor of panpsychism) is any indication, there is as much threat as communion from a natural world alive with minds, so we may find ourselves fighting as much as protecting such *others*.

**Part II: Process philosophy** could have used a basic statement of this position from, say, Griffin, so an uninitiated reader could grasp its outlines. Whitehead's process cosmology still remains the most completely rendered form of panpsychism (aka pantheism or panentheism), and the chapters here assume an understanding of process philosophy on the part of the reader that some may not have. Basile takes up the process mantle and speaks in favour of unconscious experience, defends relationality in time as ultimate (dynamic process over static physicalism) and notes how close to Whitehead's occasions of experience are to Strawson's concept of *sesmets* (subject-of-experience-that-is-a-single-mental-

thing'). Each is an 'ultimate' or 'portion of energy-stuff' (Strawson, p. 60), though Strawson defends extended *isness* over process dynamism for which each 'single mental thing' exists only for a flash within a larger cosmic process. In this vein, Manzotti makes a strong statement for panrelationality as preceding internal 'subjective' experience: 'Qualities and relations are not a product of the internal activity of neural systems; they are processes taking place in the world' (p. 220).

The last chapters of this second part and the first several of those in **Part III: Metaphysics and mind** read to me like academic philosophy by and for academic philosophers. I slogged through them, understood the contents, but felt little reward at the end. For a topic as truly world-altering as awakening to panpsychism would be, these seemed to me inconsequential (though Harman's massive chapter is certainly witty). Solhdju's chapter, however, is another favourite. Learning from Fechner and James, she makes the important point that experience cannot necessarily be judged or understood by a rationalism or subjective position that exists external to it. Conceptual understanding requires the split of object from subject and Solhdju traces a meaning for experience that precedes the schism (precedes conscious experience). Furthermore, though each thing receives experience relationally, it affects the whole in dynamic reciprocity: 'Each novel thing that comes to be known thus takes part in the creative transformation of reality, which then serves as a plane for future experience *ad infinitum*' (p. 312). Needless to say, she identifies her position, with James, as panexperientialism. This is the one essay that seems to find a way to accept external panrelationalism with inner (not 'subjective') experience by noting how

they both interactively create the process of ongoing reality. Solhdju is also able to capture that animistic sense of ‘re-enchanted nature’ (Griffin, 1998) or ‘the spell of the sensuous’ (Abram) that is missing in the analytic panpsychism-by-default approach. We access the unconscious aesthetically and intuitionally, after all.

It is in the last chapter that Skrbina returns and attempts to answer the questions I’ve mentioned – in my view with limited success. His dependence on analytical philosophy may reveal its limitations here. Confusingly, Skrbina suggests new terms – *particeptikon* for reality, and *hylonoism* for panpsychism. To his credit, he emphasizes the magnitude of what is being proposed, but he also fails to see that becoming conscious of our own natural experience could be the source of the dualism he identifies as appearing along with mortal knowledge. He comes out for dual-aspect monism (a unified oneness in two aspects) within ‘a holistic and interconnected cosmos’ (p. 363). In this he appears to stand against Strawson’s view of internally isolated experience. He deals quickly and impressively with the so-called combination problem by calling upon dynamical systems theory, which elegantly explains how subsystems can combine into more complex single systems and so on without depending on category shifts as in ‘brute’ emergence. A phase shift in systems theory is emergent and not deterministically predictable, but it does not involve the emergence of something totally unlike its source, as brute emergence apparently does. The shifts, transformations, and *combinations* involved have their own probability mathematics within a single category.

He first avoids then finesses the important issue of conscious vs unconscious experience by declaring that ‘we might more profitably speak of a continuum of mental states’, including ‘least aware states all the way up to the loftiest introspective or meditative states’ (p. 367). In this way, he reduces the problem to one of mentality and avoids the seeming contradiction of unconscious experiencing. He lists six characteristics of mind, but it doesn’t take much insight to see he is referring to the conscious mind, which he has already admitted is only a very minor percentage of the full spectrum of awareness. He admits that there must be dynamical systems below each moment of qualitative consciousness that are not conscious: ‘On this view, conscious and unconscious mental activities are going on simultaneously, in parallel, at all times’ (p. 373).

But then, rather than this leading him to admit that our conscious experience arises from unconscious experience lower-down the complexity scale, he suggests instead that *all* experiencing entities or relationships are composed of the same parallel mental system: ‘For each object there exists a top-level structure that serves as the conscious peak of subjectivity’ (p. 379). I found this proposal for a humanlike mind *all the way down* as nothing short of incredible and, just as detractors have cried, unnecessarily anthropomorphic. Experience *simpliciter*, preceding the subject-object split, as outlined by Solhdju and indicated by Hameroff, does not have this limitation.

However, Skrbina’s overall image of panrelational holism and interconnectedness is somehow profoundly satisfying: ‘In a strange way, each of us is a world-soul’



(p. 378). If he gave more credit to creative experience in realms that we can only recognize from our perspective as unconscious, he would be close to the cutting edge of awareness – opening our culturally isolated minds to the subtle flux of their source in the *out there*. Overall a stimulating read, possibly profound, and highly recommended.

#### Notes

Abram, David (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon).

Griffin, David Ray (1998), *Unsnarling the World-Knot* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Velmans, Max (2000), *Understanding Consciousness* (London: Taylor & Francis).

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