

## Panpsychism and the Cosmic Non-Self

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## **Panpsychism and the Cosmic Non-Self**

Panpsychism may be experiencing another renaissance in consciousness studies, having survived from classical antiquity into the present day (Philip et al., 2022). Its detractors continue to argue against its radical postulates. The theory, broadly defined by the assumption that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous throughout matter, is rooted in two first principles. The first is that subjective experience, or mentality, exists, although a subject (i.e., an entity with a singular point of view) is not necessarily required (Harris, 2021; Philip et al., 2022). The second is that subjective experience cannot be accounted for, nor created by, matter that lacks an inherent subjective dimension. This subjective dimension can be understood as one of the twin faces of reality, with mind (subjective experience) on one side and matter (objectively observable phenomena) on the other (Chen & Chen, 2022). Both of these first principles have been criticized to varying degrees. The first principle has been denied obliquely by critics such as Dennett (1992). The second principle is denied explicitly by the currently dominant materialist paradigm in consciousness studies, which seeks to explain subjectivity in purely material (or single-faced, see above) terms. In the face of criticism, panpsychism offers several substantive rebuttals, and a parsimonious version of the theory – cosmopsychism – avoids the pitfalls that have dogged classic panpsychist thought. The goal of this paper is to consider several common critiques of panpsychism and provide their counterarguments, as well as to suggest a potentially fruitful direction for the theory.

In his 1992 paper “Quining Qualia,” Dennett attempts to expose qualia as figments. Put plainly, qualia are simply experiential phenomena (Harris, 2021). Dennett’s argument, however, hinges on a definition of qualia as “ineffable, intrinsic, private, directly apprehensible properties of experience” (p. 74). Panpsychism does not require any or all of these characteristics to define qualia (e.g., non-private qualia; Harris, 2021; effable qualia; Keppler & Shani, 2020). From certain panpsychist perspectives, definitions such as Dennett’s misconstrue the fundamental nature of qualia and are more relevant to illusory experiences of macro-level subjects (e.g. ourselves) than to qualia themselves. More pressingly, such arguments fail to address or explain away the fundamentally subjective dimension of experience wherein qualia arise, the existence of which drives the impetus behind panpsychism.

Modern materialism posits that all phenomena are reducible to objectively observable phenomena (Smart, 2022). Thus, materialism rejects the idea that reality has two faces: there is

only matter, and the theories we have about it now (e.g. quantum physics) are capable of accounting for subjective experience. In response to the materialist paradigm, panpsychists argue that, despite holding great promise for addressing the so-called easy and “real” problems of consciousness (Seth, 2021b), materialism fails to adequately address the hard problem (Keppler & Shani, 2020). The easy problems include questions that concern the discovery of mechanisms that govern processes such as the sleep-wake cycle (Blackmore & Troscianko, 2018). The real problems, a term coined by Anil Seth (2021b), involve a more complex investigation of the neural correlates of consciousness and of specific conscious experiences. The hard problem seeks to bridge the explanatory gap between matter (which appears to lack an internal dimension of subjectivity) and the subjective experience of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). In light of these distinctions, the argument continues, panpsychism offers the most compelling conceptual framework for addressing the easy, real, and, most importantly, the hard problems of consciousness.

### **Criticisms of Panpsychism**

While most consciousness researchers and theorists do not deny legitimacy to the first principle outlined above (that subjective experience exists), the second is still subject to intense debate. Taking the stance that matter as we understand it can generate subjective experience, critics such as Seth (2021b) argue that panpsychism has no explanatory power, that it fails to generate testable predictions, and that its most formidable problem is of its own making. This apparently formidable problem - the (de)combination problem - will be discussed in the next section of this essay. Seth’s first criticism can be viewed as two pronged: First, that panpsychism is of no use in regard to solving the hard problem of consciousness as the hard problem simply does not exist, and second, that panpsychism is unable to address the easy or real problems of consciousness (Seth, 2021b).

A serious discussion of the first prong of Seth’s criticism is outside the scope of this paper, but the ontological importance of the explanatory gap is not unanimously agreed upon. Given that we do not know whether the explanatory gap really exists - Seth (2021b) concedes that it may remain after all the real problems are solved - it seems rational for scientists and philosophers alike to conclude that both options remain relevant orientations for study. The second prong of Seth’s first criticism is rebutted by the work of neuroscientists such as Tononi and Koch (2015), and theoretical physicist/philosopher pair Keppler and Shani (2018, 2020), whose work weaves

together physics, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind to connect the hard, easy, and real problems together into one intelligible framework. Rather than exposing panpsychism as lacking explanatory power, such work reveals serious panpsychism to be akin to a metatheory that seeks to utilize and incorporate research across domains, realizing in sum greater explanatory power than can its parts.

It is a common argument amongst consciousness researchers that panpsychism fails to generate testable predictions (Seth, 2021b; Frankish 2021). This argument can partly be explained by the origins of panpsychism as a metaphysical idea. Its roots in Western thought are embedded in the philosophy of ancient Greece, whence materialism also has its beginnings (Philip et al., 2022; Smart, 2022). Much of the modern developments in panpsychism have remained in this tradition. Yet notable exceptions, such as Integrated Information Theory (IIT), explicitly aim to produce testable predictions (Tononi & Koch, 2015). Debate remains over whether IIT can provide evidence for panpsychist claims (Bartlett, 2022), but new testable predictions continue to be posited (Keppler & Shani, 2020). These developments will be explored more closely later in the essay, but presently, we will address Seth's (2021b) assertion that panpsychism is debilitated by a problem of its own making: the (de)combination problem.

### **The Most Formidable Problem**

Panpsychism, as it is generally understood, faces a formidable problem that is unique to the theory: the combination problem. The combination problem refers to the difficulty in conceptualizing how the experiences of micro-subjects, such as fundamental particles (i.e., metaphysical simples; the smallest building blocks of reality), could combine to form the experiences of macro-subjects, such as ourselves (Chalmers, 2021). A parallel term - decombination - describes the twin problem faced by cosmic level panpsychism, wherein a cosmic-subject (e.g., the universe) must somehow "decombine" to form macro-subjects with seemingly private experiences (Miller, 2017). Some forms of panpsychism are more vulnerable to these criticisms than others.

The term panpsychism, while denoting a variety of ubiquitous consciousness theories, is frequently conflated with micropsychism. Micropsychism is a kind of panpsychism that posits that fundamental particles both have and ground conscious experience. A common response to the combination problem from micropsychists is to promote non-constitutive micropsychism. Non-constitutive micropsychism suggests that macro-subjects (such as ourselves) are not necessarily

constituted from micro-subjects (such as quarks), and instead are emergent. Another position, autonomous micropsychism, takes a middle path, arguing that macro-subjects are not wholly constituted from micro-subjects (Chalmers, 2021). Given these axioms, what explanatory role do micro-subjects play in this view that a materialist account could not provide equally well?

A more logically satiating position is found in cosmopsychism, the theory that consciousness is grounded in the entirety of the cosmos as a whole. This theory satisfies the trend towards holism in modern physics (Chalmers, 2021), and does not necessarily entail metaphysical monism (cosmopsychism is commonly conflated with idealism, and a spiritually charged “mind of God” view of the physical universe). Consciousness in a cosmopsychist view can be conceptualized as a ubiquitous dimension or background field of subjectivity, much like spacetime, extending throughout the universe (Harris, 2021). The decombination problem only follows from cosmopsychism if one or both of the following assumptions are made: that subjects exist at all, or that subjects are ontologically fundamental. Panpsychists of different theoretical orientations have argued against both propositions.

### **A Non-Subject Response**

The decombination problem is most salient when we imagine a cosmopsychist universe as a subjective entity in itself, and when we assume that macro-subjects such as ourselves<sup>2</sup> are real entities that must be explained. However, the ubiquity of consciousness does not necessitate a cosmic subject which must be decombined, and human subjects may not be what they appear to be. Experiences can be conceptualized as distinct from experience had by a self. Seth (2021a), independent of his opposition to panpsychism, criticizes the concept of the self, asserting that it is “a bundle of perceptions” rather than a determinate entity that exists as a unified object, either abstract or concrete (p. 176). Harris (2021) adopts this perspective, common in the Buddhist meditative tradition, and applies it to the decombination problem. Far from the mind of God conception of panpsychism, Harris (2021) proposes that qualia could be appearances “arising in the universe, derived from interacting forces and field,” only appearing private to an illusory self when closed systems, such as matter or memory, interact in specific ways with the fundamental conscious substrate (p. 136). If consciousness is taken to be fundamental in this way, and selves are understood to be illusory constructs, the decombination problem begins to look much more like the real problems of consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> Intentional solecism. For the purposes of this paper, the self and subject are interchangeable concepts.

## **A Quantum-Physics Response**

Maintaining the assumption that a cosmic-level subject is unnecessary and illogical, a quantum physics argument for cosmopsychism offers a similar conception to Harris' while remaining agnostic on the possibility of macro-level subjects. Keppler and Shani (2018, 2020) propose that the "ubiquitous field of consciousness" (UFC) underlying the cosmopsychist view is synonymous with the zero-point field. The zero-point field is an electromagnetic background field conceptualized within stochastic electrodynamics, a branch of theoretical quantum physics interested in understanding the behaviour of quantum particles. The decision to equate subjectivity with the zero-point field is, they admit, an informed choice based on the assumption that the explanatory gap is real and uncrossable for standard materialism. If the zero-point field is equated with the UFC, consciousness and perspectival selves necessarily emerge from phase locking between other fields and the zero-point field. In addition, they propose that "the organizational characteristics of the [neural correlates of consciousness] NCC are indicative of the brain's interaction with and modulation of the UFC" (Keppler & Shani, 2020, p. 1). This approach promises not only to tackle the easy, real, and hard problems of consciousness, but also offers specific testable hypotheses rooted in the measurement of photon pulses generated by the zero-point field. For instance, if the zero-point field is synonymous with the UFC, careful study of "particular sets of phase-locked ZPF [zero-point field] modes" should lead to the generation of "psychophysical mapping rules" between these zero-point field modes and any given qualia (Keppler & Shani, 2020, p. 5). However, from a materialist perspective, even a perfect correlation between zero-point field modes and conscious experience will not be sufficient evidence for a ubiquitous field of consciousness. Where a panpsychist might see evidence for a mental dimension of matter at the most fundamental level - an answer to the hard problem - a materialist might see evidence for a material explanation of mind at the highest resolution - an answer to the real problems.

## **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Compared to micropsychism, cosmopsychism seems to hold the most promise for a serious investigation of ubiquitous consciousness. Specifically, a non-subject orientation offers a substantive answer to the most difficult problem facing panpsychism. If the decombination problem is dissolved, and the explanatory gap is taken seriously, cosmopsychism would seem to be ahead of materialism in one important regard, because a solution to the hard problem is included

in the foundation of the theory. This leaves panpsychism with the same easy and real problems of consciousness as materialist theories, as well as a completely new set of questions surrounding the role of consciousness in the universe, or, more radically, the physical dimensions of consciousness. I propose these new questions be termed the “surreal problems” of consciousness.

Whether the epistemic power of panpsychism is interpreted as strong or weak depends on one’s beliefs surrounding subjectivity and the limits of matter. As of yet, subjectivity in another person, let alone matter, can only be inferred, and our philosophy remains vulnerable to solipsism – one can only be sure of the existence of one’s own mind, but cannot find definitive proof of consciousness in other beings. Perhaps the only way to discover the truth of matter and consciousness is to develop a method of breaking down and repairing the systems that seem to privatize phenomena. If perspectival selves could merge their river of experience with other selves or substances - micro, macro, or cosmic - and return to tell the tale, they will have obtained objective evidence for another consciousness through the subjective experience of its phenomenological world. If this is the only kind of evidence that will ever afford falsifiability to panpsychist hypotheses, let us hope that the answer is worth the wait.

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