The Many Faces of Panentheism

with Harald Atmanspacher and Hartmut von Sass, "The Many Faces of Panentheism: An Editorial Introduction"; Philip Clayton, "How Radically Can God Be Reconceived before Ceasing to Be God? The Four Faces of Panentheism"; Willem B. Drees, "Panentheism and Natural Science: A Good Match?"; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "The Experience of God and the World: Christianity's Reasons for Considering Panentheism a Viable Option"; Roderick Main, "Panentheism and the Undoing of Disenchantment"; and Michael Silberstein, "Panentheism, Neutral Monism, and Advaita Vedanta."

PANENTHEISM, NEUTRAL MONISM, AND ADVAITA VEDANTA

by Michael Silberstein

Abstract. It is argued that when it comes to the hard problem of consciousness neutral monism beats out the competition. It is further argued that neutral monism provides a unique route to a novel type of panentheism via Advaita Vedanta Hinduism.

Keywords: Advaita Vedanta; neutral monism; panentheism

Why should we care about panentheism? Because it offers us an opportunity to think differently about the relationship between our conscious, experiential, and spiritual selves on the one hand and human beings as conceived by the reigning paradigms in cognitive science and neuroscience on the other; the reigning paradigm being just an expression of methodological and metaphysical naturalism. As we will see, panentheism also allows us to think differently about our relationship to the universe as a whole.

The reigning paradigm in cognitive science and neuroscience is mechanistic, as in computationalism or biological mechanisms—what John Searle calls biological naturalism. He asserts that given biological naturalism, the scientific study of consciousness requires two steps: first, discover the neural correlate of consciousness (NCC) of the entire field of conscious experience (not just some particular subset such as visual experience), and second go from this NCC to a discovery of the actual biological causal mechanisms that give rise to conscious experience. In his 2004 article "Biological

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Naturalism," this is what Searle says about the future prospects of biological naturalism among scientists and philosophers:

> *It is worth pointing out that practicing neurobiologists of my acquaintance, such as Francis Crick, Gerald Edelman and Cristof Koch, implicitly or explicitly accept a version of what I have been calling biological naturalism*. They look to the operations of the brain to find an explanation of consciousness. It will probably take a long time before Biological Naturalism is generally accepted by the academic profession because we follow a long tradition of teaching our students the mistaken view that this is a philosophical problem of impossible difficulty. But notice that we have to train our students to think there is an impossible mystery as to how neuronal processes could cause conscious states. It is not a view that follows naturally either from reflecting on one's own experiences or from studying brain operations. *Once we overcome the mistakes of the tradition, I think the facts will fall naturally in to place*. (Searle 2004, 14; emphasis added)

Whether we are talking about action, cognition, or conscious experience, the idea is that cognitive neuroscience will discover mechanisms that explain the essential features of human beings. But herein we shall focus on conscious experience proper, because that is typically considered the experiential essence of what it is to be human and it provides a route to a type of panentheism, as we shall see.

Of course, nothing in either the sciences, humanities, or religious traditions necessarily commits one to any particular ontological interpretation or metaphysical commitment about the nature of self or reality, but nonetheless such metaphysical paradigms do frequently and fervently coalesce. And the reigning paradigm in the natural sciences of human beings is clear: we are sophisticated machines of one sort or another. Many coming from the humanities or spiritual traditions find this conception of human beings alienating and reductive, whereas many coming from scientific traditions find the other traditions to be something akin to myths, fairy tales, or other comforting fictions. The same holds true of course for competing conceptions of the entire universe of which we are a part.

In a world clearly suffering from an overabundance of disunity it would be nice if the scientific enterprise and the other traditions could somehow be engaged in the same project. After all, it is only relatively recently in the history of humanity that science, philosophy, theology, and religion have been rendered asunder. Some people worry that, at least in the case of human consciousness and our place in the universe, this Enlightenment-generated split has thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

Of course whether or not some degree of reunification is possible depends on exactly how we conceive of science one the hand and the humanities and religion (broadly construed) on the other. If science is just methodological naturalism plus metaphysical naturalism, and spiritual/religious traditions are defined as explorations of the supernatural realm at best

constrained by scientific discoveries, then the rift between the Western intellectual engine of the Enlightenment and the heart and soul of humanity shall remain. That is, if science and religion (again broadly defined) are either in direct conflict or "non-overlapping magisteria" then there is little hope for a renewal of vows in the great factions of the human endeavor to understand ourselves and the nature of reality.

Pantheism might argue that if God is just nature then the hope for unity has been achieved. It is trivially true that if God is defined as nature then science now becomes an exploration of God, that is, religion. There are many scientists and practitioners of the science and religion game who try to sell pantheism these days. The titles of their books say it all: Stuart Kauffman's *Reinventing the Sacred: A New Vision of Science, Reason and Religion* (2010); Ursula Goodenough's *The Sacred Depths of Nature* (2000); Loyal Rue's *Nature Is Enough* (2012); Diamuid O'Murchu's *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (2004).

These latest proponents of pantheism are all concerned about the alienation and anomie created by the scientific paradigm/Enlightenment and they seek to re-enchant the world by emphasizing the "holism," "emergence," and "complexity" in nature. The hope is that pushing back on unwarranted reductionism and mechanistic thinking in the sciences will help re-enchant nature and make the existentially lonely human feel "more at home in the universe," as Kauffman puts it. Perhaps this does work for some people, but leaving aside the many uses of terms such as "holism" and leaving aside how accurate such claims are, it seems that pantheism has not become a best seller for the public at large. In short, pantheism appears not to have made a dent in the alienation, and anomie in question. After all, at the end of the day, according to pantheists, the only thing that exists is spacetime and its contents. Few of these proponents of pantheism deny the basics of metaphysical naturalism, such as that matter as traditionally conceived is fundamental. And it is important to note that very few of these "New Pantheists" deal in any detailed way with the hard problem or generation problem (GP) of conscious experience: if matter is fundamental why/how does conscious experience emerge? We will return to this question shortly, but again, humans are most identified with their conscious selves.

Perhaps you the reader do not consider yourself religious in any way or could care less about disunity, alienation, and anomie or any other psycho-socio-political consequences of the Enlightenment. Nonetheless there is another motivation to care about rapprochement if you have *any* beliefs, such as those about the nature of conscious experience, spiritual beliefs, and so on, that you worry can't be squared with methodological or metaphysical naturalism. That is, many of us hope to form worldviews that are reasonably complete and consistent. Therefore, many of us want to know where the line is between scientific investigation and scientism.

There is at least in principle one theological view that does bring science and those other traditions back together in some way. The view is called panentheism, and it is defined as follows:

> Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world. It offers an increasingly popular alternative to both traditional theism and pantheism. Panentheism seeks to avoid either isolating God from the world as traditional theism often does or identifying God with the world as pantheism does. (Culp, 2017)

Given panentheism, then obviously there is some nontrivial and noneliminativist sense in which science, theology, and religion are exploring the same reality. Of course, there are going to be many different varieties of panentheism, and there is the question of why anyone should believe it. And it turns out how one answers the latter epistemic question is going to greatly constrain what type of panentheism one finds plausible. For example, suppose, for whatever reason, you are not comfortable believing in panentheism merely on the basis of faith in theism, interpretations of sacred texts, religious or theological authorities, and so on. Perhaps you are enough of a methodological or metaphysical naturalist that invoking God as a creator doesn't sit well with you, or perhaps you have purely philosophical reasons for doubting, such as "the problem of evil." All of this speaks directly to why the Enlightenment created a rift between science and religion in the first place.

Given all this, is there another route to panentheism, one consistent with methodological and metaphysical naturalism? It will be argued there is another route, namely through the exploration of the hard or GP of conscious experience. Once we see how to properly conceptualize the relationship between mind and matter in creatures such ourselves we can see the way forward to relating them more universally and thus to "God" and the universe. It will be argued in the next section that neutral monism is the right way to relate so-called mind and matter, and in the section after, that neutral monism in turn allows for a kind of panentheism. But the reader must be warned that the kind of panentheism defended herein yields a conception of God much more in keeping with certain strains of thought in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism than in Christian theism.

Rejecting Panpsychism and Radical Emergence

This section will be devoted to describing the need for neutral monism and why it is plausibly the best alternative in light of the failures of its main competitors. The next section will be devoted to explicating neutral monism.

The GP: Radical Emergence versus Panpsychism

Let us return to Searle's prediction regarding biological naturalism. At least in certain quarters of the cognitive neuroscience of consciousness and consciousness studies more generally, Searle's prediction that biological naturalism would prevail did not come to pass. Here, for example, is Cristof Koch in his 2014 *Scientific American* article entitled, "Is Consciousness Universal?" explaining perhaps why Searle's prophecy failed:

> Yet the mental is too radically different for it to arise gradually from the physical. This emergence of subjective feelings from physical stuff appears inconceivable and is at odds with a basic precept of physical thinking, the Ur-conservation law—*ex nihilo nihil fit*. So if there is nothing there in the first place, adding a little bit more won't make something. If a small brain won't be able to feel pain, why should a large brain be able to feel the god-awfulness of a throbbing toothache? Why should adding some neurons give rise to this ineffable feeling? The phenomenal hails from a kingdom other than the physical and is subject to different laws. I see no way for the divide between unconscious and conscious states to be bridged by bigger brains or more complex neurons (Koch 2014, 2).

What exactly led to Koch's change of heart is debatable, but in the preceding passage he seems to have had the epiphany that for conscious experience to be caused by brains and their purely biological properties would require radical emergence, not weak emergence as Searle suggests. And Koch seems to have sided with fans of panpsychism such as Galen Strawson who claim that radical emergence is impossible. Indeed, in this article and others Koch defends a version of what he calls panpsychism: "A more principled solution is to assume that consciousness is a basic feature of certain types of so-called complex systems (defined in some universal, mathematical manner). And that complex systems have sensation, whereas simple systems have none" (Koch 2014, 2). He calls his brand of panpsychism more "narrow and nuanced" than the standard kinds of compositional panpsychism, but nonetheless it does entail that certain particles or particle interactions would have some form of consciousness.

While both radical emergence (the claim that minds "pop" out of brains and other biological systems under the right conditions) and panpsychism agree that conscious experience is fundamental in the sense of being irreducible to physical or biological phenomena (something Searle would grant as well), only panpsychism claims that consciousness or subjectivity is fundamental in the sense of being possessed by whatever the most fundamental physical constituents of the universe are. But more importantly, panpsychism claims that the only intrinsic properties of matter are mental ones or, at the very least, that everything that has material properties also has mental ones.

So all this begs the questions: How did the cutting edge of the cognitive neuroscience of consciousness come to find itself in such dire (or at least weird) straits, and have some of the thought leaders in the field so quickly abandoned biological naturalism? After all, if one looks at the rhetoric of Koch, Francis Crick, and other later twentieth century arch reductionists (Francis Crick and Christof Koch 1990; see also Crick 1994; Koch 2004), the message was clear: "neuroscience will now resolve the ancient mind/body problem and put thousands of years of ancient metaphysical speculation to rest." It certainly doesn't look as if biological naturalism has prevailed over ancient philosophical speculation—on the contrary—so what happened? The answer, it turns out, lies in the difficulty of making the very first step in Searle's method, namely, trying to find the NCC:

> However, there is still no consensus on whether any of these signs can be treated as reliable "signatures" of consciousness. In particular, there can be consciousness without frontal cortex involvement . . . , gamma activity without consciousness . . . , such as during anaesthesia . . . , and consciousness without a frontal P300, for example, during dreaming sleep . . . . Moreover, it is likely that many of the signatures proposed as possible NCC may actually be correlates of neural activity that is needed leading up to a conscious percept . . . , or for giving a report following a conscious percept . . . , rather than for having an experience. A major challenge is to keep constant cognitive functions such as selective attention, memory, decision making and task monitoring, in order to isolate the "naked" substrate of consciousness at the neuronal level . . . . Finally, NCC obtained in healthy adults may or may not apply to brain damaged patients, to infants, to animals very different from us, not to mention machines. (Tononi and Koch 2015, 3)

What we learn from Tononi and Koch here is not just the difficulty of finding the NCC (even if it exists), but the acknowledgement that it might be completely different in different individual humans, the same individual at different times, and in different animal species. In other words, even if the NCC model is true, conscious experience, like so many other processes in complex biological systems, might be multiply realizable, radically plastic, and so on.

Here then is an argument to summarize our situation when it comes to explaining conscious experience:

(1) Assume ontological and methodological naturalism are true and therefore substance dualism, subjective idealism and the like are no-gos.

(2) Conscious experience can't be simply reduced without remainder to biological or physical processes.

(3) Biological naturalism is a no-go as a distinct alternative because it entails radical emergence (see point 2).

(4) So for all practical purposes we are left with radical emergence or panpsychism.

Against Radical Emergence and Panpsychism

This section is devoted to arguing against radical emergence and panpsychism. The "generation problem" as William Seager and others call it will be defined because it is that problem that drives both radical emergence and panpsychism. And then radical emergence and panpsychism will be defined in terms of their respective reactions to this problem. It will be argued that both radical emergence and panpsychism are untenable. In the final section, neutral monism will be defined, and it will be argued that only neutral monism truly defeats the GP by deflating it.

The overall thrust is that we are driven to radical emergence or panpsychism because of the standard physicalist/materialist assumptions shared by both: that matter is fundamental, the nature of reality is therefore compositional, and therefore that material and mental features are essentially different and distinct. Radical emergence and panpsychism are therefore just "riders" or "patches" for physicalism, whereas neutral monism is the cure.

Again, the GP or hard problem is this: Assuming that matter is fundamental, then how does mere insensate matter generate consciousness? For this problem to be as devastating as David Chalmers (1996) and others allege (independently of one's judgment about conceivability arguments), one has to assume something like that matter is *essentially* non-mental. As Barbara Montero puts it:

> Instead of construing the mind/body problem as finding a place for mentality in a fundamentally physical world, we should think of it as the problem of finding a place for mentality in a fundamentally non-mental world, a world that at its most fundamental level is entirely non-mental. (Montero 2009, 210)

Or as Strawson puts it:

> That is what I believe: experiential phenomena cannot be emergent from wholly non-experiential phenomena. The intuition that drives people to dualism (and eliminativism, and all other crazy attempts at wholesale mental-to-non-mental reduction) is correct in holding that you can't get experiential phenomena from P phenomena, i.e. shape-size-mass-charge-etc. phenomena, or, more carefully now—for we can no longer assume that P phenomena as defined really are wholly non-experiential phenomena—from *non-experiential* features of shape-size-mass-charge-etc. (Strawson 2008, 20)

Radical emergence (or strong emergence if you prefer) is the view most closely associated with C. D. Broad which claims, for example, that there

are brute psycho-physical bridge laws in the actual world. As Seager puts it:

> This latter view, that emergence should be understood in terms of a supervenience relation defined via nomological necessity is perfectly respectable and not unfamiliar. In essence, it was the view held by the so called British emergentists (see McLaughlin 1992), notably Alexander (1920), Morgan (1923) and Broad (1925). (Seager 2012, 147).

Such brute bridge laws are supposed to involve nomological necessity and pertain to the actual world only. The claim is that strong emergence is an answer to the GP. Panpsychism also takes GP at face value and proposes the following resolution:

(1) Matter is the fundamental building block of reality but has no intrinsic physical properties (fundamental physical properties are relational).

(2) The physical world is composed of or otherwise determined by basic physical entities and such fundamental physical entities (whatever those may be) have an intrinsic psychical-conscious or subjective aspect (consciousness is ubiquitous).

(3) Therefore, there is a sense in which all physical composites have a psychical/subjective nature however attenuated (universality of mentality).

(4) Therefore, the purely physical description of the world is incomplete (consciousness or subjectivity is co-fundamental with matter).

According to panpsychism there can be no consciousness without matter; consciousness is an intrinsic property of matter. And the latter claim is just an axiomatic fact about the universe; it is not explained by anything else. A panpsychist of a certain sort might object that perhaps only certain physical entities possess consciousness and not all fundamental physical entities. While that is certainly possible, it seems to violate the premise of panpsychism that consciousness is co-fundamental with matter, not radically emergent and not dualism. Strawson makes the same point:

> Micropsychism is not yet panpsychism, for as things stand realistic physicalists can conjecture that only some types of ultimates are intrinsically experiential.But they must allow that panpsychism may be true, and the big step has already been taken with micropsychism, the admission that at least some ultimates must be experiential. And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us I think that the idea that some but not all physical ultimates are experiential would look like the idea that some but not all physical ultimates are spatio-temporal (on the assumption that spacetime is indeed a fundamental feature of reality). I would bet a lot against there being such radical heterogeneity at the very bottom of things. In fact (to disagree with my earlier self) it is hard to see why this view would not count

> as a form of dualism. So I'm going to assume, for the rest of this paper at least, that micropsychism is panpsychism. (Strawson 2008, 20)

Having defined the competitors, what follows is an attenuated argument that neither radical emergence nor panpsychism in the end help to answer the hard problem or the "generation problem." (For a lengthier attempt at refuting these two views see Silberstein forthcoming).

If we take GP seriously then consciousness must be fundamental *in some sense.* The biggest problem with strong/radical emergence is that it doesn't seem to be explanatory and therefore exacerbates the worry that minds popping out of brains, a total violation of the unity that presumably otherwise exists in nature, is just unnatural and untenable. If laws explain by necessitating and necessitating requires showing why some phenomena must obtain given certain conditions, that is, by showing that things could not have been otherwise, then such brute bridge laws don't *explain* anything. Perhaps one has a perfect correlation in such a case but that doesn't constitute an explanation, as we all know. Even proponents of the neural correlate of consciousness approach such as Searle's biological naturalism (2004) agree that finding such correlates would only be a first step—one can't stop there and say a new fundamental law has been discovered—one must then use that correlation to discover the *causal mechanism* that generates conscious experience. If one asks the question, "but why does conscious experience always arise in the actual world when certain material or functional conditions obtain?," no answer will be forthcoming, it's just a brute fact/brute necessity about the actual world. That is not a "nonreductive explanation" as some claim; that is no explanation at all. This is especially troubling if such a psycho-physical bridge law is the only law in the "basic inventory of emergent properties" as Chalmers alleges (1996). Even if one is willing to reject causal closure of the physical (CoP) as some are, there is still the question of *how* the "presence" of conscious mental states "impacts" brains states.

Such a stand-alone, one-of-a-kind brute/fundamental law is a *deus ex machina*—"and then a miracle occurred" kind of affair. That is, if matter is fundamental and essentially non-mental then radical emergence must be some sort of occasionalism that replaces God with a miraculous law of nature. This may be explanatory for some, but it isn't a natural or scientific explanation, nor is it a law of nature, it's a brute law of meta-nature, surprising to not only the Mathematical Archangel but perhaps to God herself, as Strawson notes (2008).

However, there is a more recent causal or dynamical, dualistic account of strong emergence that rejects CoP and physicalism as it pertains to mental properties. In other words, it rejects the supervenience-based, synchronic, nonreductive physicalist conception of strong emergence that we were just criticizing.

On this causal account of metaphysically emergent properties, "it will be natural to suppose that they are *caused* to be by the object's fundamental parts, which have latent dispositions awaiting only the right configurational context for manifestation" (O'Connor and Wong 2015). In turn, these newly arisen emergent properties such as mental properties can causally effect biological and physical processes. This conception of strong emergence is certainly a rejection of any kind of CoP, rejecting realization and embracing downward causation. Therefore, it doesn't conflict with any pre-existing commitment to physicalism, reductive or otherwise. It is very important to understand what is meant by the word "caused" here:

> We do not use the term in this neutral manner. Our usage corresponds to the first of these: a power to produce or to generate, where this is assumed to be a real relation irreducible to more basic features of the world. Our favored technical term for this is "causal oomph." So understood, causation is not amenable to analysis in non-causal terms, but instead involves the exercise of ontologically primitive causal *powers* or *capacities* of particulars. Powers are either identical to, or figure into the identity conditions of, certain of the object's properties, which are immanent to those things as non-mereological parts. (O'Connor and Wong 2015)

The type of causation specified here requires that, under certain conditions, when a physical or biological system reaches say a certain degree of complexity of some sort, it has the irreducible causal power to produce or generate a new causally efficacious emergent property such as mental properties. Such properties are by hypothesis in this case *essentially different* and *completely novel* with respect to their emergent base. If this irreducible kind of causation is the norm in the world or at least common, then why are mental properties the only properties where this sort of causation seems even remotely plausible to most people? For example, the analogue of this sort of explanation for the emergence of life from a chemical base doesn't seem at all natural or explanatory—it wouldn't count as a viable scientific hypothesis to most working scientists. So again, if mental properties are the only case of this sort of causation then we are back to disunity in nature.

Does this causal account of strong emergence escape the concerns leveled against the former nomological conception? As we said, this causal account of strong emergence has an advantage in the sense that it rejects the basic tenets of physicalism, at least as regards mental phenomena, but it is largely still in the same position in that mental properties are the only plausible phenomena for which this sort of strong emergence might even be considered. Which is just to say that such causal strong emergence is equally damning for ontological and explanatory unity. After all, causal strong emergence cannot really alter the conception of matter as intrinsically non-mental without veering into pan(proto)psychist territory; and it still maintains that, while causally efficacious mental properties are irreducible, matter is in some sense fundamental. While the causal account of strong

emergence has no worries about CoP and while this is property and not substance dualism, it still has to explain how nondual essentially mental phenomena and essentially physical phenomena can causally interact. In short, moving from law-talk to causation-talk isn't a cure-all for strong emergence. Such strongly emergent causal processes are still just brute facts we must accept with "natural piety" about the actual world.

With regard to emergent property dualism (strong causal emergence) versus substance dualism, why is it more believable, more probable that causally potent qualia-baring immaterial souls/selves/subjects pop out of brain processes under the right conditions than the claims of substance dualism? Interestingly, in what follows O'Connor (2014), in considering the argument from realism about consciousness to theism, argues that the hypothesis of theism increases the probability that the admittedly potentially implausible claim of strong emergence of mental properties is true:

> We have suggested that the phenomenal realist may reasonably suppose the existence of basic, general laws connecting neural-state types and families of phenomenal-state types (corresponding more or less directly to distinct sensory modalities). Such laws will encode in part facts about specific emergent dispositions of fundamental physical particulars. Here is where we see the potential for design-style reasoning. It seems plausible that there are a variety of ways things might have been with respect to the fundamental constituents of the world. We do not have in mind the Humean claim that the very particulars there are might have interacted in fundamentally different ways. We mean, rather, that there might have been ever so many different sorts of entities having different sorts of basic dispositions from the ones that are manifested in our world. And in particular, it seems a priori rather unlikely that fundamental physical entities should have emergent dispositions toward phenomenal qualities. (That this is a plausible claim is suggested by the fact that many brash but otherwise reasonable philosophers judge the emergentist view to be an utterly implausible hypothesis about our own world, and some are tempted to declare it outright impossible.) Yet, given theism, it seems more to be expected, since we may reasonably suppose the conditional probability of there being agents capable of the kind of experiential life that we enjoy on the hypothesis of theism to be at least not very low, since it is reasonable to think that one of the goods a purposive world designer would wish to see in its creation are creatures of just that sort. (O'Connor 2014, 20)

Herein O'Connor seems to be leveling/acknowledging much the same criticisms against strong emergence that was raised above, and in response claiming that the assumption of theism makes it a much more probable and believable doctrine. We don't deny their inference as such; we just think it's telling that defenders of what is supposed to be a naturalistic account of conscious experience feel compelled to back it up with theism. After all, given a belief in theism, why not just accept the package of immaterial souls plus theism, why bother instead having God enable brains or what have

you, to be such that conscious experience pops out of them under certain conditions. And in a material world without God or souls why do conscious selves pop out of brains? Whether you answer with psycho-physical bridge laws or very special causal powers, it's just a brute fact according to strong emergence.

Does panpsychism fare any better than radical emergence? No. The best arguments for panpsychism are generally taken to be what Seager (2009) calls the "argument from analogy," the "genetic argument," and the "argument from the dispositional nature of fundamental physical properties." The first argument claims there is some feature of fundamental matter such as quantum entanglement that is mind-like, and therefore maybe quantum entities are at least proto-conscious. The second argument is really just the claim that radical emergence is impossible. The third argument claims that fundamental physical properties are not intrinsic, that they must nevertheless possess intrinsic properties and the only intrinsic properties are mental, for example, qualia. Needless to say, none of these arguments are decisive and they have all been heavily attacked (see Silberstein 2010, 2014).

The standard arguments against panpsychism are as follows (Seager 2016):

(1) Combination problems.
(2) No sign and not-mental problems.
(3) Unconscious mentality problem—pan(proto).
(4) Causal completeness problem.

As for the first problem, panpsychism may not have a GP but it does have several combination problems (Chalmers 2014). Namely, how do all those simple minds combine to make conscious agents such as ourselves? If you think fundamental physical entities possess free-floating qualia, then how do all those very tiny discretized quales come together to make one of us? If you think subjective experience requires an experiencer then how do those very tiny conscious beings combine to make one human conscious agent with a unified experiential field? The second problem says that, contrary to the argument from analogy, there is absolutely no evidence that fundamental physical entities have mental properties or minds and therefore panpsychism is simply unjustified. The third problem says that pan(proto)psychism only makes the first problem worse because now we can't even conceive of what proto-mentality might be or if it's even coherent. So it threatens to turn the combination problem back into the GP. The fourth problem is that causal CoP (or microphysical closure) would seem to render mental properties epiphenomenal. But CoP aside, the point is that we *never* have to bring mental properties to bear to explain the behavior of

purely physical, chemical, or biological systems. This brings us back to the second problem, of course.

To many of us, any one of these problems is enough to reject panpsychism. But of course ever-hopeful defenders have their responses (see Silberstein forthcoming). Before we move on to neutral monism let us summarize what we have learned so far. Regarding radical emergence, it is hard to see how it could be true and the GP is real. If matter is essentially non-mental and yet there is some basic physical law/causal condition that says under the right configurations of matter that consciousness arises from it, then such law/causal conditions must be either impossible or beyond naturalistic explanation. That is, if matter is fundamental and essentially non-mental, then radical emergence must be some sort of occasionalism that replaces God with a miraculous law of nature or causal superpowers.

On the panpsychism side, in the service of explaining conscious experience on the length and time scales of embodied creatures on Earth with at least some sort of sensory apparatus and some sort of central nervous system, we have seen people appeal to the very small, but *everything* we have *ever* experienced tells us that only the middle porridge is "ahhh, just right" when it comes to the processes associated with conscious experience. Panpsychism is also fraught with several other well known problems, none of which are easily discharged even to this very day.

As noted, neither radical emergence nor panpsychism seem like very stable positions; they are at best patches for physicalism or ontological reductionism, the views that drive them. The best argument for either position seems to be the claim that they are the lesser of evils with respect to the other (pick your poison), but there are alternatives. One thing we know for sure: on pain of contradiction, panpsychism cannot invoke radical emergence to get out of its various combination problems, and radical emergence cannot invoke panpsychism to resolve the GP. So what assumptions led us to this absurd situation where we think it's either one or the other? The assumptions are as follows:

(1) The GP is real (matter is essentially non-mental and it's fundamental).
(2) All fundamental entities must have intrinsic properties.
(3) Fundamental physical entities don't have intrinsic physical properties.
(4) Consciousness is an intrinsic property (qualia) and by elimination must be the intrinsic aspect of fundamental physical entities.

Where does this leave us? Given the problems with both radical emergence and panpsychism it's high time to question at least some of their shared assumptions. This brings us to neutral monism.

Neutral Monism to the Rescue

Both radical emergence and panpsychism agree on (1) above and therefore both attempt to answer the GP directly. To *deflate* the GP and get around the master argument for radical emergence and panpsychism we need another alternative. As long as matter is conceived of as essentially non-mental and experience is conceived as qualia we are stuck with these problematic views. So the alternative must reconceive matter and mind. This is exactly what, properly understood, neutral monism does. Given that the key defenders of neutral monism in the West, such as William James and Bertrand Russell, also defended panpsychism at various points in time and given that "the avowed neutrality of neutral monism tends to slide towards some kind of panpsychism or idealism" (Seager 2007, 28), people can certainly be forgiven for thinking that neutral monism and panpsychism may not be completely distinct doctrines, but it is very important to see that they are distinct. As James saw very clearly, we need to *deflate* the GP, not answer it directly. We need to deny that everyday conscious experience is an entity; for example, it isn't qualia-like, it is not intrinsic. As James notes in *A Pluralistic Universe*, it is "intellectualism" or rationalism that got us into this mess in the first place and that's what we must reject:

> Intellectualism in the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told by its *definition.* Ever since Socrates we have been taught that reality consists of essences, not of appearances, and that the essences of things are known whenever we know their definitions. So we first identify the thing with a concept and then we identify the concept with a definition, and only then, inasmuch as the thing *is* whatever the definition expresses, are we sure of apprehending the real essence of it or the full truth about it . . . . Intellectualism does not stop till sensible reality lies entirely disintegrated at the feet of "reason." (James 1912, 218)

The mind/body problem and the hard problem of consciousness are the offspring of this "intellectualism." Let's start with what we actually know: everyday conscious experience appears to be intimately related to embodied organisms with certain complex internal structures maneuvering an environment. As James puts it:

> The individualized self, which I believe to be the only thing properly called self, is a part of the content of the world experienced. The world experienced (otherwise called the "field of consciousness") comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest. Where the body is is "here," where the body acts is "now"; what the body touches is "this"; all other things are "there," and "then" and "that." (James 1912, 380)

James is defending neutral monism, which holds the following:

(1) Mental and material features are real, but in some specified sense reducible to or constructable from a neutral basis in a noneliminative sense of reduction.

(2) The neutral basis is generally not conceived as substance.

(3) Mental and material features are not separable or merely correlated, they are *non-dual*, indeed, they are *not essentially different and distinct aspects*.

Quoting James himself, here is how Leopold Stubenberg characterizes his neutral monism:

> Prior to any further categorization, pure experience is, according to James, neutral—neither mental nor material:
>
> > The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the "pure" experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that.* (James 1904b, 23)
>
> Mind and matter, knower and known, thought and thing, representation and represented are then interpreted as resulting from different groupings of pure experience (Stubenberg 2009).

Let us then adopt the neutral monism of William James and Bertrand Russell as characterized herein:

> Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience, taken in one context of associates, play the part of the knower, or a state of mind, or "consciousness"; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective "content." In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. (James 1904, 21)
>
> The whole duality of mind and matter . . . is a mistake; there is only one kind of stuff out of which the world is made, and this stuff is called mental in one arrangement, physical in the other. (Russell 1913, 15)
>
> Things and thoughts are not fundamentally heterogeneous; they are made of one and the same stuff, stuff which cannot be defined as such but only experienced; and which one can call, if one wishes, the stuff of experience in general. (James 1904, 110)
>
> "Subjects" knowing "things" known are "roles" played, not "ontological" facts. (James 1904, 110)

On this view, conscious experience (subjectivity) is not an "add-on," it is as much a part of the fabric of the universe as so-called matter. The GP or the hard problem is a cognitive illusion generated by the inference or projection that experience is inherently or essentially mental and the "external" world is inherently non-mental. The claim that the world is

carved at the joints *à la* physical/mental; inner/outer; subject/object, and so on, is not a datum, but rather an inductive projection.

One way to interpret James or at least amend his view is as follows:

(1) There is no conscious experience without a subject.

(2) Where there are perceptions there is a perceiver and vice versa.

(3) No subject/self without an object/world and vice versa.

So experience is inherently relational in the following sense. A conceptual or projected cut is made in "the stuff of experience" between the subject and the object. In the Buddhist tradition (and in some Hindu traditions as well) it happens when the "I am" thought arises, for example, the individual thought "I am in pain now." In keeping with the suggested amendment to James it helps to look at a possible way of understanding neutral monism that is inspired by Immanuel Kant (1998), Edmund Husserl (2001), Martin Heidegger (1996), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Arthur Schopenhauer (1969), and a variety of Asian traditions such as Advaita Vedanta (Gupta 1998).

This is not the place for historical details, and important differences between these thinkers will be glossed over. Most of them do not necessarily self-identify as neutral monists, but following Dan Zahavi (2005), who is writing about Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and others, we can say that for all these traditions of thought the minimal subject and the external world (the minimal object) self-consistently coexist; you cannot have one without the other. There is a self-consistency relation such that the subject and the external world are both necessary and sufficient for the other. Following Kant's unity of apperception and Schopenhauer's will and representation, we can go a step further: It is only when the subject/object cut exists that one gets a world in space and time—the phenomenal experience of being a subject in an external world in which time is passing. So subject/object and world in space/time are both necessary and sufficient for one another. One can of course find similar ideas in the works of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in their respective accounts of temporal experience. One can also find excellent expressions of this idea in Advaita Vedanta as illustrated by the following passages from Gupta, which again echo neutral monism:

> The goal of Advaita Vedanta is to show the ultimate non-reality of all distinctions; reality is not constituted of parts. (Gupta 1998, 1)

> When pure consciousness individuates itself into subject and object, there results knowledge—the distinction between "knower and known." . . . In talking about Brahman [pure consciousness], it is not a subject or an object, but neither and both; the distinction is not real. Because reality is nondual, the known and the knower come to be recognized as one: brahman and atman, the objective and subjective poles of experience, are nondifferent. (31)

> Atman is pure distinctionless, self-shining consciousness, which is non-different from brahman. It is that state of being in which all subject-object distinction is obliterated. It does not have a beginning or an end; it is eternal and timeless. Time only arises within it. (34)

If one has a certain analytic or Western philosophical bias, it is easy to be put off by the Advaita Vedanta terminology, but we urge the reader to set aside that reaction and think of such claims from a purely phenomenological perspective.

Many of the aforementioned Western thinkers, however, make a mistake that neutral monism corrects. Namely, they place the explanation for this grand self-consistency relation between subject/world in space and time in the head of individual experiencers. For Kant it is his "categories," for Schopenhauer it is his "representations," and for Husserl it is his "inner representations" or presentations of temporal experience. Kant famously argues that the unity of experience in time and space requires a unity of self and vice versa, otherwise there is no manifold of successive representations. This means that the dynamical character of thought and the world are two sides of the same coin. Kant and the others are right that we do not experience things in time and space, but rather we experience them temporally and spatially. But, they are wrong to say that this is an imposition of individual minds and their categories. The mistake, in one form or another, which we find in both the analytic and continental traditions, is representationalism or internalism.

Once we take neutral monism on board, we can immediately see that there is no need for (and no sense to) representationalism and internalism to explain experience (Silberstein and Chemero 2015). The point here is that subject and object codependently exist as a subject-in-a-world-in-space-and-time; they are two sides of the same coin, so the agent is not trapped behind "a veil of perception" but is directly part of the world, and the external world is not some external container that the subject projects a virtual reality on to. Given neutral monism, (transcendental) phenomenology ultimately cannot be and should not be divorced from natural science, and experience cannot be separated from the natural world.

In other words, we are talking about direct realism. Again, we must take the brackets off phenomenology and let it be unbound. The experience of time's passage, for example (a key focus of Husserl and perhaps the very essence of everyday conscious experience), is neither in the head (the subject) nor in the external world (the object); the experience is fundamentally relational in that it requires that a subject/object cut be made in the neutral "field of pure experience" as James calls it. It is the self-consistency relation between subject and object that allows for the experience of time. This relation or structure is not in anything nor

located anywhere; rather, it is why there are things in time and space as experienced.

Given neutral monism, self/world are two nondual sides of the same neutral coin, therefore the dynamical character of thought and the world are two sides of the same coin. Again, the conscious mind is not some utterly distinct entity that imposes or projects time and change onto a static universe as if the mind were just some virtual reality machine that we are stuck behind. No, on this view the very existence of the codependent conscious self/world-in-space-and-time unity is a self-consistency relation; you simply cannot have one without the other.

Neutral Monism and Panentheism

We have seen that neutral monism is an underappreciated and far more plausible view than its competitors; it is a view that resolves the hard problem by deflating it. Again, given neutral monism, so-called mental and physical features of the world are neither essentially mental nor essentially physical, they are nondual features of a neutral ground, that get categorized as being mental or physical for various reasons. To see how neutral monism can underwrite a form of panentheism we must discuss more the nature of the neutral itself and relate that to a definition of God.

The neutral factor in neutral monism is "presence" and it is the one feature of reality that isn't relational:

> On the other hand, neutral monism is a radical doctrine from the usual physicalist standpoint. It knocks the physical, as scientifically understood, from its perch of ontological preeminence. It suggests that any effort to reduce everything to the physical is fundamentally misguided. Neutral monism has to accept a notion of "presence in experience" (what James called "pure experience"). This presence is not labeled as "consciousness" by the neutral monists, since they regard consciousness, and its subject, as a very sophisticated feature of the constructed mental realm. Nonetheless, presence is, I believe, what funds the hard problem of consciousness. Presence is what constitutes the "what it is like" of conscious experience. This is quite explicit in the neutral monist's alignment of the neutral with the qualities of experience, and especially perceptual experience (the paradigm case for explaining the "what it is like" aspect of consciousness). Speaking for myself, I do not think that presence can be denied. The neutral monist claim that it forms the bedrock of reality is surprisingly powerful and fertile, and may yet help us understand reality and our place within it. (Seager 2016, 326)

Thus, one way of interpreting James is that "being," "pure being." or "being thus" are nowness or presentness, what some might call presence. Presentness, that is, "being," in the Western traditions of phenomenology and existentialism is typically thought of as either bracketed experience in the phenomenological tradition or merely a qualitative experience to ultimately be explained by neuroscience in the analytic tradition. There

are important exceptions in the West such as Heidegger, Henri Bergson, James, and Merleau-Ponty. In the traditions of existentialism, pragmatism, and phenomenology, one can find varying expressions of the idea that the "lived present," "lived experience," or "living present" are among the most fundamental aspects of reality. Also, as alluded to earlier, in some Hindu and Buddhist texts, presence is neither bracketed nor just a brain state, it is fundamental.

In the Advaita Vedanta tradition, when all qualitative and intentional states have ceased what remains is presence (*nirvikalpa samadhi*). There is also *savikalpa samadhi*, in which there is still a residual sense of subject and object, whereas in *nirvikalpa samadhi* even that relation goes, and there is only what might be called "pure presence." Given that presence is fundamental, it cannot be defined in terms of other concepts, of either a material or mental nature, hence its neutrality:

> Advaita Vedanta centrally posits the existence of a permanent "self" (atman). The self is characterized as the "witness" (saksin) of the experiences, that is as that which is conscious of them—yet not in the sense of some substantial entity that performs the witnessing, but rather as nothing but the taking place of witnessing (consciousness) itself. This chapter argues for the plausibility of this notion of a witness consciousness, interpreted as the abiding experiencing of the ever-changing experiences. Synchronically and diachronically, manifold experiences are presented in one and the same consciousness, whose oneness is not reducible to some unifying relations between the experiences, but rather forms the dimension in which they, together with all their interrelations, have their existence in the first place. This presence-dimension is [our emphasis] . . . what is called atman (qua witness) in Advaita. (Fasching 2010, 20)

Savikalpa samadhi would be direct awareness of presence. *Nirvikalpa samadhi* would be pure presence. Can the latter be "known"? If it is known, it is experienced as an object. But then it is not pure presence. It can, though, be experienced. That is *nirvikalpa samadhi*. This is not awareness of, or consciousness of, presence; this is nowness/presence itself.

Whereas we generally experience time as an endless succession of point-like "nows" as a result of that subject/object cut, the idea here is that presence is actually relatively fundamental, universal, unmoved, and unchanging. To ask "where is presence?" is to miss the point that presence or pure being is a precondition for all spatiotemporal experience, including the localization of objects and properties. Presence or nowness is the backdrop against which change is perceived.

The essential theological claim being made here is that the witness consciousness is a manifestation of pure presence and it is the ground of all else that exists, and thus we may call witness consciousness/pure presence God. The witness consciousness/pure presence is both one with and beyond everything else in existence, and therefore we have a kind of panentheism in

the form of Avaita Vedanta Hinduism. Others have made this suggestion as well, as John Culp (2017, quoting Robert Whittemore) notes: "Although not the dominant interpretation of the *Upanishads*, multiple intimations of panentheism are present in the *Upanishads*."

In terms of the question of how the witness consciousness/pure presence or "brahman" could ground reality when the universe allegedly existed for billions of years before individual conscious beings came along, it's important to disentangle the witness consciousness/pure presence (in the language of Advaita Vedanta) from the everyday consciousness of individual beings such as ourselves. As described above, in Western philosophical terms the witness consciousness/pure presence could be seen as the transcendental condition for the existence of any *subject or object*—for the world as experienced. That is, the self/world complex is not *caused* to emerge temporally/dynamically in a process-like fashion; rather, it is the subject/object cut that is taken to be transcendentally prior (don't confuse this with temporally or causally prior) to the existence of a subject in a world in space and time.

Perceiver (subject) and perceived (object) coexist in a self-consistent fashion as a single aspect of the witness consciousness/pure presence. So the point is that while subject and object are codependent and thus relational, presence alone is the only remaining intrinsic feature and it also is a neutral feature that grounds both the nondual subject/self and object/world. For this reason, one might be inclined to associate God with pure presence only and not the witness consciousness, but the point is they are both one with and transcend spacetime, but perhaps pure presence even more so. In the Advaita Vedanta tradition, everyday individual conscious beings such as ourselves can merge into the witness consciousness itself, which in turn can merge into pure being or being-itself—pure presence. "Witness" is a relative term for pure presence inasmuch as it is related to something called "world." However, "world" and "witness," "object and subject," are really just pure presence aware of itself.

The point is, the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Hinduism provides us with another alternative for what the neutral might be. In this tradition, while brahman is often equated with the witness consciousness (*sakshi*), there are varying degrees of subtlety of the witness consciousness. The blanket term for the experience of such states is *samadhi* (absorption). In *savikalpa samadhi*, there remains some residual sense of a distinction between witness and witnessed. But in *nirvikalpa samadhi* that slips away, so there is nothing but the witness. It is no longer really "witnessing" itself, it is simply being itself (Deutsch 1980, 62–63). This being itself is beyond all description, concepts, and predication, "free from distinctions of all kinds." The claim is that brahman is *nirguna*, that is, without qualities. It is hard to imagine anything more neutral, which again is why one might want to equate God with pure presence only. In the Advaita Vedanta texts

it is often said therefore that brahman is one with yet beyond the world of space and time. Brahman is beyond the world, but it also *is* the world. In the words of the twentieth-century Hindu Saint Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj in his book *I Am That*:

> The witness who stands aloof, unmoved and untouched, is the watch-tower of the real, the point at which awareness, inherent in the unmanifested [pure presence], contacts the manifested. There can be no universe without the witness, there can be no witness without the universe, (1973, 53)

The English word "witness" (especially if followed by the English word "consciousness") implies something observing something else. That concept of observation clearly implies something like consciousness (in the conventional sense); so asserting it is fundamental sounds like idealism. However, if we take seriously the phenomenology of meditative states, the shift from *savikalpa samadhi* to *nirvikalpa samadhi* entails that the sense of "observer-hood" passes away, and one is not so much "witnessing" as "being." Think of this state as a kind of coalescence of mentality and materiality—and hence as "neutral" in this sense. Here the claim is that "being," "pure being," or "being thus" are nowness or presentness, what some might call pure presence. Again, when all qualitative and intentional states have ceased, what remains is pure presence (*nirvikalpa samadhi*).

Given that presence is fundamental, it cannot be defined in terms of other concepts, of either a material or mental nature. Again, this is not awareness of, or consciousness of presence, this is nowness/presence itself. Perceiver (subject) and perceived (object) co-arise in a self-consistent fashion from presence. And again, do not think of this co-arising as a causal process in time. From the perspectiveless (and experienceless experience) "perspective" of pure being, there is no subject, nor a world in space and time, only being itself.

As for the specific relationship between the world and God (i.e., brahman) there is the Sanskrit word *lila*, typically translated as "God at play." In the Advaita Vedanta tradition this is often characterized as analogous with the way human beings dream up entire worlds in the dream state of sleep. Here is a beautiful expression of this from the Westerner Jorge Luis Borges in his *Avatars of the Tortoise*:

> The greatest sorcerer [writes Novalis memorably] would be the one who bewitched himself to the point of taking his own phantasmagorias for autonomous apparitions. Would not this be true of us? I believe that it is. We (the undivided divinity that operates within us) have dreamed the world. We have dreamed it strong, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and secure in time, but we have allowed tenuous, eternal interstices of injustice in its structure so we may know that it is false. (Borges 1998, 101)

However, it must be stressed that this is only an analogy, because in the Advaita Vedanta tradition there is no dreamer conceived as a self-existing entity or being—brahman is not a thing, agent or being, but the ground of all those. Again, in the words of Nisargadatta Maharaj:

> Why do you bring an outer doer [God]? The world recreates itself out of itself. It is an endless process, the transitory begetting the transitory. It is your ego that makes you think that there must be a doer. You create God to your own image, however dismal the image. (1973, 54)

Given all of this, it is certainly understandable why those who have a craving for traditional forms of Christian theism with an anthropomorphized creator God will not find this brand of panentheism very palatable. Likewise, those who lean towards old-fashioned conceptions of methodological and metaphysical naturalism will also find all this unpalatable. Though nothing in it is conceived as supernatural as such, brahman transcends spacetime and that is probably enough to put off most naturalists. Whatever your gut reaction, it is humbly submitted that this is another live possibility for panentheism, one that provides a unified account of reality.

Note

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