

Short Essay: The Problem of Panpsychist Vagueness

It Is Time for Fundamental Panpsychist Views to Be Formulated in a Strictly Panpsychist Manner

Within the analytic panpsychist tradition, a vagueness concerning essential panpsychist positions has become established, one that unfortunately contributes to the "dilution" of what panpsychism stands for.

I stipulatively designate this problem as the "Vagueness Problem of Panpsychism."

A vivid example of this vagueness can be found in formulations employed by the highly esteemed Philip Goff.

To illustrate, consider a post he published on X:

"Consciousness is a general property, which comes in specific forms (e.g. pain, seeing red, etc.). My view is that fundamental physical properties (e.g. mass, spin, charge) are incredibly simple forms of consciousness." (Goff 2021)

This statement addresses the very nature of what panpsychism is, yet - confusingly - it can be interpreted in several very different ways.

Interpretation 1: Russellian

Consciousness is the intrinsic property of the physical.

Interpretation 2: Strictly Panpsychist

The physical is consciousness.

Interpretation 3: Idealist

Consciousness is primary, and the physical is essentially grounded in it.

If one regards panpsychism as an autonomous metaphysical position within the philosophy of mind, then this autonomy should, indeed must, be expressed as unambiguously as possible in matters concerning the nature of panpsychism.

Provocatively, I proclaim:

"Physicalists and idealists alike succeed in expressing their respective foundational positions unambiguously.

What physicalists and idealists achieve, we panpsychists should be able to achieve as well."

We should therefore begin to formulate fundamental questions concerning panpsychism in general in a strictly panpsychist manner.

To formulate something in a strictly panpsychist manner does not mean to lean toward a particular panpsychist variant.

A strictly panpsychist statement contains no tendency in one direction or another.

Although Galen Strawson speaks of "pure panpsychism," it is by no means as pure and unadulterated as the name would suggest.

Strawson's views are essentially inspired by the Russellian variant, which understands consciousness as an intrinsic property of the physical.

Consequently, he arrives at the interpretation that panpsychism is immanent to physicalism.

"Real physicalism, realistic physicalism, entails panpsychism." (Strawson 2006)

"Where something is only intrinsic, it is absent where the non-intrinsic is present."

Interpreted in a strictly panpsychist manner, the physical is consciousness.

But is all consciousness also physical?

One may, of course, define the concept of the physical in an extremely broad manner.

One may define the physical - following Aristotle - as identical with nature (= the physical in the Aristotelian sense).

One may identify the physical entirely with that which constitutes the object of study of physics (= the physical in the scientific sense).

And one may find a number of other definitions as well.

However, one may also stipulate the physical as a philosophical variable in order to leave temporarily undetermined what the physical concretely is.

This has the advantage that one can philosophically work with the concept of the physical without expending excessive effort on defining the physical.

Within the current analytic panpsychist literature, one can observe a tendency for the definition of the physical to receive more attention than central questions of panpsychism itself.

Unfortunately, Strawson and Goff are among the leading figures in this respect as well.

For example, in his academic foundational work "Consciousness and Fundamental Reality," Philip Goff devotes nearly 20% of the book to defining what the physical is, might be, or ought to be.

This is only a rough estimate, obtained with the assistance of several AIs.

Regardless of the exact percentage:

"Within panpsychism, too much attention is devoted to the physical."

Drawing distinctions is essential.

Yet something even more essential should not and must not be overlooked:

its own identity.

It is time for the identity of panpsychism - within panpsychism itself - to receive greater attention.

Greater effort must be devoted to identifying what is genuinely panpsychist.

What is genuinely panpsychist about the Russellian variant, Cosmopsychism, or systemic panpsychism?

However, this genuinely panpsychist aspect will become clearly recognizable only if it is formulated in a strictly panpsychist manner.

To formulate something in a strictly panpsychist manner means to establish an identity.

But what is to be identified?

Consciousness, for one - that is clear.

The other element I provisionally stipulate as a philosophical variable.

This yields the following strictly panpsychist function:

Consciousness (x) = x

In systemic panpsychism, x is stuff - and stuff is that which is capable of offering resistance to its own no-longer-being.

One might object that this function does not constitute an identity statement.

Yet it does.

For:

Regardless of what is substituted into the function, it is, as it is, nothing separate from consciousness.

It IS - not merely in terms of its nature - but wholly and entirely - and thus absolutely - consciousness.

This relationship becomes evident when one considers a similar function by way of illustration.

Namely, that of existence.

Existence (x) = x

Regardless of what is substituted into this function: it IS existence.

This function makes the following clear:

There is no "in-between" form of existence.

That is to say: there is no hybrid existence.

Whatever is considered, it is wholly and entirely existence.

And what holds for existence holds, in exactly the same manner and without restriction, for consciousness.

A note:

I prefer the functional notation over the classical variant (Consciousness = x), because an x cannot stand representatively for the totality of that which consciousness is in its entirety.

Sources

Strawson, Galen. "Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 13, no. 10-11 (2006): 3-31.

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