

## Three problems with panpsychism

by Titus Rivas

I'm often asked why I'm not a panpsychist. I've decided to write this short explanation so that from now on I can easily refer to my problems with panpsychism. I do not claim originality for any of these problems.

By panpsychism, I mean any theory that states that all elements in physical reality are linked to non-physical, psychical or proto-psychical elements and that this would explain the existence of animal and human minds. Naturalists may view panpsychism as an interesting solution to the naturalistic question how consciousness could arise from complex brain processing, because according to panpsychism, mind would simply be generally linked to matter. Thus, mind would not magically arise from the as such purely physical processing in the brain, but it would have been there all along (possibly in a dormant state), in the physical parts the brain is composed of. This principle would also explain the presence of mind in all other animals. Panpsychists mention other advantages of adopting their ontology, such as that it would offer us a beautiful, satisfying world view, but this won't concern us here.

### Objections

I have three problems with panpsychism that can be summarized as follows:

#### *Analytical objections*

##### **1. Panpsychism seems incompatible with a substantial personal self or soul**

Unlike the emergent (semi)substance dualism of scholars like Karl Popper and William Hasker, panpsychism seems to entail an anti-substantialist conception of the personal self. If the mind is composed of mental elements linked to the physical components of (parts of the) brain and if mental processes are intrinsically linked to physical processing in the brain, it is unclear where the personal self could ever come in. In other words, panpsychism does not solve the naturalistic binding problem, and it even adds another problem absent in forms of (substance) emergentism. To realise phenomenal consciousness there has to be a self that undergoes that phenomenal consciousness, because otherwise consciousness could not be phenomenal or subjective. However, before there is a self there can't be any consciousness. So the mind can only be conscious if there is also a self. However, there is nothing in the brain which would be an exact mirror of the self. The self (in the specific sense of the subject of phenomenal consciousness, rather than in the sense of self-concept or self-awareness) is not a mental pattern or process (it is a logical precondition for conscious mental patterns and processes, rather than those mental patterns or processes themselves) so it can't be just a mental mirror of physical patterns or processes in the brain.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that panpsychists usually reject substantialism in general (and a substantial self in particular) and opt for process metaphysics.

## **2. Panpsychism leads to parallellism**

Panpsychists may deny that their position leads to a parallellism between mental and neurological processing, in other words: they may deny that parallellism is incompatible with mind-brain interaction. I do hold that panpsychism leads to parallellism, because according to panpsychism any event in the mind is mirrored by an event in the brain (as two intrinsically linked aspects of reality), and vice versa, so that mental processes are by definition paralleled by cerebral processes, and vice versa.

So far, I haven't read anything that would convince me that panpsychism is indeed logically compatible with the rejection of parallellism.

I reject parallellism because it leads to an unsolvable epistemological problem. If the brain never affects the mind, this means we can never have a good reason to believe there is a physical brain (or even physical world), as it would never affect our minds. Therefore, panpsychism should be abandoned in favour of theories that allow for a causal impact from the brain upon our mind.

### *Empirical objection*

## **3. Panpsychism seems incompatible with data from research into psi and survival**

Although panpsychism seems to be rather popular among people who are interested in psychical research and parapsychology, its implications actually seem largely incompatible with it. In psi research, the results suggest that the mind may possess certain causal properties that are lacking in the brain, because in psi it transcends the physical boundaries of the brain. This goes against the mind-brain parallellism implied by panpsychism (see objection 2). In survival and reincarnation research, the results suggests that the personal self and its mind survive death and can in principle be linked to a new brain after death. This goes against both parallellism and the very reason why panpsychism is proposed, namely that it is part of a naturalistic framework according to which the mind is fully embodied in the brain (and therefore could never become separated from it).

It seems panpsychism cannot be reformulated to such an extent that it would be able to deal with these problems.

What is my own position? It continues to be substance dualism, both for humans and other sentient animals.

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