

# Essay Review

## Why Neutral Monism is Superior to Panpsychism

Skrbina, D. (2009): *Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium*. John Benjamins Publishing Corp., Amsterdam. ISBN 978-90-272-5211-1 (Euro 110.-; hbk)

### 1. Outline

This is an edited collection of papers on panpsychism divided into three sections: Analysis and Science; Process Philosophy; and Metaphysics and Mind. The book begins with a historical overview of panpsychism by Skrbina and the iconic Strawson essay, Realistic monism: Why physicalism entails panpsychism, both excellent pieces. Throughout all sections of the book one can find articles that: 1) discuss the history of panpsychism in Western and Asian thought, 2) in one way or another relate panpsychism to quantum mechanics, cosmology or non-linear dynamical systems theory and 3) attempt to reformulate or restate panpsychism so as to avoid classic concerns such as the “combination problem.” Some of the essays break new ground and some are boiler plate, but overall this is an essential collection for those interested in the subject.

I want to argue here that neutral monism is a superior position to either panpsychism or dual-aspect theories, neither of which is entailed by it. Indeed, I think the more progressive essays in the volume such as Manzotti and Skrbina’s concluding essay are most charitably interpreted as leaning toward neutral monism. At the end I will provide a sketch of my own brand of neutral monism and its relation to cognitive science.

### 2. Taxonomy

Let us have a look at a little taxonomy, taken largely from Stubenberg (2009), which will help me explain why neutral monism is the stronger view in a family of views that are often conflated for obvious conceptual and historical reasons. I will dub this family of views dual-aspect theories *broadly construed*. Dual-aspect theories claim that mental and material properties are manifestations or aspects of one underlying non-dual reality that is neither intrinsically mental nor material. The key taxonomic questions are as follows for further sorting:

1. Is there a neutral basis and, if so, how is it characterized?

2. How are the mental and the material, respectively, characterized and how are their relations to each other conceived?
3. How exactly do the mental and the material, respectively, relate to the neutral basis if there is one?

These questions generate different views in panpsychism, dual-aspect theories, and neutral monism.

*Panpsychism:*

1. Mind (proto-mentality or proto-phenomenality) suffuses the universe.
2. Every physical particular or physical entity (such as atoms or subatomic particles) enjoys some measure of mentality or has a correspondent in the realm of the mental, and *vice versa*.
3. No neutral basis underlies the essentially psychophysical world.
4. No reduction or identification is to be had in any dimension.

*Dual-aspects (narrowly construed):*

1. There is a neutral basis generally conceived as a substance(s).
2. Mental and material aspects do not reduce to or cannot be constructed from the neutral basis.
3. Both aspects are *essentially distinct* yet inseparable (correlated of necessity) such that they are co-fundamental ways of apprehending the neutral basis.
4. For each instance of the neutral basis, it can be regarded as either material or mental.

*Neutral monism:*

1. Mental and material features are real but, in some specified sense, reducible to or constructable from a neutral basis in a non-eliminative 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.

### 3. Panpsychism and Its Problems

Panpsychism is generally defended on the grounds that physicalism or materialism cannot in principle ever *explain* how conscious experience could “emerge” from material substance whose *essentially* non-mental properties include spin, charge and mass. Typical in these arguments is the claim that one could never start with material substance or matter and derive *ab initio* in any fashion the existence of conscious experience, nor

could a purely physical theory with a purely physical vocabulary capture or explain conscious experience in a “conceptually adequate” way.

Notice right away that to get excited about this ancient *metaphysical* debate one has to sign onto *essences and substances*. Indeed, advocates of panpsychism and related views typically assume that physicalism (the doctrine that everything logically supervenes on fundamental physical facts) is true in principle for all phenomena except conscious experience (Chalmers 1996).

However, as some of us have been at pains to demonstrate lately, there is very little phenomena that can even in principle be derived from fundamental physics. One cannot, for example, even derive molecular structure from ordinary quantum mechanics, let alone conscious experience (Silberstein 2002). Horst (2007) refers to the idea that reduction and supervenience are the norm outside of psychology as a hidden assumption and continues (Horst 2007, p. 46):

It is this assumption that makes the appearance that there are explanatory gaps in the case of psychology seem unacceptable to reductionists and eliminativists, and seem like a unique and sexy problem to dualists, Mysterians and nonreductive physicalists. It is thus the linchpin that holds together an entire problematic in philosophy of mind today.

Horst rightly points out that this unexamined assumption of successful intertheoretic reduction in the non-mental special sciences (and thus proof of metaphysical supervenience) drives much of the logic in various quarters of philosophy of mind. First, he notes that historically the plausibility and success of intertheoretic reduction is what drove physicalism and not the other way round. Second, the naturalist’s assumption that any special science phenomena (mental or otherwise) must either be reduced to be real or it must be eliminated. Third, dualism’s (or panpsychism’s in this case) assumption that because the mental alone is unique in failing to be reduced it must constitute another fundamental element alongside the physical.

Both Horst (2007) and myself (Silberstein 2001, 2002) have argued that philosophy of science no longer supports the assumption of widespread intertheoretic reduction in the non-mental special sciences and has thus abandoned the “metatheoretical” norm of intertheoretic reduction. Rather, the lesson of philosophy of science is that intertheoretic reduction (certainly as characterized by many philosophical accounts such as the model by Nagel (1961)) is rare in the natural sciences.

Horst addresses the implications of post-reductionist philosophy of science for the canonical views in philosophy of mind. His main conclusion is that given the state of disunity in the natural sciences, there is no longer much warrant for believing that: a) physicalism (or naturalism)

is highly probable, b) that phenomena must be reduced to be real or c) that mind is unique in resisting intertheoretic reduction; though he grants it maybe unique for other reasons and may have special problems being reduced. He argues that disunity in the natural sciences shows that mind is not unique simply for being irreducible and that rampant disunity in the natural sciences suggests that the shared assumption that mind is special in this way is not well founded. Explanatory gaps and failures of intertheoretic reduction are the norm in science and not the exception.

In short, all the canonical views in philosophy of mind are in trouble because they are predicated upon the dubious assumption that naturalism (or physicalism) is true of the non-mental special sciences. The physicalist might argue that failures of intertheoretic reduction to date are simply a function of ignorance and that it will become clear in the near future that only the mental fails to logically supervene on the physical. Perhaps, but it is not at all obvious that this is the way to bet now.

Perhaps more importantly than faulty assumptions about intertheoretic reduction, it seems to me that talk of *essences* and *substances* itself is what generates much of the mind-body problematic and there is no good empirical reason to believe in such ancient and scholastic bugaboos. Don't get me wrong: Science does not and cannot transcend metaphysics by any means. For example, identity theorists like Koch and Crick are certainly in the grip of metaphysical assumptions that shape how they interpret everything such as brain imaging data etc. So while I advocate that philosophy of mind should be practiced and conceived as a subset of philosophy of science (see Chemero and Silberstein 2008) rather than metaphysics and should therefore start with the best science, I am under no illusions that this means metaphysical neutrality. However, I still know of no good reason to bring *essence* or *substance* into our scientifically useful categories.

The way the hard problem is set up by people like Chalmers leaves only solutions like dualism or panpsychism on the table. This ought to make one skeptical of the setup to begin with. However, I completely agree that when it comes to conscious experience, the mind-brain identity theory is incoherent because the experiential cannot be nothing but the non-experiential. That is, I agree that neuroscience can never provide a *reductive* explanation of conscious experience. However, even as a purely metaphysical position, panpsychism is hardly the only contender here.

In my view the main problem with panpsychism is left completely untouched by all the essays in *Mind that Abides*. This problem is a variant of the "combination problem", and it can be phrased as the following dilemma: *Either panpsychism (P) is claiming that physical particulars have mentality in the standard sense or it is not.*

- If the former is correct, then P is absurdly unwarranted and does not solve the hard problem any more than dualism.

- If the latter is correct, then P is meaningless/empty and cannot solve the hard problem without emergence anyway because the latter is necessary to solve the combination problem.

Keep in mind that one of the main arguments for panpsychism is that conscious experience cannot possibly *emerge* from or be identified with the essentially non-mental. Strawson (2009, p. 36) uses this to argue that physicalists and identity theorists must of necessity be panpsychists:

My claim is different. It is that experiential phenomena “just are physical”, so that there is a lot more to neurons than physics and neurophysiology record (or can record).

The claim here is that neurons for example have some sort of proto-mentality that *somehow*, when combined in the right way, yields conscious experience and the unity of consciousness. Of course, panpsychists do not despair of solving the combination problem someday given that neurons are not *essentially* non-mental on their view.

However the identity theorist can simply solve their metaphysical problem by denying that physical phenomena are *essentially* non-mental. They do not have to go as far as the panpsychist does and say that neurons, for example, have proto-mentality. And again, what does proto-mentality mean? If the mentality of neurons is nothing like that of human conscious experience then how does combining them yield such qualitatively different phenomena as human experience – and why think panpsychism is any better off than physicalism in this regard? If proto-mentality just means the potential for conscious experience given the right conditions then the wise physicalist can embrace this idea as well.

It is telling that panpsychism’s solutions to the “combination problem” all look exactly like the identity theory’s solutions to the “hard problem”. They both invoke computational and dynamical complexity, large-scale neural synchrony, etc., to explain the emergence of conscious experience from the brain. I am frankly suspicious of two allegedly different metaphysical theories of mind which nonetheless agree on everything about how science ought to proceed when it comes to explaining and probing the mind. If this means the end of *a priori* metaphysics spinning freely from science, I can live with that.

#### 4. Neutral Monism to the Rescue

I agree with panpsychism wholeheartedly insofar as even if everything else could be reductively explained, conscious experience cannot ever be. However, when it comes to grounding the explanation of conscious experience it seems to me that panpsychism is the worst of all possible metaphysical positions and is scientifically moribund to boot. Although Strawson

would not appreciate this way of putting it, I think that panpsychism with its many materialist assumptions is the negative image of physicalism. Not only does it share with materialism (traditionally conceived) belief in essences and substances, but even more damning, panpsychism typically embraces a kind of atomism whereby the universe is made of proper parts with some sort of “primitive thisness.”

Indeed, it is really the assumption of some sort of atomism that drives panpsychism! For panpsychism, it is atomism that blocks physicalism from explaining the emergence of conscious experience and it is atomism that demands that the proper parts of the universe have some proto-mentality. Furthermore, panpsychism often shares the problematic assumption with dual-aspect theories that mental and physical aspects are *essentially distinct*, further complicating the picture. That is, panpsychism is a reification and multiplication of qualia or proto-qualia which makes the mind-body problem and the hard problem in general intractable. Nagel (1979, p. 181) sums much of this up with his master argument for panpsychism: 1) physical reality is composed of “rearrangeable” particles of matter; 2) mental states are neither reducible to or entailed by physical states; 3) mental states are real and 4) there are no “truly” emergent properties.

Whereas panpsychism is still a reification of scholastic thinking, neutral monism is a true deflation of the mind-body problem. Let us remind ourselves that according to neutral monism:

- Mental and material features are real but, in some specified sense, reducible to or constructable from a neutral basis in a non-eliminative sense of reduction.
- The neutral basis is generally not conceived as substance.
- Mental and material features are not separable or merely correlated, they are non-dual, indeed, they are not *essentially* different and distinct aspects.

Let me then be more specific in what neutral monism entails for me:

1. There are no qualia, and conscious experience is *not* a property, thing, entity or substance that *emerges* from a substrate like ectoplasm being excreted from the brain.
2. Subject (self) and object (world) are co-existent, co-defining and self-consistently constructed. As the co-related features of the well-known face/vase Gestalt image, world and self are two complementary sides of the same coin.
3. Conscious awareness belongs to embodied, embedded and extended organisms. Therefore the very idea of neurons or atoms having experience is a *non sequitur*. A dynamical systems treatment of ecological psychology plus enactivism yields a new brand of neutral monism wherein *affordances* are about the world as experienced and not, say, steps and ladders.

4. The phenomenon of conscious experience is not *internal* to brains, not something that happens *inside* us. The outside/inside distinction is no more absolute than the mental/material distinction.
5. Conscious experience is intentional and it yields a meaningful world for the organism – the much discussed being-in-the-world. Conscious experience is not anything that can be in the world; rather, it is that which gives us a world in the first place and *vice versa*.
6. Conscious experience involves *temporal flow* essentially and it involves essentially the feeling of *nowness* or *presentness* wherein the past, present and future interpenetrate one another in that we anticipate the future and remember the past. In other words, the succession of present moments (that which feels real) are not windowless.
7. The world is not made of anything or composed of proper parts, it's relations all the way down. The world is not a thing, entity or substance either – think of graph theory as opposed to set theory.
8. If brain-body-world forms a strongly coupled non-linear dynamical system, representationalism is unnecessary and thus computationalism is false. Intentionality and conscious experience go hand in hand – they are not orthogonal phenomena. So while there may be many interesting neural *correlates* of conscious experience, they are just necessary (but not sufficient) conditions of conscious experience.

## 5. From Neutral Monism to Cognitive Science and Back Again

Despite the importance that Ryle's (1949) *The Concept of Mind* had in 20th century philosophy, it did not contain satisfactory solutions to many of the problems it addressed. Even Ryle himself thought so, and spent many years later in life trying to address what he took to be the great shortcoming of *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle realized that his early work did not give an adequate account of the real-time activity of thinking, the sort of activity Rodin's *Le Penseur* is engaged in. Ryle's later attempts to solve this problem were aimed at explaining how real-time thinking was not merely speaking, aloud or to oneself, but at the same time not something other than speaking. For example in his "Thinking and Saying", Ryle (1979) wants to describe thinking in a way that is not reductionist, but still avoids inflating it into something mysterious, because such (Ryle 1979, p. 80)

Reductionist and Duplicationist theories are the heads and tails of one and the same mistake. ...

The specific notion of Thinking, which is our long term concern, has been duly deflated by some philosophers into Nothing But such and such; and duly reinflated into Something Else as Well.

To get between the “Nothing But” and the “Something Else as Well” conceptions of thinking, Ryle asks us to consider pennies. A penny is more than a mere metal disc (it is not Nothing But a metal disc), but when you have a penny you do not have two things (you don’t have Something Else as Well). Similarly, Ryle argues, thinking is not Nothing But speaking, but it is not Something Else as Well. I do not endorse Ryle’s story about real-time thinking, not even in outline, but I do agree with his contention that the right story about it must be neither reductionist nor duplicationist. I think the same is true of conscious experience.

Conscious experience is neither reductionist nor duplicationist. Conscious experiences, so I propose, are not Nothing But brain activity, but this does not mean they are to be reified as Something Else as Well. Telling this sort of story about consciousness seems impossible, and may in fact be impossible within the current problem space in philosophical discussions of consciousness. That is, the landscape of the debate has become so constrained that there is no space between reductionism and duplicationism, and we are stuck with immaterial qualia, hard problems, harder problems, and really hard problems, but nothing that seems like a satisfactory solution. Indeed, the hard problem seems cooked up to be straightforwardly “soluble” only by dualism or eliminativism. More importantly, debating the hard problem yields no empirical progress.

My goal is to alter the landscape and, I hope, allow some progress in understanding consciousness. The landscape can be altered by taking work in extended cognitive science seriously. Arguing that taking cognitive systems to be extended brain-body-environment systems makes it attractive to take experience to be an essential feature of such systems. In other words, I argue that if you believe, as a growing number of cognitive scientists and philosophers now do, that the explanation of cognitive systems must encompass portions of the extra-neural, extra-bodily environment, you probably should also believe that the same is true in explaining consciousness, on pain of dualism and the like. I believe that both cognition and consciousness are extended, and therefore speak of “extended phenomenological-cognitive systems” (Chemero and Silberstein 2010; see also Chemero 2009). In such systems, conscious experience is neither Nothing But brain activity, nor Something Else as Well (i.e., qualia).

## 6. Concluding

My embrace of neutral monism comes primarily as a consequence of the story about extended phenomenology-cognition. There are several reasons why neutral monism might be preferable to physicalism in its own right. Physicalism generates the hard problem and guarantees that it has no satisfactory solution. Neutral monism allows a possible dissolution to the

hard problem. Historically speaking, many theories of thinking and experience have required or strongly suggested particular all-encompassing ontological frameworks to go along with them. Berkeley, Kant, the phenomenologists, Gibson, and Varela each posited, necessarily, simultaneous theories of mind and world. In this case the theory dictates a rejection of atomistic conceptions of the world such as physicalism and panpsychism, replaced by a version of ontological structural realism (OSR; Ladyman 2009):

Ontic structural realists argue that what we have learned from contemporary physics is that the nature of space, time and matter are not compatible with standard metaphysical views about the ontological relationship between individuals, intrinsic properties and relations. On the broadest construal OSR is any form of structural realism based on an ontological or metaphysical thesis that inflates the ontological priority of structure and relations.

More specifically, OSR claims that “the relata of a given relation always turn out to be relational structures themselves on further analysis” (Ladyman 2009). Note that OSR does not claim that there are relations without relata, just that the relata are not individuals but always ultimately analyzable as relations as well.

I would argue that both (1) a correct understanding of scientific work on extended phenomenology-cognition and (2) resolving the hard problem strongly recommend rejecting the physicalist orthodoxy. This, some might believe, is too large a price to pay. I disagree. I would happily give up physicalism, which is problematic in its own right and useless on the ground in terms of scientific practice. A fruitful way forward in the science of cognition and phenomenology should be a way to see between a Nothing But and a Something Else as Well.

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