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Realistic Panpsychism

Commentary on Strawson

Galen Strawson's 'Realistic monism' (2006) is a crisp and compelling paper, one that should put to rest many of those lingering concerns about how 'unreasonable' a view panpsychism is. Strawson succeeds in giving a most succinct and illuminating argument that radical emergence is untenable, and, therefore, that the experiential quality of mind is inherent in the material structure of the universe. This has profound and far-reaching implications, both within and outside conventional philosophy.

For many, this will be a shocking conclusion. The old intuitions about the uniqueness of humanity are deeply embedded in all of us, both through our cultural heritage of Christianity and via the secular, mechanistic worldview that predominates in official circles today. The Christian view grants mind and soul only to human beings, who, alone among the things of creation, are formed in the image of God. Apart from certain radical theologians, most notably St Francis, Christian orthodoxy allows no role for any psychic qualities in non-human nature. The mechanistic worldview is equally hostile to any form of panpsychism; matter is inherently lifeless and insentient, merely pushed about by the laws of physics. The emergence of mind and consciousness is an unexplained, and perhaps unexplainable, mystery.

It is a form of hubris to hold that only human beings, or (in slightly more enlightened thinking) only the 'higher animals', are capable of experiencing the world. There is certainly no evidence for this. Where it is held, whether explicitly or implicitly, it is pure presumption. Those who insist that panpsychism cannot be true are heirs to Descartes and his Christianized ontology. These neo-Cartesians see humans (or humans and higher animals, etc.) as miracles of existence, alone in possessing subjectivity, alone in holding a qualitative perspective on

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the world. Perhaps they get some satisfaction from this. Perhaps it is comforting to believe that consciousness is a rare thing — an *extremely* rare thing — in this universe, and that we are among the blessed few. But one should at least expect a modicum of evidence before accepting such a view. As Strawson points out, ‘there is *absolutely no evidence whatsoever*’ for an utterly non-mental reality.

Evidence in favour of panpsychism must of necessity be indirect and circumstantial, since we can have no direct access, nor even useful indirect access, to the internal world of non-humans. Arguments can be roughly grouped into positive and negative forms. The former attempt to show why panpsychism is likely to be true; the latter why non-panpsychism — i.e. neo-Cartesianism — is likely to be false. In the pages of this journal (Skrbina, 2003) and in my recent book *Panpsychism in the West* (Skrbina, 2005) I have argued that, historically, there have been many such arguments; in my book I identify twelve distinct ones. This is so because many of our greatest thinkers and philosophers have held to some version of panpsychism. Among the more notable luminaries we can include: virtually all the pre-Socratics, Plato (arguably), Aristotle, the Stoics, Bruno, Campanella, Spinoza, Leibniz, Diderot, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, James, Peirce, Bergson (arguably), Whitehead and Hartshorne — not to mention a host of British scientist-philosophers: Priestley, Eddington, Jeans, Huxley, Haldane, Sherrington, Waddington, Bohm and Bateson.

Strawson introduces a new take on one of these arguments, that of Non-Emergence. This argument claims that mind or consciousness cannot plausibly emerge from non-conscious matter, and thus that the only alternative is to see all matter as in some sense enminded. This view originated long ago, in the work of Epicurus (ca. 300 BCE), who argued that the spontaneous action of the human will can exist only because will is exhibited by atoms themselves. Several other important thinkers accepted some form of this argument; among them, Telesio, Patrizi, Gilbert, Campanella, Fechner, Paulsen, Clifford and Strong. Even Thomas Nagel (1979) put forth a tentative version — though without endorsing it. But these non-emergence arguments were, for the most part, never really developed. Rather, they are typically stated in passing, as if the author finds the view almost self-evident — or at least as not requiring much elaboration.

To Strawson’s credit, he sees that there is much more to be said; and much more at stake. If I may hazard a simplified reconstruction of his main points:

- There is one ultimate reality to the universe, which encompasses all real and concrete phenomena (monism, or ‘realistic monism’, or ‘real physicalism’, as he prefers).
- ‘Mental’ (experiential) phenomena are a part of this monistic reality, and hence are ‘physical’ (as distinct from ‘physicSal’, i.e. reality as described by modern physics).
- ‘Radical kind’, or brute, emergence is impossible, i.e. mental phenomena cannot arise from any purely non-mental stuff (which exhibits only shape-size-mass-charge-etc. phenomena).
- Therefore, the one reality is inherently experiential.

Many common forms of emergence, Strawson argues, *are* comprehensible; liquidity reduces to shape-size-mass (‘P’) phenomena, life does the same, spatial things reduce to spatiality, and so on. The emergent quality is ‘conceptually homogenous’ with the underlying phenomena. But experientiality is not like this; it is conceptually *heterogeneous* with any supposedly non-experiential physical reality. Unless we allow for miracles, mind cannot emerge from a non-mental substrate. So we either deny our own consciousness (absurd, in Strawson’s view), or we accept that experientiality is a fundamental part of reality.

Though he doesn’t use the term, Strawson’s view is essentially that of *dual-aspect monism*. This is an approach that dates back at least to Spinoza: There is one ultimate substance of the world, but it exhibits two faces — ‘physical’ from the ‘outside’, and ‘mental’ from the ‘inside’. Since the one reality is simultaneously physical and mental, the problem of emergence does not arise. Furthermore, dual-aspect monism strongly urges one toward panpsychism, since it is very hard to see how such a world could exclude mind from any part of reality. In fact, many dual-aspectists have reached a panpsychist conclusion; among these, Schopenhauer, Peirce, Royce, as well as Spinoza.

Strawson’s citations from Eddington are instructive. They demonstrate the insightful metaphysical sensitivities of that great British astrophysicist. The passage from Eddington’s *Nature of the Physical World* (1928) is especially interesting (which I partially repeat from Strawson’s piece for purposes of comparison):

The recognition that our knowledge of the objects treated in physics consists solely of readings of pointers and other indicators transforms our view of the status of physical knowledge in a fundamental way . . . Take the living human brain . . . I know that I think, with a certainty which I cannot attribute to any of my physical knowledge of the world. . . . How can this collection of ordinary atoms be a thinking machine? . . .

[N]ow we realize that science has nothing to say as to the intrinsic nature of the atom . . . Why not then attach it to something of a spiritual nature of which a prominent characteristic is *thought* . . . We have dismissed all preconception as to the background of our pointer readings, and for the most part we can discover nothing as to its nature. But in one case — namely, my own brain — I have an insight which is not limited to the evidence of the pointer readings. That insight shows that they are attached to a background of consciousness. [Furthermore] I may expect that the background of other pointer readings in physics is of a nature continuous with that revealed to me in this particular case . . .

Such words recall the thinking of Schopenhauer, one of the most prominent panpsychists in Western thought. Eddington's 'foreground' Schopenhauer interprets as a collection of sensory impressions, as per classical idealism. Eddington's 'background' is, for Schopenhauer, that which we perceive within ourselves, namely, *will*. Compare his words:

The double knowledge [of the world as both will and idea] given in two completely different ways . . . has now been clearly brought out. We shall accordingly make further use of it as a key to the character of every phenomena in nature, and shall judge all objects which are not our own bodies . . . according to the analogy of our own bodies, and hence shall assume that as on one hand they are idea, just like our bodies, . . . so on the other hand, what remains of objects when we set aside their existence as idea of the subject, must in its inner nature be the same as that in us which we call *will*. For what other kind of existence or reality should we attribute to the rest of the material world? Where should we obtain the elements from which to put together such a world? Besides will and idea nothing is known to us, or is even conceivable. (Schopenhauer, 1819/1995, pp. 37–8)

His 1928 work was not the only time Eddington ventured into panpsychist territory. His earlier book, *Space, Time, and Gravitation* (1920) included this observation:

In regard to the nature of things, this knowledge [of relativity] is only an empty shell — a form of symbols. It is knowledge of structural form, and not knowledge of content. All through the physical world runs that unknown content, which must surely be the stuff of our consciousness. Here is a hint of aspects deep within the world of physics, and yet unattainable by the methods of physics. (p. 200)

Later, in 1939, his *Philosophy of Physical Science* noted the following:

The recognition that physical knowledge is structural knowledge abolishes all dualism of consciousness and matter . . . When we take a structure of sensations in a particular consciousness and describe it in physical terms as part of the structure of an external world, it is still a

structure of sensations. It would be entirely pointless to invent something else for it to be a structure of. Or, to put it another way, there is no point in inventing non-physical replicas of certain portions of the structure of the external world and transferring to the replicas the non-structural qualities of which we are aware in sensation. The portions of the external universe of which we have additional knowledge by direct awareness amount to a very small fraction of the whole; of the rest we know only the structure, and not what it is a structure of.

Although the statement that the universe is of the nature of ‘a thought or sensation in a universal Mind’ is open to criticism, it does at least avoid [a] logical confusion. It is, I think, true in the sense that it is a logical consequence of the form of thought which formulates our knowledge as a description of a universe. (pp. 150–1)

This latter passage seems to incline toward absolute idealism, but is certainly consistent with a panpsychist ontology.

Strawson grants that problems remain with a panpsychist real physicalism. He accepts that ‘whatever problems are raised by this [panpsychism] are problems a real physicalist must face’. He spells out three noteworthy concerns. First is the ‘combination problem’, the question of how many, small atomic experiencers can combine to form, for example, our singular sense of consciousness. He cites James (1890) as elucidating this issue, but by the time of his 1907 Hibbert lectures James seems to have reconciled himself with it.

James’s 1890 work was critical of panpsychism because he could not, at that time, envision how lower-level bits of ‘mind-dust’ or ‘mental atoms’ could combine into higher-order minds. As he recounts:

I found myself obliged, in discussing the mind-dust theory, to urge [the view that higher-level states are not combinations.] The so-called mental compounds are simple psychic reactions of a higher type. The form itself of them, I said, is something new . . . There is thus something new in the collective consciousness . . . The theory of combination, I was forced to conclude, is thus untenable, being both logically nonsensical and practically unnecessary . . . The higher thoughts, I insisted, are psychic units, not compounds. (James, 1909/1996, pp. 188–9)

He notes that ‘for many years I held rigorously to this view’, a view compelled by ordinary reasoning and logic. But by 1907 he was ready to give it up. If compounding of mental entities is not allowed, he said, then we are forced to accept a radically discontinuous picture of the world:

[I]f we realize the whole philosophic situation thus produced [by non-compounding], we see that it is almost intolerable. Loyal to the logical kind of rationality, it is disloyal to every other kind. It makes the universe discontinuous . . . I was envious of Fechner and the other

pantheists [read: panpsychists] because I myself wanted the same freedom that I saw them unscrupulously enjoying, of letting mental fields compound themselves and so make the universe more continuous . . . In my heart of hearts, however, I knew that my situation was absurd and could be only provisional. That secret of a continuous life which the universe knows by heart, and acts on every instant, cannot be a contradiction incarnate. If logic says it is one, so much the worse for logic. (James, 1909/1996, pp. 205–7)

James thus found himself ‘compelled to give up the logic, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably’ that demanded a non-compounding of mind. ‘Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it’ (p. 212). Ultimately we find ourselves swept into ‘the great empirical movement towards a pluralistic, panpsychic view of the universe’ (p. 313). All this suggests that ordinary analytical logic cannot adequately grasp the notion of panpsychism. Perhaps this is why so many philosophers today have such a hard time accepting it.

Strawson’s second problem is that we need to better understand the vast range of qualia experienced by objects ranging from atoms to humans to (perhaps) higher-order entities. Just as we see a spectacular range of physical complexity in things, so we should expect, and perhaps be able to describe, a correspondingly spectacular range of subjectivity in things.

Third, he suggests that we need to develop a more refined metaphysics, one that can engender a more ‘vivid sense’ of this panpsychist nature of the universe. He refers to the process nature of things, suggesting that perhaps a process philosophy view, such as that of panpsychists Whitehead, Russell (arguably), Hartshorne, or David Ray Griffin, might be fruitful.

These last two issues are not so much problems as tasks, areas needing further development. The combination problem is significant but not insurmountable; certainly it is less daunting than articulating a comprehensible theory of radical emergence of mind from utterly mindless matter.

I would add that, in addition, we might encourage a greater understanding and respect for the panpsychist insights of those leading thinkers of the past. Panpsychism has a long and noble legacy in Western thought, but this legacy is almost completely unknown — to the point that even as eminent a philosopher as John Searle could, in 1997, call panpsychism ‘breathtakingly implausible’, and state that ‘there is not the slightest reason to adopt panpsychism’.

Clearly we have far to go. But work is proceeding on several fronts. Strawson's analytical approach is one of at least six distinct lines of thought pursuing panpsychist ontologies. Others include:

- The *quantum physics* approach, as articulated in various forms by Haldane, Bohm, Seager and Hameroff.
- The *information theory* approach, as developed by Bateson, Bohm and the early Chalmers.
- The *process philosophy* approach, originated by Bergson and James, and further elaborated by Whitehead, Hartshorne, Griffin, DeQuincey, Manzotti (2006a, 2006b) and many others.
- The *part-whole 'holarchic'* approach, as conceived by Cardano in the sixteenth century and given new life by Koestler and Wilber.
- The *nonlinear dynamics* approach, envisioned by Peirce (1892) and further developed in various forms by myself, Deiss (2006), and others.

To be sure, a fully articulated metaphysic of panpsychism remains far off. But Strawson's (2006) groundbreaking paper goes a long way toward this end.

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