Against Panpsychism

Raymond Tallis argues that mind is not everywhere.

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Ontology, the branch of philosophy that tries to establish what kinds of beings there are or determine the basic categories of being, is in a rather bad way.

It is sometimes treated with disdain by those who feel that the last word on the ground floor of reality belongs to the natural sciences, notably physics. This view is not confined to physicists and their camp followers, but is shared by many philosophers. In the glorious polemic that opens *Every Thing Must Go* (2008), James Ladyman lambasts philosophers for relying on their intuitions to address questions about ultimate reality instead of getting up to speed with current physical theory.

As if that were not bad enough, philosophy itself seems to have reached an impasse in addressing traditional ontological questions, particularly those that arise from the 'mind-body problem'. All the standard options here seem equally bankrupt. There are two main versions of monism – the idea that there is just one kind of stuff in the universe. *Materialism* claims that all is matter, whatever matter boils down to. But it cannot accommodate the strange properties of material objects such as you and I – persons who are aware of the material world and that part of it which is themselves. *Idealism*, according to which all is mind, making the material world a construct of the mind, also leaves entirely unexplained the difference between matter-like pebbles and mind-like thoughts. The alternative to monism is *dualism*, which acknowledges the irreducible difference between pebbles and thoughts and proposes that there are *two* kinds of fundamental substance: material objects that are located in space and time and have physical properties such as size and weight; and mental items that are not located in space and time and do not have physical properties such as size and weight. Unfortunately, dualism creates more problems than it solves, most notably the place of mind in an overwhelmingly mindless universe. More specifically, there is the problem of how individual minds could be in touch with and act upon the extra-mental world, beginning with their own bodies. A locationless, weightless ghost would seem unable to take up residence at a particular place in the universe – either the body or its brain – and to lack the capacity to interact with its machinery.

Monism and dualism, however, come in many forms, and recent developments in both -isms have narrowed the gap between them with a view to reducing the obvious inadequacies of each. Property dualism, for example, argues that mind and body are two aspects of a single substance. This seems compatible with mind-brain identity theory, according to which brain events have two aspects: neurophysiological processes and conscious contents. However, two minutes' thought is more than enough to dispose of the identity theory. Most obviously, the neural activity supposedly associated with consciousness is nothing like the elements of consciousness. As has often been pointed out, there is nothing like the experience of colour in the electrochemical discharges in the visual cortex. The gap seems even greater when we think of objects that are experienced as being 'over there', distinct from ourselves-as-subjects, that is, distinct from experiences. And the gap is greater still when we come to memories of things past: things that are present to us but explicitly no longer present; or knowledge of facts, such as that the Battle of Waterloo took place in 1815. These problems

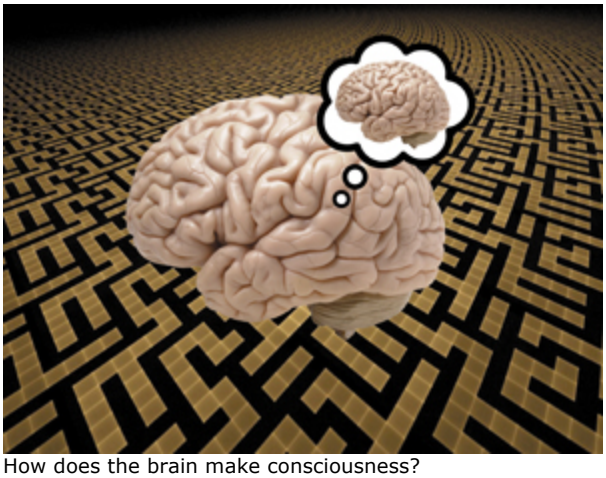
are compounded by the fact that the neural activity which is supposed to be identical with consciousness (such as in some parts of the cerebral cortex) is not fundamentally or even strikingly different from neural activity which most certainly is not (such as in other parts of the cerebral cortex). Less obvious, but just as damaging, is that consciousness and neural activity cannot be two aspects of something because any differentiation of aspects presupposes consciousness, and you can't presuppose consciousness to explain consciousness.

Panpsychism & Bertrand Russell

Dual aspect monism, however, has paved the way for an astonishing new theory that is now gaining increased popularity among philosophers. It is called panpsychism. According to panpsychists, mind is not confined to conscious living creatures, but is a fundamental and universal property of all things.

Philip Goff, one of the most persuasive advocates of panpsychism, is guest editor of this issue of *Philosophy Now*. In his beautifully lucid essay (to which I am heavily indebted), 'Bertrand Russell and the Problem of Consciousness' (in *Consciousness and the Great Philosophers*, edited by S. Leach and J. Tartaglia, 2016), Goff connects panpsychism with a form of neutral monism associated with Bertrand Russell.

Russell argued that our difficulty in understanding how something as apparently radically different from experiences as nerve impulses could be identical with them originates in the fact that objective observation does not give us the real nature of material events. It can show us their causal relations and their mathematical structure, but not their intrinsic nature. Or, as Adam Frank has put it, "our best theories for *how matter behaves* tell us very little about *what matter is*" ('Mindless Matter: Matter Alone Cannot Explain the Riddle of Consciousness', *Aeon*, 13th March 2016). So what we learn of nerve impulses through neuroscience does not tell us what they are *in themselves*. To know what they are in themselves, you would have to *be* them. But according to Russell, we *are* our nerve impulses, or at least some of them. Being them, we find they are experiences.


How does the brain make consciousness?

It is this argument that justifies Russell's deeply counter-intuitive claim that a physiologist observing a brain is seeing not the activity in the brain being examined, which is observed from without, but his own experiences, that is to say his own nerve impulses, which are

experienced from within. What we directly know is our own brain activity, which gives us only mediated access to external objects, and hence to the objective knowledge that ultimately leads to the science of the brain.

There is a danger stemming from this view: neuro-solipsism. If all that I *know* is activity in my brain, then the sense I have that I know a world out there populated with things and people must be an illusion. Yet if there are no true perceptions, beliefs, or thoughts about the external world, we have no reason for accepting the neural theory of consciousness, and even less for trying persuade others of its truth!

Russell's argument also opens the way to a broader monism in which mind and matter are simply aspects of a more fundamental stuff that is neither. Mind, that is to say, is everywhere: wherever there is stuff, there is mind. As Philip Goff puts it, "an electron has an inner life."

Problems With Panpsychism

Unfortunately, far from solving the problem of identifying mental activity with neural activity, panpsychism makes it worse. If all stuff has mind as one of its aspects, what is special about the brain such that it – and not say rocks and trees – is aware of a world in virtue of being aware of itself? What is it about a brain that enables the mind-like aspect of things to manifest itself? If even the smallest things have very basic kinds of experiences, how is the macroscopic consciousness of organisms such as birds and beasts and people built up out of these elementary constituents? What the consciousness of these constituents would amount to and how the consciousness of a vast assembly of such constituents would throw in their lot with each other to generate an agreed upon continuous, world-supporting viewpoint of a macroscopic conscious being like you and me is entirely obscure. This is the so-called combination problem. Equally, or even more, obscure is why this happens in some things and not others; in brains, for example, and not pebbles, mountains, toe nails or hearts. What is it about a brain and its neural activity that enables it to gather up countless mental sequins into an advanced consciousness, such as is possessed by a reader of *Philosophy Now*?

There is a variant of panpsychism called 'Cosmopsychism' offered up to address the combination problem. (Goff discusses it in 'Panpsychism', forthcoming in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*, eds S. Schneider and M. Velmans). Cosmopsychists argue that it is a mistake to begin with the 'smallist' assumption that the primary components of consciousness are to be found at the level of microscopic constituents, which throw in their lot with each other to make up a macroscopic mind, a viewpoint. Rather, it is the universe as a whole that is conscious.

While this may address the problem of tiny bits of conscious stuff working together to produce macroscopic conscious entities, it does not explain: (a) How it is that some entities in this 'panconscious' world seem to be conscious (people) and others (pebbles) apparently not; (b) Why, among conscious entities, some (such as philosophers) are more conscious than others (such as oysters); and (c) How it is that conscious beings such as you and me have distinctive viewpoints *on* the conscious universe.

Cosmopsychism, that is, replaces the combination problem with the 'disaggregation problem', of how universal consciousness becomes individual conscious minds. This is reminiscent of the problem that Kant's transcendental idealism faces in accounting for

individual minds that have specific contents in part dependent on the spatio-temporal location of a particular (organic) body. (I discussed this in an 'Overdue Appearance of Immanuel Kant', *Philosophy Now* Issue 118.) Also, a conscious-as-a-whole universe would presumably be a consciousness of everything, which is impossible to imagine. Less obviously, it might be consciousness of *nothing* – since there would be nothing outside of its consciousness for it to be conscious *of*. Panpsychism ironically falls foul of the danger that, if the relationship between mind and world, or more specifically, knower and known, is too cosy, then there would be no objects of knowledge, even less a painful, laborious process of acquiring knowledge.

A common defence of panpsychism is that, while (as Goff admits) it seems crazy, no other theory can account for the relationship between mind and brain. And it is true that the materialist alternatives appear on close inspection not to be "the safe harbour of metaphysical sobriety that many may desire," as Adam Frank argues in 'Mindless Matter'. But this defence sounds like an 'ontology of the gaps' analogous to the 'God of the gaps' argument for the existence of the deity.

Goff also points out that ideas that have once been thought crazy are now conventional science. I can envisage Groucho Marx's response to that argument: "They said Newton was mad and he was a genius; they said Einstein was mad and he was a genius; and they said my Uncle Louis was mad – and he was."

Ontology is in poor shape, but that is, perhaps, not a bad thing. For an ontological agnostic like me, it means that anything is possible – apart from what is presently on offer.

Raymond Tallis' latest book, Of Time and Lamentation: Reflections on Transience *is out now.*