

Evolutionary Panpsychism

Lorenzo Sleakes lorenzosleakes@gmail.com

Panpsychism is a worldview in which the mind is placed as a fundamental and natural part of the world. The goal of panpsychism is to picture mentality evolving through a continuous process and in no way as an abrupt irruption of some totally alien fundamental entity into a previously unconscious world. But the most popular panpsychist model today betrays that motivation by still invoking some kind of sudden and radical emergence of high level animal sentience into the world. The popular type of panpsychism I refer to is called constitutive panpsychism because within it the mind of high level animals springs miraculously out of the combination of billions of underlying conscious fundamental particles. The only difference between this constitutive panpsychism and the materialism it aims to depose is that the fundamental particles have a hidden mentality, but there is still the sudden and discontinuous inexplicable leap from the lowest level to the highest. I propose a better kind of panpsychism, one that remains true to its original motivation where there is a continuity of evolving minds that are each fundamental at several levels in nature and there is no composition of higher minds from lower minds. While still involving emergence, it is not a radical or brute emergence but an intelligible emergence of a more evolutionary sort and it retains the possibility of mental causal efficacy at higher levels as well as micro-levels because animal minds are not merely derivatives but fundamentals with potential powers of their own..

This proposal involves the ubiquitous natural processes of fission and fusion. In the world of particle physics a simple example would be the fusion of an electron and positron to produce a photon and the subsequent fission of the photon into an electron and positron. If the elementary particles are elementary mental subjects as panpsychism theorizes, then fusion and fission involves combining and splitting of subjects. A ubiquitous example of fusion in biology is the coming together of sperm and egg in fertilization to produce a new fertilized egg or zygote . Fission is involved in the subsequent creation of all the cells in an organism from the cell divisions originating from that fertilized egg. Again if these cells have a hidden mentality then cellular fusion and fission involves the merging and splitting of minds. Our high level animal minds, rather than miraculously popping into existence when billions of particles combine, then are born from the fission and fusion of a subset of nerve cell minds in the brain. There are three possibilities here: either a single nerve cell mind becomes the Leibnizian dominant monad of the animal - this is what James called the pontifical cell hypothesis that he saw as a logically coherent (though not necessarily believable) alternative to the combination problem. Another possibility is that the minds of a group of nerve cells fuse to become one mind with each cell giving up its individual mentality. A third is that a group of nerve cells remain individual subjects while they mentally divide into new minds that then fuse to form the animal's dominant monad. In any of these cases there is a continuity of subjectivity through all of evolution going back to the first eukaryotic cells.

Emergent evolutionary panpsychism involves a principle of continuity and conservation. Such principles are at the heart of science and the idea of the ancients that "nothing comes from nothing". Mind comes from pre-existing minds and self from pre-existing self. There is no brute

or radical popping into existence of an animal mind merely because billions of particles are organized momentarily in a certain way. Rather, in this framework the conscious self has a diachronic unity, a persistent existence over time that neither materialism nor constitutive panpsychism can provide. It models the inherent common sense that we are the same selves even after we wake up from a deep sleep and even as we grow and age. The lowest level “point particle” is represented as having a hidden nature as a subjective “point of view”. This is what the particle is in essence prior to its objective relational and mathematical properties. Relativistically and biographically over time those pointlike individuals may be portrayed as world-lines. When adding synchronic spatial extension, the “points of view” become “frames of reference” that can then be diachronically visualized as world-tubes. The universe can be modeled as a 4 dimensional network of interacting subjective world-tubes. It is not so controversial that minds have a synchronic unity. After all, it is hard to see how a visual field is anything but a unitary image with up, down, left, right dimensionality - a frame of reference. But the world-tube model also sees minds as synchronic with permanence and continuity over time. In this framework the strong common sense of a naturalized self identity persisting though time is preserved. After all, you remember past episodes as not merely facts but things that you personally had experienced back then. And about the future said Nagel: “You anticipate future experiences as things that will happen to you, this self, not just to a later stage of the organism, and you fear your own future pain in a way that you don’t fear the future pain of others – because it will be yours.”

A major problem with constitutive panpsychism is that the gap is too great between the elementary particle minds and the minds of animals with brains. There is no intelligible connection between the micro and macro levels. I have already discussed a probable step in between by assuming the cells within a multicellular animal are themselves conscious and so consciousness was there all along and forms one continuous flow from the beginning of eukaryotic cellular life. But this still leaves a huge chasm between the mentality of elementary particles and the first cells. A credible candidate to fill this evolutionary intermediate level are large multi-conformational molecules such as proteins that have the complexity and flexibility (essentially able to bend at the joints) to become self-movers. Proteins are the building blocks of all life on Earth. Mental emergence of cellular life happened when certain cells developed an internal protein cytoskeleton that enabled a sophistication of controlled self-movement. So instead of an unreasonable leap from particles to brains we can recognize our planet’s layered structure where there are logical steps to a higher mentality. Sentient particles interact to make up sentient macromolecules which build the cytoskeleton of sentient cells that develop into the nervous systems of conscious animals.

References:

William James - The Principles of Psychology vol 1
Thomas Nagel - The I in Me
Lorenzo Sleakes - Panpsychism and Real Mental Causation
Lorenzo Sleakes - Scientific Animism