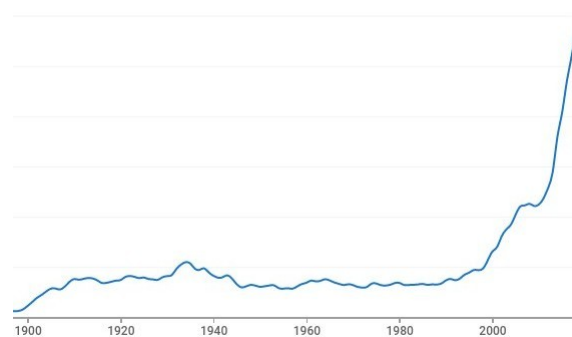


# From Panpsychism to Neutral Monism... and Back Again (?)

Since the publication of Strawson's 'Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism' (2006) and its swarm of replies in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, the remarkable reinvigoration of panpsychism continues apace. See e.g. Skrbina (2009); Brüntrup and Jaskolla (2016); Seager (2020), and here, for what it is worth, is the google ngram for 'panpsychism':



This recent surge of work in panpsychism may trace back to a chapter in David Chalmers's *The Conscious Mind* (1996) but panpsychism has been of perennial interest, falling out of sight for only a few decades in the mid-twentieth century (for a thorough history see Skrbina 2017).

Through these decades, various forms of reductive materialism held sway in Western analytic philosophy but there was a constant undercurrent of resistance that focused on consciousness and its strange, seemingly rather arbitrary relation to the presumably mindless entities of basic physics, which - at least in the minds of many physicists and especially their philosophical handmaidens - plumbed the true, complete and fundamental nature of reality and which provided the ultimate constituents of absolutely everything. No place for consciousness down there and seemingly no way, and never any physics driven need to, generate consciousness as nature evolves from the early inchoate quark-gluon plasma to the complexity we observe today for the fundamental physics driving all this is the same throughout.

What Chalmers presented as the 'hard problem' of consciousness might have been recently under appreciated but nonetheless, as Strawson has often pointed out, it was a vivid mystery throughout the 19th century exactly when the completeness of the physical picture was taking hold. Thomas Huxley said that 'how it is that any thing so remarkable as a state of consciousness comes about as the result of irritating nervous

tissue, is just as unaccountable as the appearance of the Djin when Aladdin rubbed his lamp' (1866). I think Huxley is right. We should pause to wonder at just how very weird it is that in a world fundamentally devoid of it, a state of consciousness could arise.

John Tyndall put the same point thus:

. . . the passage from the physics of the brain to the corresponding facts of consciousness is inconceivable as a result of mechanics. Granted that a definite thought, and a definite molecular action in the brain, occur simultaneously; we do not possess the intellectual organ, nor apparently any rudiment of the organ, which would enable us to pass, by a process of reasoning, from the one to the other. They appear together, but we do not know why. (1870, p. 63)

Tyndall was, of course, basically a supporter of the new scientific materialist outlook but held that at bottom both matter and consciousness, as well as their linkages, were ultimately mysterious: 'On both sides of the zone here assigned to the materialist he is equally helpless. If you ask him whence is this "Matter" of which we have been discoursing . . . he has no answer' (p. 64).

The now largely neglected – though not by Strawson – 19th century physiologist, Emile du Bois-Reymond, enunciated a version of the hard problem and went so far as to declare it unsolvable in an infamous address to the Congress of German Scientists and Physicians in 1874 (du Bois-Reymond 1874). Although couched in terms of the classical physics of the 19th century, du Bois-Reymond articulates a version of the hard problem and the explanatory gap (Levine 1983). He sketches the reasons for it whose essence still informs recent panpsychism. The core idea is that it is impossible to deduce the presence of consciousness from even a complete fundamental physical description of the world. Du Bois-Reymond works in the context of classical, pre-relativity, physics – an antediluvian world view still tacitly lurking in the thought of many philosophers working today – but enunciates quite well the principle of the causal closure of the physical. In principle, a complete fundamental physical description of the world (or any isolated part) would provide the resources to explain everything that happens in the physical world. He is not worried about the phenomena of life which was, he wrote, merely an 'exceedingly difficult mechanical problem' (1874, p. 23) but 'we cannot, by means of any imaginable movement of material particles, bridge over the chasm between the conscious and the unconscious (p. 28). Du Bois-Reymond is happy to agree that the physical state of the brain will give rise to consciousness but this transition is completely inexplicable.

That is one ultimate mystery of two he identifies. The other is that of the 'inner nature' of matter itself. Du Bois-Reymond even enunciates the Russellian Monist's deepest hope:

... the question arises whether the two limits of our knowledge of Nature are not perhaps identical, i.e., whether, supposing we understood the nature of matter and force, we should not also understand how the substance that underlies them could, under certain conditions, feel, desire, and think (1874, p. 32).

Du Bois-Reymond could not share this hope, and ends his address with his famous pessimistic assessment: not merely *Ignoramus* but *Ignorabimus!*<sup>1</sup>

The worry here can be expressed in a number of basic arguments, all of them controversial though some are very familiar and well honed. Let us briefly review the arguments.

1. Subjectivity vs. Objectivity. Thomas Nagel argued that because consciousness is an inherently subjective feature of the world it could not be explicated in purely objective terms (see Nagel 1974). The victory condition for a ‘reduction’ or ‘naturalistic explanation’ of consciousness is for the reduction to be expressed in completely objective (or ‘scientific’) terms. Reminiscent of du Bois-Reymond, Nagel points out the ‘subjective character of experience . . . is not captured by any of the familiar, recently devised reductive analyses of the mental, for all of them are logically compatible with its absence’ (1974, p. 436). This is in stark contrast to *all* other cases of emergence we know of. For example, the non-liquidity of water (at normal temperature and pressure) is logically incompatible with the properties of hydrogen and oxygen and the laws governing them.
2. Epistemic Access. The objective-subjective gap leads to the strange feature of the phenomenal character of experience that it cannot be known except by its instantiation in the knower. Frank Jackson (1982) leveraged this into the argument that the scientific or objective description cannot be complete because one could know all of it without knowing the nature of subjective experience (e.g. what it is like to see red). This highly intuitive argument reinforces the sense that there is an unbridgeable ‘gulf’ or explanatory gap between consciousness and the world as studied by physics.
3. Modal Variation. The absence and unknowability of subjective character in terms of the objective view of the world seems to imply that the undeniable linkages between, say, brain states and states of consciousness are not dictated by physical law alone. Maybe, instead, there is some kind of extra psycho-physical law which, as John Searle put it, underpins the fact that ‘biological processes produce conscious mental phenomena, and these are irreducibly subjective’ (1992, p. 98<sup>2</sup>). Evidently, there is nothing in the physical laws which necessitate the production or appearance of consciousness, so there could be a possible world with our physical laws but different psycho-physical laws. This leads to the ‘zombie’ argument (see e.g. Chalmers 1996, ch. 2): there could be a world just like ours physically, but lacking the subjective character side of reality. The existence of

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<sup>1</sup>This pronouncement really rubbed people the wrong way and du Bois-Reymond was widely vilified. One perhaps surprising reaction came from mathematics. David Hilbert was convinced there were no unsolvable problems and in his 1930 radio address proclaimed what became his epitaph: ‘Instead of the ridiculous *Ignorabimus*, our solution is, by contrast, “We must know. We will know”’ (see McCarty 2004). A year later came Gödel’s incompleteness results.

<sup>2</sup>This is what Searle said; it’s not clear what he meant however since he frequently claims to be a materialist and holds that the emergence of consciousness is much like the emergence of liquidity. Strange, since obviously there is nothing irreducible about liquidity.

such a possible world follows from Nagel’s observation, save for a posit of bizarre, inexplicable and ad hoc facts about absolute necessity.

4. Vagueness and Consciousness. On standard pictures of the relation between matter and consciousness, it takes complex physical states to ignite consciousness. What these might be, despite our growing knowledge of some interesting though rough correlations between brain states and states of consciousness<sup>3</sup>, we have no clue. But the candidates are things like neural synchronization or large scale recurrent organization of neural processes. Whatever the neural candidate, call it  $\phi$ , its general complexity will mean that there will be borderline cases where it is simply unclear whether the state is a  $\phi$  or not (e.g. is the neural synchronization extensive enough). This will be a matter of vagueness, not ignorance. Just as some people count as borderline cases of ‘tall’, some neural states will be borderline cases of  $\phi$ . But there are no borderline cases of consciousness, even the slightest, most inchoate, confused and dim feeling is totally a case of consciousness. There is a basic mismatch between the ontological status of consciousness and its neural surrogates<sup>4</sup>.
5. Consciousness and Value. Arguably, the *only* thing which possesses intrinsic value is consciousness or rather, more precisely, states of consciousness. More arguably, ‘nothing can be intrinsically good unless it contains... consciousness’ (Moore 1912). Undeniably, at least some states of consciousness are intrinsically valuable. But extant physicalist theories of consciousness endorse a thesis of multiple realizability, by which the identity of a qualitative state of consciousness is independent of its physical realizers (that is, a computer simulation of my brain is - on many accounts - enjoying the same state of consciousness as myself). This implies that the realizers are states with instrumental value. If I had some brain disease and the doctors replaced diseased neurons with electronic surrogates, and my consciousness thereby continued unchanged, I would not care about the replacement. The surrogate neurons are merely the means to the intrinsically valuable end of consciousness. By Leibniz’s law something with instrumental value only cannot be identical to something with intrinsic value<sup>5</sup>.

All these arguments suggest that consciousness does not fit into the otherwise smooth system of integration with the scientific-physicalist picture of the world in which every phenomenon can, in principle, be explicated in terms of or ‘grounded in’ the resolution of the phenomenon into more or less complex systems of fundamental physical entities.

It’s a fairly quick step from this core problem of consciousness to panpsychism via a straightforward argument:

P1. Consciousness is real, it exists.

P2. Consciousness cannot be physically reduced (or fully explicated in purely physical terms).

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<sup>3</sup>For a fascinating clinical take on this see Owen (2017).

<sup>4</sup>For discussions of the vagueness argument see Antony (2006); Simon (2017); Tye (2021).

<sup>5</sup>There has been lots of work on consciousness and value lately. The argument sketched here was floated in Seager 2001. See also Cutter (2017), Lee (2019), Siewert (1998), ch. 9.

P3. Nature does not exhibit radical emergence.

C. So, consciousness is a fundamental feature of the world, presumably ubiquitous in nature, which is panpsychism.

The premises range from highly to reasonably plausible. A few philosophers – the illusionists – deny that consciousness exists, e.g. Daniel Dennett (1991<sup>6</sup>) and Keith Frankish (2016). Illusionism is the compliment that materialism pays to the problem of consciousness. It is the last dodge in the face of the problem, but to say the least it is highly implausible. P2 is the burden imposed by the arguments above. P3 is more controversial. The non-existence of radical emergence is certainly not a priori (see Wilson 2021). But nature does not seem to make any such radical leaps and the leap to consciousness must be, by argument 4 above, sudden and hugely disruptive as well as apparently absolutely unique in nature (as Strawson 2006 argued, following a long tradition upholding continuity in nature). William Clifford put it thus:

... we cannot suppose that so enormous a jump from one creature to another should have occurred at any point in the process of evolution as the introduction of a fact [i.e. consciousness] entirely different and absolutely separate from the physical fact (1886, p. 265).

Clifford then notes that there is no way to stop this argument working back prior to the origin of life itself:

we are obliged in order to save continuity... that along with every motion of matter, whether organic or inorganic, there is some fact that corresponds to the mental fact (1886, p. 266).

Panpsychism is thus a fairly reasonable position to take in the face of the problem of consciousness. On the other hand, it faces at least two major hurdles. The first, of perhaps dubious significance, is the flat implausibility of assigning some kind of consciousness to the fundamental units of physical reality. Many balk at this but as David Lewis noted, it is hard to refute an incredulous stare. It does not seem to be *impossible* for the fundamental physical entities, whatever they might be, to have some spark of inner life (this truth is part of what makes the problem of consciousness so difficult – we don't really know anything about the physical conditions that can be associated with consciousness).

The second major problem is the infamous combination problem<sup>7</sup>. The problem arises when the panpsychist tries to cash the promissory note that panpsychism avoids radical emergentism. To succeed at this, there needs to be an intelligible account of how the elementary portions of consciousness distributed over the physical fundamentals can lawfully combine, conjoin, fuse or otherwise come together into the kinds of complex

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<sup>6</sup>Where we find the remarkable claim that 'There seems to be phenomenology. . . . But it does not follow from this undeniable, universally attested fact that there really is phenomenology' (p. 366). Elsewhere he adds that subjects reports of their phenomenology constitute 'a fictional world' including the 'sounds, smells, hunches' etc. which the subject 'sincerely believes to exist' (p. 98).

<sup>7</sup>The problem is most trenchantly presented by William James (see 1890/1950, especially ch. 6; see also Seager 1995).

consciousnesses with which we are familiar. It is hard to find any account that does not face serious objections<sup>8</sup>. Although I believe there are number of promising approaches to the combination problem it is far from clear that it can be solved<sup>9</sup>.

But instead of further articulating the panpsychist position I'd like to sketch a somewhat different approach, one which I think has the advantages of panpsychism without the disadvantages (I concede it might have an incredulous stare issue of its own). Notice that P2 in the above argument has an obvious loophole. What would happen if we relaxed the condition that consciousness be *physically* reducible?

One way to exploit the loophole is via some version of what has come to be called Russellian Monism (for a recent overview see Goff and Coleman 2020), a view which has seen a parallel explosion of interest to that of panpsychism and is often presented as a version of panpsychism. Roughly speaking, a *non-panpsychist* Russellian monist posits an intrinsic, non-relational and non-mental nature 'behind or below' the observable physical world investigated by the physical sciences and further holds that this intrinsic nature is what gives rise to consciousness. Quite independently of the problem of consciousness, this intrinsic background is needed to provide the ground for all the relational structures which science investigates, and to which its investigations are restricted. As Strawson points out, Arthur Eddington championed this line of argument, but took the panpsychist path:

... the exploration of the external world by the methods of physical science leads not to a concrete reality but to a shadow world of symbols, beneath which those methods are unadapted for penetrating. Feeling that there must be more behind, we return to our starting point in human consciousness – the one centre where more might become known. (Eddington 1929, p. 73)

Eddington's thought is that in consciousness we already know a non-relational, intrinsic or 'categorical' feature of the world. If the relational structures given by science need a categorical basis, why not take the simple path and let something we already fits the general bill, namely consciousness itself, serve? Russell himself did not quite go down this path but he did agree that in consciousness we have some access to the intrinsic nature of reality, as in his cryptic pronouncement that 'what the physiologist sees when he looks at a brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining' (Russell 1927, p. 383).

However, the loophole in P2 does not require an immediate leap to panpsychism or the idea that consciousness itself is the ground of reality. Perhaps the ground is some aspect of the physical world itself, invisible to science insofar as it is restricted to revealing only the relational structure of the world (see Stoljar 2006). The obvious problem with such an approach is that it seems little more than the bald assertion that the posited physical features suffice to generate consciousness. There is no intelligible account of the nature of this new intrinsic physical feature, or how it, being devoid of consciousness, would serve to ignite consciousness in matter.

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<sup>8</sup>Much has been written about the combination problem. Probably the best overview is Chalmers (2016).

<sup>9</sup>The deepest, and rather optimistic, look at the general issue of combining minds is Roelofs (2019).

Perhaps, then, the ground is something else altogether, a neutral, neither physical nor mental, feature of the world. Proponents of such a ‘neutral monism’ (a term coined by Russell), ‘radical empiricism’ (the term favoured by William James) or ‘elementary event monism’ (the term of Ernst Mach) evidently still face the ‘generation problem’ of explaining how the neutral will enable consciousness. Typically, they try to shift the goalposts by characterizing the neutral in suspiciously mentalistic terms: Russell’s ‘sense data’ or ‘percepts’, James’s ‘pure experience’<sup>10</sup> and Mach’s ‘sensations’<sup>11</sup>.

We can follow James in endorsing a truly neutral monism and perhaps not quite end up in panpsychism. Nor should we take the neutral to be a mysterious, shadowy background entity whose nature, as neither mental nor physical, is incomprehensible. We would like to explicate consciousness within this system, outline its relation to the physical world and do the latter without rebooting the problem of consciousness<sup>12</sup>.

In order to do all this we need but one primitive notion: presence. Take some time to appreciate what is present to you at this moment. Both the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ worlds are present in a host of different ways. Presence transcends the mental-physical split in at least two ways. One is that both the mental and physical, despite their differences, are equally present. The second is that presence is never definitively physical or mental. What is present to you now is (I expect) some more or less ordinary physical objects (in my case a desk, a room, a computer, etc.). But evidently the right dose of LSD in the right circumstances, or even just an especially vivid albeit rather pedestrian dream, could have made what is present to you now an hallucinatory experiential feature of reality, non-veridical in its presentation of the physical world, but just as much present to you. This suggests that presence is inherently neither mental or physical.

It is of course natural to take ‘presence’ to mean ‘presence to mind’, but this slide towards the subjective is not mandatory and should be resisted. Presence itself should be taken as the foundational feature of reality. Rather than taking presence to be a relation to mind, take minds to be a relation defined over presence. Similarly, let us take the physical world to be another – intersecting – system of relations defined in terms of presence. This is the core idea of neutral monism, which James expressed as:

The one self-identical thing has so many relations to the rest of experience [i.e. James’s ‘pure experience’] that you can take it in disparate systems of association, and treat it as belonging with opposite contexts. In one of these contexts it is your ‘field of consciousness’; in another it is ‘the room in which you sit’. . . (1912/2003, p. 7).

Russell put it this way:

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<sup>10</sup>James came to recognize this and in a 1909 notebook entry wrote that ‘the constitution of reality which I am making for is of the psychic type’ (1988, p. 126). James’s path toward panpsychism is nicely charted in Cooper (1990).

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed survey of the neutral monisms of these three thinkers which assiduously avoids ascribing anything like panpsychism to any of them see Banks (2014).

<sup>12</sup>The view outlined below bears interesting relations to Sam Coleman’s (Coleman 2014, 2017) ‘panqualityism’ though I think once we grasp the nature of presence and the ‘presence first’ program various difficulties facing Coleman are much less pressing.

the whole duality of mind and matter. . . is a mistake; there is only one kind of *stuff* out of which the world is made, and this stuff is called mental in one arrangement, physical in the other (Russell's italics; 1913/1984, p. 15).

We just need to appreciate that this *stuff* is simply presence, something we are directly acquainted with in every experience but which, as is generally evident in experience, is not itself mental. This stuff does not 'turn into' the physical world, or the mental realm when arranged in the right way; rather the right sort of arrangement *is* the physical world or *is* the mental realm.

Just as it is natural to fall into error by assimilating presence to 'presence to mind' it is also natural to think we can *generate* presence. Just by turning my head I can change what is present. But if neutral monism is true, this too is the wrong way to think of presence. Mark Johnston, in a paper which is a gold mine of ideas helping to capture the kind of neutral monism I am proposing<sup>13</sup>, comes close to what I am trying to get at here when he writes:

We are not Producers of Presence; it is not that our mental acts make things present. We are Samplers of Presence; our mental acts are samplings from a vast realm of objective manners of presentation. It is of the nature of existents to present, in all the various ways in which they can be grasped in this or that mental act of this or that individual mind (2007, p. 253).

This is not quite right because it's wrong to think of the 'modes of presentations' as dependent on objects which 'have' them. Rather, presentations are the fundamental reality and objects are relations defined over the presentations. This makes another of Johnston's remarks less cryptic. He says 'properly understood, there are no subjective phenomena' (2007, p. 248). Every experience is an entrance to the objective world of presence through, I cannot resist writing, the doors of perception.

How much presence is there? We have no idea of the limits of presence. It could be that presence is restricted to *me*, leading to a peculiar kind of solipsism<sup>14</sup>. After all, I've never run across any that wasn't mine. Seriously, such narcissistic parochialism is no reason to restrict the range of presence; any possible form of experience will reveal more sorts of presence. But this again has it backwards: every form of presence reveals more sorts of possible experiences. Presence itself is fundamental reality and some of it is within our grasp (I wonder if all of it within *something's* grasp).

If solipsism is one extreme<sup>15</sup>, the other is that every possible form of presence is actual<sup>16</sup>. I rather favour this view since it avoids the need to impose what would seem

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<sup>13</sup>I hasten to point out the Johnston does not endorse even his own account, let alone the neutral monist extension of it. In fact, he begs his readers to answer 'a plea for help: Here follows a hypothesis, help me to see just why it couldn't be so!' (2007, p. 233).

<sup>14</sup>For a fascinating examination of this kind of solipsism, though not in the context of neutral monism, see Hare (2009).

<sup>15</sup>It might seem that the true minimal extreme would be that there is no presence, but we know that is not so. No one can deny that something is present. Beyond, or behind, consciousness itself, it is the fact of presence that underpins the unassailable knowledge that something exists.

<sup>16</sup>The picture of plenitudinous presence is somewhat inspired by Julian Barbour's picture of physical



an arbitrary limitation on what is present, based upon the extremely narrow range to which human beings have access. So imagine a hugely multidimensional space where each axis represents some feature of presence. What is present to you right now is a point in this space delimited by what we inadequately call colour, shape, position, smell, sound, distance, occlusion, etc. etc. I don't mean to suggest that presence is limited to sensory qualities; cognitive aspects are included in what is present and rich systems of interrelatedness, e.g. a 'cell phone' (yes, a cell phone can be present to me). Of course, these names are impositions on presence, which in itself is neutral: not physical, mental, technological, biological. The true epoché is beyond Husserl's. Do not just bracket the world, bracket mind and world to be left with reality simply as it is present.

Of note is that this space of presence does not contain an axis for time or physical space. It does not contain an axis for mind, consciousness, mass, charge or other familiar forms of existence. These are all systems of relations defined over what is present. A physical object could be, perhaps, likened to a certain 'thread' through the space of presence: one which satisfies all the conditions of physical objecthood, whatever those might be: maybe size, shape, continuity over temporal and spatial tracks, etc. plus the myriad of connections to other things constitutive of objective existence. Space and time themselves will be co-defined with these objects and with mental features. Minds form another set of 'threads' meeting other conditions (whatever those might be, maybe memory continuity, various sorts of coherence relations, many kinds of relations between sensory and cognitive features, etc.). Our quotidian world of objects, animals and people is a set of these threads of presence. On this view, persons are systems of presence. Here, again, is Johnston:

... the modes of presentation of the items in my perceptual field are perspectival; that is, they present items to a particular viewing position, or more generally to a particular point from which someone might sense the surrounding environment. The implied position at which those modes of presentation seem to converge is the position of my head and body. To that same implied position, a bodily field, as it were a three-dimensional volume of bodily sensation, also presents. And that implied position is also one from which certain acts, presented as willed, emanate (p. 259).

But again, don't think of modes of presentation as anchored to objects. Presence is first, with all its perspectival character (other forms of presence - maybe - lack perspectival character, maybe we can even experience some of these under the right conditions of 'loss of self').

This sort of neutral monism can offload a host of traditional philosophical problems onto the quotidian world. What is causation? We might follow recent interventionist or Bayesian accounts: causation is a certain relation of events in the quotidian world which we can assess and discover as we thread our way through the space of presence. Is there a metaphysical problem of causation? Causation is a productive or sustaining

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reality, in which every physical possibility exists and a 'world' is set of possibilities which obey a host of constraints, some of which we know as the 'laws of nature' (see Barbour 2000).

relation between events which involve objects and properties. The system of presence does not include any such. The realm of presence just, so to speak, sits there all at once internally densely articulated but never changing. So no, there is no metaphysical problem of causation. What is freedom of will? Freedom is the quotidian system of personal acts which meet ordinary conditions of autonomy (whatever they may be in detail, neutral monism won't answer that question). Is there a metaphysical problem of freedom? Freedom only exists in the realm of beings who can entertain options and make choices. The system of presence does not include any such, so no, there is no metaphysical problem of freedom.

More exotic philosophical issues can also be offloaded. Scientific realism? As James celebrated in the name of his theory, neutral monism is a kind of empiricism. It accords primacy to what is 'observable' or 'experienceable'. But that does not entail in any straightforward way scientific anti-realism, though it is compatible with it. An anti-realism such as Bas van Fraassen's (1980; 2002) takes the quotidian world as ontologically fundamental and observability within the quotidian world thereby takes primacy. Neutral monism's brand of empiricism is more revisionary. So, an object in the *quotidian* world is real if it meets the standards of evidence needed to establish its existence (whatever those standards might be). So, do electrons exist? I'd say we have pretty good evidence they do. Are they part of the fundamental nature of reality? Not at all – they don't even come close to being a candidate.

Given that some sense has been made of the picture of reality aimed at here, two questions naturally arise. The first is: what about the original problem of consciousness? The theory of neutral monism is designed to solve (or perhaps dissolve) this problem. The world is made of 'what it is like' stuff. If consciousness is apprehension of what is present by a mind then there is no problem of consciousness. Some of the threads of presence constitute minds which, essentially by definition, are apprehending what is present and so automatically there is something it is like for them. There is no traditional problem of consciousness, no problem of explaining how the physical world generates, realizes or constitutes consciousness, because that problem stems from a basic mistake about the ontology of reality.

Perhaps there is a question about why we find ourselves in a world where there are stable psycho-physical relations; in fact there is a question about why we find ourselves in a stable world at all. I suspect a Kantian answer is available to answer these sorts of questions. The threads of presence which constitute minds will meet constraints akin to Kant's conditions of experience which will include a stable world and stable relations between mental features and the world. Of course, almost all randomly selected threads of presence will not abide by these constraints and won't constitute anything like a mind in a world, or even just a mind (if there is a genuine difference between minds and minds-in-worlds).

There will be skeptical possibilities of course, but these live in the quotidian world. One might try to think of a problem rather akin to the philosophical version of the Boltzmann Brain issue. Which is more likely: that my experience is part of a large thread of presence or simply an appropriately structured sub-thread? It might seem, in some a priori sense, the latter. But it is a mistake to think of a conscious being as 'moving' along its thread of presence. To mangle Santayana's beautiful expression

of the temporal now, my consciousness is *not* like a spark running along a fuse of presence. What I am is not a point on a thread but the whole thread with its relational ramifications extending through the whole world. Could ‘I’ be nothing but *this* quasi-instantaneous bout of presence? That is *not* the same as the quotidian worry that the entirety of existence is the recent 300 milliseconds of my experience. I don’t see how to definitively disprove that kind of quotidian solipsism of the present moment but obviously that offers no reason to believe in it. Things look different, however, from the perspective of the complete system of presence. In the arena of presence, this quasi-instantaneous bout of presence is part of a world involving thread and I am that thread. It is a weird kind of error to try to pin ‘me’ down to one point in the thread as if there is some worry that there are no other parts to it. Those parts are real and timelessly constitute the thread of presence which I am, as part of the giant set of threads which make up *our* world.

The second natural question: is this form of neutral monism a kind of panpsychism after all? It is obviously closely related to panpsychism, insofar as presence is more or less equated to the ‘what it is like’ aspect of conscious experience. And while it does seem to me - though it is controversial - that William James ended up concluding that his radical empiricism was a kind of panpsychism, that his ‘pure experience’ *was* a kind of experience, this does not seem to be an inevitable conclusion. Presence can be without being presence to mind. Perhaps it could be argued that ‘mind’ should be taken in some ultra minimal sense and that therefore presence resolves into infinitesimal sparks of consciousness. Perhaps this is only a verbal dispute, but such sparks are not what one would call conscious minds. Consciousness is a familiar part of the quotidian world and is typically taken to be something like the apprehension, usually under some categorizing guise, of what is present. Such apprehending parts of the world are quite special and a little bit rare. The hope behind panpsychism is to solve the problem of consciousness by adding consciousness to the physical world at a fundamental level. Why not instead take the world to be the hugely various relational structures organizing what is present? This makes the world open to us, leaves it scientifically investigable and eliminates any problem of consciousness.

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