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Is Panpsychism Simple?

Henry Taylor

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Abstract

Some have argued that panpsychism offers the most simple view of reality. The most prominent advocate of this argument is Philip Goff. In this paper, I examine Goff's position, and argue that considerations of simplicity and parsimony do not support panpsychism. Quite the reverse: they give us good reason to *reject* it.

1. Russellian monism and panpsychism

Motivating panpsychism is not easy. In the face of incredulous stares, the demand for strong supporting argument is high. Could simplicity help? It is this suggestion that the current paper will examine. To understand panpsychism in its contemporary form, we must start with Russellian monism. Russellian monists claim that physical science tells us about the mathematical and nomic features of material properties, but that it misses something out, because material properties have a nature that goes beyond the mathematical/nomic. Following Philip Goff (2017a: 143), we can call this non-mathematical/nomic nature *categorical*. I use the term 'micro-categorical properties' for micro-level properties that have a categorical nature.

Russellian monists also claim that micro-categorical properties help explain the macro-level conscious experiences had by you and me. Call these 'macroexperiences' (Chalmers 2015). Panpsychists claim that micro-categorical properties are phenomenal (call this 'microexperience'). Panprotopsychists claim that micro-categorical properties are protophenomenal: they aren't phenomenal but they combine to give rise to macroexperience.

2. Mystery, Simplicity and Parsimony

Goff gives a book-length defence of panpsychism (all references are to Goff 2017a unless otherwise stated). His motivation for panpsychism is its theoretical superiority to other views, especially panprotopsychism. He says: '[t]he only thing we know for certain about the deep nature of material entities is that at least some of them—for example, you and I—have a consciousness-involving nature' (169) and that panpsychism is a view on which 'the nature of microscopic things is continuous with the nature of macroscopic things' (169). This is in contrast with panprotopsychism, which 'leads us to complexity, discontinuity and mystery' (170). Thus, we are led 'in the direction of panpsychism' (170. See also Goff 2017b: 283). Call this the simplicity

argument for panpsychism. In this paper, I argue that the simplicity argument fails, and that in fact considerations of simplicity and mystery give us good reason to *reject* panpsychism in favour of panprotopsychism. The conclusion of this paper is not that panpsychism is hopeless, but that the simplicity argument fails, so I won't discuss other arguments for panpsychism (Strawson 2006), and I won't discuss Russellian monism generally (Stoljar 2001). I also set aside the other fascinating, important and original arguments in Goff's book.¹

3. *The combination problem*

It is conceivable that microexperiences/microsubjects could exist in the absence of macroexperiences/macrosystems. So, assuming that conceivability entails possibility (96-105) it cannot be that microexperience/microsubjects ground macroexperience/macrosystems (171-176). This is how Goff characterizes the combination problem for panpsychism. He calls it the 'subject-summing problem' (171).

There are other forms of combination problem, some of which affect panprotopsychism. The panprotopsychist is committed to the claim that macroexperience can arise out of a non-phenomenal base. This itself presents a form of the combination problem, and we will return to it below. But the version that Goff considers is especially dangerous for two reasons: first, it doesn't just show that we don't know how macroexperience is grounded in the microexperiential, but aims to show that macroexperience *cannot* be grounded in microexperience. Second, panprotopsychists do not face this version of the problem: they don't have to explain how microexperiences/microsubjects combine to produce macroexperience/macrosystems because they don't believe in microexperience/microsubjects. As Goff says, this problem is 'faced only by panpsychists' (171).

It is in Goff's answer to the subject-summing problem that issues arise for the simplicity argument. He suggests two responses, which I deal with in §4 and §5 respectively. This paper is concerned with Goff's solutions to this problem, so I won't discuss other panpsychists' views.²

¹ Goff (2017a: 158-162) also rejects the panqualityist position defended by Coleman (2017). I won't discuss this.

² See Roelofs (2014) for another version of the combination problem that only affects panpsychism, and which he solves without making additional ontological commitments. Goff also discusses two more proposed solutions (176-179) but dismisses them, so I ignore them.

4. *Consciousness+*

Goff's first suggestion is that each micro-categorical property is a combination of two aspects. One aspect is consciousness, and the other is a '+' aspect. We are ignorant about the + aspect. Goff claims that if we had a complete grasp of the full nature of consciousness+ (including the + aspect), then we would not be able to conceive of microexperience/microsubjects in the absence of macroexperience/macrosystem and the subject-summing problem wouldn't get off the ground. The idea is that the situation only *appears* conceivable because of our ignorance of the + aspect of consciousness+.

4.1. *The problem*

Panprotopsychism postulates a kind of property (protophenomenal properties) of which we are largely ignorant, and Goff criticises panprotopsychism for this because it introduces mystery. Now Goff is introducing something that is just as mysterious (+ aspects), so he is susceptible to the same criticism.

To put flesh on this claim, consider that for every protophenomenal property the panprotopsychist must accept, the panpsychist must accept a + aspect of a micro-categorical property, which is equally mysterious. It could be replied that our ignorance of + aspects is not that bad. It could potentially be suggested that the + aspects are the set of laws that explain how the microexperiential can combine to create macroexperience, and that our ignorance of them is no worse than our ignorance of other laws, such as those of quantum gravity. It may further be suggested that we may one day discover these laws. However, our ignorance of the + aspects is much more severe than our ignorance of quantum gravity because + aspects are in principle cut off from scientific investigation (because they are categorical) so it is far more difficult to see how we might obtain knowledge of them. In any case, of course the panpsychist can promise that we will one day discover the nature of the + aspects, but the panprotopsychist can just as plausibly promise that one day we will discover the nature of the protophenomenal. Both sides can give the same promissory note, so the panpsychist's kind of ignorance about + aspects is no better than the panprotopsychist's ignorance about the protophenomenal. In fact, the panprotopsychist can make a precisely analogous suggestion: that protophenomenality just is the set of laws explaining how we get from the non-phenomenal to the phenomenal, that we will one day discover.

So panpsychism has mysterious + aspects, and panprotopsychism has mysterious protophenomenal properties. So far, the views accept a similar amount of mystery. But panpsychism *also* claims that micro-

categorical properties have *conscious* aspects, about which we know little. As Chalmers says, we are not really ‘in a position to say much about what microexperience is like’ (2015: 252). Of course, it could be debated precisely how mysterious such microexperiences are (perhaps they are only a little more mysterious to us than bee consciousness, for example). Nonetheless, it must be accepted that they are an at least slightly mysterious addition to our ontology, which the panprotopsychist does not accept.

So panprotopsychism has mysterious protophenomenal properties; panpsychism has mysterious + aspects of properties *and* conscious aspects of them (which are at least slightly mysterious). So in terms of the ontology of micro-categorical properties, panpsychism is slightly more mysterious.

Now, in terms of the *relation* between the micro-categorical and macroexperience, the two views postulate different kinds of relation, which share similar amounts of mystery. Panprotopsychists say that macroexperience arises from a non-phenomenal base; panpsychists say that macroexperience is constructed from millions of microexperiences.³ As we have seen, both views can account for these respective relations, but in doing so, both have to accept entities about which we are ignorant (protophenomenal properties in one case, + aspects in another). So both views leave the relation between macroexperience and the micro-categorical somewhat mysterious. Note that the panpsychist cannot reply that the mysterious relation has already been accounted for by accepting microexperiences and + aspects, because the panprotopsychist can simply reply that her mysterious relation has also been accounted for by accepting protophenomenal properties.

The panpsychist could claim that the emergence of the phenomenal from the non-phenomenal is more mysterious than the emergence of macroexperience from microexperience. But intuitions will be divided, and both sides have an equally good explanation of why their respective relations are mysterious (ignorance of protophenomenal properties, and +aspects respectively). We have no good reason to think that either is the more mysterious.

³ Both panprotopsychism and panpsychism accept the gradual diachronic evolution in complexity of consciousness from lower organisms to mammals. However, this is different from claiming that many microexperiences synchronically combine to produce one macroexperience. Only the panpsychist says that.

In summary, both views leave the relation between the micro-categorical and macroexperience somewhat mysterious. But in terms of the ontology of micro-categorical properties, panpsychism is slightly more mysterious because it must accept two entities about which we know little: + aspects and microexperiential aspects, whilst panprotopsychism must only accept one: protophenomenal properties.

We have looked at mystery. Now turn to simplicity. I take simplicity to be a cluster of notions, including:

- (i) Qualitative parsimony: minimising commitment to many different types of entity.
- (ii) Quantitative parsimony: minimising commitment to a large number of a certain type of entity.
- (iii) Avoidance of ad hoc claims: minimising the number of additional complications to save the theory from objections.

Note that (i-ii) are kinds of ontological simplicity, whilst (iii) is a more theoretical kind. Goff commits to the existence of + aspects of micro-categorical properties, whereas panprotopsychism does not. Similarly, panprotopsychism needs to accept the existence of protophenomenal properties, whilst panpsychism does not. So far, the two views are equal in terms of simplicity.

But once we take into account the other commitments of the theories, we see that panprotopsychism is much simpler. The panprotopsychist only accepts the types of experiential property that we already have good reason to believe in: those that feature in the experiences of macroscopic creatures. Conversely, the panpsychist must accept these experiential properties *and* the types of experiential property supposedly had by micro-categorical properties. By postulating fewer types of experiential property, panprotopsychism wins on (i).

As well as accepting fewer types of experiential property, panprotopsychism also postulates fewer instances of them: it claims that experiential properties only have instances in the experiences of macro-level creatures. Conversely, the panpsychist must claim that experiential properties occur in these creatures and also ubiquitously at the micro-level. So panprotopsychism wins on (ii).

When we examine the metaphysics of categorical properties, simplicity considerations continue to favour panprotopsychism. Goff accepts that micro-categorical properties are complex: they have a

consciousness aspect, and a + aspect. The panprotopsychist does not accept that micro-categorical properties have aspects. Rather, she says that micro-categorical properties are ontologically simple: they consist of a simple unified protophenomenal nature. Indeed, the panprotopsychist need not accept that the relation of aspecthood exists at all. Thus, the panprotopsychist has commitment to fewer types of primitive metaphysical relations, giving her a further advantage in terms of (i). Furthermore, by avoiding postulating aspects, panprotopsychism is less susceptible to the criticism that it is making ad hoc modifications (thus winning on (iii)).

It might be replied that protophenomenal properties account for the realisation of mathematical/structural properties and also the emergence of macroexperience, so they must have distinct aspects for these different roles (cf. Howell 2014). But we cannot infer from the fact that a property fulfils two distinct theoretical roles to the claim that it has different ontological aspects which fulfil these two roles. Notice that the panpsychist cannot claim that the phenomenal nature of micro-categorical properties itself accounts for both the realisation of the mathematical/structural *and* the emergence of macroexperience because the subject-summing problem is precisely designed to demonstrate that phenomenal natures on their own are inadequate to account for macroexperience. That is why + aspects are postulated in the first place.

Could the panpsychist claim that aspects are useful for *other* reasons, and so we have to accept them anyway? Goff suggests that aspects help us account for colour and the substance-property relation (220-226). I cannot examine these debates here, but I will say that aspects are not normally invoked to account for these phenomena, so much more would have to be said to show that they are in fact required.

As well as mystery and simplicity, Goff also mentions a third consideration (169): panpsychism assumes continuity between the micro-level and the macro-level (because it assumes that both levels have phenomenality), whilst panprotopsychism introduces discontinuity (because it claims that consciousness is only macro-level).

However, macro/micro continuity is not itself a theoretical virtue. We already know from physics that there is a huge amount of discontinuity between macro and micro. It would not be considered a theoretical virtue for a physicist to assume continuity, and there is no reason to assume that continuity will be true

when we turn to categorical entities that physics does not give us a complete grasp of. More generally, theory construction should not proceed by assuming continuity between two sets of entities. Rather, we discover continuities and similarities between sets of entities, and then we use these to group entities into kinds, and attempt to explain the similarities between members of the same kind (Boyd 1989). Continuity is discovered, then explained, not assumed.

With regard to continuity, Goff has suggested to me that we would reject a theory that claimed that the law of gravity didn't apply in a certain part of the universe. This may be thought to be because of considerations of continuity. However, the cases are disanalogous: we would reject this claim about gravity because we have an independently motivated theory to think that gravity operates on all objects with mass, regardless of where they are in the universe.

A slightly different argument may be suggested by the panpsychist at this point: that because micro-categorical properties are *categorical*, and macrosubjects are partially constituted by categorical properties, that gives us reason to think that micro-categorical properties are also conscious (Goff hints at ideas like these: 169). But it would be a fallacy of composition to infer from the fact that a macrosubject has consciousness to the claim that some of its constituents do.

Goff may say that panprotopsychism has to accept another kind of discontinuity that panpsychism avoids: that there was once no experience in the universe, and that at some point experience arose. However, the panprotopsychist can simply reply that this is no more metaphysically problematic than the appearance of ordinary emergent entities such as water from H₂O molecules. The panpsychist may counter-reply by claiming that the experience case is unintelligible to us, whilst the water/ H₂O case is not (Strawson 2006). But the panprotopsychist already has a good explanation of why this is: it is because in the experience case we lack certain crucial information (about protophenomenal properties) which we do not lack in the water/H₂O case, not because the experience case is any more metaphysically problematic. Of course, claiming this kind of ignorance of protophenomenal properties does lumber panprotopsychism with some mystery, but (as argued above) it still works out less mysterious than panpsychism.

4.2 Goff's responses

Goff addresses the concern that once panpsychism makes use of 'consciousness+', it ends up being mysterious. He makes two replies (181). I take them in reverse order.

Response 1: Simplicity and continuity.

Goff argues that panpsychism still wins in the end:

the hypothesis... that all material entities instantiate consciousness+ is simpler than the hypothesis... that brains instantiate consciousness while things other than brains instantiate protophenomenal properties. Panpsychism assumes continuity while panprotopsychism assumes discontinuity (181).

There are two strands here: simplicity and continuity. Goff says that panpsychism is simpler because it claims that consciousness is a feature of all material objects, whilst panprotopsychism is less simple because it ascribes consciousness to only some. But it is hard to see what kind of simplicity he has in mind: it is not part of the theoretical virtue of simplicity to ascribe a feature to more entities than a rival theory. In fact, ascribing a certain feature to more entities may plausibly be seen as a disadvantage of that theory, as it forces us to accept that that feature is more widespread than the rival theory would hold, which bites against quantitative parsimony. With regard to continuity, the point from §4.1 applies: micro/macro continuity is not itself a theoretical virtue.

Response 2: Partial knowledge of properties.

Goff also claims that the consciousness+ panpsychist still has less mystery in her world view, because she can claim that every micro-categorical property has a conscious aspect, and thus we have a 'partial understanding of every material property' whilst the panprotopsychist view gives us 'zero understanding of the deep nature' of any property (181).

This argument is being used to motivate panpsychism. The trouble is that the reasoning is circular. For the belief that micro-categorical properties have conscious aspects to amount to knowledge, one criterion that must be met is that it must be true. So, for us to have good reason to think that this belief amounts to knowledge, we need good reason to think that it is true. But in this case, the very reason given to accept the truth of the belief (that micro-categorical properties have conscious aspects) is that we then

get knowledge about micro-categorical properties. So our reason to accept that the claim is true relies on the fact that if we believe it, we gain knowledge; but we only have good reason to think that we do gain knowledge if we already have good reason to think the claim is true. The argument is circular.

An analogy will help. Suppose you and I are presented with an opaque box, and asked what is in it. I say that there is a ball in there. When you ask why, I say that if we accept that there is a ball, then we at least know something about the box's contents: we know that there is a ball in there. The reasoning is problematic because in order to think that belief in the ball amounts to knowledge, we would already need good reason to think it was true. So the claim that belief in the ball gets us knowledge cannot itself be used as an argument in favour of the truth of the belief. Similar reasoning applies for the belief that micro-categorical properties have conscious aspects.

A more general point: a major part of Goff's project is to avoid what he calls 'noumenalism' (166). He aims to give an account of the world that is epistemically filled-in (i.e. minimises the number of unknown entities). This is one motivation for accepting that micro-categorical properties have conscious aspects. I have just argued that this is circular, but notice that even if we do accept that we know that micro-categorical properties have a conscious aspect, Goff's position does not end up with fewer mysterious entities. As I said, for every mysterious property that the panprotopsychoist must commit to, the panpsychoist must commit to a mysterious + aspect. So the world remains just as epistemically un-filled in as before.

5. *Secretive Relations*

As well as the consciousness+ view, Goff also suggests another way to deal with the combination problem. He claims that we lack a full understanding of the spatial relations between micro-categorical properties, if we had a complete understanding (what he calls a 'transparent conception') of these relations then we could see how it is that macroexperiences/macrosjects arise from the microexperiences/microsubjects, and the situation described in the subject-summing problem would be inconceivable (181-186).⁴ We don't need consciousness+, but we do need partially secret relations.

⁴ Elsewhere, Goff claims that we could also accept that there exist non-spatial relations of phenomenal bonding between microexperiences (2017b), of which we lack understanding. My points apply *mutatis mutandis* to this claim.

5.1 *Mystery and simplicity again*

On this view, we have a partial knowledge of spatial relations, but they also have some nature of which we are ignorant. So, an analogous argument as the one from §4 can be run. The panprotopsychist has mysterious protophenomenal properties, the panpsychist has the mysterious components of spatial relations. So in these commitments, they are equal in terms of mystery. But the panpsychist also has microexperiences, which are at least slightly mysterious, which increases mystery. The panpsychist must also accept more types of phenomenal property, and more instances of phenomenal properties, offending qualitative and quantitative parsimony. So once again, the panprotopsychist has slightly less mystery, and a lot more simplicity in her view.

5.2 *Partially mysterious relations: a gratuitous addition?*

Recall that with the consciousness+ response, there were other kinds of simplicity that favour panprotopsychism over panpsychism: the panprotopsychist does not have to accept aspects of micro-categorical properties. There is an analogue with the ‘secret relations’ response. To the panprotopsychist, there is no need to claim that spatial relations have a mysterious component. In this further way, her ontology is more parsimonious. Furthermore, because the panprotopsychist has no need to invoke this view of spatial relations, she is less susceptible to the accusation that she is complicating her theory with ad hoc modifications.

At one point, Goff argues that we have independent reason to believe that spatial relations have such a hidden nature. He says that ‘our understanding of spatial relations is mediated by our mathematical models’ but that ‘for spatial relations to be part of concrete reality, they must have a more than mathematical categorical nature’ (184 and 2017b: 294-5). But we should reject the inference from the claims that spatial relations are part of concrete reality and that our understanding of them partially makes use of mathematics to the conclusion that they must have a nature that is hidden from normal mathematical/scientific investigation. Russellian monists are committed to believing that normal material properties have a nature that goes beyond that which is described by physics, but there is no reason to think that the same must be said of spatial relations. With material properties, there are independent arguments to show that properties must have at least some non-dispositional/nomic, categorical essence that is in principle cut off to scientific investigation (Lewis 2009, Lowe 2006: 138). Goff himself uses these arguments in his attack on causal

structuralism (138-139). These arguments cannot be extended to spatial relations, because the arguments specifically target the view that all properties have an entirely dispositional/causal essence. Spatial relations are not exhaustively dispositional/causal properties, so these arguments do not concern them. There is no independent argument to show that spatial relations must have a nature that outruns what we learn of them from normal experience and geometry.

I am not saying that we already have complete knowledge of spatial relations. There may be more to know (presumably there is more to know about the relation between objects and space-time, for example). The point is that with the case of spatial relations, we have no good reason to think that there is some information that is in principle cut off from normal mathematical scientific investigation, as Goff claims. Conversely, we do have such reason in the case of normal material properties.

In any case, even if all parties do accept that spatial relations have a hidden nature of some kind, the panpsychist would still have more types of phenomenal property, more instances of phenomenal properties, and microexperiences of which we have no positive conception. Panprotopsychism would still be preferable.

Considerations of simplicity, continuity and mystery do not lead us to panpsychism. They lead us away from it and straight towards its rival: panprotopsychism.⁵

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