



## Panpsychism: The Science and Philosophy of an Intelligent Universal Mind

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Move over survival of the fittest. Step aside gradual evolution through adaptability and random mutations. There is a new player on the scientific/philosophical block. It is called 'Panpsychism', and it threatens to challenge absolutely everything currently known about what the universe is and how it works. On the simplest level, Panpsychism makes the astounding claim that the

universe, rather than being a sterile backdrop in which materialistic 'stuff' evolves and develops, is instead a web of consciousness that brought about everything that is. This way of thinking is nothing new for those who follow metaphysics and some ancient religious systems. The idea of an Akashic Field has been around for millennia. But for scientists, operating within the parameters of mathematics and the scientific method, to give such a theory a name and subject it to peer reviewed papers, is a breakthrough. What Panpsychism says is that the universe itself may be self-aware.

## Metaphysics meets Science

Zen masters for thousands of years have said that all is one, but to give this concept official sounding labels such as 'entanglement' and 'proto-consciousness fields' is quite shocking. It means that lines of inquiry which have traditionally moved along two separate roads, called metaphysics and science, may have now merged into one superhighway.



Meditate Zen Meditation Sitting Buddhist Monk (CC0)

Christof Koch, of the Allen Institute for Brain

Science, a Seattle-based, independent, nonprofit medical research organization dedicated to accelerating the understanding of how the human brain works, has been designing experiments which define consciousness. His results indicate that biological organisms are conscious if they are capable of changing their behavior when confronted by new situations. But if a system is able to act upon its own state and, in effect, determine its own fate, it is conscious even if it is not biological or organic.



Magical Galaxy illustration. (Public Domain)

Although he has yet to present his ideas in the form of a formal 'Theory of Mind', it is still a fascinating conjecture that has many theoretical physicists re-reading traditional religious systems of thought and wondering if the ancients intuited what modern mathematicians have finally deduced. With more experimentation, Panpsychism might produce repeatable observations that could lead to fully-developed scientific theories about the nature of a universe that intentionally produced mankind. It might also help understand man's unique place in a cosmos that has developed biological entities which are able to comprehend and become conscious of themselves as separate and individual beings.

## Differentiating Panpsychism

To fully understand what this means, one needs to first differentiate Panpsychism from other traditional systems of religious thought. The first systematized religion was very probably what is now called 'Animism'. This was the belief that everything is animated by fully-developed, conscious, and intelligent spirits that eventually came to be known as gods. This differs from Panpsychism in that panpsychists shy away from the idea that human-like, and especially god-like, attributes live within disparate objects found in nature. The distinction is important. When the ancient Greeks, for instance, wrote that 'everything is alive', it sounds like Panpsychism. But they still viewed the universe as a stage upon which animated entities and objects played their part, rather than saying that the universe itself was the author of the play.



Sistine Chapel The Creation Of Adam Painted (CCO)

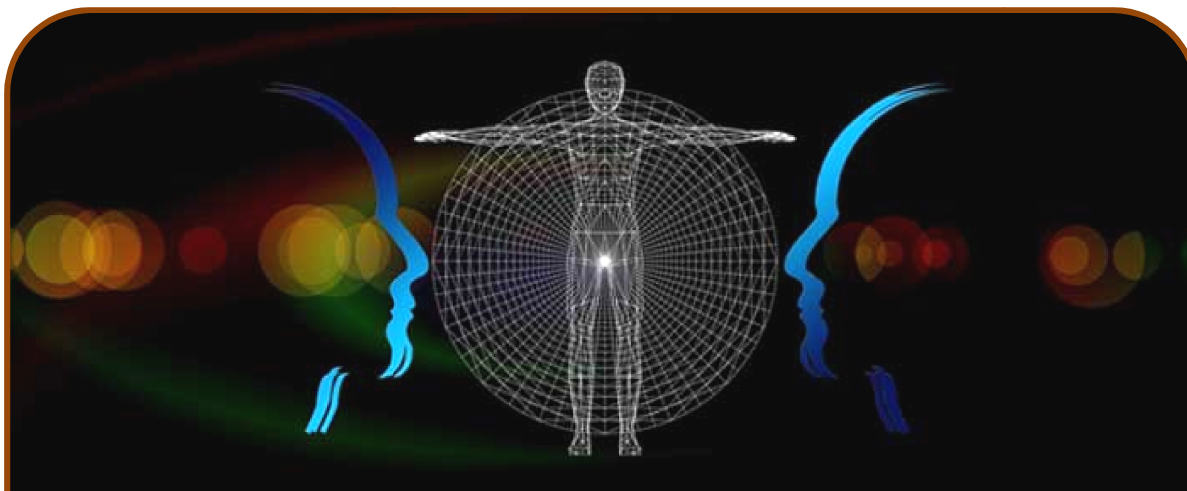
Pantheism came closer to the idea when it claimed that everything, collectively, is God. But it didn't go so far as to define the nature of mind and individual entities that make up creation. Baruch

Spinoza, the great Jewish-Dutch Sephardic philosopher, considered God and the cosmos to be one, but didn't speak to the nature of mind itself, so some panpsychists claim him as their own and others do not.

The philosophical/religious system called Panentheism surmises that God penetrates everything. According to this world view, a single, unified God is omnipresent as spirit in all things. But panpsychists argue that this does not really represent their views because the concept of 'God within something' downplays the notion of the thing itself being a whole and unique expression of universal mind.

These distinctions are subtle. The average layperson probably thinks such semantics get in the way of understanding, but science is complex. To the true scientist or philosopher, specifics are important. If the basic, underlying concept of Panpsychism is that all things are an expression of a mind-like quality, or even that all things possess a mind-like quality, such minute differentiations are important.





'What is Mind?' (CC0)

## What is Mind?

The term Panpsychism was first invented way back in the 16th century by Francesco Patrizi, an Italian philosopher. He combined two Greek words, pan, meaning 'all', and psyche, meaning 'mind', to describe his belief that all things have a mind-like quality. But this definition is so general in scope that it took until recently for scientists to employ it. What, after all, does 'all things' mean? And what is 'mind'? Are rocks conscious? Does an electron possess a mind? Until there is agreement on definitions for those two concepts, further research is futile.

But Panpsychism moves the discussion away from objects and places it instead directly on the fabric of the universe itself. It is the cosmos that is mind, not the objects in it. They merely reflect the greater reality. Sir James Jeans, an English mathematician, astronomer and physicist, perhaps said it best back in the 1940s: "The universe looks more and more like a great thought rather than a great machine."

It is important, however, to keep reminding oneself that all this discussion about who first started thinking along the lines of the Panpsychism theory detracts one from what is really important. The point is not that the modern theory of Panpsychism may not, indeed, be very modern. The point is that the theory has now bridged a great gulf that, until recently, separated science from philosophy, metaphysics, and religion. It is now officially a cross-discipline field of research. This is extremely important. It means that specialists from different academic disciplines are searching for the truth about mankind's ancient origins, and that their research is beginning to converge. If panpsychists can bring all things in both the material and the mental realm together under one roof, some startling conclusions come to light:

- First: 'Mind' is inherent in all things. It is not injected into them or imposed upon them. They are expressions of mind itself.
- Second: That means that 'mind' has a focus to it. There is purpose and direction. The universe is not a cosmic accident. Its structure is not accidental and its unity is real.



- Third: The ancients were right when they intuitively grasped the fact that a forest, for instance, is not just a bunch of trees. It is an entity unto itself, with a unique personality or spirit. It consists of a multitude of systems, such as trees, plants, animals, rocks, and atmosphere. Together all these systems make up one bigger system. And forests are a part of a greater system called Mother Earth, which is part of an even greater system called the Milky Way galaxy, and so on, all the way up to a universe, which could very well be part of an even greater system called a Multiverse. In other words, everything is one. It is thus imbued with purpose and direction, because it is all an expression of Universal Mind.

People who believe in a God are now saying: "I told you so!" Non-believers may like the concept of Panpsychism, but feel uncomfortable because they instinctively feel something so complex cannot be contained within the rather simplistic parameters of traditional religious understanding. So, it is not hard to understand why there is a great deal of conflict swirling around this whole topic. It comes with built-in dissension. Perhaps the easiest way to put the two views in context is to reduce the whole problem to two distinct ways to view the universe.



'Human brains are receivers of mind' (CC0)

## Views of the Universe

The Panpsychism view is that mind came before the universe, and that the universe is a self-realization, or manifestation, of that mind. 'Mind' is therefore distinct from 'brain'. Human brains are receivers, not originators, of mind. Think of a radio. Radio waves permeates human existence, but people are not aware of them until they tune into the correct frequency to pick up the signal. In this illustration, 'mind' is the radio wave, 'brain' is the radio receiver.

The opposing view is called 'Emergentism'. This is the view that a mindless universe came first and mind somehow emerged from it at a later, unknown time. 'Mind' is therefore a product of evolution. Chance rules the universe, and humans are the lucky beneficiaries of that chance. Emergence theory holds sway in the halls of academia these days. The problem is that it is very difficult to explain how mind managed to emerge in biological entities. Most physical attributes, such as eyes and ears, for instance, are simply genetic reconfigurations of things that existed before. Parents pass them on to their children. But mind is not a biological constant. A human egg, as far as one can tell, does not have a mind. A newborn baby does. How and when does such a miracle take place?



'Mind is inherent in all things (CC0)

In 2006, Galen Strawson wrote a ground-breaking article called *Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism*. Not too many people read it because it appeared only in *Oxford Scholarship Online*, but in it he argued that there is one ultimate reality to the universe. 'Mind' seems to be part of this ultimate reality. But 'mind' consists of mental stuff, which cannot arise from non-mental stuff. Therefore, the one reality and 'mind' must be identical. In

his words: "Brute emergence is by definition a miracle every time it occurs." Given the universality of mind, that is a difficult fact to swallow.

From a strictly rational viewpoint, therefore, the concept of Panpsychism has to be at least entertained in any honest scientific or philosophical system of thought. If Strawson is correct, mankind's ancient ancestors once again seem to have anticipated modern scientific thought. What they intuited with their right brain, is now being figured out with the left brain.



The ultimate Mystery that is called God (CC0)

Why is this important? Simply this. The world is a complex place. Sometimes people feel overwhelmed. Many may feel as though they are living insignificant, pointless lives that are bereft of meaning and purpose. But if all are a product of Universal Mind that has been, so far at least, 13.8 billion years in the making, it means people matter. We are important! What seem to be significant political divisions are, in the long run, pretty insignificant. If enough men and women take the long view, they can rise above politics and get about the important business of fulfilling mankind's potential.

Panpsychism is, at root, about something that is very close to metaphysics, or 21st-century spirituality. It is not about religion, although many religious concepts have found their way into the discussion. It does not have a lot to say about theology, although theology may be important in the search for knowledge about the ultimate Mystery that is called God, Jehovah, Allah, Brahman, Manitou, the Great Spirit, Creator, the Ground of our Being, Eternal Consciousness, and many other names.

### **We Are Alive in Universal Mind**

Instead, the scientific or philosophical study of Panpsychism is a search for that which is common to every human being who has ever lived and who ever will live. Whether one considers a worldview to be sacred or secular, religious or humanist; whether one eagerly awaits the newest scientific discovery or spend the days dreading the next disclosure that might undermine a faith, every man and woman share something with every other human being on earth: We are alive. Vibrantly alive. Mysteriously alive. We live and breathe and swim in an ocean of spirituality. We are not only one with Universal Mind, we are a product of it. We thus have immense value.





The music of spheres, songs of heavens (CC0)

Think of the words great religions have used to describe spiritual attributes: compassion, goodness, love, joy, peace, everlasting life. Think of the ways the ancients linked spirit with the environment and how indigenous peoples around the world see the handiwork of spirit in their surroundings. Ancients listened for the ‘music of the spheres’, the song of the heavens. All one has to do is substitute the words ‘Universal Mind’ for ‘Spirit’ and one immediately enters into a common system of thought. Universal Mind is no longer pictured as a remote being ‘out there’. It is now a universal construct ‘in here’.

Spirituality is thus our connection with that which makes us distinctly human. Love is spiritual. Compassion and empathy are spiritual. When human beings treat each other with respect, they practice spirituality. Love, faith, hope, trust, and respect are rock-solid real. People have died for them. They rule history. But they cannot be taken apart, broken down, and studied under a microscope. Religions often corral spirituality within systems and doctrines, but spirituality refuses to conform to rules. When a soldier, out of compassion and in spite of his training, passes up a chance to shoot a helpless enemy, he exhibits spirituality. When a victim forgives her assailant, she exhibits spirituality. Spirituality is about music, not spreadsheets. It is about

understanding and compromise, not rules and regulations. It is poetry, not prose, but it can infuse spreadsheets, rules, regulations, and prose with meaning. In the end, what gives life purpose and makes it worth living is our universality and one-ness, the very essence of Panpsychism. And that is our hope.

Top Image: Universe Milky Way Stars Sky Person Looking Night (CC0)

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