

If Panpsychism Is True, Then What?

Part 2: Existential Implications

If panpsychism is true, consciousness pervades our brain, every cell in our body, and the entire surrounding universe, all 94 billion lightyears of it. A universe full of consciousness, even if most of this consciousness is incredibly simple, still sounds like a legendary story we tell our children to see their amazed reactions. If this might be the actual world we live in, it seems to challenge us to rethink our feelings, attitudes, and overall orientation towards existence itself. And it suggests that panpsychism might speak to some of the same anchoring psychological needs as religious belief does: a sense of belonging, transcendence, greater purpose, or comfort in the face of death. But except for an occasional feeling of awe, to what extent can a metaphysics of consciousness help in forging such an existential anchor?

Several philosophers have addressed various facets of this question, typically from the standpoint of a specific type of panpsychism. Their explorations sometimes lead to apparently contradictory or even seemingly absurd conclusions. In this paper, we aim to review and categorize these discussions under two broad headings:

First, what are the implications of panpsychism with regard to the basic, non-material, existential needs of the human psyche? Some panpsychists present the view as re-enchanting the world, rebuilding the lonely and alienating world presented by physicalism out of conscious beings with whom we have a deep kinship and with whom we can hope to have some sort of encounter, or even communication.

Second, what are the implications of panpsychism for the greater existential questions which come to mind from time-to-time but may be considered non-essential or even unscientific. Here we focus on two subtopics. One is the relationship of panpsychism and the veridicality of mystical, spiritual, and psychedelic experiences that seem to reveal that «we are all one». The second revolves around the fear of death. Does panpsychism have the means to attenuate this existential dread, even lead to death's acceptance?

Finally, we consider briefly how far the logical implications of panpsychism might actually be reflected in changes in motivation and behavior – whether, as some proponents have suggested, a panpsychist society or movement is better-placed to find meaning in life. Here we sound a note of caution: panpsychism might be transformative for some people, but its wider impact will likely depend on its embedding within a social and cultural structure that selects some implications over others to emphasize, reinforce, or institutionalize.

1. *Existential Relations*

Several authors have suggested that panpsychism has the potential to change the nature and tone of our relationships with the universe and things within it¹. One major claim is that panpsychism can make us feel as though we stand in some sort of important relation with the things in our surrounding environment. We denote these feelings as «relational experiences» and identify them with what one may call basic psychological, existential needs. When one is no longer hungry or thirsty and has a shelter to keep warm in the night, after some time one eventually will feel an existential longing for these experiences. In particular, we will consider three sorts of relational experiences:

1. The feeling of kinship or affinity: feeling as though we have something important in common with another being, that makes us feel closer to them.
2. The feeling of communication: feeling as though another being is trying to convey something to us, such that its actions or expressions mean something.
3. The feeling of loneliness and the contrasting feeling of encounter: feeling as though one is alone in the sense that we sometimes desire and sometimes find crushing, or alternatively feeling as though one is, in some sense, in communion with another being.

¹ See particularly F. Mathews, *For love of matter: A contemporary panpsychism*, State university of New York Press, New York 2003 and Id., *Living Cosmos Panpsychism*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism*, Routledge, London 2020, pp. 131-143; D. Skrbina, *Ethics, Eco-Philosophy, and Universal Sympathy*, in «Dialogue and Universalism» 23, 4 (2013); P. Goff, *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness*. Pantheon Books, New York 2019 and J. McWeeny, *Which Bodies Have Minds? Feminism, Panpsychism, and the Attribution Question*, in K. Maitra - J. McWeeny (eds.), *Feminist Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022.

The focus of this section will be on the difference that panpsychism might make relative to more mainstream views, on which many animals, but no non-animals, are phenomenally conscious. What changes if we come to regard plants, ecosystems, inanimate things, fundamental particles, or the cosmos as a whole, as conscious? Plausibly, people do already sometimes *have* relational experiences with such entities (e.g. feeling like the universe is communicating with them or feeling less alone because of a tree). But these are often dismissed as unwarranted, anthropomorphic, or even delusional. Does panpsychism imply that such experiences might in fact be more correct than often thought, and if so which ones?

1.1. *Kinship*

We are phenomenally conscious: viewing another being as also phenomenally conscious is thus viewing it as like us in at least one respect. Sometimes viewing things as like us makes a difference to how we feel about them: it makes us feel a sense of kinship or affinity, a metaphorical warmth or closeness.

For example, Goff writes that «on the panpsychist worldview, humans have a deep affinity with the natural world: we are conscious creatures embedded in a world of consciousness»². This contrasts with the opposing dualist idea that «Ontologically speaking, I have nothing in common with a tree. There is no real kinship with nature if dualism is true»³. In a similar vein, Skrbina proposes that panpsychism supports:

«[A] sensitive awareness of the levels of continuity between ourselves and other objects or systems. An awareness of similarity is most likely to produce a feeling of identification, of a certain existential closeness, which will yield positive values. [...] Universal sympathy finds its surest ground in the belief that all things possess mind. Where one sees no mind, there can be no real sympathy»⁴.

Does panpsychism really justify feeling more kinship with nature – does it make that feeling *correct*? Here we should first ask: does asking about justification even make sense? Can feelings of kinship be right or wrong? In one sense

² P. Goff, *Galileo's Error*, cit., p.191; cfr. H.H. Morch, *Does Panpsychism Mean That "We Are All One"?*, in «Journal of Consciousness Studies» (Forthcoming), p. 7.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ D. Skrbina, *Ethics, Eco-Philosophy*, cit., p. 69.

yes: the trait they are based on sharing might or might not actually be shared. If I feel a kinship with someone based on our shared love of baseball, but in fact they hate baseball, then my feeling is misplaced. So kinship based on phenomenal consciousness will be misplaced if the thing in question is not actually conscious. Moreover, panpsychist theories differ widely in which things they attribute consciousness to: for example, Goff's version ascribes consciousness only to fundamental things and to sufficiently highly-organized aggregates, and so while Goff argues that trees are likely conscious, he likely cannot claim that nature as a whole, i.e. earth's biosphere, is conscious. On Goff's panpsychism, then, «kinship with nature» will only mean kinship with the various particular organisms that make up nature, and the entire cosmos, whereas other forms of panpsychism might additionally support feelings of kinship with earthly nature as a whole.

But the more difficult question is: if a given property is in fact shared, what are the appropriateness conditions of feeling a sense of kinship based on sharing it? Intuitively, some properties don't warrant such feelings: the property of reflecting light is very widely shared, and the property of being such that $2+2=4$ is even more widely shared, but these don't seem to ground a meaningful kinship. Is there any objective basis for saying which properties do and do not count here? It might simply be that we consider it appropriate to feel kinship over sharing an *important* property, so everything turns on which properties a given person happens to consider important.

Phenomenal consciousness seems like a good candidate to ground feelings of kinship, because it seems like a very important property. But it is not the only important property, and even if (e.g.) trees share this property with us, there are still clearly many important properties that we do not share with them. Moreover, even if panpsychism is false and trees are not conscious, physicalists can still point to many important properties we share with them, like materiality, biological life, a common evolutionary origin, and a common cosmic origin⁵. It's not clear that the pattern of shared and unshared properties is by itself enough to justify either feeling or not feeling a sense of kinship.

⁵ Goff suggests that most people are either explicit or implicit dualists to some degree, and so the more apt comparison is between panpsychism and dualism. This may well be true, but «more kinship with nature than dualism» is a low bar, and physicalists might reasonably claim that their view, if more thoroughly internalized, could also support feelings of kinship with nature based on shared materiality, shared biology, and shared origins.

In consequence, it remains unclear how far panpsychism justifies a sense of kinship with nature that would otherwise be unjustified. Nevertheless, one might consider the following two hypotheses initially plausible:

- Because consciousness is an important and striking property, it is reasonable to feel a somewhat greater sense of kinship with nature, at the margins, if we believe nature to share it.
- Greater feelings of kinship with nature are independently desirable, given the present ecological circumstances, because they are likely to motivate wiser and better actions, both for nature and for humanity.

This suggests a positive view of panpsychism's implications, even independently of whether feelings of kinship can be considered correct in and of themselves⁶.

1.2. *Loneliness and Encounter*

Freya Mathews claims that panpsychism supports an «ethos of encounter»⁷. The word encounter is hard to define rigorously, but the idea seems to be something like the following. Physicalism is sometimes described as yielding a feeling of cosmic loneliness, in which we find ourselves alone in a universe that feels, in some sense, cold and indifferent. The opposite, presumably, would be a world in which we were never fully alone, in which everything around us was a companion, something with whom we could potentially be in a relationship. And a panpsychist world might seem to be just such a world.

Talk of loneliness, encounter, and relationship seems to connect with something deep in our existential, emotional nature. Indeed, questionnaire studies show that loneliness is a common experience throughout western society and likely globally, most prevalent in teenagers and the elderly⁸. Loneliness

⁶ Is there a risk from excessive closeness - from focusing so much on what is shared that we lose an appreciation of the strangeness and otherness of the natural world? Panpsychism is sometimes accused of a kind of anthropomorphism, and we should certainly not want our relationship to other living things to reduce to «they're all just like us!» But recognising commonalities does not mean ignoring differences, and panpsychists might reasonably point out that ascribing consciousness to something actually amplifies the significance of its differences, by implying that they are reflected in an inaccessible, subjective, experience that remains mysterious to us even as we learn more about its structure and dimensions.

⁷ F. Mathews *For love of matter*, cit., p. 73.

⁸ See G. Berguno - P. Leroux - K. McAinsh - S. Shaikh, *Children's experience of loneliness at school and its relation to bullying and the quality of teacher interventions*, in «The qualitative report» 9, 3 (2004), pp. 483-499, and M. Pinquart - S. Sorensen, *Influences on loneliness in older adults: A meta-analysis*, in «Basic and applied social psychology» 23, 4 (2001), pp. 245-266.

is standardly defined as a distressing feeling that accompanies the subjective perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity and in particular the quality of one's social relationship⁹. But can any objective state of affairs make it appropriate or inappropriate to subjectively feel alone, accompanied, or encountered?

We can start with a few observations. It is possible to feel lonely in a crowd, and even in a conversation, if one feels some sort of disconnect between how the other seems to see one and how one wishes or expects to be seen. Conversely, reading the right line in a book can relieve loneliness – can make one feel seen even though there is nobody around to see one, and even though the book's author certainly never anticipated that this particular individual would read it. Interestingly, interactions with non-human animals sometimes relieve loneliness and sometimes don't. Relatedly, it is common to speak of feeling seen, recognized, even perhaps in some wordless sense understood, by a non-human animal. No identifiable content need be communicated, beyond the mere sense of: you're here, and you're aware that I'm here.

So we might say as a first pass: feeling lonely involves feeling the absence of some desired sort of relationship. Feeling that one is encountering, or is in the company of, another, involves feeling the possibility or actuality of some desired sort of relationship. As with feelings of kinship, these feelings can be objectively inappropriate if we are wrong about the absence, possibility, or actuality of a given sort of relationship, but what sorts of relationship warrant them may simply come down to what sorts of relationship – what forms of recognition, what joint activities, what mutual perception or mutual desire or mutual respect – we happen to desire, consciously or unconsciously, at a particular moment.

If that first pass is roughly right, panspsychism might have real but limited implications for loneliness. On the one hand, most of the forms of relationship we desire seem to involve consciousness: we want to be consciously seen, consciously liked, consciously loved, and would likely feel dismayed to learn that the person we thought saw, liked, or loved us was in fact a philosophical zombie. So insofar as more of the universe is conscious – and insofar as consciousness is more fundamental, more deeply rooted in the fabric of reality – there is a corresponding expansion of the necessary conditions for many potential relationships. On the other hand, most of the relationships we desire require more than mere consciousness: a rock, even a phenomenally conscious one, cannot fulfil the usual expectations for a good friend. In particular, we might think that

⁹ L.C. Hawley - J.T. Cacioppo, *Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms*, in «Annals of behavioral medicine» 40, 2 (2010), pp. 218-227.

any sort of relationship requires mutual awareness of some kind, and on the face of it most non-animal beings are not aware of much. Of course, spelling out the sort of awareness that is needed here is tricky: as noted above, an author's words can make me feel less alone, even if they are long dead and were never aware of me in particular. They were, though, aware of me in a certain unspecific way: they sought to express themselves to readers, and I do, in fact, fall under that heading. Perhaps we could apply a similar analysis to a conscious rock: perhaps it is aware simply of the world, in virtue of being constantly barraged with causal influences from its surroundings, and since I am part of the world, I fall under that heading, and the rock is thus aware of me, albeit in an incredibly attenuated sense. Does that sort of mutual awareness allow me to encounter the rock?

Ultimately, how much panpsychism expands the prospects for meaningful encounter – how much it relieves our cosmic loneliness – depends on what sorts of relationship we desire in our individual human existence, what sorts of consciousness enable those relationships, and which beings have those sorts of consciousness. And these questions are not settled simply by the truth of panpsychism.

1.3. *Communication*

One of the most striking supposed implications of panpsychism is Mathews's claim that it turns the world into a «communicative order», one in which communication is possible not only between humans but also with many parts of the natural world and even with the cosmos as a whole¹⁰. This is supposed to open up a way «to live in communicative exchange, erotic engagement, with one's own immediate environment»¹¹, and in «dialogical engagement with a communicative world»¹².

What panpsychism implies here depends a lot on what we mean by terms like communication. The popular Gricean account of communication links it to self-referential intentions: I communicate with you when I intend to produce an effect in you as a result of your recognizing that very intentio¹³. This account

¹⁰ F. Mathews *For love of matter*, cit., p. 8 ff.; cfr. Id., *Living Cosmos Panpsychism*, cit..

¹¹ F. Mathews *For love of matter*, cit., p. 18.

¹² *Ibi*, p. 11.

¹³ See, e.g., H.P. Grice, *Meaning*, in «Philosophical Review» 66, 3 (1957), pp. 377-388; S. Neale, *Paul Grice and the philosophy of language*, in «Linguistic Philosophy» 15 (1992), pp.509-559; T. C. Scott-Phillips, *Meaning in animal and human communication*, in «Animal Cognition» 18, 3 (2015), pp. 801-805; R. Moore, *Meaning and ostension in great ape gestural communication*, in «Animal Cogni-

has been criticized at times for imposing unreasonably high standards, and so various weaker or adjusted versions have been offered, particularly in discussions about whether and in what sense different animal species are capable of communication. But any Grice-inspired definition of communication, however amended, will attach importance not to phenomenal consciousness but to fairly sophisticated forms of intentionality, in particular the ability to track how another mind is being affected by one's own actions. On the other hand, there is a much broader sense of communication, on which all sorts of things communicate just because they exchange information that is functional for them in some way: e.g., my phone communicates with my laptop when they sync files, and my hypothalamus communicates with my pancreas to regulate blood sugar. But this does not seem to require particular consciousness.

As a result, it's hard to see a clear and direct implication of panpsychism here. In the weak sense of communication, it doesn't require consciousness, so a panpsychist universe isn't necessarily any more communicative than a physicalist or dualist one. In the stronger, Gricean sense, communication requires much more than mere consciousness, including psychological capacities that seem to be lacking in many animals and probably all non-animals, so again a panpsychist universe is not necessarily any more communicative than a non-panpsychist universe.

However, Mathews suggests a third sense of communication, for which consciousness does play a key role. She writes:

«Since [...] there is a mental or interior dimension to the physical world, that world is potentially imbued with meanings and/or purposes of its own. [...] That the world is imbued with meanings and/or purposes of its own suggests the possibility of communication between ourselves and it. [...] if communication is understood as a process whereby subjects (centers of subjectivity) disclose aspects of their nonmanifest interior states to one another, then, on the present metaphysical assumption, the impulse to communicate may be intrinsic to those parts of the field that have achieved relative individuation as subjects»¹⁴.

In this third sense, something communicates when it willingly expresses an inner conscious state outwardly. The suggestion seems to be that our complex human awareness of how a specific audience will respond to our expressive

tion» 19 (2016), pp. 223-231; R. Moore, *Gricean Communication and Cognitive Development*, in «The Philosophical Quarterly» 67, 267 (2017), pp. 303-326.

¹⁴ F. Mathews *For love of matter*, cit., pp. 39-40.

acts is just one elaboration of a more basic impulse to let it out, to render our inner state outwardly manifest. This basic expressive impulse, implicitly, builds in an inchoate awareness of the existence or possibility of other minds – that whatever I manifest outwardly can be perceived by others. But it might lack any differentiated awareness of which parts of the world are minds, what they can perceive, and how they perceive it. The link between communication and this primitive orientation towards an un-pre-defined other is also why Mathews links both to the Greek figure of «eros», and the idea of «erotic engagement»: they involve a desire that is open-endedly directed at the other as other, rather than depending on how the other can subserve one's own pre-defined goals.

This sense of communication does require phenomenal consciousness, but it still does not imply that a panpsychist universe is necessarily a communicative one. Rather, it implies that result only if the basic communicative impulse is held to be universally present in all conscious subjects. Mathews' view, which she terms «Living Cosmos Panpsychism» holds precisely that, so the implication of universal communicativity does follow. More precisely, the communicative order connects all *subjects*, which on Mathews' account is all living organisms and also the cosmos as a whole.

Other versions of panpsychism might or might not ascribe the basic communicative impulse to all living organisms (depending on what forms of consciousness these might have) or to the cosmos itself. Moreover, they might question to what extent this very basic sort of communication can account for some of the practices Mathews speaks of:

«The communicativity of reality [...] may need to be activated via practices of address or invocation. Responses to such address may be manifested through serendipitous conjunctions or synchronistic arrangements of circumstances. From this perspective, the language the world speaks, when it does speak, is a poetic – concretised and particularized – one. For example, in relevant invocational settings, it may take the form of a bush burning on a mountain, a raven participating discreetly in a funeral ceremony, a butterfly alighting on a dead woman's breast, a message bird appearing out of nowhere to show the way, lightning punctuating a ritual performance with apposite displays. All such signs, whether occurring in religious contexts or not, may be seen as instances of a vast poetic repertory, a repertory of imagery, of meaning conveyed through the symbolic resonance of things. It is in such language then that our invocations may need to be couched, since it is in such language that the world is able to respond: it is able to speak things»¹⁵.

¹⁵ F. Mathews, *Living Cosmos Panpsychism*, cit., p. 141.

If we are supposed to take these «serendipitous conjunctions» (what a cynic might call coincidences) as encoding a determinate message, i.e. as communicating something, then it would seem to require more than just a basic communicative impulse, latent in the universe simply as the intrinsic nature of all physical processes. It would seem to require a more-or-less determinate intention to convey something specific to an audience capable of understanding it, which in turn seems to imply a substantial level of cognitive sophistication and integration. The cosmos would have to be not only conscious, and not only living, but also something like a person, or even a God(dess). Most atheistically-inclined panpsychists would not ascribe this kind of communicative intention to the cosmos. Goff, however, has recently argued for a cosmic purpose and «teleological cosmopsychism», the hypothesis that the universe is a conscious mind which directs itself towards certain goals¹⁶. This position is not too dissimilar from Mathews' Living Cosmos Panpsychism and would allow for the possibility of caring cosmic communication as part of a cosmic plan. Unfortunately, Goff leaves open many of the details as to how the cosmos would derive such a plan before setting itself into conscious motion.

Alternatively, Mathews' point about poetic cosmic communication may not be that any determinate message is communicated. Indeed, she does not seem to describe such engagement as transmitting any specific message, but as effecting a sense of personal connection:

«When the living cosmos responds [...] we feel so intimately and extravagantly blessed, so moved and shaken on our metaphysical moorings, that our allegiance henceforth will be first and foremost to this cosmos itself [...] Love of world in this sense becomes our deepest attachment»¹⁷.

The experience of being «moved and shaken», in a way that transforms our deepest attachments, is reminiscent of what the next section calls «mystical experiences». For now we can simply note that implications of communicativity largely seem not to follow from panpsychism per se but from specific ideas about both what counts as communication and about what forms of consciousness are widespread.

¹⁶ P. Goff, *Why? the Purpose of the Universe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2023.

¹⁷ F. Mathews *Living Cosmos Panpsychism*, cit., p. 141.

2. *Mystical experience, oneness, and death*

As our basic needs are fulfilled, often a new sort of desires arise. While one may question their status as needs, they constitute a factual existential hunger. In the previous section we discussed the potential of panpsychism for re-enchanting our relationship with things on a basic personal level. We briefly glanced over a particular sort of immensely emotional relational experience we referred to as Mystical. This section explores in detail the implications of panpsychism with respect to related existential questions which transcend personal relationships, particularly around mystical, spiritual, and psychedelic experiences, the self-other boundary, and the fear or acceptance of death.

2.1. *Mystical experiences*

First, consider the idea sometimes floated that panpsychism might constitute a theoretical vindication of the broad and diverse class of what we may call «mystical experiences»¹⁸. These experiences exhibit similar characteristics across historical periods and cultural settings¹⁹. Their major distinguishing feature is a kind of self-loss or an all-encompassing self-expansion. In particular, experiencers describe a feeling of transcendent unity also referred to as oceanic boundlessness in combination with an encompassing love and bliss. This highly emotional experience of «we are all one», combines with a noetic aspect of believing this experience to represent fundamental knowledge²⁰.

¹⁸ See P. Goff *Galileo's Error*, cit., pp. 206-217; M. Albahari, *The Mystic and the Metaphysician: Clarifying the Role of Meditation in the Search for Ultimate Reality*, in «Journal of Consciousness Studies» 26, 7, 8 (2019), pp. 12-36; S.L. Ritchie, *Panpsychism and spiritual flourishing: Constructive engagement with the new science of psychedelics*, in «Journal of Consciousness Studies» 28, 9, 10 (2021), pp. 268-288, and P. Marshall, *Does Mystical Experience Give Access to Reality?*, in «Religions» 13, 10 (2022), p. 983.

¹⁹ For discussion see, e.g., W. James, *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Longmans Green and Co., London 1902; A. Huxley, *The perennial philosophy*, in «Perennial Classics» 4, 4 (1945), pp. 618-622; W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and philosophy*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1960, p.186; L. E. Thomas, *Late-life effect of early mystical experiences: A cross-cultural comparison*, in «Journal of Aging Studies» 11, 2 (1997), pp. 155-169; R.W. Hood Jr - Z. Chen, *Mystical, spiritual, and religious experiences*, in *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, The Guilford Press, New York 2013², pp. 422-440; M. Singh, *The cultural evolution of shamanism*, in «Behavioral and Brain Sciences» 41, 66 (2018).

²⁰ The latter is also known as subjective personal gnosis, see K. Velkoborská, *Performers and Researchers in Neo-pagan Settings*, in «Traditiones» 41, 1 (2012), pp. 65-76.

An overwhelming feeling of mystical union is not necessarily bound to a religious context but can arise in many seemingly unrelated situations. An experience of oneness can occur during meditation and through ingestion of psychoactive substances²¹. It may appear as spontaneous revelation in a highly agonizing situation but can also occur during everyday activities²². The mystical experience of blissful transcendent unity sometimes even emerges as a symptom of focal epilepsy²³.

The fact that similar experiences occur across traditions and time periods calls out for explanation, and the relative plausibility of candidate explanations is where panpsychism is thought to have an impact. Hence Goff writes:

«Just because people have these experiences, it doesn't follow that they correspond to anything real. [But] I am not persuaded by the arguments that have been advanced to try to show that mystical experiences must be delusions. Probably the most common reason for supposing this is the assumption that mystical experiences purport to reveal a supernatural realm [...] for the panpsychist there is another option. Rather than taking formless consciousness to be something beyond the physical universe, the panpsychist could maintain that formless consciousness is the ultimate nature of physical reality, or at least some aspect of it»²⁴.

We might frame this point in terms of a choice between three options:

1. Mystical experiences accurately reveal something supernatural, beyond or outside the physical world.
2. Mystical experiences accurately reveal an aspect of the physical world itself.

²¹ See J. A. Astin, *Stress Reduction through Mindfulness Meditation*, in «Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics» 66, 2 (1997), pp. 97-106; M. Earleywine - L.F. Ueno - M. N. Mian - B. R. Altman, *Cannabis-induced oceanic boundlessness*, in «Journal of Psychopharmacology» 35, 7 (2021), pp. 841-847; L. Roseman - D.J. Nutt - R.L. Carhart-Harris, *Quality of Acute Psychedelic Experience Predicts Therapeutic Efficacy of Psilocybin for Treatment-Resistant Depression*, in «Frontiers in Pharmacology» 8 (2018).

²² See, e.g. J. S. Corneille - D. Luke, *Spontaneous Spiritual Awakenings: Phenomenology, Altered States, Individual Differences, and Well-Being*, in «Frontiers in Psychology» 12 (2021); E. Tolle, *The power of NOW: A guide to spiritual enlightenment*, New World Library, California 2004. See also L.E. Thomas, *Late-life effect*, cit..

²³ F. Bartolomei - S. Lagarde - D. Scavarda - R. Carron - C.G. Bénar - F. Picard, *The role of the dorsal anterior insula in ecstatic sensation revealed by direct electrical brain stimulation*, in «Brain Stimulation» 12, 5 (2019), pp. 1121-1126, and F. Picard, *Ecstatic or Mystical Experience through Epilepsy*, in «Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience» 35, 9 (2023), pp. 1372-1381.

²⁴ P. Goff, *Galileo's Error*, cit., p. 207.

3. Mystical experiences reveal nothing about deeper reality; they are illusions of some kind, even if useful or valuable ones.

Thus James describes the epistemological possibility that mystical states might offer «windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world», but also remarks «what comes must be sifted and tested, and run the gauntlet of confrontation with the total context of experience»²⁵.

Scientifically minded thinkers might feel as though option 3 has to be the right answer, for two reasons. First, option 1 is unlikely, because as best we can tell there just isn't anything supernatural in reality for these experiences to connect to, and it would be profligate to postulate a whole new realm of reality just to account for them. So far, panpsychists can entirely agree. Second, option 2 cannot be right, because, as Goff puts it, referencing prominent atheist Sam Harris:

«[The] insights of mystical experiences [...] are, for Harris, confined to truths about the nature of our minds and can tell us nothing about the nature of the universe in general. If panpsychism is true, however, this distinction collapses»²⁶.

That is: mystical experiences are still experiences, states of our minds which we know through being conscious of them. If reality is fundamentally non-conscious, then it might be hard to see how any conscious experience could directly reveal it. By contrast, if panpsychism is true, then it's a live possibility that mystical experiences might directly reveal «the more fundamental element of each particular conscious mind [that forms] the backdrop of each and every conscious experience»²⁷.

Note that the choice among these options is not directly settled by identifying the neural mechanisms that bring them about. For instance, studies suggest a correlation between experiences of ego dissolution, in both meditation and psychedelic use, and altered connectivity in the default mode network in healthy adults²⁸. Some theorists explain feelings of blissful union in some epileptic cases by appealing to a prediction circuit involving the insular cortex, which comes to «overrate» its predictive success, either due to a missing link to high level generative models or due to an attenuation of the large-scale networks instan-

²⁵ W. James, , *The varieties of religious experience*, cit., pp. 338-339.

²⁶ P. Goff *Galileo's Error*, cit., p. 210.

²⁷ *Ibi*, p. 208.

²⁸ R. Millière - R.L. Carhart-Harris - L. Roseman - F.-M. Trautwein - A. Berkovich-Ohana, *Psychedelics, Meditation, and Self-Consciousness*, in «Frontiers in Psychology» 9 (2018).

tiating these models²⁹. The researchers suggest that the same explanation might also cover the meditative and psychedelic cases, though it is unclear what to say about cases where mystical experiences appear spontaneously during everyday activities. Spontaneous cases may reflect random fluctuations in neural activity, perhaps among a subpopulation of especially susceptible individuals. But identifying a neural mechanism producing an experience does not by itself dictate whether that experience is an illusion or an insight. This applies even if the mechanism can be shown to be harmful or beneficial, functional or dysfunctional, for purposes like organismic health, survival, or reproduction: there is no guarantee that illusions cannot be useful, or insights detrimental, for such purposes³⁰.

In sum, panpsychism may defuse certain objections to viewing mystical experiences as veridical. It can allow that, as Albahari puts it, «the mystic and the metaphysician» approach converging insights about the world through different methods³¹.

2.2. Oneness

One of the most prominent ideas associated with mystical experiences is a shift in, or removal of, the boundaries between self and other. Where everyday life involves a sharp awareness of our separateness from other things, mystical experiences often seem to reveal a deep unity. What does panpsychism imply about this feeling of unity?

Perhaps this sense of oneness might be vindicated by panpsychism simply based on oneself and all other things sharing the nature of consciousness. If we

²⁹ F. Picard, *Ecstatic or Mystical Experience through*, cit.

³⁰ For what it is worth, the functionality or dysfunctionality of mystical experiences is far from clear. Disruptions of the default mode network in psychedelic use seem to enable increasing crosstalk among large-scale brain networks, which has been linked to increased cognitive flexibility: see G. Petri - P. Expert - F. Turkheimer - R. Carhart-Harris - D. Nutt - P.J. Hellyer - F. Vaccarino, *Homological scaffolds of brain functional networks*, in «Journal of The Royal Society Interface» 11, 101 (2014); N.L. Mason - K.P.C. Kuypers - J.T. Reckweg - F. Müller - D.H.Y. Tse - B. Da Rios - J.G. Ramaekers, *Spontaneous and deliberate creative cognition during and after psilocybin exposure*, in «Translational psychiatry» 11, 1 (2021), p. 209. Psychoactive mushrooms have likely been part of the diet of early hominids and may have had positive effects on abilities related to communication, social bonding and creativity: J.M. Rodriguez Arce - M.J. Winkelman, *Psychedelics, sociality, and human evolution*, in «Frontiers in psychology» 12 (2021). Thus, the neuronal changes associated with mystical experiences might be beneficial to some individuals, and even if they are considered dysfunctional for an isolated individual, they might be beneficial for a person integrated within certain sorts of community.

³¹ M. Albahari, *The Mystic and the Metaphysician*, cit..

thought of the sense of oneness as a sort of intensified acute version of the sense of kinship, discussed above, then shared consciousness might seem like a perfectly reasonable basis for it, even if they do not rationally mandate it. And feelings like this matter to people, as part of what Ritchie calls «spiritual flourishing»:

«First, spiritual flourishing is marked by transcendence – the experience of being part of something larger than oneself [...] Second, spiritual flourishing will involve connectedness with Ultimate Reality (however naturalistically or theologically defined), the rest of the natural world, and/or other humans»³².

However, this seems like a rather deflationary sense of oneness. After all, we already take ourselves to share the consciousness with other human beings, and this does not yield a constant oceanic sense of oneness with them. And some versions of panpsychism seem ill-suited to support any stronger sort of oneness than this: if individual conscious minds are strongly emergent relative to the fundamental consciousness they appear from, then they really do seem to be fundamentally many, and not one. On the other hand, constitutive panpsychists, especially constitutive cosmopsychists, treat the individual mind as a metaphysically superficial thing, grounded in a more basic form of consciousness inherent in matter itself, or in the universe as a whole. Such views may go further and assert the possibility, or actuality, of overlap between minds, or phenomenal unity relations between distinct minds.

Hence some panpsychists have advocated for what Mørch calls the «same-person» and «same transcendental self» views³³. Both claim that a single, fundamental, consciousness exists and that each of us in some way participates in it. The stronger claim, «same-person», holds that we each literally are this fundamental consciousness: a single subject, simultaneously undergoing trillions of streams of consciousness and, in each stream, encountering the effects of its other streams and mistaking itself for a separate subject. Some panpsychists present this as the best way of addressing the combination problem, while others present it as the best way to resolve puzzles about personal identity, if panpsychism turns out to be true, but in neither case does it follow directly from the claims of panpsychism³⁴.

³² S.L. Ritchie *Panpsychism and spiritual flourishing*, cit., p. 271.

³³ H.H. Mørch *Does Panpsychism*, cit., p. 8 ff.

³⁴ For the first approach, see J. Benovsky, *Mind and matter: Panpsychism, dual-aspect monism, and the combination problem*, Springer, Berlin 2018; for the second, see H.H. Mørch *Does Panpsychism*, cit., pp. 13-17.

The more moderate claim, «same transcendental self», says that while we are in one sense separate subjects (many empirical selves), we are in another sense one subject (one transcendental self). Mørch worries that this view is not, ultimately coherent, since its affirmation of both oneness and many-ness is paradoxical. But we might see this as a positive, given that the mystical experience is in some ways paradoxical. Interviewees who are or have been in these states often claim to be at a lack of words when it comes to expressing their experiential insight, but they just as often seek to express it in deliberately paradoxical terms, for example: «Black does not cease to be black, nor white white. But black is white and white is black. The opposites coincide without ceasing to be what they are in themselves»³⁵. Ecstatic paradoxical speech in the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism is described as meeting God in speech and has been granted its own word, «Shath»³⁶. Over the last century «paradoxicality» was once listed alongside «ineffability» on various versions of mystical experience questionnaires but then disappeared completely in favor of the latter³⁷. A recent analysis revealed paradoxicality as a strongly correlated factor and calls for its revival in comprehensive questionnaires in this field of research founded on the personal description of the experience³⁸.

Overall, it is unclear what the mystical sense of oneness requires in order to not be an illusion. But insofar as many forms of panpsychism have implications which could readily be taken as a basis for feelings of oneness and connection, Ritchie may be right to speculate that it could contribute to some people's spiritual flourishing.

2.3. *Death*

Finally, what does panpsychism imply about death? Panpsychism generally has little room for personal immortality: there is no individual soul that can survive when the physical brain decomposes. But it may impact the status of what does survive – the matter of the brain, and the physical universe more broadly. On non-panpsychist views, these things are fundamentally different

³⁵ O. Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1923.

³⁶ C. W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*, State University of New York Press, New York 1985.

³⁷ R. W. Hood. *The Construction and Preliminary Validation of a Measure of Reported Mystical Experience*, in «Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion» 14 (1975).

³⁸ K. Stocker - M. Hartmann - L. Ley - A.M. Becker - F. Holze - M. E. Liechti, *The revival of the psychedelic experience scale: Revealing its extended-mystical, visual, and distressing experiential spectrum with LSD and psilocybin studies*, in «Journal of psychopharmacology» 38 (2024).

from me, insofar as I am a conscious subject and they are completely non-conscious. Upon my death, the candle flame of my consciousness is snuffed out utterly. Any panpsychist view will at least reject this picture: even when my individual psyche dissolves, the matter and energy of my body, subsequently transforming into other structures, remain forms of consciousness. These may not be mine in any distinctively personal sense, and so we might not think of them as the continuation of me, but merely as something akin to me and descended from me³⁹. The end of me is not an abrupt end, an annihilation, but simply flowing into different forms. It remains unclear, however, to what extent this fact by itself, that death is a radical transformation of consciousness rather than its annihilation, should change anyone's feelings towards death: it seems to be in some respects analogous to the comfort which people take in the continuation of their children, ideas, or other sorts of legacy.

Whether panpsychism can offer a fuller solution to the fear of death depends on the last subsection's question, about the sense of one-ness associated with mystical experiences. On either the «same-person» or «same transcendental self» view, the fearfulness of death seems to be mitigated, or even erased. When my everyday self dies, my «true self» may lose one perspective, but there is still so much for me to experience. As Goff puts it:

«My individual conscious mind will unravel and cease to be at the moment of bodily death. But one essential component of my mind – formless consciousness which is the backdrop to all of my experiences – does not cease to be»⁴⁰.

This may be a comfort for many, though the significance of this result depends, like so much else, on what we care about. If what I want, when I want to survive, is specifically for my distinctive psychology to continuity, then the fact that my «true self» continues on when this particular psychology is gone will not be comforting (nor will reincarnation with no memories of the previous life). If what I want is just continued consciousness, then the persistence of the all-encompassing world-soul would seem to give me everything I want. If I care about both, then any claim of oneness based on the cosmic connection and continuity of consciousness should somewhat reduce my sense that death is the

³⁹ An argument for the persistence of personal selves through post-thanatological consciousness based in constitutive panpsychism has been made by Schermbrucker. B. Schermbrucker, *Selfhood Beyond Death*, in «Metaphysica» 25 (2024).

⁴⁰ P. Goff, *Galileo's Error*, cit., p. 210.

end, without eliminating it. This accords with the sense of serenity in the face of death that is sometimes a product of mystical experiences:

«It is of interest that cancer patients and others who find such profound mystical experiences in their memory banks are not necessarily convinced of personal immortality... Rather, they tend to report a conviction that Eternity, or Infinity, a state of consciousness outside of time, is so unquestionably real to them that it does not much matter one way or another whether the everyday personality survives when the body stops functioning and decomposing»⁴¹.

3. *Conclusions*

Does panpsychism imply that the world is re-enchanted, that we are at home in the universe at last? Can this metaphysical theory be of help in fulfilling basic human existential needs? That depends. Partly it depends on what sort of panpsychist theory is correct. Do we live in Mathews' universe of striving consciousnesses reaching out to connect with each other? Or do we live in a universe of uncaring, indifferent, fluctuations of phenomenal qualities, without impulse, intention, or meaning? Or do we live in a radically monistic universe, where a single subject sees through its delusions of multiplicity only in occasional mystical experiences?

But it depends, also, on much more subjective questions about what each of us wants and cares about. Which similarities make us feel a sense of kinship with something? Which forms of mutual awareness relieve our loneliness? For some people, panpsychism might not change their feelings towards the natural world at all, either because they already found it enchanted and enchanting or because they still don't. And it's hard to see a basis for judging such reactions wrong.

Nevertheless, it is striking that panpsychism reveals the universe to be richer than physicalism in some of the things that people want in a hospitable universe (and more interconnected in some important ways than dualism). What this means for a given person's emotional life is up to them. Any form of panpsychism implies a continuity of fundamental nature between conscious subjects like us and everything else around us, and many forms will additionally imply that we are all phenomenally connected, or that we are all parts of a single, fun-

⁴¹ W.A. Richards, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015, p. 48, quoted in S. L. Ritchie *Panpsychism and spiritual flourishing*, cit., p. 273.

damental, conscious, whole. There might not be a deductive argument leading from these metaphysical claims to feelings of awe, belonging, transcendence, and serenity, but for many people they might nevertheless inspire such feelings. So what results we arrive at depends both on the specific version of panpsychism considered, and on the emotional disposition of the person considering it.

Whatever panpsychism might justify, we should also ask what actual psychological and sociological effects it might have. Goff writes:

«Imagine if children were raised [...] to see the movement of a plant toward the light as expressing its own desire and conscious drive for life, to accept the tree as an individual locus of sentience. For a child raised in a panpsychist worldview, hugging a conscious tree could be as natural and normal as stroking a cat. It's hard to tell in advance the effects of such a cultural change, but it's reasonable to suppose that children raised in a panpsychist culture would have a much closer relationship with nature and invest a great deal more value in its continued existence»⁴².

One might be wary of the thought that a shift in metaphysics would produce a much closer relationship, or make us perceive a great deal more value. After all, many people feel little kinship either with clearly conscious animals, or with other human beings. And while we do indeed find it natural and normal to stroke a cat, we also find it natural and normal that tens of billions of chickens and cows are slaughtered every year, after short and often miserable lives in factory farms. The determinants of our feelings clearly include far more factors than just metaphysics, and the determinants of our actions and policies include even more.

Here we must differentiate between philosophical implications (our primary topic here) and actual social results. Panpsychism is a metaphysical theory, not ChatGPT. At the same time, panpsychism is more likely than most metaphysical theories to be fascinating to a wide audience: «We thought we were alone? Welcome to the zoo!». Can fascination be leveraged into transformation? Can panpsychism lead to mystical experiences of oneness? For this there is so far only anecdotal evidence, as one of the authors (Kuske) claims that in moments when they really believe in and imagine the myriad of consciousnesses in and around themselves, this does lead to some kind of pleasurable cognitive overload and ecstatic bodily response. Remarkably, there does exist experimental evidence for the reverse effect, that mystical experiences lead to an increased

⁴² P. Goff, *Galileo's Error*, cit., p. 191.

belief in panpsychist theories⁴³. While we cannot tell everyone to use psychedelics, advertising meditation may be a step in the right direction⁴⁴. Possibly the most promising way to bring panpsychism to the people is simply through sharing knowledge: explaining the theory and its implications. We want to make it well known, maybe even a part of school curricula.

On the other hand, maybe right now panpsychism is simply too «all over the place» to be really convincing to a broader audience. We hope this paper shows that it is worthwhile to dig deeper. Through further inquiry we might develop the set of theories which comprise current panpsychism from being fringe perspectives into one coherent metaphysical explanation for how to understand consciousness, the universe, and perhaps most importantly, ourselves.

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ABSTRACT

If panpsychism is true, it suggests that consciousness pervades not only our brains and bodies but also the entire universe, prompting a reevaluation of our existential attitudes. Hence, panpsychism potentially fulfills psychological needs typically addressed by religious beliefs, such as a sense of belonging and purpose but also transcendence. The discussion is organized into two main areas: the implications of panpsychism for basic human existential needs, such as feelings of kinship, communication, and loneliness; and for greater existential questions relating to mystical experiences including transcendent unity and alleviation of the fear of death. In conclusion panpsychism may provide a deeper meaning in life for some people but its broader impact depends on individual dispositions and the cultural context in which it is embedded.

Keywords: Panpsychism, Consciousness, Existential Needs, Loneliness, Mystical Experiences, Death, Transcendence, Belonging

⁴³ S. M. Nayak - R.R. Griffiths, *A single belief-changing psychedelic experience is associated with increased attribution of consciousness to living and non-living entities*, in «Frontiers in psychology» 13 (2022).

⁴⁴ But see M. Farias - E. Maraldi - K.C. Wallenkampf - G. Lucchetti, *Adverse events in meditation practices and meditation-based therapies: a systematic review*, in «Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica» 142, 5 (2020), pp. 374-393.