

# Panpsychism and the Inner-Outer Gap Problem

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## ABSTRACT

Panpsychism is viewed by its advocates as resolving the main sticking points for materialism and dualism. While sympathetic to this approach, I locate two prevalent assumptions within modern panpsychism which I think are problematic: first, that fundamental consciousness belongs to a perspectival subject (whether microlevel or cosmic) and second, that the physical world, despite being backed by conscious subject(s), is observer-independent. I re-introduce an argument I'd made elsewhere against the first assumption: that it lies behind the well-known combination and decombination problems. I then propose a new argument against the second assumption: that it leads to an equally pernicious difficulty I call the "Inner-Outer Gap Problem." The variant of panpsychism I continue to develop and defend, Perennial Idealism, avoids these assumptions and their problems, allowing real progress on the mind-body problem. Perennial Idealism is a type of panpsychist idealism rather than panpsychist materialism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: SITUATING PERENNIAL IDEALISM IN THE MIND-BODY DEBATE

In 1896 a sixteen-year-old Indian schoolboy, Venkataraman, underwent a remarkable cognitive transformation. Overcome with a sudden fear of death, he began to investigate "What is it that dies and what survives death?" This wasn't a mere intellectual inquiry, but a deep and spontaneous dive into the nature of his conscious being. It culminated in what he took to be a direct realization of his real and deathless nature: an unconditioned, aperspectival consciousness. He reportedly spent the rest of his extensively documented life established in what Advaita Vedantins call the "Self" or "Atman": an indivisible and abiding consciousness that presents itself experientially as ultimately real. He described it as a supremely happy state that was, from that point on, completely free of his former sense of identity as an individual self with all its fears and attachments. He was to become known as Ramana Maharshi, ultimately establishing a reputation as being one of the most respected Indian sages of the twentieth century.

A renowned scholar-poet, Muruganar, recorded Ramana's teachings, which Ramana himself then checked for accuracy. Some statements he recorded give a flavour of Ramana's position:

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The infinite eye [Ramana's term for aperspectival consciousness] is only being-consciousness. As it has no fraction 'within itself, nothing whatsoever exists in its [perspective] to be known as 'another'. It is devoid of . . . space, time, cause, effect . . . and so on. (2008, 390)

The *jñānī* [one who has realised the Self] knows the entire world that appears in consciousness as pure consciousness alone. Realising that the world has no independent reality apart from consciousness, he will abide calmly in the Self. (2008, 471)

In Ramana's philosophy, neither the limited subject nor the objects it sees have fundamental reality. Both arise and fall together. Consciousness remains and is continuously experienced when both are absent:

Question: Is the seen [*drśya*] world real?

Ramana: It is true in the same degree as the seer [*draṣṭā*]; subject, object and perception form the triad [*tripuṭī*]. There is a reality beyond these three. These appear and disappear, whereas the truth is eternal. (2008, 384)

It is intriguing that a similar-sounding philosophy has been echoed in the words of other mystics in different centuries and traditions. Huxley (1946) called this the "Perennial Philosophy." I have argued that their reported experiences are consistent with conveying a metaphysical underlay of aperspectival consciousness whose nature is unbound by space, time, and sensory qualities. The aperspectival nature of consciousness comes through in its "conveyance as . . . a pure unity or oneness that lacks differentiation, including, most especially, that between subject/object, self/other, knower/ known, seer/seen" (Albahari 2019, 10). The mystics all appear to be saying that what prevents us from realising this to be so, keeping us trapped in the illusion of occupying a separate mind-independent world, is our erroneous sense of being an individual self. They say that the destruction of this self-illusion is both possible and necessary to apprehend directly the true nature of reality.<sup>1</sup> Metaphysicians whose job it is to investigate reality should surely consider it worth asking: "Could Ramana and these mystics have been right about the ultimate nature of consciousness?"

My project over the years has been to inquire into the Perennial Philosophy, using the methods of analytic philosophy to extrapolate from it a plausible metaphysical system. Since its casting of consciousness as foundational makes it a form of idealism, I've called it "Perennial Idealism." While this metaphysical position is handicapped by its own admission that discursive thought cannot yield a complete understanding of its fundamental claims, the analytic inquiry is still of great value. It can provide a clearer view of why the mystics should be taken seriously, and why philosophical method may fall short as a way of apprehending what is ultimately real. Why assume, after all, that intellectual thought must be the royal road to understanding *all* that there is?

There is a further reason why the Perennial Philosophy is worth delving into. Quite independently, the tide of thought on the mind-body problem has been turning towards metaphysical systems that take consciousness to be fundamental.

Philosophers are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with explanations that have been dominating the intellectual landscape. Standard materialism, for example, is the view that consciousness can be completely explained in terms of nonconscious matter. But the subjective qualities of consciousness seem so utterly different to the formal mind-independent structures of matter. It appears that one could perfectly grasp the causal nexus of various neurophysiological structures without any clue that they underpin the taste of chocolate. Subjective experiences emerging from matter at any putatively sufficient level of complexity remain puzzling and mysterious. The problem of reducing conscious qualities to basic features of material systems is known as the “Hard Problem of consciousness” (Chalmers 1996). Materialism’s standard rival, dualism, upholds the view that mind and matter (or its properties) are metaphysically independent of one another. This system has its own well-known pitfalls. While the velvety taste of chocolate seems subjectively to impel the lifting of yet another square to the mouth, it becomes an awkward bystander to the neurochemical story of lifting that can be told completely without the taste. This problem of finding a causal place for conscious qualities in the physical world is known as the “Causal Exclusion Problem” (Papineau 2002, 16–17).

Both materialism and dualism, although opposed to each other, regard material fundamentals to lack conscious qualities. This opens an explanatory gap between mind and matter. For materialism the hard question is how matter can give rise to mind; for dualism it is how mind can causally impinge upon matter. Modern panpsychism proposes to close the mind-matter gap by endowing the very nature of matter with mind. From an outside perspective, material fundamentals are deemed to behave in the measurable spatiotemporal terms that are described by the physical sciences. It is from these external observations that we arrive at our understanding of the physical world with its formulas and equations. But implementing these equations, hidden behind the scenes, are conscious subjects. There is something that it feels *like* to be fundamental matter (and perhaps some intermediaries such as cells and atoms). We can arrive at this intuition, panpsychists say, by reflecting on our own physical existence. Science will describe our bodies and brains in external, spatiotemporal terms, but we know that there’s more to the story: that from inside there is something it feels *like* to inhabit them and implement their behaviour. It makes similar parsimonious sense, say the panpsychists, to suppose that consciousness lurks behind and animates all physical systems, whether their fundamentals occur at a quantum or cosmic level.

In this and other ways panpsychism is viewed by advocates to close the mind-matter gap (Chalmers 2016). The Hard Problem of consciousness for materialism seems to vaporize once we recognize that consciousness occurs fundamentally, with no need to emerge problematically at an arbitrarily high level. We would, moreover, not expect to encounter any conscious qualities through methods that examine physical matter from the outside. Conscious qualities are only directly observable by *being* the material entity in question. The causal exclusion problem seems also to vanish once we recognize that, far from being awkward bystanders, conscious qualities are what animate the observable behaviour of matter. The recognition that their intrinsic nature is not something we would expect to find (unless we are the entity in question) allows conscious qualities the coherent possibility of being causally efficacious while being hidden from purview.

Through appearing to sidestep the problems of its predecessors, panpsychism ushers consciousness onto the central metaphysical stage. It is a step in the right direction. But panpsychism, at least in its most common forms, is not yet Perennial Idealism. It differs from Perennial Idealism along at least one of two axes. First, panpsychists usually assume that consciousness, at its most fundamental level, qualifies the perspective of a subject. This assumption isn't shared by Perennial Idealism. Following the mystics, the position regards consciousness at its fundamental level to be aperspectival and so free of localised subjects.<sup>2</sup> Second, panpsychists usually assume consciousness to be the hidden intrinsic nature of *matter*. What this means is that while matter's inner conscious nature is available only to the entity in question, its measurable exterior bears those structures independently of any observer. When we measure the structure and behaviours of a particle or brain, for instance, those structures and behaviours are fully present before we arrive on the scene to measure them. Nothing in their ontology is contributed to by the one who is observing or measuring them from outside. The observer-independent aspect is what makes this brand of panpsychism a form of materialism which, following Brentyn Ramm (2021) in his application of this term, I shall call *panpsychist materialism*. The view developed in Perennial Idealism, by contrast, posits physical structures that depend as much on the observer as on the observed. There are no observer-independent patterns of physical reality, such as structures or relations, waiting to be discovered. While Perennial Idealism is also a brand of panpsychism, it is an idealist brand which, following Ramm, I shall call *panpsychist idealism*.<sup>3</sup>

With this background in place, the paper will offer arguments against these two prevalent panpsychist assumptions. In accepting neither, Perennial Idealism will emerge in a stronger position than the standard variants. Addressing the first assumption will be largely an exercise of review as I've argued elsewhere (Albahari 2019, 2020) that fundamental consciousness is better cast as aperspectival rather than as perspectival. The discussion will briefly summarize the most famous objection to panpsychism known as the "Subject Combination Problem." The difficulty with combining perspectives spurs the dialectical move from micropsychism to cosmopsychism. While cosmopsychism's endorsement of universal consciousness makes it a closer cousin of Perennial Idealism, its standard adherence to a cosmic *perspective* renders it vulnerable to a "decombination" problem. Avoiding this problem, I have argued, requires relinquishing the assumption that universal consciousness be perspectival. In reviewing this line of thought I will address a recent objection to it by Itay Shani (Shani 2022). The second prevalent assumption is held by panpsychist materialism and is one against which I'll be offering a new argument that I call the "Inner-Outer Gap Problem." It contends that their central dialectical motivation for embracing panpsychism—that of closing the mind-matter gap of its predecessors—is undermined by their casting of physical structures as observer-independent. If the argument works, then it is as serious a problem for panpsychist materialism as the combination and decombination problems. If one is to go the panpsychist route, which I think is the right route, the only way to close the gap is to be a panpsychist idealist.

The upshots of this paper will thus be that panpsychism, while stronger than its materialist/dualist predecessors, should not cast fundamental consciousness as

perspectival (section 2) but as aperspectival (section 3). And in accounting for the physical world, panpsychism should not be cast as materialist (section 5) but as idealist (section 6). (Section 4 expands on the distinction between panpsychist materialism and panpsychist idealism). In meeting these two criteria, Perennial Idealism (expounded in section 3) will be seen to fit the bill (section 6), rendering it a viable way forward in the mind-body problem.

## 2. THE PROBLEM WITH CASTING FUNDAMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS PERSPECTIVAL

Stated more precisely, panpsychism is the general position that all concrete things are in some way grounded in consciousness and, in its modern incarnation, that all but the most basic subjects are in some way made from other conscious subject(s). This is usually coupled with the claim that base-level consciousness belongs to a subject. The subject's extrinsic nature is cast in terms that capture an object's concrete, physical side: as a structured particle, human, universe or so forth. The subject's intrinsic nature is by contrast described as a localized and centred perspective with a conscious field in which experiences come and go. Those experiences are felt *to* a centred perspective, whether attentively or inattentively. The range of experiences being felt to a given perspective helps to circumscribe that subject's conscious field, thereby individuating one subject from another. Lucy's tasting of chocolate is available to her perspective and not to that of her friend Jim. They are therefore treated as different subjects. Subjects appear then to be hermetically sealed off from one another, giving rise to the well-known Subject Combination Problem.<sup>4</sup>

The Subject Combination Problem is paramount for the variant known as *micropsychism*. In micropsychism we humans are held to be conscious subjects by virtue of the fact that our smallest microconstituents are conscious subjects. Whether by constitution or emergence, we inherit our conscious experience from them. But since subjects appear to be hermetic, it is very hard to imagine how microexperiences belonging to different microperspectives could combine to produce macroexperiences that associate with a single macroperspective. We can readily imagine paint combining to form new colours, but not perspectives and their experiences combining to form new perspectives and experiences.<sup>5</sup> To avoid this problem, some panpsychists have turned to cosmopsychism, the variant that deems the cosmos to be the most basic conscious constituent. In cosmopsychism we inherit our conscious subjecthood from that of the cosmos. While there is no longer a combination problem, I have argued that most brands of cosmopsychism are vulnerable to a *decombination* problem.<sup>6</sup> So long as cosmic consciousness is attributed to a perspective-bearing *subject*, macrosubjects such as ourselves will have trouble being derived intelligibly from cosmic consciousness.

Philip Goff (2017) defends what I call the "transparent" version of cosmopsychism. He states that we are conscious subjects in virtue of the fact that the cosmic subject includes, in its conscious field, our conscious experiential perspectives as components of its overall experience. Following William James (1909, Lecture V),

who launched a similar attack on cosmopsychism’s nineteenth-century idealist counterparts, I’ve argued that this would entail, incoherently, that the cosmos takes into its perspective incompatible mental states. It would experience Fiona’s overwhelming fear of annihilation at death alongside Fred’s overwhelming elation at the prospect of a stint in heaven (Albahari 2020, 122). Itay Shani (Shani 2022, 17) concurs with this objection, noting also that Goff’s cosmic subject “chops the psyche off cosmopsychism!” All minds in the living world, he observes, are involved in an effort to intelligently integrate their contents. No subject has been surmised to act as a mere ‘storehouse’ of disconnected experiences.

But Shani still thinks it coherent (as he did in his 2015 paper [Shani 2015]) for the cosmic subject to partially ground our experiences. He avoids the incoherence of contents with a workaround: the cosmic subject shares with us its own field of conscious awareness, bestowing its sentient nature and perspectival structure upon *our* conscious fields, whilst not being privy to any experiences that lie within our purview. Cosmic consciousness is likened to an ocean whose vortices (our perspectives) have localized activity (our experiences) whilst still being made of ocean (conscious sentience). I objected to Shani’s variant on the grounds that that while it avoids Goff’s incoherence objection, it undermines what it takes to be a subject by violating its perspectival architecture (Albahari 2019, 2020). As I said: what normally delineates one conscious subject from another is that any experience within a subject’s conscious field is automatically given to its perspective. If a taste of chocolate manifests in Lucy’s conscious field, then it is experientially registered by Lucy’s perspective, making *her* the subject to which it belongs, and no-one else. On Shani’s position, however, Lucy’s enjoyment of chocolate manifests also within the cosmic subject’s conscious field and is stipulated to belong to it while *not* being registered by its perspective. But in what meaningful sense, then, can Lucy’s enjoyment of chocolate be really said to *belong to* the cosmic subject? It is far more in line with what we know about subjects to say there are two nonoverlapping subjects, the cosmos and Lucy, with the chocolate-experience belonging to Lucy only. In responding to my objection, Shani adds a further analogy:

... there are regions in one’s conscious field concealed from one’s view. We of course do not think of blind spots as shielding from us hidden pockets of experience and individual subjectivity but why can’t something like this characterize [cosmic consciousness’s] relation to the lesser subjects emergent in its midst? (Shani 2022, 19)

As Shani himself notes, visual blind spots don’t hide pockets of subjective experience—but this is just the thing that needs accounting for if the analogy is to be convincing. Even if not strictly incoherent, I maintain that Shani’s endorsement of ‘translucent’ cosmopsychism (as he describes it) is *ad hoc*, having nothing motivating it other than a push to resolve the decombination problem. In violating the perspectival architecture of subjects, it goes against what has, in the history of philosophy, made conscious subjects the kind of puzzling entities they are (Albahari 2019, 9). Just as we don’t have evidence for subjects that act as storehouses of experience, we

don't have evidence for subjects which contain within their conscious field other subjects and their experiences. If Goff's cosmopsychism chops off the psyche, Shani's version *changes the subject*.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. THE CONTOURS OF PERENNIAL IDEALISM

To avoid the (de)combination problems and move forward in the mind-body debate panpsychists should, as Perennial Idealism does, leave perspectival subjects as they are and seek instead a resolution that casts foundational consciousness as aperspectival. The appeal to aperspectival consciousness will *not* be an *ad hoc* manoeuvre if we take seriously the data from relevant mystical experiences. But taking mystical data seriously should in turn require that the notion of aperspectival consciousness be intelligible, allowing our perspectives and experiences of the world to arise coherently from within it. While I address these issues at length in earlier pieces (Albahari 2019, 2020), this section will outline the contours. We'll get a better sense of how Perennial Idealism pans out metaphysically, setting the stage for defending an idealist (rather than a materialist) rendering of panpsychism.

The first point of note is that the foundational aperspectival consciousness, in Perennial Idealism, is the intrinsic nature of our everyday conscious field. Mystical experience serves to *reveal* the real nature our conscious field rather than to *transform* it into something else. I've so far referred to the conscious field as that medium of awareness in which phenomena come and go. While elusive to perception and introspection, which are geared toward seeking objects, this awareness, sometimes referred to as "witness-consciousness," is self-fulgent—alive to its own presence. Often compared to the sun, it is intransitive—not an object of experience being shone upon but the light being shed on experiences. It is a mode-neutral awareness that knows, attentively or inattentively, that experiences from different modalities are operative. How, then, could this conscious field serve to ground and explain our impression of being a subject in the world?

First, what makes our conscious field appear perspectival? It is the manifestation of objects to a subject. While objects can broadly comprise any discernible target of perception or introspection, we are always initially aware of objects via what I call "cognisensory" imagery. These are the experiential qualities associated with different cognitive and sensory modalities: sights, sounds, thoughts, and so on. Arising in the conscious field, they form the building blocks for Perennial Idealism. The arising of imagery, on the theory, will never occur in isolation but will always come with a first-person perspective. There can be no such thing as a headache or the sight of a tree that does not appear to a perspective. This tallies with observation and has important implications for Perennial Idealism. It helps us begin to conceive of how the observable appearance of objects could naturally bring with it a perspective within a conscious field that is in itself aperspectival. Just as a plant comes with roots, imagery comes with a perspective from which it is viewed. A subject essentially is, in Perennial idealism, imagery to a conscious perspective. So long as we experience consciousness *with* perspective-inducing objects, our conscious field will always appear in the dichotomized subject/object format, making it seem perspectival by nature. The cognisensory imagery, moreover, strongly suggests the presence of an external

and spatiotemporal world—even that imagined while dreaming. This compounds the deep automatic assumption that our consciousness is localised in an embodied perspective, with one conscious field per subject.

Though our conscious field generally appears bifurcated, as objects manifesting to a subject, some mystics have reported on directly experienced states in which there was an absence of both cognisensory imagery and a centralized registering observer to experience and coordinate them. It would be question begging here to assert that these claims of object-free pure consciousness are true. However, the mystics claim that *were* all imagery to vanish from our conscious field, consciousness would by default present itself in the aperspectival way they describe. Given how Perennial Idealism has been explained, this bare possibility makes sense—which is all we need here. Without objects there would be nothing to cue consciousness into the sense of being a subject occupying a localized perspective. Nor, conceivably, would there be any sense of space or of time passing. Our experience of being in a spatial world, after all, depends on registering imagery such as sights, sounds, proprioception, and cognitions. The inward flow of imagery helps secure a sense of time passing. The excision of all imagery could at least *conceivably* precipitate an experience of our luminous conscious field as independent of any perspective, space, and passing time—just as the mystics proclaim.

It is moreover quite conceivable that were a person to fully experience consciousness in the absence of such parameters, they would no longer feel tethered to a perspective. The deep automatic assumption of perspectival limitation would be extinguished. I've sometimes compared this to a person who, having spent all her life in a square windowless room, comes to experience open space for the first time. She could never again, as she might have done before, suppose space to be intrinsically square-shaped. This is exactly how mystics such as Ramana speak of consciousness. While objects continue to be registered, eliciting a nominal perspective from which they are viewed, there is no identity, they say, with this perspective that registers them. Insofar as we take subjects to delimit consciousness to a perspective, they are seen as illusory. So too are external objects. Rather than being seen as stand-alone entities in a mind-independent world, subjects and objects are registered as dream-like phenomena within a boundless consciousness.

Having outlined the foundations of Perennial Idealism in a way that makes initial sense of the mystical reports, it can now be asked: What is the relation between these imagery-bound subjects? Are they self-standing or interconnected? As the mystics don't tend to elaborate on a world they regard to be dream-like, Perennial Idealism must branch out here in its metaphysical conjecture. I have proposed that subjects are deeply interconnected. The cognisensory imagery, which I take to indicate the world of objects around me, is what inwardly and directly frames my perspective as a subject. This imagery is simultaneously the outward and indirect appearance of other subjects, all of which arise from aperspectival consciousness.

As I sit here and type, an organized field of imagery coalesces in my conscious field. There's what I take to be my husband, a computer screen, a bookshelf, pot-plants, sensations, and thoughts. I propose that these are all the outward extrinsic appearances to me of other subjects as they arise from the conscious field. Their



combined disclosure as imagery to a single perspective makes me a single subject. But which are the different subjects that I indirectly register as this imagery? I'm confident that my husband is one: a single perspective to which other imagery (including myself) appears. I suspect that my plant is a subject. But I doubt that I am registering single subjects when I behold the bookshelf or a computer screen. I could be registering a vast collection of microsubjects—atoms perhaps—or part of a wider subject, such as the cosmos. Likewise, the imagery comprising my thoughts and sensations might be the registration of many neuro-cellular subjects, each with their own perspective, or part of a wider subject, the cosmos. When it comes to identifying subjects, I am agnostic on what principle individuates them, open to whatever turns out to be the best account (a topic of debate amongst panpsychists). It could be that what appears to us as the cosmos, cells, or particles, are conscious subjects. My account simply requires that our conscious field be grounded in aperspectival consciousness rather than in other subjects, and that any cognisensory imagery appearing within (and thereby helping comprise) a given subject's perspective is the outer extrinsic appearance of other subjects, whether single, in part, or many.

Because the imagery framing a subject's inner perspective is literally *made* from the outer extrinsic appearances of other subjects, there can be no such thing as a solitary subject. This not only staves off solipsism; it renders Perennial Idealism thoroughly panpsychist. Recall our definition of panpsychism: that all concrete things are in some way grounded in consciousness, and that subjects (if nonbasic) are in some way made from other subjects. Depending on the variant, this plays out differently. On the proposed idealist version, all concrete things, *viz.*, *their imagistic appearances as such to a subject's perspective*, arise from pure consciousness, and subjects are made from the *outer extrinsic appearances* of other subjects. The italicized portions emphasize the idealist leanings that put it in contrast to the more popular, materialist versions of panpsychism. These typically say: all concrete things (as opposed to their *appearances* as such) have some grounding in consciousness-bearing subjects, and these subjects (if nonbasic) are made from other subjects (as opposed to merely their outer extrinsic *appearances*).

In the following section, I expand further on the differences between these two approaches before arguing, in section 5, that panpsychist materialism fails to close the mind-matter gap.

#### 4. CONTRASTING PANPSYCHIST MATERIALISM WITH PANPSYCHIST IDEALISM

In further contrasting the materialist and idealist brands of panpsychism it is instructive to start with where they overlap. Suppose I'm beholding another subject, Lucy. If I'm a neuroscientist peering into her skull, I will find a brain with complex neurological structures. Both brands of panpsychism can agree that what presents itself to me as an embodied brain is the outer extrinsic appearance of an intrinsically conscious subject. But from here they diverge. The materialist version will say that the observed physical structures of Lucy's brain are wholly independent from my observations of it. These physical structures are grounded in Lucy's conscious field—in

what it is like to be her (and perhaps also some other factors, but let's keep it simple for purposes of the illustration). The idealist version will say that the physical structures of Lucy's brain that I observe are *not* independent from my observations of it. On the idealist version I propound, the structures ascribed to Lucy's brain are grounded proximally in my conscious field as I observe it and distally in Lucy's conscious field. In particular, the structures are derived proximally from the patterns of cognisensory imagery that appear directly to my perspective (and help constitute me as a subject) and distally from the subjecthood of Lucy who appears indirectly to me as brain-like imagery.

The dominance of panpsychist materialism has meant that its contrast with panpsychist idealism has had relatively little coverage in the literature. When types of panpsychism have been branded "idealist" they have not usually mapped onto the version propounded here. Philosophers tend to distinguish kinds of panpsychism that are "pure" or "impure," or similarly "idealist" or "double-aspect." Although important in their own right, these labels tend to describe the degree to which a physically specified object, such as Lucy's brain, is grounded in its conscious backing, such as in what it's like to be Lucy. "Pure" or "idealist" versions tend to say that the objects are completely grounded in their conscious backing; "impure" or "double-aspect" versions tend to say that the grounding also has some nonconscious (structural or unknown) contribution. They are still variants of panpsychist materialism. While Chalmers (2016) has been amongst those to have used this terminology, he has recently articulated a distinction that *does* map onto what I have in mind. He outlines the differences using the labels of "realist" versus "anti-realist." On what I call panpsychist materialism he writes:

... what it is for physical facts *p* to obtain is for certain structural roles to obtain [with] ... no commitment to "esse est percipi" ... [V]iews like this are naturally understood as versions of realism about the physical world, rather than versions of anti-realism. The physical world really exists out there, independently of our observations; it just has a surprising nature. Indeed, views of this sort are highly congenial to epistemological structural realism, which says roughly that science reveals the structure of the physical world but not its intrinsic nature. (2020, 354)

Contrasted with this, says Chalmers, are "anti-realist" positions in which "for any non-mental fact *p* about concrete reality, what it is for *p* to obtain is for appearances that *p* (or closely related appearances) to obtain" (2020, 354).<sup>8</sup> While Berkeley's idealism best typifies this "anti-realist" stance, panpsychist idealism is also "anti-realist" insofar as there is *some* dependence of concrete reality on their appearance as such. But it is worth noting how this differs from Berkeley's more extreme and I think less plausible version.

Berkeley was not a panpsychist, at least in the modern sense of the term. For him, a physical object such as an apple, with God's backing, depended *entirely* on its imagistic appearance to a human observer. For the panpsychist idealist, the apple depends only *partially* on its appearance to a human observer. The apple-like appearance to humans is itself the outward registration of other subject(s), bestowing a measure of realism to panpsychist idealism. These other subjects still exist as subjects, appearing

as object-imagery to one another's (perhaps micro) perspective when human subjects leave the room. But their specific outward manifestation, as an apple, exists only in the conscious field of human (or similar) observers. So long as we understand antirealism to signal *some* dependency of physical structures on observing subjects, Chalmers's distinction captures well enough the central difference between materialist and idealist brands of panpsychism.

## 5. THE INNER-OUTER GAP PROBLEM FOR PANPSYCHIST MATERIALISM

With the distinction between panpsychist materialism and panpsychist idealism now explained, I offer my argument against the former. I call it the "Inner-Outer Gap Problem." The essence of this problem will be that because panpsychist materialism construes physical structures as existing *sub specie aeternitatis*, independently of observers, it fails to close the mind-matter gap. It remains a mystery as to how inner conscious qualities could ground or realise such outer physical structures. To arrive at this point, the dialectic will progress through a series of steps where potential escape hatches are blocked and the noose progressively tightened.

Recall the two ways in which panpsychism is regarded by modern advocates to close the mind-matter gap. First, it is supposed to endow the intrinsic nature of matter with consciousness, such that it resolves the Hard Problem for standard materialism. Second, this hidden inner conscious nature is supposed to serve as the filler for those functional roles pertaining to the behaviour of matter, thereby solving the Causal Exclusion Problem for dualism. The dialectic is notably set up so as to imbue what we think of as ordinary *material* objects—bearing the mind-independent structures of mass, charge, and so forth—with a surprising inner nature of consciousness. Philosophers approaching panpsychism from this angle are thus primed to view panpsychism through a materialist lens. For example, Galen Strawson writes that his favoured brand of panpsychism:

... has nothing to do with idealism in the Berkeleyan sense ... according to which 'physical objects' are ideas in minds. [It] leaves the universe wholly independent of our minds—except for those parts of it that are our minds. ... The question is: What is the ultimate, intrinsic, categorical nature of the stuff that exemplifies the structures that physics discerns and captures in its equations? [Physicalist panexperientialism] answers: the ultimate, intrinsic, categorical nature of physical stuff is experience, experientiality. (2020, 319)

In introducing panpsychism to a general audience, Hedda Hassel Mørch writes:

... because of [their] distinctly qualitative, non-structural properties ... conscious experiences are just the kind of things that the physical structure could be the structure *of*. ... the hard problem of consciousness all but dissolves. (2017, online)

And of a mainstream brand of micropsychism, Chalmers argues that it:

promises to avoid the problems of physicalism and dualism . . . [M]icrophenomenal properties certainly play a causal role in physics. They are the properties that play the most fundamental causal roles in physics: the mass role, the charge role, and so on. (2016, 27, 29)

But with an observer-independent rendering of the physical roles and structures, it is not immediately obvious that the experiential qualities pinned down by panpsychist materialists are “just the kind of things that [these] physical structure[s] could be the structure[s] of.” For a start, the set of experiences that are supposed to ground these physical structures *face the wrong way*. Rather than facing outwards, to the scientists who are supposed to observe the data and extract the equations, they face inwards, to the perspective of the subject undergoing the relevant experiences. Take Lucy’s enjoyment of chocolate. This experience, that is supposed to be realizing the causal structures in her brain, is available only to Lucy and not to Jim who is examining her brain. What Jim does immediately observe are neural networks that appear as patterns of visual images to *his* perspective. So it is from Jim’s experience, not Lucy’s, that the abstractions attending Lucy’s brain are directly harvested. This observation tallies well with panpsychist idealism. Experiential qualities *are* just the kind of things that physical structures could be the structures of, provided we focus on the right set—those facing, rather than with their backs towards, the relevant observer. But then this makes the structures observer-dependent.

In response, panpsychist materialists are likely to insist that the patterns of brain-imagery showing up in Jim’s perspective merely reflect what he has *discovered* to be already out there. The structures that he sees, with their spatial relations, are simply part of the external presentation of Lucy’s subjective experience as advertised ‘on the box’ of the theory. Of course, what he experiences (spatial patterns embedded in grey matter) isn’t going to exactly resemble what Lucy experiences. It only matters that the discoverable physical structures are grounded in Lucy’s experience.

Will this do? There’s another red flag: the specific neural *structures* that Jim finds in Lucy’s brain as she chomps chocolate are unlikely to be mirrored in Lucy’s experience. If they were grounded in her experience, she should have some awareness of it. To this, the panpsychist materialist may reply that we could be looking at the wrong level. Suppose, for instance, that micropsychism is correct and that many of the structures Jim finds in Lucy’s brain are in fact the external collective appearances of numerous smaller subjects (such as neurons) rather than of Lucy considered as a whole subject. Perhaps the level of external structure that rightly maps onto Lucy’s experience of eating chocolate is displayed more coarsely, such as in her observable behaviour as she lifts the chocolate bar to her mouth. Such behaviour is apparent to both Lucy and Jim’s perspective. And perhaps Jim can also discover some higher-level neurophysiological patterns that are isomorphic to various aspects of what it’s like to be Lucy, such as in her decision to eat more chocolate.

Could these higher-level isomorphic patterns and physical behaviours, apparent to both Lucy and Jim, be the outer manifestation of Lucy’s inner subjective experience, such that the outer is wholly grounded in or realised by the inner? We now arrive at the heart of the Inner-Outer Gap Problem for panpsychist materialism. For

we are being asked to consider this: that Lucy's inner subjective experience—accessible to her perspective only—somehow grounds or realises the manifestation of observer-independent structures and behaviours that unfold outwardly in space, *sub specie aeternitatis*. But what intrinsically-natured stuff could embody the abstractable structures and behaviours that stand ready to present themselves to outsiders? They can't without mystery be embodied in Lucy's experience, as her experience, we already noted, is available only to her perspective, *facing the wrong way*. Yet to embody the structures in mind-independent stuff *facing outwards* is to fall right back into standard materialism. Either way, we are faced with reconciling two entirely different kinds of phenomena: mind and observer-independent matter. We are back to the mind-body problem with its gap. Except the problem this time is that rather than mind mysteriously emerging from matter, as with standard materialism, material structures are mysteriously emerging from mind. The matter-mind gap hasn't closed with panpsychist materialism. It has merely migrated—to the very definition of matter.

It may be responded that by focusing on macroproperties of experiences had by humans we are looking at the wrong level. On reductive versions of panpsychism, the causal role of our human experience, together with any macrophysical structures and behaviours, is ultimately inherited from and realised by experiential properties at the foundational level. But matters are no better for panpsychist materialism on the ground floor. In fact, if we consider micropsychism, the situation is even worse. Physicists will generally agree that there are physical relations, such as spatiotemporal ones, that hold between microlevel entities. Yet fundamental consciousness, on micropsychism, is confined to each separate micro entity. So it is hard to see how, without a common subjective medium linking them together, any isomorphic spatial (or other) relationship *between* them could be grounded in consciousness. Chalmers, in a survey article, has noted this challenge. In appraising the microlevel version of 'Pure Russellian panpsychism' which maps onto the position being described here, he writes:

Here the worry is that spatial properties seem to involve certain fundamental relations—distance relations, on a standard view—between fundamental physical entities. Pure Russellian panpsychism requires that these relations are realized by fundamental experiential relations between microsubjects. But it is very hard to understand what a fundamental experiential relation between distinct subjects of experience might be. The most basic experiential properties that we know about seem to be monadic properties of individual subjects. What sort of basic experiential relations between subjects might there be, that can play the role of spatial and temporal relations? (2020, 361)

Chalmers reviews several ways, none very convincing, in which a micropsychist might address the problem. One approach for instance “might allow non-experiential spatiotemporal properties in their picture of the world” while arguing that it is still plausibly a consciousness-based position (2020, 362). This strategy is an example of the impure or double-aspect panpsychism mentioned earlier. But tactics like this do

little to close the mind-matter gap. For like Descartes, one still has to contend with the problematic interface between two very different modes of being: conscious, nonspatial minds on one hand, and the material space that houses them on the other.

Turning to the other ground-floor option, Chalmers notes that cosmopsychism can more readily handle relational features between smaller elements. For the cosmic subject could have a global experience whose co-conscious structures, apparent to its perspective, map onto the structures and spatial relations discoverable by science (2020, 365).<sup>9</sup> While the prospect of locating structurally isomorphic features in consciousness is indeed brighter for cosmopsychism than for micropsychism, the main underlying problem remains. Just as Lucy's experience of eating chocolate does not without mystery digest into observer-independent structures and behaviours, so too the cosmic experience does not without mystery transmute into observer-independent structures discoverable by physics. For if the cosmic subject truly undergoes an experience to its perspective *in the normal way that we understand experiences and subjects*—albeit on a far more expansive scale than our own—then it will be available only to the cosmic subject's perspective.<sup>10</sup> Short of divine intervention, there is no accounting for how this vast but private inner sphere of experience could get its structures shunted out into open air *sub specie aeternitatis*.

To conclude this section, there's no less of a mystery with grounding observer-independent material structures in conscious minds than there is in grounding conscious minds in observer-independent material structures. Whether of the cosmic or microlevel variety, panpsychist materialism does not close the gap between consciousness and matter.<sup>11</sup> This makes the Inner-Outer Gap Problem every bit as objectionable as the (de)combination problems. The only way forward on the mind-body problem is for panpsychism to give up the assumption that physical structures are observer-independent.

## 6. WHY PANPSYCHIST IDEALISM CLOSES THE MIND-MATTER GAP

Panpsychists are right to note the suitability of experiential qualities for grounding and realizing the abstract physical structures of the world discoverable by science. But panpsychist materialists go wrong by pinning these physical structures directly on experiences that face away from the observing scientist. Panpsychist idealism pins the physical structures right in front of the scientist, where they appear to be, inside the organised experiential imagery of their conscious field as they observe the object. The subjects behind these familiar observed physical objects, also arising in consciousness, play a distal role by appearing as cognisensory imagery to the scientist. Although subjects and their structures still bear an inner and outer aspect, they all manifest within an observer-dependent sphere. There is no troublesome transmutation from subjective inner life to observer-independent reality. The Inner-Outer Gap Problem is avoided.

It bears noting that although the most prevalent rendering of panpsychism is materialist, a couple of contemporary cosmopsychists have adopted an idealist approach. One of these is Itay Shani.<sup>12</sup> While his view was earlier criticised for grounding our conscious field in the cosmic perspective rather than in aperspectival

consciousness, the rest of his position makes good sense. Should the cosmos be conscious—a prospect my position is open to—I would endorse Shani’s “principle of lateral duality.” According to this principle, the conscious cosmos manifests a revealed and a concealed side. Its concealed side pertains to the private experience that is had from its cosmic perspective. Its revealed side:

... appears as a spatially extended medium, evolving in time, and differentially structured into various phases and configurations ... [It is] what, in common parlance, we identify as physical nature. ... [It] is the absolute in its *appearance* as an exterior complement to the subjective realities of created selves. (2015, 411, 412)

What makes Shani’s position idealist is that the outer, revealed aspect of the cosmos—which presents itself to us as physical reality—depends for its existence upon our observing it as such. There is no problematic gap between mind and the physical reality.

Is there a connection between how a subject presents itself from the inside and how it appears to other subjects from the outside? Panpsychist materialists search for isomorphic structural mappings, such as between Lucy’s chocolate eating behaviour as observed from her own and Jim’s perspectives. There is no reason to discontinue this search. But rather than saying that aspects of Lucy’s inner experience manifest extrinsically as structurally isomorphic observer-independent motions in space and time, I would say that they are *disposed to appear* to other humans in that structurally isomorphic way. Likewise, if the cosmos is conscious then it is disposed to appear to humans in its characteristically structured way, just as we are disposed to have it appear to *us* in that way. The dispositions are anchored inside a subject’s experience, whose imagery is not causally passive but phenomenally powerful, “prone to eliciting ordered imagery when either registering other subjects to itself or being registered by other subjects” (Albahari 2019, 24).<sup>13</sup> Perennial Idealism is developed elsewhere in some detail along these lines, where a dispositional framework is used to account for law-like regularities that appear within the imagery.

Regardless of whether panpsychist idealists would wish to develop the position in this way, I hope to have made it clear that as far as panpsychism goes, the idealist route is the only way forward. Panpsychist materialism, while on the right track, has become stuck. Although its advocates reject standard materialism in favour of a consciousness-based theory, its place in the mind-body dialectic has panpsychism awkwardly straddling both paradigms. I suspect that a residual adherence to materialism feeds into the famed combination problem. The Subject Combination Problem arises from envisaging subjects as encased in observer-independent material bodies that are located in mind-independent space. This primes us to think of their combination as involving, like lumps of clay, a literal squishing together of perspectives. In moving fully to an idealist paradigm, physical reality and subjects are reframed as modes of appearance in consciousness. As such, the urge to think about subject combination in this problematic way vanishes. For the imagery that frames a subject’s perspective, making it the thing it is, is not made directly from other subjects,

whose perspectives are inaccessible, but from the outer *appearances* of them. And our conscious field partakes not in that of other subject(s), which compounds the combination problem, but in the *aperspectival* ground of pure consciousness from which subjects arise.<sup>14</sup>

## 7. CONCLUSION

I have presented arguments against two prevalent assumptions within modern panpsychism. The assumption that fundamental consciousness is perspectival leads to (de)combination problems, while the assumption that structures of the physical world are observer-independent leads to the Inner-Outer Gap Problem. In rejecting both of these assumptions, Perennial Idealism carries forward the advantages of panpsychism while avoiding its most pressing difficulties. And its metaphysical ground of pure *aperspectival* consciousness has the endorsement of mystics such as Ramana Maharshi. Should these mystics be right, the metaphysic would find an anchor in real life experience that lends it a gravitas beyond that of mere abstraction. Moving panpsychism from a materialist to an idealist and perennialist paradigm will bring many new challenges, but it moves in the right direction.<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. My argument for the convergence thesis (on Perennialist content) has been multistranded, drawing not only on mystical reports from across different traditions and times, but on the independent viability of a metaphysical system that could sustain the “Perennialist” content. The greater the viability of the metaphysic, the more likely it is that the reports converge, and vice versa (Albahari 2019).
2. While some (such as Shani [2022]) argue that subjects need not involve perspectives, my use of the term “subject” (to involve a perspective) is simply meant to track how I think mystics such as Ramana use the term when they describe pure consciousness as being *beyond* the subject/object dichotomy.
3. For an alternative defence of panpsychist idealism, see Ramm (2021). Regarding terminology, David Chalmers (2020) has recently described all consciousness-based metaphysical systems as “idealist,” branding (what I refer to as) panpsychist materialism as a type of “realist” idealism and (what I refer to as) panpsychist idealism as a type of “anti-realist” idealism. To capture the contrast, I prefer Ramm’s terminology as it better conveys the legacy of materialism that most panpsychist advocates hang onto—of significance to the theme of this paper.
4. There are also other types of problem, but the subject version is generally considered the most serious.
5. For a detailed argument on its incoherence, see Coleman (2014) and Shani (2022).
6. Shani (2022) has expressed preference for an alternative term, since, he thinks, “decombination” implies that each of the decombined elements have to have initially combined to make up the whole. I see no such implication. The term “decombination”, like Chalmers’s “decomposition” (2020), is wholly consistent with the idea that the cosmos is metaphysically prior to its parts (including smaller subjects), with the puzzle being how any parts can be intelligibly derived from the whole. “Decombination Problem” is also the only term to succinctly suggest a dialectical inverse of the Combination Problem. It doesn’t have to imply, as Shani thinks, a metaphysical symmetry between the two.
7. Bernardo Kastrup’s (2018) version of cosmopsychism suffers from a similar problem. Using the model of dissociative identity disorder, he proposes that we are dissociated alter egos of the cosmic subject. But I would argue again that it’s far more natural to say that there are different nonoverlapping conscious subjects rather than one cosmic conscious subject containing the other subjects within its field of consciousness. Should he redefine “cosmic subject” to mean something that extends beyond the reach of its consciousness, with our conscious experience grounded in regions of its unconscious mind, then I’d argue that the problem now shifts to getting our consciousness out of its unconsciousness—analogueous to the Hard Problem for materialism. This objection can also be made against Freya Mathews’s (2011) position.



8. As mentioned in note 3, Chalmers (2020) also regards them both as types of *idealism* in virtue of being mind-based, but this is only a terminological difference.
9. Cosmopsychist materialism is defended by Galen Strawson (2020). Shani and Keppler (2018) defend a variant consistent with it. Goff (2020) defends an impure variant of cosmopsychism that adds to conscious subjects a more expansive property of “consciousness+” to handle extension and causal powers. But this invokes gaps of its own.
10. Attempts to get around this by changing the definition or parameters of “subject” and “experience” will only move the bump of mystery under another part of the cosmic carpet, incurring objections similar to those that I launched in the previous section.
11. For a related criticism of panpsychism that focuses on the problem of grounding spatial structures in experiences, see Aleksiev (2021).
12. See also Kastrup (2018) and possibly Matthews (2011). As mentioned in note 9, Shani has a later coauthored defense of cosmopsychism that is open to a materialist rendering of cosmopsychism. Somewhat ironically, that paper gives up the assumption that fundamental consciousness is perspectival.
13. In identifying dispositions with subjects, I follow the thinking of C.B. Martin (2007), except that he opted to identify dispositions with qualities rather than subjects. The view also resonates with Mørch’s (2020) notion of phenomenal powers—so long as the powerful phenomenal qualities are understood to be integrated with a subject.
14. For another take on the problem in this arena, see Ramm (2021, 94–100).
15. I would like to thank David Godman for helping edit this paper and Itay Shani for many fruitful discussions and feedback on this paper. I have also benefited from ongoing correspondence with Galen Strawson and from earlier exchanges with Damian Aleksiev and Philip Goff.

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