



## A New Debate on Consciousness: Bringing Classical and Modern Vedānta into Dialogue with Contemporary Analytic Panpsychism

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*Panpsychism* is the view that consciousness (*psyche*) is present everywhere (*pan*). Recent analytic philosophers of mind, such as Galen Strawson (2006), David Chalmers (2015), Philip Goff (2006, 2017a, 2017b), and Itay Shani (2015, 2018), building off of the work of earlier pioneers, such as Thomas Nagel (1979), have articulated and defended some version of panpsychism. Strawson defends micropsychism, Chalmers defends panprotopsychism, and Goff and Shani advocate different versions of cosmopsychism. Although many of these philosophers draw from historical sources in the Western tradition, such as Baruch Spinoza, William James, or Bertrand Russell, none of them seriously explores the possibility of some kind of panpsychism in non-Western philosophy, and, more importantly, the consequences of what a constructive engagement between Western and non-Western theories of panpsychism might provide.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to analytic philosophers of mind, a growing number of scholars working in cross-cultural philosophy have begun to investigate both Western and non-Western approaches to panpsychism. For example, Douglas Duckworth (2017) has investigated panpsychism in relation to Yogācāra Buddhism, while both Luca Gasparri (2017) and Miri Albahari (2019) have investigated Advaita Vedānta in relation to cosmopsychism. This chapter aims to continue the work of cross-cultural philosophy by doing the following. First, it provides a background for current analytical discussions of panpsychism, which begins with the work of Galen Strawson, and moves through the work of Sam Coleman and Philip Goff in relation to micropsychism, cosmopsychism, the combination problem, and the decombination problem. Second, using a central claim from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, as well as recent work in analytic metaphysics

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on *grounding*, it presents two different ways of understanding three major schools of Vedānta on consciousness. Third, it discusses the recent attempts of Albahari and Gasparri to show how Advaita Vedānta is different from cosmopsychism. Fourth, it presents an epistemological problem for the Advaitin view, and argues that other Vedāntic traditions do not face the epistemological problem that Advaitins face. Fifth, in a forward-looking direction, it articulates a framework for a new debate on consciousness, by bringing the role of the self in panpsychism into contact with debates over illusionism about consciousness. Sixth, it charts out future directions for widening and enriching this new debate on Vedānta, panpsychism, and illusionism in consciousness studies. The driving question of the new debate is: Which illusion, if any, should we accept—consciousness, the self, both, or neither?

The best way to drive toward this new debate on consciousness and the self is by asking the question: In the age of materialism about the mind, how have we found our way back to panpsychism, perhaps the oldest theory of consciousness across cultures? By answering this question and tracing our way forward through the debates in analytical philosophy of mind, we can come upon a connection with classical Indian philosophy, and construct a new debate. The new debate derives in part from looking at what is at issue about the self and consciousness across Vedānta and analytic panpsychism.

## 14.1 The Rebirth of Panpsychism

Within contemporary philosophy of mind, *promissory note materialism* (PNM),<sup>2</sup> is the view that although physics + chemistry + biology + neuroscience do not at present offer a complete account of consciousness, in the future a complete theory will be found through the development of these disciplines in combination with one another. The slogan of PNM is that our current ignorance is not an absolute barrier to understanding consciousness, but merely a limitation of our current theorizing. Moreover, PNM holds to the view that consciousness is rationally understandable. PNM ought to be contrasted with Colin McGinn's (2000) *mysterianism*, which holds that consciousness is fundamentally mysterious and that no amount of development within these paradigms will lead to an increase in our understanding of how a physical theory of consciousness could be true. On this view, even if physicalism is true, we cannot understand how it offers a complete account of consciousness. However, we should ask: Are there any other options available?

Within the space of non-mysterian views, panpsychism has slowly risen in contemporary philosophy of mind as a competitor to PNM and mysterianism. At least one reason it has risen is because of the perceived implausibility of substance dualism and property dualism as viable alternatives to PNM within contemporary science. Substance dualism is found in Western philosophy in the work of Descartes. It holds that there are fundamentally two distinct kinds of things in nature: matter, which is essentially extended; and mind, which essentially has the capacity for thought. Property dualism is an alternative to substance dualism. It was articulated and advanced by Chalmers (1996). It holds that there are fundamentally two distinct kinds of properties, physical and mental, but not two distinct kinds of substances. Both kinds



of dualism have a hard time explaining how mental causation works, since causation is best understood as operating within kinds as opposed to across disparate kinds. Given the importance of mental causation to a theory of consciousness, both kinds of dualism have very little to offer over PNM.<sup>3</sup>

Panpsychism offers an alternative to PNM by holding to the position that taking consciousness to be a fundamental feature of the universe has greater explanatory power than taking consciousness to be derivative of and reducible to matter.

It is worth noting that panpsychism is not a new metaphysical framework for thinking about consciousness. Rather, it is one of the oldest theories of consciousness. Some of the key ancient Greeks who advocated a form of panpsychism include Thales, Anaxagoras, and Heraclitus. And it is a view that in the middle part of the twentieth century was ridiculed as being implausible and incoherent because it implies that stones and dirt are conscious. One way to understand what I call the stone-objection to panpsychism is through consideration of an argument generated around the *connection challenge*.

#### 14.1.1 The Connection Challenge to Panpsychism

1. When panpsychists argue that consciousness is everywhere, either “consciousness” is being used in the *same* sense when we say that a human and a stone are “conscious,” or “consciousness” is being used in a *different* sense.
2. If “consciousness” is being used in the same sense, then it is incoherent, since we have no idea how a stone could be conscious in the same sense that we are: it has no agentive behavior or perceptual capacities or sentient experience or registration of information from its surroundings that correlate with consciousness in us.
3. If “consciousness” is being used in a different sense, then we are faced with the *connection challenge*: How is the kind of consciousness that is found in the stone related to the kind of consciousness found in humans? What does an account of consciousness in humans have to do with giving an account of consciousness, in a very different sense, for stones?

Therefore,

4. Either panpsychism is incoherent, or it must answer the connection challenge.

The connection challenge forces skepticism about panpsychism: What is the motivation for the current resurgence of interest in panpsychism, given the challenge? Assuming that panpsychism is not incoherent, one might specifically wonder: What resources make it a superior theory to that of PNM? What justification do we have for the view? And importantly, what can we gain from a cross-cultural inquiry into panpsychism, something that is missing in the contemporary analytic literature on panpsychism?

## 14.2 Enter Micropsychism

Panpsychism is a rather general thesis that can be developed in a number of ways. The core claim of panpsychism is that consciousness is everywhere. However, this leads us immediately into further questions.



On the one hand, we ought to ask: What kind of consciousness are we talking about? For example, following Ned Block (1995), we can draw a distinction between *access consciousness* and *phenomenal consciousness*. Phenomenal consciousness is the more commonly understood notion of consciousness that has to do with what Nagel (1974) has called the *what it is like* component of experience. For example, the phenomenology of experiencing the color red or the smell of a rose is different from the phenomenology of experiencing the color blue or the smell of lentil curry.<sup>4</sup> These experiences have a *what-it-is-like* component which captures their phenomenal character. By contrast, access consciousness pertains to a mental state's capacity to be exploited in cognition, such as in reasoning and rationally guided speech and action. Given this distinction there are four questions we can ask. First, is access consciousness actually a kind of consciousness that could be everywhere, given that some things don't have mental states? Second, what is the relation between phenomenal and access consciousness? Third, what kind of consciousness is at play in the claim that consciousness is everywhere? Fourth, whose consciousness is it that is everywhere? And if we answer with the specification that we are talking about phenomenal consciousness, one might further ask: Is the kind of phenomenal consciousness that is present everywhere more like human consciousness, where a sense of *ownership* typically accompanies one's phenomenal experience, or is it absent? Human consciousness is typically felt as owned when reflected upon. And if consciousness is everywhere and impersonal, how do we make sense of the ownership component of consciousness?

On the other hand, what does it mean to say that consciousness is *everywhere*? In what sense is it everywhere? Is it everywhere because it is fundamental, in the sense of being an ineliminable property or constituent of the universe? Or is it everywhere because the universe itself is simply a conscious field?

David Chalmers (2015) offers helpful guidance on how to understand contemporary panpsychism. Goff (2017a) presents Chalmers' distinction in a slightly modified form:

*Constitutive panpsychism*—Forms of panpsychism according to which facts about human and animal consciousness are not fundamental, but are grounded in/realized by/constituted out of facts about more fundamental kinds of consciousness, e.g., facts about micro-level consciousness.

And

*Non-constitutive panpsychism*—Forms of panpsychism according to which facts about human and animal consciousness are among the fundamental facts.

According to Goff the most common form of constitutive panpsychism is:

*Constitutive micropsychism*—The view that all facts are grounded in/realized by/constituted out of consciousness involving facts at the micro-level.

One way to understand the motivation for contemporary panpsychism within analytic philosophy of mind is to look at an analysis of the argument for *micropsychism* and the corresponding problem it faces: the *combination problem*.

Strawson's (2006) argument for *micropsychism* is a two-stage analogical argument. In the first stage of the argument he shows that macro-level, human consciousness is a nonfundamental property of the universe, and that it must have evolved through a process of gradual emergence. In the second stage of the argument he examines two competing hypotheses concerning how the emergence could have occurred. PNM is the view that macro-level, human consciousness emerges from fundamental elements of the universe that are *not* conscious in any sense. *Micropsychism* is the view that macro-level, human consciousness emerges from fundamental elements of the universe, at least some of which are conscious in some sense. My evaluation of Strawson's argument begins with the second stage where we compare PNM and micropsychism. The core question is: Why favor micropsychism? Strawson's main argument at this stage is analogical:

1. We cannot understand how something extended in space can emerge *only* from entities that are non-extended in space. It is inconceivable that entities with zero extension, such as points in Euclidean space, combine with one another in some way to generate something that has extension in Euclidean space.
2. The case of *consciousness* in relation to matter is sufficiently similar to the case of *extension* in relation to points. While we can understand how certain things can emerge from other things, we cannot understand emergence in every case. We cannot understand how nonconscious matter can give rise to conscious experience. It is inconceivable that matter, which lacks the crucial ingredient, can combine in some way to generate conscious experience.

Therefore,

3. Micropsychism is a far more promising approach to emergence than PNM, since it minimally posits the correct ingredients for a process of emergence to operate on in order to generate macro-level, human consciousness.

For this argument to be good, micropsychism must provide an account of mental chemistry, an account of how the emergence of macro-level human consciousness emerges from fundamental entities that are conscious operating in combination with nonconscious fundamental entities. The question of how things combine leads to the notorious *generalized combination problem*: for micro-conscious entities to play an explanatory role in the emergence, regulation, and behavior of macro-conscious human and animal states, we must know: (1) how micro-conscious entities combine, and (2) what principles of combination regulate micro-conscious entities interacting with nonconscious entities. This version of the combination problem is voiced via a strong skepticism: we don't even know how to begin offering an account of *mental chemistry*. However, the *generalized combination problem* is not as severe a threat to micropsychism as the *real combination problem*. Sam Coleman (2014) holds that it presents a far more serious problem for micropsychism than the generalized combination problem.

1. Macro-conscious states, such as conscious human mental states, are perspectival in the sense of always having a limited point of view. *From the phenomenology of consciousness*.

Therefore,

2. Anything that is conscious is perspectival. *From* (1).

Therefore,

3. Micro-conscious states are perspectival. *From* (2).
4. If micro-conscious states combine together with other micro-conscious states or nonconscious states, then macro-conscious states would be perspectival in virtue of the combining of micro-conscious states that are individually perspectival. *Principle of combination.*
5. Individual perspectives (at the micro-level) cannot sum to make a macro-perspective.

Therefore,

6. Macro-consciousness cannot be built out of micro-conscious entities.

Importantly, we should ask: Why believe (5)? One line of reasoning is the following.

1. Perspectives are essential to the identity of micro-subjects.
2. If micro-subjects combine to make macro-subjects, then the combination, for it to be genuine, must preserve the identity of the micro-subjects in the combined macro-subject.
3. The individual perspectives of micro-subjects don't survive when they are combined; rather, they merge together into a new unified perspective. Consider A who sees all and only red, and B who sees all and only blue. When they are combined in a higher point of view C, where both red and blue are seen, the identity of A and B disappears, and so do their perspectives. Now everything comes from the perspective of C, where A and B don't remain. Therefore,
4. Micro-subjects cannot combine, while holding their identity, and yield macro-subjects of conscious experience.<sup>5</sup>

The *real combination problem* is stronger than the *generalized combination problem* because the former articulates a concrete problem, while the latter simply voices skepticism about how to combine micro-conscious entities with other micro-conscious entities and nonconscious entities. The generalized combination problem is really just a request for a theory of mental chemistry. However, the real combination problem takes an essential feature of conscious experience, the subjectivity of perspectives, and manufactures a block for any kind of combination by noting that from individual micro-conscious nonhuman perspectives one cannot arrive at macro-conscious human perspectives, since perspectives don't sum and preserve their identity. The upshot of the problems is that they force one to reconsider panpsychism, and how it could be developed. On the assumption that micropsychism is the only viable option for panpsychism, we reach a dead end quite quickly.



### 14.3 The Move to Cosmopsychism

If micropsychism suffers from a structural problem related to the issue of combining small conscious entities together in order to get to a larger whole conscious state at the human level, then perhaps panpsychism is better pursued in a different metaphysical frame. The metaphysical assumption underlying the micropsychist approach is that macro-conscious states are grounded in and derive from micro-conscious entities. But this explanatory route assumes that parts are prior to wholes. *Priority Monism* (PM), developed and defended by Jonathan Schaffer (2010), is the view that facts about wholes are prior to facts about their parts. If PM is correct, then we might pursue panpsychism by claiming that there is one unified conscious whole—the universe—of which each macro-conscious entity, dolphin or human, is a part, and whose consciousness is explained derivatively from the consciousness of the whole universe. The resulting view is called *cosmopsychism*. Following the earlier distinction by Chalmers between constitutive and non-constitutive panpsychism, Goff (2017a) articulates the combination of priority monism and constitutive panpsychism as follows:

*Constitutive cosmopsychism*—The view that all facts are grounded in/realized by/constituted out of consciousness-involving facts at the cosmic level.

Goff (2017a, 2017b) carefully points out that it is not the case that cosmopsychism is committed to the thesis that the universe is God. The claim that the universe is conscious is the minimal commitment of cosmopsychism, but that claim is not the same as the thesis that the universe is God. For either it is possible that an entity exhibits some kind of consciousness without exhibiting the kind of consciousness that is necessary for thought and agency that is found in accounts of God's nature; or it could be that the universe as a whole is a mess of consciousness that is not coherent enough to count as grounding any God-like properties. Moreover, cosmopsychism is open to the view that consciousness is fundamental even if it is no person's consciousness that is fundamental. That is, on cosmopsychism it is possible that consciousness is everywhere, since it is the one fundamental feature of the universe, but it is no one's consciousness that is everywhere, because fundamental.

But why believe cosmopsychism? Cosmopsychism makes a commitment to priority monism and the view that the universe is conscious. Are those commitments problematic? Is the leap to cosmopsychism based on the fact that it simply avoids the combination problem or is there a real metaphysical advantage with respect to other components of consciousness that we seek an explanation for, such as causation or agency?

The *general* and *real* combination problems are based on the idea that we need to explain how micro-conscious entities can combine, but since cosmopsychism rests on priority monism, it does not face the combination problem. Nevertheless, cosmopsychism faces the combination problem's twin sister, the *decombination problem*: How is it that we can arrive at multiple unified macro-conscious states from a universe that is conscious? This is a version of the age-old question: How can we arrive at the many from the one?

Goff (2017b) offers several analyses of how to solve the decombination problem. If the problem in the case of micropsychism is that when A only sees blue and B only sees red, they cannot combine to form C who sees blue and red, the composite perspectives of A and B, then the problem for cosmopsychism is to show how something like C, a unified perspective, can decompose to form A's perspective of blue only and B's perspective of red only. There are two subtle questions here. First, how does decombination happen? What is the mechanism for decombination? Second, what does decombination look like?

One of Goff's analyses of how to solve the decombination problem focuses on allowing the universe to be the grounding base for individual states of consciousness through decomposition.

*Universe:* The whole unified conscious field has both (i) and (ii) as parts:  
 (i) blue-to-perspective-A;  
*And*  
 (ii) red-to-perspective-B.

Therefore,

*Individual:* Each individual inherits from the unified conscious field what it is phenomenally conscious of by decomposition.  
 (iii) A sees only blue;  
*And*  
 (iv) B sees only red.

On this account, cosmopsychism grounds the phenomenal character of A's and B's experiences by simple decomposition. Notice here that we have an answer only to the second question. We have not been told how the decombination happens. What we are told is what the decombination metaphysically involves. That is, we have been told that neither A's nor B's experience is anything over and above the decomposition of the universe's experience of blue-to-perspective-A and red-to-perspective-B, so that A sees only blue and B sees only red. But we have not been told how this decomposition happens.

Critically, concerning what we have been told, it might be argued that on this proposal neither A nor B *owns* their experiences in any real way; they simply *inherit* their experience from the experience of the universe as a whole, thus robbing them of genuine ownership. If the kind of consciousness that needs to be explained in the case of macro-level human consciousness involves not only the *what it is like* aspect of experience, but also the *for me* aspect, then this cosmopsychist attempt to solve the decombination problem will pay a heavy price. Moreover, if Strawson's micropsychism fails to solve the combination problem because perspectives from individuals cannot sum to make another perspective, then this attempt fails to solve the decombination problem because the ownership of experience cannot be inherited downward in the relevant sense of "ownership." While it is true that a person can inherit a house from a relative, and thus own a house through inheritance, the sense in which the inheritance of an experience needs to yield ownership is more intimate than what we get with the legal notion of ownership through inheritance. If what is transferred to A is *blue-to-perspective-A*, and to B is *red-to-perspective-B*, we arrive at a conscious





state that is phenomenal, and perhaps even directed, but clearly not owned in the intimate sense in which we think of our experiences as being owned when we reflect on them. Delimiting the field of consciousness does not entail ownership, in the rich sense where our phenomenology is tied to the feeling of ownership and subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

This representative, yet incomplete, tour of panpsychism has led us to the combination and the decombination problem. One might ask: Is panpsychism really a promising account of how to explain consciousness over what we get from promissory note materialism? And to the point of this chapter: What can be gained from an engagement with Vedāntic traditions with respect to panpsychism, if panpsychism already faces both the combination and decombination problem in both of the ways it has been developed? With regard to the promise of panpsychism, I see no reason to stop pursuing it simply because we face challenging problems. More importantly, after over one hundred years of research on promissory note materialism, substantial questions remain. Therefore, it seems reasonable to investigate panpsychism further. And importantly, that exploration should take us to certain Vedāntic traditions where the core ideas of panpsychism—that consciousness is present everywhere and that it is fundamental—is developed in different ways. Perhaps the different ways in which it is developed provide an alternative way of seeing what advantages it has over promissory note materialism. In Section 14.4, I will provide an analytical survey of three schools of Vedānta as a prelude to a more substantial exploration of what the Vedāntic traditions have to offer.

#### 14.4 An Analytical Taxonomy of Vedānta

One way to taxonomize the different schools of Vedānta is to look at a central statement from Chāndogya Upaniṣad. At 3.4.1 it is written, *sarvaṃ khalvidam brahma*. This passage is often translated as:

(\*) All this is verily Brahman.

However, it can be interpreted differently by other Vedāntic schools.

Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta interprets (\*) as follows:

(a) Brahman *alone* is real.

The core idea is that *all this* is ultimately identical with Brahman, which is the only reality.

Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta interprets (\*) as follows:

(b) Everything is *dependent on* the reality of Brahman.

The core idea is that *all this* is dependent on Brahman, but there are varying degrees of reality.

Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta interprets (\*) as follows:

(c) Everything in the universe *actually is Brahman* in different forms.<sup>7</sup>

The core idea is that *all this* is nothing but different forms of Brahman itself.





Because many contemporary panpsychists use research on grounding in metaphysics to articulate their view, it will be useful to cast the Vedāntic views above in the framework of grounding as well. Arguably, *grounding* is a binary, irreflexive, and asymmetric relation. Nothing grounds itself, and if  $x$  grounds  $y$ , then  $y$  does not ground  $x$ . In addition, the notion of *grounding* is closely related to the notion of *in virtue of*. Plato, for example, is famous for asking, through the mouth of Socrates: Is an act lovable by the gods *in virtue of* its being pious? One could replace the notion of *in virtue of* in the question with *grounded in* or *grounded by*. We would then get the question: Is an act lovable by the gods *grounded in* its being pious? Grounding is also a making-true relation. If  $x$  grounds  $y$ , then facts about  $x$  make true facts about  $y$ . Importantly, grounding is not the same relation as supervenience, which is often defined in modal terms: a set of properties  $A$  supervenes on a set of properties  $B$  just in case no two things *can* differ with respect to their  $A$ -properties without also differing with respect to their  $B$ -properties.<sup>8</sup>

Within research on grounding one important question concerns what can be inferred from a grounding claim, such as “ $X$  is grounded in  $Y$ .” In particular the question concerns what follows about fundamentality, reality, or degrees of reality. Supposing (i) is true, one might ask: Which of (ii) to (v) follows?

| <b>General Claim</b>                       | <b>Example</b>                                       |
|--|--|
| (i) $X$ is grounded in $Y$ .               | A table, $T$ , is grounded in its parts, $P1...Pn$ . |
| Therefore,                                 |  |
| (ii) $Y$ is more fundamental than $X$ .    | $P1...Pn$ are more fundamental than $T$ .            |
| (iii) $X$ is not real, but $Y$ is.         | $T$ is not real, but $P1...Pn$ are.                  |
| (iv) $X$ is real, but less real than $Y$ . | $T$ is real, but less real than $P1...Pn$ .          |
| (v) $X$ is just as real as $Y$ .           | $T$ is just as real as $P1...Pn$ .                   |

According to Schaffer (2009), metaphysics need not be taken only as a search for what exists. It can also be taken as a search for what is fundamental as opposed to what is derivative. On the *ordered conception* of reality, where some things are fundamental and others are derivative, we should say that from (i), (ii) follows. If  $X$  is grounded in  $Y$ , then  $Y$  makes  $X$  true, but  $X$  does not make  $Y$  true. So,  $Y$  is more fundamental than  $X$ . However, the inference to (iii) is more controversial. Should we say that the grounded is not real, while the ground is real? Or, should we simply say that (iv):  $X$  is real, but less real, than  $Y$ ? Or, should we affirm (v):  $X$  is just as real as  $Y$ ? I will use the difference between the inference from (i) to (iii), (iv), or (v) to draw out another way of seeing how the three Vedāntic schools differ. Where “Anand” is the name of a person, all Vedāntic schools accept the claim that from (i), (ii) follows, but they differ in their understanding of the relation between (i) and (iii), (iv), and (v).

Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta claims the following:

- (i) Anand is grounded in Brahman, and (ii) Anand is less fundamental than Brahman.





However,

(iii) Anand is unreal, and Brahman is real.

Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta claims the following:

(i) Anand is grounded in Brahman, and (ii) Anand is less fundamental than Brahman.

Nevertheless,

(iv) Anand is real, just less real than Brahman.<sup>9</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta claims the following:

(i) Anand is grounded in Brahman, and (ii) Anand is less fundamental than Brahman.

Yet,

(v) Anand is just as real as Brahman.<sup>10</sup>

With this basic taxonomy of Vedāntic positions on consciousness, we are in a position to ask: To what extent does cosmopsychism differ from these Vedāntic views? And do these Vedāntic schools provide conceptual resources that can be effectively used in current debates on consciousness? Since there is quite a bit of recent work on Advaita and cosmopsychism, my focus in Sections 14.5 and 14.6 will be on Advaita and a critique of it that separates it from the other schools of Vedānta. I will use my analysis of Advaita to articulate a new framework for a cross-cultural debate on consciousness and the self.

## 14.5 Cosmopsychism and the Comparison with Advaita Vedānta

Both Itay Shani (2015) and Anand Vaidya and Purushottama Bilimoria (2015) note that cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedānta share some features in common. Neither, however, claims that cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedānta are identical views of consciousness or that they are two variants of the exact same type. Noting parallels is *not* sufficient for identifying a unifying underlying type. Gasparri (2017) and Albahari (2019) go much further in their analysis of the metaphysics of Advaita, explaining how it differs from cosmopsychism and outlining some of its explanatory benefits over cosmopsychism with respect to consciousness.<sup>11</sup>

Gasparri provides an important engagement with the comparative question: Does Advaita Vedānta present a version of cosmopsychism? He looks into the roots of how a promising version of cosmopsychism is constructed metaphysically by looking at the role Jonathan Schaffer's (2010) *priority monism* plays in the development of it. To understand *priority monism*, one needs to see how it differs from other important kinds of monism. Gasparri draws a useful contrast between *existence monism*, (EM), and *priority monism* (PM):





(EM) There exists exactly one concrete particular: the whole cosmos.

And

(PM) There exists exactly one basic concrete particular: the whole cosmos.

The metaphysical distinction between (EM) and (PM) is that the former allows for the existence of only one concrete particular, while the latter allows for the existence of a plurality of concrete particulars, but of only one basic particular. (EM) is about existence, while (PM) is about fundamentality. When cosmopsychism is formulated against the backdrop of (PM), Gasparri claims that we get the following four theses that constitute *priority cosmopsychism* (PC):

- (PC1) There is exactly one natural ultimate: the physical cosmos.
- (PC2) The physical cosmos instantiates phenomenal properties.
- (PC3) There are macro-level subjects of experience.
- (PC4) The phenomenal properties of macro-level subjects of experience are derivative of cosmic consciousness.

Against this account of (PC), Gasparri provides the following four theses as an account of Advaita Vedānta (AV):

- (AV1) There is exactly one (fundamental) entity: Brahman.
- (AV2) Brahman is not a physical entity instantiating phenomenal properties: it is pure consciousness.
- (AV3) Physical plurality and individual selfhood are illusory appearances: there are no real macro-level subjects of experience.
- (AV4) The apparent phenomenal properties of macro-level subjects of experience are derivative of Brahman.

So, what differentiates these two views? Gasparri offers the following analysis:

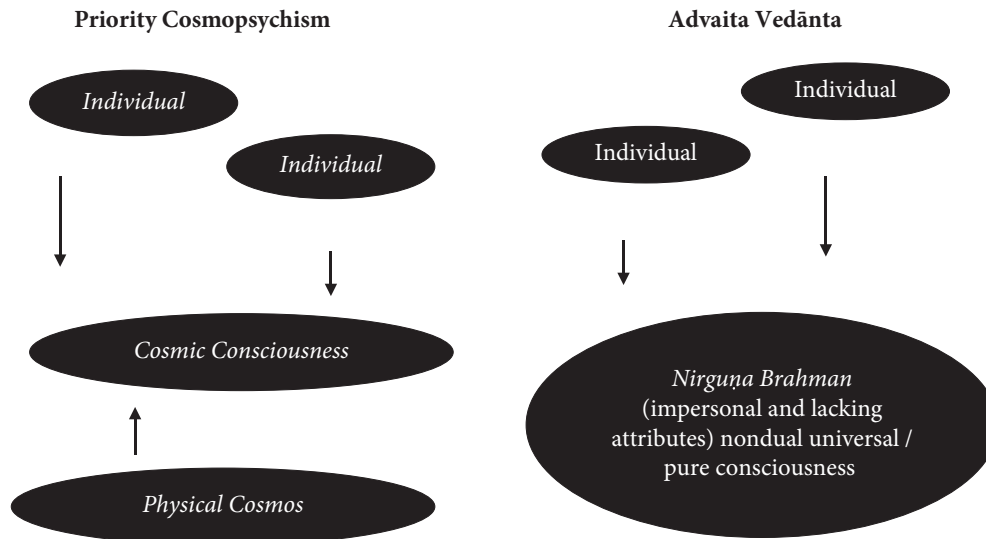
|              |                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| Similarities | (PC1) and (AV1); (PC4) and (AV4) |
| Differences  | (PC2) and (AV2); (PC3) and (AV3) |

Both (PC) and (AV) *accept* some type of monism at the fundamental level and hold that there is a relation of derivation of nonfundamental facts from fundamental facts. The central differences between (PC) and (AV) come from two directions. On the one hand, (PC) maintains that there is a physical universe that instantiates cosmic consciousness, while (AV) holds that there is *no* physical universe that instantiates Brahman.

On the other hand, there is a difference with respect to the distinction between reality and unreality. Advaita Vedānta holds that nondual universal/pure consciousness alone is real, and that individual subjects, such as Anand, are unreal. Although Anand's consciousness is real, Anand as a subject is unreal. Priority cosmopsychism holds that cosmic consciousness is real, and strictly speaking, is neutral about the reality of subjects of experience. However, if priority cosmopsychism is to solve the decombination problem in a convincing way, it is likely that it will need to accept the reality of subjects.



For how is there even a decombination problem to be solved, if human subjects are unreal? A diagram comparing the two views is useful, as shown in Figure 14.1. Where italic font stands for what is “real,” normal font stands for what is “unreal,” downward arrows stand for “derives from,” upward arrows stand for “grounded in,” we have the following contrast.



**Figure 14.1** Priority Cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedānta

However, Gasparri’s presentation of the ontology of Advaita Vedānta’s priority cosmopsychism overlooks two important aspects of comparison. On the one hand, there are different ontological categories at play in the analytical metaphysics that backs priority cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedānta. On the other hand, the very notion of “consciousness,” while in the semantic range of the relevant Sanskrit term “*cit*,” needs further explanation and clarification. One might summarize the important missing difference between the two views by adding to (PC1–4) and (AV1–4) the following zero-base claim:

(PC0) Cosmic consciousness is *neither* implicitly *nor* explicitly characterized as being essentially spiritual and eternal, no matter how else it is characterized.

And

(AV0) Nondual universal/pure Brahman consciousness is explicitly characterized as being essentially spiritual, eternal, and real. It is *nirguṇa* (impersonal and without attributes); and it is essentially *nirguṇa*. But *saguṇa* Brahman (personal with attributes) is only empirically real. It is ultimately unreal.

On one side of the coin, in Advaita Vedānta, *the only reality* is nondual universal/pure consciousness, which is spiritual, eternal, and completely devoid of attributes. The essential nature of Brahman is nondual universal/pure consciousness without



attributes. On the other side of the coin, in Advaita Vedānta, what is spiritual, as an ontological category, is *neither* mental *nor* physical.<sup>12</sup> In Advaita Vedānta the mind is as *insentient* as *physical* matter, and nondual spiritual reality underlies both mind and matter. As a consequence, we might note that the structural similarity between (PC) and (AV) in the embrace of *monism* might not be sufficiently robust to even constitute a strong similarity, since *the very monistic entity structurally in common* is too different. As a consequence, we should never think that the kind of consciousness that is fundamental in (PC) is the same as what is fundamental in (AV). *There is a hard separation between the two views at the fundamental level.* With respect to Figure 14.1, we see that in (PC) the physical cosmos is the instantiation base for cosmic consciousness, which suggests that cosmic consciousness has a relation to the physical. However, in (AV), nondual universal/pure consciousness is neither physical nor mental, it lacks attributes, is impersonal, and has no other instantiation base. It fundamentally exhausts the category of what is real.

#### 14.6 Is the Advaitic View of Consciousness Superior to That of Cosmopsychism?

Given that the Advaitic view is different from priority cosmopsychism at a fundamental level, one might naturally wonder whether the Advaitic view is superior to priority cosmopsychism, or if it has any resources for dealing with contemporary problems in the philosophy of consciousness. Albahari (2019) sums up the problem for cosmopsychism as a prelude for making the case that the Advaitic view is superior.<sup>13</sup>

1. Cosmopsychism, within the analytic terrain, faces the decombination problem.
2. Solving the decombination problem, as some attempt to do, by grounding through inheritance leads to the view that the cosmos is not a subject of experience or that the contents of experience for the subject are epistemically incoherent.
3. Either giving up on the cosmos as a subject or allowing for the resurfacing of the decombination problem in terms of incoherent contents is problematic within the analytic terrain.

Therefore,

4. The decombination problem is insurmountable within the analytic terrain.<sup>14</sup>

If the problems for cosmopsychism are so severe with respect to the decombination problem, what can Advaita Vedānta offer? Albahari offers one point of view by arguing that *Brahman consciousness does not belong to a subject* in Advaita. Rather, it is a field of consciousness without any subject. So, within the nonanalytic terrain, giving up on universal consciousness having a subject might not be problematic. Gasparri offers another point of view by emphasizing the fact that within the framework of Advaita Vedānta, *human subjects are unreal.*

Arguably, the advantage of (AV) over (PC) comes from two differentiating sources. First, (AV) does not allow for the generation of the question: How can we generate human-level individual consciousness from nondual universal/pure consciousness? If







there are no human subjects to account for, then there is no problem of explaining how we decompose from the unified nondual universal/pure consciousness. Second, (AV) provides a picture of nondual universal/pure consciousness where it lacks a subject. As a consequence, we get a view that holds that both fundamental consciousness and nonfundamental local consciousnesses are without a subject. Subjectivity is put into question. According to (AV), only the fundamental field of nondual universal/pure consciousness is real. Thus, one might think that the core advantage is that (AV) does not have a subject generation problem, since there are no subjects at either the fundamental or derived level.

A novel and forward-looking way to capture the difference between analytic metaphysics of mind and the Vedāntic traditions is to take note of the problem space each is engaged in. In analytic metaphysics we appear to be aiming at a project where we show how we can construct human-level consciousness from the reality of cosmic consciousness. With respect to cosmopsychist theories, the central problem concerns how we recover the reality of subjects, such as you and I, from cosmic consciousness. By contrast, in the Advaita tradition of Vedānta, the core view is that nondual universal/pure consciousness is real, but subjects are unreal. There is no need to require that a theory of consciousness show that subjects can be reconstructed, for they are unreal. Furthermore, the non-Advaitic schools of Vedānta engage Advaita precisely on the question of whether subjects are real. As a consequence of juxtaposing these positions, one might wonder whether the goal of analytic metaphysicians of mind is misguided. That is, should we even try to regain the reality of human-level consciousness, if the only thing that is real is nondual universal/pure consciousness and not human subjects? Is the question fundamentally misguided? Are the twin problems of combination and decombination that micropsychism and cosmopsychism respectively face merely illusions sustained by the background metaphysical assumption that subjects are real?

One can gain a comparative understanding of the relation between (PC) and Vedāntic traditions by bringing them into contact with Keith Frankish's (2016) defense of *Illusionism*. He maintains that illusionism denies:

that experiences have phenomenal properties and focus[es] on explaining why they seem to have them. They [illusionists] typically allow that we are introspectively aware of our sensory states but argue that this awareness is partial and distorted, leading us to misrepresent the states as having phenomenal properties. Of course, it is essential to this approach that the posited introspective representations are not themselves phenomenally conscious ones. (2016: 13)

Now, consider the following differences across the three positions.

With this background set, the core question is: *Which illusion, if any, should we accept?* Should we believe that both phenomenal consciousness and subject-hood are real, or that at least one is an illusion?

*Cosmopsychists* can be taken to hold that cosmic consciousness is real and fundamental. They seek to explain how human-level consciousness arises. Their project makes sense on the assumption that human subjects are real. *Illusionists*, in contrast, deny the very claim that human-level consciousness is real. One can conceive of their project as one that



assumes that human subjects are real, and seeks to explain the unreality of phenomenal consciousness. *Advaitins* take a different route. They hold that *only* nondual universal/pure consciousness is real. They *deny* that nondual universal/pure consciousness has a subject that is real and that the subject-hood of human consciousness is real. They seek to explain how our ignorance facilitates worldly illusions.

| Theory                 | Subject | Phenomenal Consciousness | Comment   |
|------------------------|---------|--------------------------|---|
| <i>Cosmopsychism</i>   | Real    | Real                     | Holds to the reality of macro-subject consciousness, and seeks to explain it in terms of the reality of cosmic consciousness in relation to the reality of macro-subjects.  |
| <i>Illusionism</i>     | Real    | Unreal                   | Holds to the reality of macro-subjects, but denies that their phenomenally conscious experiences are real. Instead it seeks to offer a theory of how phenomenal consciousness is illusory and generated by something that is not conscious. |
| <i>Advaita Vedānta</i> | Unreal  | Real                     | Holds only to the reality of nondual universal/pure consciousness and denies that there are real macro-subjects of experience. It seeks to explain the illusion of individual subjects.   |

Having gained this comparative insight, we should now turn to a critical examination of Advaita Vedānta in relation to the other schools of Vedānta. But before I do so, it will be useful to simply lay out a position I hold, which affects the viability of illusionism and Advaita directly. I will then turn to a direct critique of Advaita.

As I see it, it is much easier to defend the idea that we have ordinary and scientific knowledge when we accept the following two claims. First, human consciousness is real and some experiences are illusory/unreal, while others are non-illusory/real. For, if human consciousness is an illusion, how can it support the acquisition of knowledge? Can an illusion really be the basis for knowledge? Second, the subject of experience is real, such that there is an actual individual who can be said to have evidence for believing something. For, if there is no subject, then who is there to believe on the basis of the evidence? Who is the epistemic subject that has the evidence? We need both the reality of the self and consciousness for real evidence. Without real consciousness and real subjects, there is no medium nor base for any beliefs about the nature of consciousness. My point is that if one wants to save scientific explanation and knowledge as well as offer a plausible theory of human consciousness, then one cannot accept the view that human-level consciousness is unreal either because the subject is unreal or because phenomenal consciousness is unreal. In general, I reject bi-directional illusionism—the thesis that both the self and consciousness are an illusion.

The central problem for Advaita that I will develop here is intended to show how Advaita is different from other Vedāntic traditions because of an epistemological

problem that it faces. I call this problem the *epistemological problem for Advaita Vedānta*. In my view, if consciousness is the datum that cannot be denied in the investigation of it, then we cannot be justified on the basis of conscious experience in believing something about consciousness when we take human-level consciousness to be unreal. How can that which is unreal provide us with a foundation for believing something that is real? We might put this worry in the following way: what is unreal can only lead to what is unreal while what is real can lead both to what is unreal and real.

Remember that Advaitins claim that consciousness is real while subjects are unreal. Noting that human-level consciousness is a combination of three components—intentional aboutness, ownership/for-me-ness, and phenomenological feel—we might wonder how the composite could be real, if any of its parts are unreal. It is unstable to hold that the composite <human-level consciousness of  $x$ > composed of <aboutness toward  $x$ , for-me-ness of the experience of  $x$ , and the *phenomenal feel* characteristic of experiences of  $x$ > by human subjects can be real, if any of its parts are unreal. The assumption comes from a plausible logic for combining parts. Real + Real = Real. Real + Unreal = Unreal. Unreal + Unreal = Unreal. Based on this logical assumption governing composition, I will now argue that Advaitins are committed to the position that human-level consciousness is unreal, even though they only commit to the claim that human subjects are unreal. For the purposes of generality in the argument, let  $R$  be a generic epistemic relation, such as *evidence, justification, or knowledge*, and  $x$  and  $y$  variables ranging over the relata of  $R$ , such that  $R(x, y)$  is an epistemic relation of support. Consider the following:

1. Either  $x$  and  $y$  are both real, both unreal, or one is real while the other is unreal.
2. If both are unreal, then  $R$  cannot be an epistemic relation of any kind, since epistemic relations do not hold between unreal states and entities.
3. If  $x$  is unreal and  $y$  is real, then although  $R$  can be a causal relation, it cannot be a normative epistemic relation. Nothing that is unreal can epistemically support a belief in something that is real.

Therefore,

4.  $R$  can be an epistemic relation only if at least  $x$  is real.

Given that I have argued that Advaitins must hold that human-level consciousness is unreal, since human subjects are unreal, they are now driven to the conclusion that there is no human-level conscious evidence to which humans can appeal, since human-level consciousness is unreal and evidence requires reality on the side of the subject. Let me close this section by mentioning the strategy that Advaitins would use to respond to the epistemological argument.

In response, Advaitins would likely appeal to the distinction between *pāramārthika* (ultimate) and *vyāvahārika* (empirical) levels of reality. That is, Advaitins would accept that (4) is true, and add the qualification that there are different levels of reality. From the perspective of ultimate reality, human-level reality is unreal, but from the perspective of empirical reality, human-level reality is real. Thus, they would argue that at the empirical level, they are fully entitled to hold that conscious human experience

is real and a foundation for an evidential relation. It is only from the perspective of Brahman consciousness that human-level consciousness is unreal, and thus from this perspective, there is no appropriate evidential relation. One might see their response along the lines of an analogy with solidity. From the perspective of human-level interaction with objects, we have to admit that there are solid and nonsolid ordinary objects. However, from the perspective of quantum mechanics, there is no presentation directly of solidity and nonsolidity. Solidity is perspectival, not absolute. Although this line of response is thought to be profitable in many schools of classical Indian philosophy, such as various schools of Buddhism, a two-tiered approach to reality that is coupled to an appropriate epistemology has not yet been thoroughly pursued within analytic philosophy. An engagement between analytic epistemology and both Vedānta and Buddhism on two-tiered metaphysics and epistemology would be highly profitable. It would even yield important results for thinking about the epistemology of conscious experience when we are entertaining views in the space of panpsychism—a topic we will turn to in the conclusion of this essay.

### 14.7 Realism in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta

Unlike Advaita Vedānta, which accepts monism and takes human-level consciousness to be unreal, insofar as it is human, Viśiṣṭādvaita accepts a different form of monism and takes human-level consciousness to have a lower degree of reality, insofar as it is not Brahman. In my view, the ontology of this school is far better suited than Advaita for delivering a plausible realist account of human consciousness that resonates with the production of scientific knowledge about it. I will first present an intuitive understanding of Viśiṣṭādvaita ontology and then show that it is not vulnerable to the epistemological argument raised against Advaita.

On the Viśiṣṭādvaita ontology Brahman is the only *independently existing* reality. However, the fact that it is the only *independently existing* entity does not entail that it is the only entity that is *real*. Rather, all entities are *dependent* on Brahman, and thus real to some degree.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, the fact that all things are dependent on Brahman does not make them identical to Brahman, as we would find in the case of Advaita. Freschi (2019: 1) offers a brief account of the Viśiṣṭādvaita ontology of qualities:

Qualifications are ... a function of changing points of view. For instance, a given form qualifies a body, which in turn qualifies a self, which, again, qualifies *Brahman*. The only thing that is said not to qualify anything further is *Brahman*, since that is itself the ultimate basis of all qualifications.

Another important point of contrast between the two schools is that Brahman in Advaita Vedānta is *nirguṇa* (impersonal and without attributes), while in Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Brahman is *saguṇa* (personal and with attributes). To say that Brahman is *saguṇa* is to say that Brahman has infinite positive attributes. Moreover, in Viśiṣṭādvaita, the dependence relation that takes us from quality to quality is one of grounding, but perhaps not the same kind of grounding we find in the work of Schaffer. Rāmānuja, the



founder of the school, upholds the doctrine of *ādhāra-ādheya-bhāva*: the world remains distinct from Brahman but derives its existence from Brahman. The phrase *ādhāra-ādheya-bhāva* can be translated as “the relation between the ground and the grounded.” Rāmānuja also frequently conceives the relation between Brahman and the world in terms of the relation between soul and body. Just as the body is entirely dependent on the soul, the universe—conceived as Brahman’s “body”—is entirely dependent on Brahman. As Christopher Bartley helpfully points out, both the Viśiṣṭādvaitic doctrine of *ādhāra-ādheya-bhāva* and the doctrine of the world as Brahman’s “body” express the fundamental thesis that Brahman is the ground of the world, which has no independent existence: “This relation between self and body is that between *ontic ground* (*ādhāra*) and dependent entity (*ādheya*) incapable of independent existence (*prthak-siddhi-anarha*), between controller and thing controlled, between principal and ancillary” (Bartley 2002: 76; my emphasis).

Let me now turn to a constructive evaluation of Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta in relation to Advaita Vedānta. Remember that Advaita Vedānta faced an epistemological problem. If human consciousness is unreal, because individual human subjects are unreal, then it is not possible for there to be an evidential relation between any object in the world and human consciousness of it, such that being conscious of the object supports a belief about it for the subject. However, on the Viśiṣṭādvaita approach, human consciousness is grounded in universal consciousness. And on the present account it does not follow that human consciousness (*qua human*) is *unreal* from the perspective of Brahman consciousness. Rather, we get the weaker result that it is *less real*. As an immediate consequence, we can block the epistemological problem raised against Advaita. Again, in the case of Advaita, the problem occurs because only human-level consciousness is real, but subjects are unreal. As a consequence, we are unable to show how human-level consciousness of anything could serve as evidence for believing anything else. However, on the Viśiṣṭādvaita view, all of the elements in one’s experience of red are real, albeit less real than Brahman. Recall that when one experiences red, there are three factors, the aboutness, the for-me-ness, and the feel. On the Advaita view, both the aboutness and the for-me-ness are unreal, since the human subject is unreal. In addition, the feel component of the experience of red is unreal from the perspective of Brahman consciousness, since Brahman is impersonal and without attributes. By contrast, on the Viśiṣṭādvaita view, human subjects are real, though less real than Brahman. The aboutness and the for-me-ness of experience are real, but their reality derives entirely from Brahman, and so they are less real than it.

## 14.8 Sri Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta

Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita are two distinct options within the Vedāntic tradition. Are there others that can offer resources for thinking about panpsychism? In this section I will focus on the Vedāntic philosophy of the modern Bengali mystic Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86), which I believe to be highly profitable for contemporary panpsychism.





Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is notoriously hard to interpret. Some scholars, for instance, have interpreted him as an Advaitin while others have interpreted him as a Viśiṣṭādvaitin.<sup>16</sup> Since our purpose here is not to defend a view of his overall philosophy, but to offer resources from an interpretation of his views for debates on panpsychism and consciousness, I will use the interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy defended by Ayon Maharaj in his book *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality* (2018). According to Maharaj, Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is best characterized as "Vijñāna Vedānta," a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the mystical experience of what Sri Ramakrishna calls "*vijñāna*"—that harmonizes a multitude of Vedāntic perspectives, including both Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita.<sup>17</sup>

On Maharaj's view there are six main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta. Let us look at (VV3) and a passage from the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*:

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 3 (VV3): The Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it, and much more besides. (Maharaj 2018: 33)

God alone is the Master, and again, He is the Servant. This attitude indicates Perfect Knowledge [*pūrṇajñāna*]. *At first one discriminates, "Not this, not this," and feels that God alone is real and all else is illusory. Afterwards the same person finds that it is God Himself who has become all this—the universe, māyā, and the living beings. First negation and then affirmation.* This is the view held by the *Purāṇas*. A vilwa-fruit, for instance, includes flesh, seeds, and shell. You get the flesh by discarding the shell and seeds. But if you want to know the weight of the fruit, you cannot find it if you discard the shell and seeds. Just so, one should attain Saccidānanda [the Divine Reality-Consciousness-Bliss] by negating the universe and its living beings. But after the attainment of Saccidānanda one finds that Saccidānanda Itself has become the universe and the living beings. *It is of one substance that the flesh and the shell and seeds are made, just like butter and buttermilk.*

It may be asked, "*How has Saccidānanda become so hard?*" *This earth does indeed feel very hard to the touch. The answer is that blood and semen are thin liquids, and yet out of them comes such a big creature as man.* Everything is possible for God. First of all reach the indivisible Saccidānanda, and then, coming down, look at the universe. *You will find that everything is Its manifestation. It is God alone who has become everything. The world by no means exists apart from Him.* (Gupta [1942] 1992: 395; my emphasis)<sup>18</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta is a monistic ontology, which seeks to harmonize the opposing doctrines of Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita. In the first paragraph of the passage, one can see that in the sentence where Ramakrishna discusses how one first negates, and then affirms, the negation phase corresponds to Advaita, the world-negating doctrine that Brahman is real and the world is unreal. The affirmation phase—which Sri Ramakrishna elsewhere characterizes as the spiritual realization of "*vijñāna*"—resembles Viśiṣṭādvaita, which upholds the world-affirming doctrine that Brahman is real and the world is real, just less real than Brahman. However,





Ramakrishna goes further than Rāmānuja by maintaining that everything is God's manifestation. For Ramakrishna, as Satis Chandra Chatterjee puts it, “*everything in the universe is actually Brahman in different forms.*”<sup>19</sup> Rather than negating the reality of the world in relation to Brahman or embracing it as a lesser reality than Brahman, Sri Ramakrishna sees everything as God Himself in different forms. Interestingly, in the second paragraph, Sri Ramakrishna goes on to discuss the objection: How is the earth hard, if the fundamental nature of everything is Divine Consciousness, which is nonmaterial? His response is analogical. If we don't have a problem with believing that a man or woman can come from liquids, why do we have a problem believing that something hard can come from consciousness? In this question Sri Ramakrishna anticipates Strawson's later work.

In his 2016 piece, “Consciousness Isn't the Mystery. Matter is,” Strawson challenges the late twentieth-century idea, put forward by Chalmers, that consciousness is both deeply easy to understand and yet the deepest and most puzzling mystery to be engaged. Strawson forwards the idea that consciousness is not the puzzling part of the inquiry. Rather, matter is mysterious; given what we know about quantum mechanics and phenomena in the quantum realm we ought to wonder about matter. Strawson, inverting Chalmers' hard problem of consciousness, says, “In particular, we don't know anything about the physical that gives us good reason to think that consciousness can't be wholly physical ... So, the hard problem is the problem of matter” (Strawson 2016).

Not surprisingly, but from a different frame, Sri Ramakrishna runs up against the very problem posed by Strawson. Sri Ramakrishna's answer appears to be that matter is simply a different form of consciousness. Now, we might not understand that move, but it is consistent with the move that Strawson wanted to make. Strawson holds that consciousness cannot come from nonconscious entities. Sri Ramakrishna would agree, but would then point out that nonconscious entities can come from conscious entities, by being a different form of them.

For Sri Ramakrishna ultimate reality is both *nirguṇa* (impersonal and without attributes) and *saguṇa* (personal and with attributes). In addition, there is no longer a distinction between reality and unreality with respect to the attributes of ultimate reality, nor is there a hierarchical relation of being. Everything is just as real as everything else, yet everything in the world is dependent on ultimate reality. On this view, being grounded in ultimate reality does not make something less real than ultimate reality; it simply shows that there is dependence. A hierarchy of elements might all be real, yet still remain dependent on the one that is fundamental.

## 14.9 Future Discussions

Philosophy not only benefits from a cross-cultural and multidisciplinary engagement, it also requires it for the purposes of generating the best possible set of views from which one should seek the truth. A comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon is wide and a precondition for a proper search for the truth about a phenomenon. This cross-cultural engagement hopefully has yielded several valuable insights. These insights can be formulated as questions for future discussion.



### **14.9.1 The Metaphysics of the Fundamental Category of Consciousness**

What is the category to which consciousness fundamentally belongs? Is consciousness physical, mental, neither, or both? In contemporary Western philosophy it is common to hold that consciousness is either physical or mental. However, could there be a distinct category to which consciousness belongs in virtue of which it is fundamentally neither physical nor mental? Could consciousness be essentially spiritual?

### **14.9.2 The Metaphysics of Subjects and Consciousness**

What is the metaphysical nature of the individual subject that is supposed to be derived from, or fundamentally related to, the cosmic consciousness that cosmopsychism posits? Are individual conscious subjects real? Which illusion, if any, should we accept? Are individual subjects the illusion, or is consciousness the illusion, or are subjects and consciousness both an illusion produced by the brain in two directions: one about the internal world and another about the external world?

### **14.9.3 The Metaphysical Reconstruction of Nonconscious Reality**

It goes without saying that our modern ordinary conception of reality contains within it the idea that some things are conscious, such as cats, cows, and humans, while other things are nonconscious, such as rocks, tables, and guitars. If the fundamental ground of all of reality is consciousness, then how do we reconstruct the view that there are nonconscious entities, such as rocks, tables, and guitars? Is the view that holds that there are nonconscious entities the illusion? Is the illusion that rocks appear to be nonconscious, while the reality is that they are, if we are? By holding everything to be conscious, do we not place upon our theory the demand to explain how our ordinary conception goes astray in thinking of things as being either conscious or nonconscious?

### **14.9.4 The Epistemology of Universal Consciousness**

What is the epistemological justification for positing universal consciousness as a solution to the problem of consciousness? While there are good arguments for thinking that phenomenal consciousness at the human level cannot come from nonconscious entities, what are the means for defending this position? Are certain approaches more profitable than others? Which arguments or means are more successful than others? Can we provide a successful non-analogical argument for some version of panpsychism?

### **14.9.5 The Epistemological Sources for Understanding Universal Consciousness**

What are the epistemological sources for knowledge of universal consciousness? Given that universal consciousness is something far different and grander than individual human consciousness, what are the ways in which we can have an epistemological





connection to it? We can use introspection to access our own conscious states, but how do we access universal consciousness? Are meditation and mystical experience sources for knowledge of universal consciousness?

Let me begin with the three metaphysical questions, before turning to how Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy can be used to advance an answer to the two epistemological questions.

Our inquiry started with the idea that panpsychism is a plausible theory because there is no way to explain how consciousness arises from something nonconscious because of the analogy, made by Strawson, with the non-derivability of extension from non-extended points. This argument, while strong, provisionally led us to micropsychism, but ultimately led us to posit cosmic consciousness, because there was no convincing way to solve the combination problem for micropsychism. From there we were led to the conclusion that cosmic consciousness is equally problematic because it faces the decombination problem. Thus, while the argument for panpsychism from Strawson is intuitively strong, both micropsychism and cosmopsychism face problems of their own. At the heart of these problems is the issue of the category to which consciousness belongs at the fundamental level, and the reality of individual subjects of consciousness. Concerning the first question, we might simply note that when Goff describes panpsychism, he repeatedly uses the notion of mentality: "Panpsychism is the view that mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world. The view has a long and venerable history in philosophical traditions both East and West, and has recently enjoyed a revival in analytic philosophy" (Goff 2017a: 1).

It could be true that in the West, panpsychism is defined in this way. But it is not clear that it would be true of Vedānta. While it is true that for most people consciousness is experienced as fundamental to our mental lives, we might still wonder: *Is consciousness fundamentally mental?* In the West, both James and Russell have taken to the view, known as neutral monism, that fundamental reality is neither physical nor mental. What stops a Vedāntin from saying that fundamental reality is Brahman, nondual universal/pure consciousness, which is neither physical nor mental, but also spiritual? What if nondual universal/pure consciousness is only accidentally mental, and only mental in relation to the consciousness of some creatures? Moreover, if everything belongs to some category, and consciousness is neither physical nor mental, what prevents it from being fundamentally spiritual as opposed to falling under some other fundamental category?

Concerning the second question, we are driven to a question about the metaphysics of subjects.

#### 14.9.6 The Metaphysics of Subjects

Is being a subject real or unreal, or does it have some degree of reality that is different from the level of reality present in cosmic consciousness or nondual universal/pure consciousness, which is fundamental?

This question is important because we cannot develop a proper solution to either the combination problem or the decombination problem unless we first determine *what*





*it is that we have to recover when we say we have composed up or we have decomposed down to make a subject of consciousness.*

Suppose one consciously sees a red ball against a wall. There are three factors at play: (1) the intentional aboutness component, a person's mind being directed at the red ball; (2) the ownership "for-me-ness" component, a person's conscious experience being felt as her own; and (3) the phenomenological feel component, a person's conscious experience of red being felt as red as opposed to blue.

Now, both the combination problem and the decombination problem arise against the background issue of whether genuine perspectives can be recovered with respect to cases like consciously seeing a red ball. Recall Coleman's *real combination problem*: How do we arrive at a unified perspective through a combination of perspectives? Perspectives don't sum and divide without loss of identity. But why are perspectives important for explaining consciousness anyway?

They are important because they give us a grip on intentionality and subjectivity. Minds are *directed* when they *have a perspective*. And it is *through a perspective* that a person can *feel the ownership* of their experience. So, perspectives are at the base of the metaphysics of subjectivity that is at play in conscious human experience. The phenomenal component is present, but it is not perspectival. The redness of my experience of a ball is perspectival, but the redness is not perspectival; it is just captured in the perspective of a subject. In other words, both the aboutness and the for-me-ness of an experience are essentially perspectival. But the phenomenological character of experience, the feeling, is not essentially perspectival.

At the heart of the combination and decombination problem is the generation of the subject as an experiencing creature. The question is: How do we make up from micro-consciousness or divide down from cosmic consciousness to get to individual macro-consciousness, such as human consciousness, which essentially involves a subject? But if this is the question, then we need to step back and ask: Is subject-hood real? Are perspectives real? Is ownership real? The problem is the following. If subject-hood is unreal, then what is the target that we are aiming for when we try to solve the combination or decombination problem? Are we simply trying to explain how the illusion of subjectivity arises or are we trying to actually account for the features that are present in conscious subject-based subjective experience? How can the combination and decombination problem be formulated to be pressing problems, if subjects are unreal or have less reality than universal consciousness?

Now the claim here is not that subjects are unreal. Rather, the claim—one of the results of our cross-cultural investigation—is that through looking at Vedāntic traditions we come to see less of a focus on how subjects are generated and more of a focus on the reality of subjects, given that they are grounded in, and not as fundamental as, ultimate reality, which is universal consciousness. So, it seems that at least one path forward in the debate on analytic panpsychism is to start debating *the reality of subjects in relation to the cosmic consciousness that they posit*. Putting this in the context of illusionism about consciousness, we find ourselves facing a clear question: *Which illusion, if any, should we accept? Is it our subject-hood that is the illusion, is it our phenomenal consciousness that is the illusion, is it both, or neither?*



The third metaphysical question concerning the generation of nonconscious reality can be addressed by considering the view that there exists both a vertical and horizontal theory of consciousness. What we have been exploring at present is a vertical theory on which fundamental cosmic consciousness plays a role in explaining human-level phenomenal consciousness. However, we might add to this view a horizontal theory that tells us that there are degrees of consciousness on a scale, such as on Tononi and colleagues' (2016) *integrated information theory*. For it might just turn out that everything is conscious and what matters in different cases concerns the degree of consciousness and the capacities that underwrite those degrees of consciousness. With a horizontal story in play, one can make sense of our ordinary conception of reality by positing that insentient matter in our physical world is just noncomplex consciousness. Dirt, unlike Anand or an amoeba, exhibits noncomplex consciousness, while Anand and the amoeba exhibit more complex forms of consciousness. As Sri Ramakrishna would have said, dirt is just another form of universal consciousness. We might add to that, that it is a noncomplex form of universal consciousness, while Anand is a more complex form of universal consciousness. The illusion worth taking on in the space of metaphysical options is an inversion of our current thinking. *Pure absolute insentient matter is the illusion*. Subject-hood and phenomenal consciousness need not be the illusion. They are simply dependent on universal consciousness, but they are not illusions.

Our two epistemological questions engage the issue of how we are justified in believing in panpsychism. In general, we can think of the investigation of consciousness in terms of two stages. In stage one, we chart out the possibilities for explaining consciousness. In stage two, we go through each option starting with the one that is most plausible. Using the mid-twentieth century as the point of departure, these stages might go as follows. We start with materialism. We see it fail because of the hard problem of consciousness, which asks for an explanation of how and why anything physical has phenomenal properties.<sup>20</sup> We move to substance dualism and property dualism. We see them fail because of problems concerning causation. We move forward to panpsychism, in the form of micropsychism. We see it fail because of the combination problem. So, we posit cosmopsychism. And perhaps we are now at the stage where cosmopsychism could be seen to fail because of the problem of decombination. The overall approach to justifying the move to cosmopsychism is that the prior options have failed.<sup>21</sup>

The important move in the story above requires seeing what I call the *central justification for cosmopsychism* (CJC), which is composed of two components: (1) that the other options have failed, and (2) that there is an intuitive argument that supports the claim that consciousness cannot come from nonconscious entities. However, it is important to note that both of these arguments are negative in character. They tell us nothing positive about the nature of universal consciousness, which is being posited by cosmopsychists to explain human consciousness. Are we to assume that the kind of consciousness that we have, which, at times, we don't even feel comfortable attributing to nonhuman animals, is exactly what the nature of universal consciousness is? I call the positive answer to that question the *projection view*. On this account, universal consciousness just is our consciousness projected outward and enlarged. But is that really plausible?

Recall the connection question that was raised as an objection to panpsychism at the outset of our inquiry. We find ourselves facing it again. What is the connection between the kind of consciousness that we have and the kind of consciousness that the universe has? We need to push into this question and ask the even more pressing question: How can we come to know anything positively about universal consciousness? It is here that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy can help *even if that role is controversial*. A core tenet of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta is:

*Vijñāna Vedānta 2 (VV2)*: Since the rational intellect is inherently limited, spiritual experience is the only reliable basis for arriving at supersensuous spiritual truths. On the suprarational basis of *vijñāna*, we can affirm truths about God and spiritual experience that appear to be contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect. (Maharaj 2018: 30)

The claim here sets a limit to the kinds of ways in which we can come to understand the nature of universal consciousness. There are three ways to interpret the central justificatory claim in (VV2).

First, there is the oppositional reading of (VV2). On this reading, (VV2) stands in opposition to (CJC). In effect, (VV2) is offered as the only justification for cosmopsychism, while (CJC) consists of two components, neither of which is a genuine justification for cosmopsychism. Second, there is the conjunct reading of (VV2). On this reading, (VV2) stands as a conjunct to (CJC). In effect, (VV2) is offered as additional support for cosmopsychism. (CJC) gives us one support composed of two parts, and (VV2) gives us another. Third, there is the complement reading of (VV2). On this reading, (VV2) does not simply add a conjunct to (CJC), it offers complementation by justifying a different side of the coin. (CJC) gives us *rational negative justification* for believing in cosmopsychism. It does not characterize universal consciousness; it only gives us reason to believe that it is a coherent and reasonable position to pursue in virtue of the failure of other views. By contrast, (VV2) gives us *positive suprarational justification* for believing and understanding the precise nature of universal consciousness.

Another way to see how (VV2) can be joined to (CJC) is to consider it alongside the mysterianism of Colin McGinn discussed in Section 14.1. On the one hand, mysterianism can be understood as the claim that human consciousness is a mystery that humans cannot rationally understand. On the other hand, mysterianism can be understood as the claim that human consciousness is a mystery that humans cannot understand *currently rationally*. (VV2) provides a new way of understanding mysterianism. On this reading mysterianism is only true with respect to the rational intellect, because the positive nature of universal consciousness is not something that can be rationally understood. But this does not mean that mysterianism is the complete truth about consciousness. It is simply the truth that we arrive at by noting (VV2)—namely, that rationality has inherent limits. Mystical knowledge of universal consciousness is not mysterious; it is just hard to come by. And perhaps the combination of mystical knowledge and rational knowledge provides for the right kind of understanding that makes mysterianism take a back seat to a cross-culturally informed version of panpsychism.





Maharaj (2018) offers us six tenets for Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, three of which I have already mentioned. It is now time to present the remaining three tenets as a final closing thought on the potential sources of justification for believing in the positive character of universal consciousness.

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 1 (VV1): After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, ordinary people leave their body within twenty-one days, but certain divinely commissioned people known as *īśvaraḥṛīṣ* are able to return from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attain *vijñāna*—a spiritual state even greater than *brahmajñāna*—in which perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* are combined. (2018: 27)

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 4 (VV4): There are two levels of Advaitic realization: while the *jñānī* realizes the acosmic nondual Reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attains the richer, world-affirming nondual realization that God has become everything. (2018: 38)

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 5 (VV5): The *vijñānī*, who accepts the reality of both the *nitya* [the Eternal Reality] and the *līlā* [God's play], is able to adopt various attitudes toward—and attain various forms of union with—God on different planes of consciousness, all of which are true. (2018: 41)

A core idea of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is that mystical experience is the *only* positive access point into the nature of ultimate reality. In addition, and in relation to Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita, his view is that human consciousness is just as real as universal consciousness. It is just that our rational intellect is not going to get us to see that everything is Divine Consciousness. Our rational intellect only gets us to see that we cannot explain consciousness through materialism. However, that should not lead us either to illusionism or mysticism about consciousness. Rather, it should lead us to engage in spiritual practice, culminating in a mystical experience that provides justification for a positive understanding of universal consciousness. And our mystical justification provides us with positive empirical support for *the reality and phenomenology of nondual universal/pure consciousness*.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that although these philosophers do not engage with non-Western sources, some of them are in fact aware of non-Western ideas and their possible significance for panpsychism. Strawson and Shani are two such figures who are aware of the possible connections between analytic panpsychism and Indian philosophy.
- 2 I am borrowing this phrase from the work of Edwin May. For a more detailed discussion of what I mean by promissory note materialism, see Vaidya and Bilimoria (2015).
- 3 See Kim (2005) for a discussion of problems for dualism.
- 4 See Garfield (2016) for a critical engagement with the notion of *what it is like*.



- 5 See Lewtas (2016: 11) for discussion of whether or not the combination problem is as threatening as it initially appears.
- 6 Importantly, this objection brings out the issue of what exactly constitutes our ownership of experience. It is obvious that no one else can possess my experience. Thus, it must mean something more to say that we *own* our experience. Ownership is more intimate than what is expressed by the generic idea that everyone's experience is only their own. The intimacy is more caught up in the phenomenology than in the possession.
- 7 See Maharaj (2018: 27–45; 51–63) for extended discussion of the theory.
- 8 See McLaughlin and Bennett (2018) for this definition.
- 9 Barua (2010: 11–18) seems to defend this interpretation of Rāmānuja.
- 10 Interestingly, Laura Guerrero has pointed out to me that it might turn out that grounding is a relation that cannot obtain between the real and the unreal or things that are equally real. While it is true that it can obtain between real and less real entities, it is restricted to the real, and excludes relations where things are equally real. As a consequence of this point, one might note two things. First, it might be that grounding is not the appropriate relation to be grafted over from analytic metaphysics in order to make sense of what is going on in classical Indian philosophy. Second, it might be that grounding is the appropriate relation, but that there is a debate to be had between classical Indian philosophers and analytic metaphysicians over whether and how grounding can be a relation between the real and the unreal and between equally real things.  

How can something real ground something that is unreal? How can things that are equally real have a grounding relation between them? For the case of the unreal, we might hold the following. If what is unreal in some cases overlaps with what is an illusion, the idea would be that something real can be, and is, the ground of something unreal, when the other thing is in fact an illusion. In the case of being equally real, we might simply note that grounding is a relation concerning fundamentality; as a consequence, one cannot hold that  $x$  is the ground of  $y$  but that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally fundamental. But given that fundamentality is not the same as reality, it could be that  $x$  is more fundamental than  $y$ , but that  $x$  and  $y$  are equally real. One need not use fundamentality as a necessary and sufficient condition for being real.
- 11 See Neil Dalal's and Jeffery D. Long's contributions to this volume (Chapters 1 and 5 respectively) for detailed discussion of Advaita and Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy respectively.
- 12 In this sense Advaita Vedānta matches the central claim of neutral monism: ultimate reality is all of one kind, and it is neither mental nor physical. See Stubenberg (2018) for discussion of the position in the West. Different versions of neutral monism have been held in the West by Ernst Mach, William James, and Bertrand Russell.
- 13 The argument below is my rendering of Albahari's argument.
- 14 See Albahari (2019: 121–24) for her extended summary of this point.
- 15 See Barua (2010: 14).
- 16 See Maharaj (2018: 13–17).
- 17 Maharaj also defends the broader claim that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy is an attempt to harmonize all religions. However, for our purposes here, it is sufficient to explore the harmonization with respect to Vedānta only.
- 18 This is a slightly modified version of Swami Nikhilananda's English translation of the original Bengali passage from Mahendranāth Gupta's *Śrīśrīrāmākṛṣṇakathāmṛta*. For the original Bengali, see Gupta ([1903–32] 2010: 393).

- 19 See Chatterjee ([1963] 1985: 112).
- 20 See Chalmers (1996: 3–31).
- 21 One could view the inference here as being an inference to the best explanation. It would have the following form. Given that  $E2 \dots En$  have failed, the best explanation is  $E1$ .
- 22 See Maharaj (2018: Chapter 6) for discussion and defense of the position that mystical experience has epistemic value. It is outside the scope of the current investigation for me to defend the idea that mystical experience has such epistemic value. Nevertheless, it is rational to look to a potential source of knowledge for a domain of inquiry, when other sources of knowledge fail to give justification adequately within that domain.

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