



A Place for Protoconsciousness?

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Abstract: I argue that Gregg Rosenberg's panexperientialism is either extremely implausible or irrelevant to the mystery of consciousness by introducing metaphysical and conceptual objections to his appeal to the notion of 'protoconsciousness'.

1. Introduction

In his *A Place for Consciousness* (2004), Gregg Rosenberg defends what he calls 'panexperientialism', according to which 'experience outruns cognition' (p. 91). The aim of this paper is to evaluate this unique form of panpsychism. Rosenberg makes a number of interesting and illuminating points in defending panexperientialism. However, I argue that this doctrine is untenable.

The present paper has the following structure. In Section 2, I argue that panexperientialism is difficult to disprove, but that it is not thereby rendered plausible. In order to defend my point I compare panexperientialism with the sceptical hypothesis about other minds. In Section 3, I clarify Rosenberg's key notion of 'protoconsciousness' by comparing it with David J. Chalmers' notion of 'protophenomenal properties'. In

Sections 4 and 5 I argue, in various ways, that panexperientialism faces the following dilemma: depending on how we interpret it, panexperientialism is either very implausible or irrelevant. I conclude my discussion in Section 6.

2. Why it is Difficult to Refute Panexperientialism

Traditionally, panpsychism is formulated as the following thesis:

(1) Everything has mental states.¹

If (1) is true, then all noncognitive systems—including stones, cars, water, neutrons, trees and so on—have mental states. However, most of us believe that that is extremely unlikely to be true. It is irrational to accept such an extraordinary claim as (1) without any strong evidence. In spite of its obvious implausibility, however, (1) is difficult to disprove. For, I believe, (1) is the reverse of the sceptical hypothesis about other minds, which is also difficult to disprove:

(2) (Apart from myself) nothing has mental states.

The sceptical hypothesis is based on the idea that it is not inconsistent to assume that other people, who *seem* to have mental states, do not in fact have them at all; because removing certain mental aspects from this world does not entail any contradiction.

If it is indeed coherent to hypothesise the absence of mental states in people, who seem to have them, then, as panpsychism says, it is also coherent to hypothesise the presence of mental states in noncognitive systems, which do not seem to have them. That is, just as the sceptic's attempt to remove certain mental aspects from this world does not entail any contradiction, the panpsychist's attempt to add extra mentality to the world does not entail any contradiction. Hence, if, as most philosophers agree, the sceptical hypothesis about other minds is difficult to disprove, then, by parity of reasoning, panpsychism is equally difficult to disprove.

However, Rosenberg's panexperientialism is different from traditional panpsychism in several important respects. First, while traditional panpsychism says that *everything* has mental states, Rosenberg says that only certain things, but not limited to cognitive systems, have mental states. Thus he writes, 'The *pan* in *panpsychism* is misleading because [according to panexperientialism] it will not be the case that *everything* has experience' (p. 96). More specifically, he says, 'even if some sort of panexperientialism is true, we should not naively assume that every perceptual or conceptual individual, such as thermostat or a rock or a film plate, has experience. Large-scale, enduring, coherent experiencers may be extremely rare' (p. 96). Second, while traditional panpsychism says that everything has mental states without restriction on their kind, which could in principle include beliefs, desires, emotion, and so on, Rosenberg's panexperientialism focuses only on *consciousness*. Hence, Rosenberg writes, 'The *psychism* [in *panpsychism*] is misleading because one need not associate experiencings exclusively with cognitive activity and hence not exclusively with *minds*' (p. 96). Hence, Rosenberg's panexperientialism is a much more specific doctrine than traditional panpsychism.²

However, panexperientialism is still based on the same idea as that of traditional panpsychism. I noted above that traditional panpsychism relies on the claim that it is

coherent to hypothesise the presence of mental states in noncognitive systems, which do not seem to have mental states. That is, traditional panpsychism is a large-scale attempt to add more mentality in this world than we ordinarily think there is.³ Although panexperientialism is not as radical as traditional panpsychism, its underlying idea is the same. It tries to add more experiential properties than we normally assume by hypothesising the presence of consciousness, not only in cognitive systems, but also in some noncognitive systems.

Hence, the difficulty of disproving panexperientialism does not entail that it is plausible, to the same extent that the difficulty of disproving traditional panpsychism and the sceptical hypothesis about other minds does not entail that they are plausible.

3. Properties of Protoconsciousness vs. Protophenomenal Properties

According to Rosenberg, again, panexperientialism is '[t]he view that instances of experience actually outrun instances of cognition' (p. 91). By cognition, Rosenberg means 'functionality of the brain, including basically everything studied within cognitive science' (p. 92). While human beings are both cognitive and conscious, Rosenberg claims that, in a relevantly weak sense of consciousness, having cognition is not a necessary condition for being conscious.⁴ In order to explain his position Rosenberg invokes the notion of 'protoconsciousness'. Properties of protoconsciousness are, according to him, phenomenal and experiential properties that some noncognitive systems can have. Unlike phenomenal and experiential properties that we ordinarily have, they are not cognised.

On the face of it, properties of protoconsciousness are similar to what Chalmers calls 'protophenomenal properties' (Chalmers 1996). According to Chalmers' panprotopsychism, another variation of panpsychism, physical objects have protophenomenal properties. Protophenomenal properties are properties that are not themselves phenomenal or experiential; however, a proper combination of them constitutes phenomenal properties. Hence, according to Chalmers, phenomenal properties are logically supervenient on protophenomenal properties (Chalmers 1996: p. 126).

Rosenberg, however, explicitly distinguishes his panexperientialism from Chalmers' panprotopsychism. According to Rosenberg, properties of protoconsciousness *are*, contrary to protophenomenal properties, themselves phenomenal. He remarks, 'In contrast with protophenomenal properties, the properties of protoconsciousness are experiential properties properly considered phenomenal, but they do not require an associated cognitive engine to be experienced' (p. 97). In sum, according to Rosenberg, while properties of protoconsciousness are phenomenal and experiential on their own, they are not cognised by a relevant subject.

In what follows, I raise objections to panexperientialism by referring to these characteristics of properties of protoconsciousness. I claim that panexperientialism is either very implausible or irrelevant to the mystery of consciousness, depending on how we interpret it. I provide two different, but related, ways of defending this claim: metaphysical and conceptual.

4. The Metaphysical Objection

The mystery of consciousness arises because there seems to be a deep metaphysical gap between paradigmatically physical objects and properties, on the one hand, and paradigmatically mental properties, on the other hand. In general, panpsychists try to fill this gap by claiming that mentality is more prevalent than we tend to think. Rosenberg adopts the same line of thought and claims that noncognitive systems, which appear to lack mentality, could in fact have mental properties; in particular, properties of protoconsciousness.⁵

Regardless of their precise characteristics, properties of protoconsciousness have to be mental properties that are either metaphysically continuous with properties of consciousness we ordinarily have or distinct from them. Suppose, first, that properties of protoconsciousness are continuous with properties of ordinary consciousness. The only difference is, perhaps, that protoconscious experience is more subtle than ordinary conscious experience. In this case, there is a close connection between protoconsciousness, which some noncognitive systems, have and ordinary consciousness, which cognitive systems have. Hence, the analysis of protoconsciousness seems to be relevant to the mystery of consciousness. However, the cost of supposing that properties of protoconsciousness are continuous with properties of ordinary consciousness is very high, because this supposition makes panexperientialism almost as implausible as traditional panpsychism. That is, this supposition compels panexperientialists to accept the implausible claim that noncognitive systems are conscious essentially in the way we are (except on a smaller scale). Hence, if we assume that properties of protoconsciousness are continuous with properties of ordinary consciousness, panexperientialism turns out to be extremely implausible.

It then seems reasonable to think that properties of protoconsciousness are distinct from properties of ordinary consciousness, and this is what Rosenberg thinks. He writes:

The experiences we might attribute to noncognitive systems...have some kind of qualitative character very alien to us...Whatever we are attributing, it is not any kind of feeling with which we can empathize (pp. 94-95).⁶

This remark is consistent with the fact that Rosenberg gives the unique name “protoconsciousness” to the postulated phenomenon, instead of calling it consciousness itself.

However, if protoconsciousness, which noncognitive systems can have, is so radically different from ordinary consciousness then it is irrelevant to the mystery of consciousness, which is concerned with our ordinary consciousness. By introducing protoconsciousness, therefore, Rosenberg creates a further mystery; that of *protoconsciousness*!

Therefore, panexperientialism is either very implausible or irrelevant, depending on how we interpret the relevant notions.

Before closing this section, two related remarks are in order. (i) Rosenberg thinks, along with most other philosophers, that cognition is necessary in order to have properties of ordinary consciousness. However, this does not entail that in order to have properties

of *protoconsciousness* one needs to *lack* cognition. So, in principle, panexperientialism is consistent with the claim that cognitive systems can have properties of protoconsciousness and, accordingly, empathise with noncognitive systems that have protoconsciousness. However, it is obvious that we do not have these properties. Rosenberg needs to explain why the possession of cognition precludes us from having properties of protoconsciousness. Here, it seems to be more natural to think that we do not have properties of protoconsciousness; not because our cognition precludes us from having them, but simply because there are no such properties in the first place. (ii) It is important to note that, unlike Rosenberg's panexperientialism, Chalmers' panprotopsychism does not face the above dilemma.⁷ According to Chalmers, protophenomenal properties are distinct from properties of ordinary consciousness because they are not themselves phenomenal. However, unlike properties of protoconsciousness, protophenomenal properties *are* relevant to the mystery of consciousness. For they are, unlike properties of protoconsciousness, components of ordinary conscious experiences.

5. The Conceptual Objection

Rosenberg says that properties of protoconsciousness are experiential and phenomenal, just as properties of ordinary consciousness are. However, according to Rosenberg, protoconsciousness is, as its name suggests, distinct from ordinary consciousness. He writes:

The best term for the alien character of these fields is *protoconscious*, a term meant to suggest that they contain experienced qualitative objects that are not, strictly speaking, being experienced by the mind (because there is no associated cognition). These protoconscious states are states of pure experience. (p. 94).

Similarly, he writes, 'In contrast with protophenomenal properties, the properties of protoconsciousness are experiential properties properly considered phenomenal, but they do not require an associated cognitive engine to be experienced' (p. 97).

These passages suggest that panexperientialism may inherit a conceptual difficulty, because phrases such as 'experienced qualitative objects that are not, strictly speaking, being experienced' and 'experiential properties...[that] do not require an associated cognitive engine to be experienced' are self-contradictory. How could we claim coherently that something can be experienced without any subject that experiences it?⁸ It is analogous to saying that some parcels can be received without any subject that receives them. Surely, this cannot be true. It seems, once again, that panexperientialism is extremely implausible.

In response to this point, Rosenberg might claim that my objection is based incorrectly on the assumption that only cognitive systems can have experiential properties. He might contend that panexperientialism does not say that some phenomenal properties can be experienced without any experiencer at all, but rather that they can be experienced without any *cognitive* experiencers.

However, in order for this response to be tenable Rosenberg needs, at the very least, to explain exactly what sort of noncognitive systems can have experiences and why. Otherwise, his panexperientialism is *ad hoc*. He cannot simply stipulate without an

argument that some noncognitive systems can have experiences, particularly because such a claim is inconsistent with our commonsense. Pending a defence/explication of this claim, there is no reason to accept, or even consider, panexperientialism.

There is another conceptual problem that panexperientialism faces. Consider the following remark Rosenberg makes:

We are supposing that there are experienced qualities that share some *essence* with the qualities of our experience but that are not cognized and perhaps do not support certain properties useful only for cognitive purposes (such as intentional properties). (95, emphasis added)

Most philosophers agree that experiential features are essential to conscious experiences.⁹ For instance, painfulness is the essential feature of a painful experience. There is no such thing as a painful experience that is free from painfulness or a colourful experience that is free from colourfulness.¹⁰ Given these essential features of experiences, contrary to what Rosenberg says, it seems impossible for a system without any cognition at all to ‘share some *essence* with the qualities of our experience’. Therefore, again, panexperientialism seems extremely implausible.

In response to this point, Rosenberg might amend his position and say that since properties of protoconsciousness and properties of ordinary consciousness are distinct, there is actually nothing truly essentially common to them. Rosenberg might make such a move because he remarks as follows

When we speak of the qualitative field of some other, noncognitive, system, we are obviously not attributing to it the qualities of our own experiences. We are not attributing little pangs of pain or experiences of tiny blue dots to noncognitive systems. Whatever we are attributing, it is not any kind of feeling with which we can empathize. (p. 95)

However, this line of reasoning faces the metaphysical problem that I explained in the previous section. If properties of protoconsciousness are essentially different from that of properties of consciousness, protoconsciousness has nothing to do with ordinary consciousness. Hence, Rosenberg’s panexperientialism does not contribute anything of significance to a possible solution to the mystery of *ordinary* consciousness.

Therefore, again, panexperientialism is either very implausible or irrelevant.

6. Conclusion

The mystery of consciousness is certainly one of the most persistent problems in the philosophy of mind. It is, therefore, very unlikely that the problem is to be solved by the simple application of common philosophical theses and methods. In this respect, Rosenberg’s attempt to formulate a novel, speculative hypotheses is to be welcomed. And, indeed, in defending panexperientialism he is successful in developing a number of helpful and illuminative ideas regarding the problem. However, as I have argued throughout this paper, his panexperientialism seems untenable.¹¹

Notes

1. Rosenberg defines traditional panpsychism as the thesis that '[e]verything has an experiencing mind associated with it'. (p. 91). In this paper I set aside the controversial issue of exactly what counts as a 'thing', which seems to differ from panpsychist to panpsychist.
2. It is puzzling why Rosenberg uses the term 'panpsychism' to refer to his position when he thinks that both the *pan* and the *psychism* in *panpsychism* are misleading!
3. Here I have in mind the broadest sense of mentality, which include experiences. Rosenberg seems to exclude experiences from mentality. He says, "experience exists throughout nature and ... mentality is not essential to it." (p. 91)
4. Here 'a weak sense of being conscious' means, roughly speaking, being able to have experiences.
5. One might regard panexperientialism merely as a response to the most common objection to what Chalmers (2003) calls type-F monism: the objection that the view is false because it entails the infamous traditional panpsychism. However, in this paper I assume that panexperientialism is a more ambitious thesis, the purpose of which is to provide a foundation for a solution to the mystery of consciousness. Thanks to Torin Alter on this point.
6. This quotation is reminiscent of Nagel's bat argument (1974), according to which a bat's sensory experience is so alien to us that it is not the kind of thing with which we can (at least easily) empathise. However, I assume that the difference between protoconsciousness and our ordinary consciousness is much more fundamental than the difference between a bat's sensory experience and our sensory experience. Otherwise, it is not clear why Rosenberg needs to introduce the new term 'protoconsciousness'. Thanks to an anonymous referee on this point.
7. This does not mean that Chalmers' panprotopsycheism is free from criticisms. See, for instance, Yujin Nagasawa (2002).
8. Rosenberg seems to agree with this point. He writes, 'I do propose that phenomenal qualities could not exist unless some subject was experiencing them' (243).
9. There are some philosophers who reject essentialism of any kind and, *a fortiori*, the claim that experiential features are essential to conscious experiences. However, most philosophers would accept at least the essentiality in question.
10. Here I do not commit myself to representationalism, according to which a painful experience always *represents* painfulness that one has. My claim is only that painfulness, whether it is representational or not, is the essential feature of a painful experience.
11. For constructive suggestions and useful comments I would like to thank Torin Alter, Tim Bayne, Chris Wright and an anonymous referee for *Psyche*.

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