


BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Should panpsychists be Christians?

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Abstract

In this article, I offer a response to Joanna Leidenhag's book *Mind Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*. Whereas Leidenhag argues that the panpsychist's demands for explanation of the mind lead naturally to demands for an explanation of the whole universe, I counter that (i) the panpsychist's explanatory demands are not necessarily quite as general as Leidenhag presumes, and (ii) demands for an explanation of the whole universe can in any case be satisfying via the postulation of a self-explaining universe. I agree with Leidenhag that panpsychism is potentially a helpful way for Christians to think about the relationship between God and the universe, while disagreeing concerning how well suited process theism is to making sense of such a relationship. Finally, in terms of eco-philosophy, I agree with Leidenhag that panpsychism is conducive to a healthier relationship between humans and the natural world, while expressing reservations that a specifically Christian form of panpsychist eco-philosophy is preferable.

Keywords: Panpsychism; Christianity; environmentalism; cosmological arguments; process theology

There is a divide in the panpsychist research community, perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the split in the original psychoanalytic movement between Jungians and Freudians. There are those, such as David Chalmers, Angela Mendelovici, and Luke Roelofs, who are resolutely secular. They don't believe in a transcendent spiritual reality, but they do believe in mundane human and animal consciousness – seeing red, feeling pain, etc. – and they happen to think that these things can't be fully accounted for in the terms of physical science. I once asked Chalmers if he had any religious sentiments, to which he replied, 'Only that the universe is cool.' On the other hand, there are those such as Hedda Hassel Mørch, Itay Shani, and myself, who do have certain convictions which may be called 'spiritual', or at least which depart more radically from our standard naturalistic picture of reality than bog-standard panpsychism. I have just finished a book arguing that the universe has a purpose, for example.

However, of those in the spiritual grouping, there has not been much work connecting up panpsychism with the Abrahamic faiths. Joanna Leidenhag's book *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* is pioneering in this regard. Leidenhag argues that a partnership between panpsychism and Christianity is mutually beneficial for both parties, and outlines a number of ways in which one can be seen to benefit the other. The book is fascinating, intriguing, and enjoyable. As is always the case in philosophy, however, I found myself disagreeing at some points, as I outline in what follows.

Does panpsychism lead to God?

Leidenhag argues that the theoretical convictions that motivate panpsychism lead naturally to the existence of God. Panpsychists reject physicalism, on the grounds that we cannot intelligibly explain the emergence of consciousness from purely physical processes. This imperative to provide intelligible explanations, argues Leidenhag, is ultimately rooted in the Principle of Sufficient Reason: the thesis that, for anything that exists, there must be a sufficient explanation of *why* it exists. But accepting the Principle of Sufficient Reason leads ultimately to a need to explain the existence of the universe as a whole, an explanatory demand that Leidenhag thinks can only be satisfied by the God hypothesis.

There are a couple of places where a panpsychist can get off this bus. In their opposition to materialism, panpsychists do indeed tend to adopt principles demanding intelligible explanations. But what is sought is an intelligible explanation of *emergent* entities, in terms of the fundamental entities from which they emerge. If X is supposed to emerge from Y, then there must be something about the nature of X and the nature of Y that explains how it is that X was able to emerge from Y. For example, parties can emerge from people dancing and drinking because *all it is* for a party to exist is for there to be people dancing and drinking, etc. This kind of explanatory demand – which I have previously called ‘minimal rationalism’ (Goff, 2017) – is much more moderate than the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which demands that not only emergent entities but also fundamental reality be explained, either by itself or by something outside it.

My secular panpsychist brethren would no doubt get off the bus before the Principle of Sufficient Reason, by accepting the existence of the (conscious) universe as brute fact. However, as already stated, I have some fruity views, and I do have trouble with the idea of brute facts. I’m inclined to accept the following argument:

The Self-Explainer Argument

Premise 1 – There must be an explanation of why there’s something rather than nothing.¹

Premise 2 – There can be an explanation of why there’s something rather than nothing only if there is a *self-explainer*, namely, something which explains its own existence.

Conclusion – Therefore, there is a self-explainer.

Why accept premise 1? I have been thinking recently that there might be a way of arguing for this, which I hope to explore in future work. However, even in the absence of argument, I would accept premise 1 simply because it seems true.

All we can ever do in philosophy is start with what seems most evident. Consider the following three ‘seemings’:

- *Sensory seeming* – There seems to be a table in front of me.
- *Leibnizian seeming* – It seems as though there must be an explanation as to why there’s something rather than nothing.
- *Mathematical seeming* – It seems as though two plus two equals four.

When I reflect on these seemings in my own case, the sensory seeming seems the weakest, the mathematical seeming seems the strongest, and the Leibnizian seeming seems somewhere in between. This is brought out for me when I try to entertain the falsity of each of the above. It’s very easy to entertain the possibility that I’m in the Matrix and there isn’t

really a table corresponding to my table experience. At the other extreme, when I try to entertain the possibility that $2 + 2 = 5$, reason screams out at me that this isn't true. When I carefully reflect on the possibility that there's no ultimate explanation of why anything exists at all – that, say, the universe began to exist even though there's no explanation of why it began to exist – this isn't as obviously false as $2 + 2 = 5$, but seems rationally intolerable in something approaching the way $2 + 2 = 5$ is rationally intolerable.

That's not to say, of course, that it's easy for me to *really* believe I'm in the Matrix. But the resistance to believing I'm in the Matrix seems more a matter of psychological difficulty – my brain just won't let me believe it – whereas the sense that it can't be true that the universe came to exist without a cause doesn't seem to be merely a psychological difficulty.² Rather, it seems more akin to – albeit not as intense as – the rational insights we have in mathematical reasoning, for example, when we just 'see' that $2 + 2$ cannot equal 5.

One might respond:

Just because something *seems* a certain way, doesn't mean it is that way. And just because it's hard to accept something, doesn't mean it's false. Why think your intuitions correspond to how things are?

This is an understandable worry. The problem is that one could also make this response to the mathematical case, or indeed the sensory case, leaving one with no knowledge of anything. As I say, all one can do is start with what seems most evident. And for people like me who rank the above three seemings in the way I do, the following line of reasoning seems cogent:

- A. It is rational for me to trust my sensory seemings.
- B. If it is rational for me to trust my sensory seemings, then it is also rational for me to trust any seemings equally strong or stronger than my sensory seemings.
- C. My Leibnizian seeming is stronger than any of my sensory seemings.
- D. It is rational for me to trust my Leibnizian seeming.

So much for premise 1 of the Self-Explainer Argument. What about premise 2?

Premise 2 – There can be an explanation of why there's something rather than nothing only if there is a *self-explainer*, namely, something which explains its own existence.

I earlier gave the example of the universe coming into existence without a cause as a particularly vivid way of contemplating a putative brute fact. But the same worry would apply equally to the putative brute fact of, say, the eternal existence of the quantum vacuum. If the existence of the quantum vacuum is a brute fact, then there is no explanation of why there's something rather than nothing, because there's no explanation of why the quantum vacuum exists. Perhaps, as Roger Penrose has hypothesized, our universe was brought into existence by another universe, which was brought into existence by another universe, and so on ad infinitum. But then we don't have an explanation of why this infinite series of universes has always existed, as opposed to, say, an infinite series of ghosts, or nothing at all. The itch has not been scratched.

I'm afraid there's no getting around it. The only way there can be an explanation of why there's something rather than nothing is if there's something that explains its own existence.

We can get some kind of grip on the idea of a self-explainer by thinking of it as the polar opposite of an impossible being. An impossible being is one whose nature explains its non-existence. Once you grasp the nature of an impossible being, such as a square

circle, you just see that it can't possibly exist. A self-explainer would be an entity such that if you grasped its nature, you'd just see that it *has to exist*.

The trouble is, in contrast to impossible beings, we have no positive conception of an entity that explains its own existence. That doesn't mean there are no self-explainers: the limits of human cognition are not the limits of reality. Indeed, I believe we have good reason to think there *is* a self-explainer, because postulating a self-explainer is the only way to explain why there's something rather than nothing. But, given that we have no positive conception of a self-explainer, I don't see how we could know a priori:

- That there's only one self-explainer
- That the one self-explainer is an intelligent being.

Insofar as we can conceive of an entity that is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good – an *Omni-God* – it seems that such a being *might* exist but also might not exist.³ And so merely postulating such a being doesn't explain why there's something rather than nothing. It could be that there is an *Omni-God* that is a self-explaining being, in virtue of some of Her properties of which we have no positive conception. Maybe the Beatific Vision we enjoy in heaven consists of a direct acquaintance with such properties, such that it becomes obvious that God has to exist. But it could equally be that the universe is a self-explaining being, likewise in virtue of some of *its* properties of which we have no positive conception.

Proponents of the kalam cosmological argument, such as D. L. Craig (1979), may want to press that the universe began to exist, and so cannot be a self-explainer: if something is a self-explainer, it could be argued, then its nature guarantees its existence, and so there cannot be a time at which it didn't exist. There are a number of responses that might be made to this argument:

1. It assumes the fundamental reality of time. On a four-dimensionalist view, in which all moments of time are equally real, the entire spacetime continuum may be the self-explainer, which is consistent with the universe having a first moment of its existence.
2. If we reject kalam arguments for a finite past, we could hold that (i) our universe emerged from the quantum vacuum, and (ii) the quantum vacuum is the self-explainer and has always existed.

Even if one does accept both the fundamental reality of time, and the finite duration of the past, there remains the option of hypothesizing that (causally) prior to the big bang, the universe existed in a non-spatiotemporal form.⁴ Theists may object that we have no scientific evidence for thinking that the universe could exist in a non-spatiotemporal form. But if we are looking to postulate a self-explainer that caused the big bang, we have two options:

1. Postulate a supernatural self-explainer
2. Suppose that the universe is a self-explainer and that (causally) prior to the big bang, it existed in a non-spatiotemporal form.⁵

The second option is more parsimonious, and so, in the absence of further argument, it is the option we ought to adopt.

This, then, is where I would get off the bus from panpsychism to God, a little bit further down the road from my more secular panpsychist brethren. I am fairly confident that there is a self-explaining entity (more confident than that there is an external world

but less confident than that $2 + 2 = 4$). But it seems to me that the self-explainer might just be the (conscious) universe itself, or perhaps the (conscious) quantum vacuum. How lovely it would be to contemplate the full, self-explaining nature of the quantum vacuum, and finally put Cartesian doubt to bed. Sadly, I suspect such a thrill is probably beyond the reach of naturally evolved minds, but it comforts me to think that maybe this is a pleasure enjoyed by the quantum vacuum itself.

Should Christians be panpsychists?

As well as arguing that panpsychism leads to Christianity, Leidenhag proposes ways in which adopting panpsychism can be beneficial for Christians. Christians require, she argues, a conception of how God interacts with the natural world which is both empirically and morally plausible. At least part of the story for Christians is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in creation. But if panpsychism is false, the universe at large is a kind of unfeeling mechanism, and it's perhaps a bit hard to make sense of the Holy Spirit residing within a mechanism. That really would be a ghost in the machine! But if all of the natural world is conscious, suggests Leidenhag, then God can reside within it through the presence of the Holy Spirit within each conscious entity.

I agree that panpsychism, as well as being probably true, is a conception of reality more constant with spiritual convictions, including but not limited to Christianity. To take a contrast case, Richard Swinburne (2004) analyses God's omnipresence in terms of God's ability to impact any bit of the universe. This doesn't quite seem to capture the *intimacy* of God and creation which mystics from various religious traditions attest to, the sense that there is a living presence within all things. As St Paul put it, in God 'we live and move and have our being'.⁶ This metaphysical intimacy between the divine mind and the natural world is easier to make sense of if both are – or are made up of – conscious entities.

Having said that, I would like to raise some disagreement with some of Leidenhag's discussion of certain conceptions of divine intervention she rejects along the way.

Firstly, in terms of Robert J. Russell's quantum account of divine intervention, I think the problems are deeper than Leidenhag has described. Not wanting a view in which God violates laws of physics, Russell (2006) proposes that God interacts with the world through the indeterminacies in quantum physics. However, although the Born rule of quantum mechanics doesn't tell us exactly what is going to happen, it does tell us *the objective probabilities* of what is going to happen. If God is going to fiddle with nature in a way that flouts those objective probabilities, this is just as much a violation of the laws of physics as flouting deterministic laws. After all, deterministic laws are just probabilistic laws where the probability of the outcome is 1. A better strategy for the theist would be to adopt Alvin Plantinga's (2006) view of the laws of physics as *ceteris paribus* laws: telling us what will happen *in the absence of external influence* (so conceived, divine intervention does not violate the laws of physics). Perhaps there are problems with Plantinga's view, but, in any case, quantum mechanics doesn't seem to me to help the theist at all.

Although I think Leidenhag lets Russell off the hook too easily, I don't agree with the objections she raises against David Ray Griffin's (2004) conception of divine intervention. Griffin is a process theologian, the movement inspired by the pioneering work of Alfred North Whitehead. Process theologians deny that God is all-powerful, partly to respond to the problem of evil. God's only power over creation is to try to 'lure' creatures into higher forms of action, by placing in their consciousness higher moral ideals. Given that the Nazis choose to disregard God's attempts at persuasion, God was impotent to stop the holocaust.

Leidenhag (2021, 121) objects that process theology ‘gives no real explanation as to why suffering appears to be so unequally distributed’. But I can’t see why process theologians couldn’t explain the unequal distribution of suffering quite straightforwardly in terms of a combination of human misuse of free will and natural processes over which God has very limited control. Leidenhag (*ibid.*) also worries that process theology ‘provides no guarantee that God’s desire for good will have victory over evil’. Although it is true that the postulation of God of limited power doesn’t in itself guarantee that the universe will have a happy ending, it is open to a Christian process theologian to suppose that *as a matter of fact*, God has found a way of deepening Her connection with the world, in such a way that things are going to come good in the end. Why would anyone believe that? Well, I’m not here arguing that we do have good reason to accept the ‘Good News’ of Christianity; my only point is that Christianity is quite compatible with process theology.

That being said, there are still profound challenges for Christians hoping to circumnavigate the problem of evil in this way, perhaps the most obvious being how to make sense of the miracles of Christianity. How does a God who is only able to ‘lure’ bring about a resurrection, or a feeding of the 5,000? And if God can do these things, why doesn’t She do it more often? If Jesus really did resurrect in a supernatural body, why didn’t he make his existence an undeniable historical fact, by revealing his glorified form to all the nations of the world. Or, to take the objection of my dad – a lifelong agnostic Catholic – to Christianity: why didn’t Jesus stick around? If satisfactory answers to these questions cannot be given, then we haven’t avoided the problem of evil at all.

I personally think evil and suffering constitute very strong evidence against the Omni-God hypothesis, and hence very strong evidence against any conception of Christianity that involves an Omni-God. The process theologian’s strategy of postulating a God of limited powers seems to me the best option for making Christianity plausible in the face of evil and suffering. It remains to be seen, however, whether the challenges outlined above could be addressed.⁷

Panpsychism, Christianity, and ecology

In this final chapter of her book, Leidenhag aspires to use panpsychism to construct a conception of Christianity suited for a time of ecological crisis. Leidenhag expresses sympathy for Lynn White Jr’s (1967) concern that Christianity is ‘the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen’, given ‘man’s effective monopoly on spirit in this world’ in a standard Christian ontology. The root of this problem, according to Leidenhag, is the commitment to human beings, or humans and certain other animals, being the only conscious entities, and thus the only things of real intrinsic value. By instead adopting panpsychism, we can return to the Christianity of St Francis of Assisi, in which all things animate and inanimate have intrinsic worth.

I agree on the benefit of panpsychism to eco-philosophy, and have in the past made similar arguments (Goff (2019), ch. 5). If a tree is just a mechanism, then it has value only in terms of what it can do for us, either by sustaining our existence or by looking pretty. But if a tree is a conscious organism, albeit of a very alien kind, then it has an inherent moral status. The terrible mass destruction of forests we witnessed in Brazil in recent years under Bolsonaro has a different moral character if we see it as the burning of conscious organisms.

However, Leidenhag also thinks panpsychist eco-philosophy can benefit from Christianity. Although panpsychism allows each individual entity to have intrinsic value, she worries that we end up with a deeply egoistic world of separated, self-focused minds:

Each subjectivity in the universe, which grounds its own intrinsic value and orbiting instrumental values in itself, structures the world in a fundamentally egoist way.

While the recognition of the intrinsic value of another creates an interconnecting web of moral restrictions and obligations, values themselves are highly privatized, and thus relativized. There may be a collective society of minds, on this philosophy, but there is little scope for the community or fellowship that is sought, because there is no shared teleology, no shared values. Individual survival is the name of the game, beyond that horizon nothing remains. (Leidenhag (2021), 147)

To address this concern, Leidenhag takes an Augustine-inspired move of swapping *intrinsic* value for *sacramental* value:

Thus, intrinsic values are replaced, or perhaps reinterpreted, with sacramental value – things to be enjoyed in reference and participation of God. This counteracts the problems outlined above, since God provides a transcendent horizon and Archimedean point for value, in which all contingent values can participate and thus be opened up from their privatized survival tactics, to a shared vision and purpose. It is the sacramental nature of subjectively grounded intrinsic values that allows creatures to relate to one another in a common sphere of love and respect. God provides a transcendent horizon and Archimedean point for value, in which all contingent values can participate and thus be opened up from their privatized survival tactics, to a shared vision and purpose. (*ibid.*, 148)

I worry that Leidenhag downplays the moral significance of genuine intrinsic value, by confining its moral import to cold-blooded ‘restrictions and obligations’. The recognition of the intrinsic value of another – whether a human, a non-human animal, or a tree or plant – can inspire *positive* moral sentiments of love, respect, and deep care, as well as grounding restrictions and obligations. To truly internalize – admittedly a hard thing to do – that the other has equal worth to yourself is to overcome individualism and ego.

Having said that, it would be nice if reality as a whole was unified in a common purpose. Moreover, as I argue in my book *Why? The Purpose of the Universe* (Goff, 2023), certain features of reality, such as cosmological fine-tuning and psycho-physical harmony, give us grounds for taking that idea seriously. However, as I also explore in this book, there are ways of ways of accommodating cosmic purpose other than the God Hypothesis, such as non-standard designers, teleological laws, and cosmopsychism. The advantage of such accounts is that they avoid the problem of evil and suffering, which, in my view, is a compelling reason to reject the Omni-God hypothesis.

Notes

1. I mean ‘must’ here in an epistemic rather than a modal sense.
2. One might want to distinguish the universe having a cause from there being an explanation as to why the universe began to exist, but I am here using the former as shorthand for the latter.
3. I’m meaning ‘might’ here in an epistemic rather than a modal sense. Insofar as we’re conceiving of a *perfect* being, where perfection implies necessary existence, such a being cannot, by definition, exist contingently; such a being either exists necessarily or is impossible. This is the core of Alvin Plantinga’s (1974) modal ontological argument for God’s existence. I would respond that we cannot know a priori whether such a perfect being exists necessarily or is impossible, because we cannot know a priori the nature of the self-explainer (or self-explainers).
4. Strictly speaking, I shouldn’t use the past tense here, as we are imagining the universe causally prior to the big bang existing in a timeless form.
5. See note 4.

6. Acts 17: 28.

7. Thomas Oord (2015) is a Christian process theist who tries to reconcile Christian miracles with a God of limited power. He has very interesting proposals, but I'm ultimately not convinced they work out. I hope to write about this in future work.

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