

## Consciousness All the Way Down and Up

- (1) *What are the **four major worldviews** on mind and matter? Summarize each and identify the basic claims and problems they face.*
- (2) *Summarize the key points in the philosophy of **panpsychism**, and explain how it differs from the other alternative ontologies (e.g., which involve a “miracle” and/or performative contradictions)? What problems does panpsychism avoid that challenge other ontologies or worldview?*
- (3) *Panpsychism uses the slogan “consciousness all the way down.” What does this tell us about the relationship between mind and body?*

**Raluca-Ioana Cibu-Buzac**

### **(1) The Four Major Worldviews — Claims and Problems**

In his book *Radical Nature: The Soul of Matter*, Dr. de Quincey is proposing a radically different view on the mind-body relationship, and a new narrative premise (i.e., a set of assumptions about the nature of reality that shapes the way we know and interact with the world), which he then takes further into the definition of an alternative cosmology and ontology.

Before describing the new worldview, the author explains the limitations of the three cosmologies that pervaded modern Western thinking, namely dualism, materialism, and idealism.

Thus, **dualism** claims that mind and matter are both real, yet are completely different substances that exist independently and separately from each other. On the other hand, **materialism** considers only matter to be fundamentally real, while, though acknowledging

the reality of mind/consciousness, materialists consider it is a by-product of purely physical complex brains (i.e., everything real is natural, physical, and objective), while **idealism** claims that only mind/consciousness is ultimately real, and that matter is an illusion or an emanation of spirit.

Despite attempts of these three ontologies to encompass both mind and matter, as well as the interactions between the two, Dr. de Quincey argues that there are fundamental problems associated with each worldview, mostly because they imply a supernatural intervention into the world of nature (an ontological jump, *a miracle*), or they are self-contradictory:

- **Dualism** fails to demonstrate how mind and matter, as two separate and fundamentally different substances, could possibly interact with each other, and specifically how unextended mind could exert an influence on extended matter or vice versa.
- **Materialism** struggles and does not manage to explain how mind—which is subjective, occupies no space and has no mass—could have emerged from matter, which is spatial, massive, and objective. It is inexplicable for sentience and subjectivity to appear naturally from utter insentience and objectivity.
- **Idealism** introduces two ontological alternatives, each of them problematic, one in a pragmatic way, and the other in a philosophically logical way:
  - (a) The *maya* version of idealism (i.e., consciousness is primary and universal, and matter is an illusion, “dream stuff”) encounters the pragmatic problem of the fact that the interaction with the so-called “illusory” matter in our world has real consequences. Everyone (without exception) who claims that matter is illusory, nevertheless lives in the world as though matter is real—they avoid cars on freeways, wear clothes, live in houses, eat, and drink, etc. In other words, their *performance* in the world contradicts what they claim. They do not—and cannot—walk their talk. They commit unavoidable *performative contradictions*. That’s a *pragmatic* or *practical* problem, not a logical one (faced by dualism and materialism).
  - (b) The emanationist version of idealism (i.e., consciousness is primary and universal, and matter is an emanation from spirit, a dense form of spirit) encounters a

philosophical-logical problem, as it would require a miraculous ontological jump, on a par with the miracle required by materialist emergence of mind from pure matter. Emanationists do not deny the reality of matter; they acknowledge its reality, but claim it emanates from pure spirit, without any coherent explanation for how that could happen.

Before moving on to presenting the “fourth alternative” to the above ontologies, we need to focus on the content of the mind-body problem, which lies at the core of the philosophy of mind, and which is, in the case of most of cognitive scientists, translated into the mind-brain problem. Dr. de Quincey formulates the key question posed by the mind-brain problem as “how can the brain cause consciousness, and how can consciousness act back on the brain?” Nevertheless, the author continues by challenging the very assumption that consciousness can occur only in connection with a brain, and by advising that, in the absence of evidence in support of this assumption, we should consider the option that consciousness may exist in the absence of a brain (e.g., conscious worms, cellular consciousness, molecules or atoms).

Coming back to the three major cosmologies/ontologies — materialism, dualism, and idealism — that attempt to solve the mind-brain problem, the first one (materialism) claims that mind equals brain (i.e., identity materialism), the second one (dualism) maintains that mind is separate from brain, yet that mind can penetrate and move the brain (and vice versa), while the third one (idealism) states that brain, like all other material objects, is created by mind, and that mind alone is real (i.e., *maya* idealism maintaining that matter is illusory, yet not being able to account for the persistence of realism for survival, and emanationist idealism arguing that matter is a “devolved” spirit, yet not being able to explain the consequence of this theory, which implies that spirit is then “physical” (i.e., potentially leading to covert materialism or covert dualism.)

It is evident that, after going through the rationale and explanations provided by materialism, dualism, and idealism in relation to the mind-body problem, and in relation with the natural world, in general, these ontologies present major vulnerabilities, thus a fourth alternative is deemed necessary.

## **(2) The Philosophy of Panpsychism**

Dr. de Quincey draws radical naturalism, or panexperientialism/panpsychism, the fourth worldview, from process philosophy, and sets as trigger point for the revised understanding of physical reality, the fact that we have a limited conception of matter. Thus, the fundamental assumption of panpsychism is that if both consciousness and matter exist now, they must have both existed before and *always* in some form. Sentience and subjectivity could not have evolved from utter insentience and objectivity.

Radical naturalism avoids the problems of all the other three cosmologies by stating that *matter is intrinsically sentient*, as well as both subjective and objective. Matter and consciousness are co-eternal, mutually complementary realities, while we are subjective objects, embodied beings who know consciousness (i.e., we know it as feeling matter, not as body or matter).

Radical naturalism offers the foundation for a new science of “consciousness-within-matter,” by affirming that consciousness is the interior dynamic of matter. The in-forming activity of consciousness is intrinsic to matter, it is its own interiority and self-shaping dynamics.

Dr. de Quincey highlights the fact that a radical way out” of the mind-body problem is made possible by shifting from a “substance-thinking” to a “process-thinking” approach, where minds and bodies are understood as temporal relations (i.e., “patterns of events in time”), not only spatial ones: *“When matter is the objective constituent ingredient of purposeful process, and mind is the creative self-agency that scoops up’ past matter into the present, then their interaction—their ‘action-between’ each other—becomes a pseudo-problem. There is no ‘in between,’ no mysterious boundary or interface separating them and across which they must communicate.”*<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, mind is neither an external nor an internal force moving matter, but mind is the intrinsic process by which matter moves itself, as mind is constituent of the essence of matter. Moreover, matter is itself the bearer of consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> de Quincey, Christian. *Radical Nature: The Soul of Matter* (p. 249). Inner Traditions/Bear & Company. Kindle Edition.

### **(3) Consciousness All the Way Down**

According to Whitehead's process philosophy, the basic ingredients of the world are "experiential events," "moments of experience," and matter and consciousness always go together, all the way down.

Dr. de Quincey highlights the fact that panpsychism urges us to rediscover the soul of matter and the sacredness of nature, by looking at matter as "adventurous," as evolving by feeling its way towards ever increasing levels of complexity and organization. The story of evolution is a story that matter tells itself, and from another perspective, stories require consciousness (i.e., memory of the past, experience of the present, and anticipation of the future). Matter is full of information about its process and communicates the details of its earlier stages to its later and more organized stages. Thus, matter tells stories, and the stories create meaning.

Panpsychism offers an overarching view, comprising all the other worldviews, reconciling them, and avoiding their problems. Moreover, panpsychism is rooted into a long lineage of cults and philosophies, traced back to mythologies of pre-Indo-European neolithic and palaeolithic, Presocratic philosophers, Neoplatonists or the pivotal contribution of Giordano Bruno, the first to present a theory of intelligent matter.

The implications of radical naturalism, accompanied by the advances of quantum physics, are deep and manifold, and they re-situate consciousness and meaning at the core of a now self-organizing cosmos. At the same time, the new worldview embraces complementarity, holism, interconnectedness, synchronicity as well as causality, creativity, participation, and engagement.

Such an ontological shift potentially opens a new era for all life on Earth, if we, humans, choose to embrace and enrich it, to draw new values from it, and to act on them.