


BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Can panpsychism solve thorny theological problems?

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(Received 10 January 2023; accepted 11 January 2023; first published online 27 February 2023)

Abstract

Joanna Leidenhag has written a ground-breaking book arguing that the concept of panpsychism can solve several problems facing present-day humans. It can motivate greater commitment to concern for earth's diverse environments and the life forms that inhabit them. And it can solve theological problems connected with human consciousness, notably, how consciousness and matter coexist and interact. This article summarizes and comments on Leidenhag's arguments, then suggests several paths forward for those inspired by Leidenhag's ideas and arguments who wish to explore them and related notions in greater depth.

A ground-breaking book

The title of Joanna Leidenhag's book *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* suggests a double meaning. Humans have a special role to play in caretaking – minding – the natural world. We don't just have ecological problems, as Leidenhag sees it. Christianity has theological problems that adding mind to matter even on the smallest levels – panpsychism – could help solve.

Leidenhag contrasts her notion of panpsychism with what she considers Process Theology's version. Process Theology, she says, was inspired by ideas of William James, formalized by Alfred North Whitehead, and refined by many others, including Charles Hartshorne and David Ray Griffin. Leidenhag envisions entities at every level of the universe that possess substance subjectivity – they both have an enduring self and experience things. Process Thought, on the other hand, sees only drops of experience (James) or actual occasions (Whitehead) that are always becoming but never being. In both versions, entities at the lowest levels combine to form *nexuses* (objects) that are capable not only of experience, but, at large enough levels, cognition, ability to reason, and ability to make meaningful choices that affect reality and God.

What most bothers Leidenhag about Process Thought is that it sees God as part of an eternally existing order. And the Process God operates somewhat similarly to other actual occasions rather than first existing alone and then creating *ex nihilo*. According to Leidenhag, the Process God is embedded in a 'naturalistic frame' (Leidenhag (2021), 18, 148, 171) and is not sufficiently transcendent.

Early in *Minding Creation*, Leidenhag considers emergentism. Emergence is an elaboration on the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Some use emergence to explain how complexity arises out of vast numbers of interacting simpler constituents.

Naturalists love the idea because it seems to explain how very complex phenomena, such as consciousness or the flow of water and solidity of ice, emerge out of well-understood simpler processes or particles. Many philosophers of mind use emergence to explain human consciousness without appealing to God. Leidenhag, among many others, thinks such attempts fail.

Some theologians use emergence to build Emergence Theologies. Leidenhag cites Philip Clayton as an example. He claims that God can act causally in nature by intervening in the irreducibility between levels, undetectable to science. Similarly, Paul Davies has used emergence to explain how God influences evolution. Arthur Peacocke talks of Christ emerging out of humanity rather than God's descent into humanity as Christ.

Leidenhag thinks emergence is an unstable foundation for theology, in part, because it is scientifically untestable. Even worse is the temptation to see God as emergent, which, like Process Theology, tends to naturalize God and weaken transcendence. Or emergent theologies may think Christ emerges from below rather than descending from above. As Leidenhag sees them, Emergence Theologies lead to 'disenchantment and devaluation' (*ibid.*, 46).

To address the promise of panpsychism, Leidenhag begins with Thomas Nagel's 1979 essay 'Panpsychism'. Nagel commends panpsychism in the wake of the failure of physicalism and emergence to explain consciousness. Leidenhag considers David Chalmers, who argues that we must make consciousness fundamental to the natural world. Leidenhag characterizes Chalmers's notion as 'dualism all the way down' (*ibid.*, 54) and thinks that his ideas can imagine creaturely minds as ubiquitous in the universe without being divine.

Of course, panpsychism has its critics. Leidenhag considers some common objections, which she names the Incredible Stare Objection (it's implausible, bizarre), the No Sign Objection (lack of evidence), the Uneconomic Objection (posits unnecessary phenomena), the Unscientific Objection (doesn't jibe with physicalism), and the Brute Objection (it just is).

The biggest criticism may be the Combination Problem: panpsychists can't explain how experience-capable micro-entities combine to form deeply conscious macro-entities. This one has force. Physicalists can no better explain how consciousness emerges from networks of neurons, however, so rival theories have the same problem.

One of Leidenhag's major contributions is her exploration of the compatibility between panpsychism and theism. She uses the causal principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing arises) and the *principle of sufficient reason* (everything must have a cause) to suggest that panpsychism implies theism.

One of the most systematic articulations of panpsychism in the modern period was Leibniz's monad-based system. A monad is a unity of the physical and the mental, not an aggregate or combination of two differing properties. According to Leibniz, monads exist at every level of reality, from the subatomic to the human body-mind. Sufficiently advanced consciousness is a soul, and some animals other than humans have one.

According to Leibniz, a universe alive in every part provides more centres of consciousness to glorify God. Leidenhag calls this a 'Sacramental Ontology' (*ibid.*, 88). What she particularly values in Leibniz is his commitment to divine transcendence, foreknowledge, and rationality. She also appreciates Leibniz's view that God creates *ex nihilo*.

To explore panpsychism and divine action, Leidenhag considers the work of three theologians. She argues that panpsychism, if not solving their problems, could at least strengthen their positions. Panpsychism could help Robert J. Russell posit divine action where science finds indeterminacy, especially in quantum mechanics. Panpsychism would allow Russell to claim that God acts cooperatively with experiencing entities rather than by intervening. Leidenhag thinks David Ray Griffin and Process Theology would be more robust if they viewed actual occasions as enduring subjects. Panpsychism could help Kathryn Tanner reconcile creaturely freedom with God's sovereignty. Tanner worries that God's saving *and* humans choosing salvation represent overdetermination.

Leidenhag considers how panpsychism can help address ecological crises. Humans are more likely to value all aspects of creation if experience is a feature widely distributed throughout creation. 'While panpsychism has been cast as the understudy to physicalism in recent philosophy of mind and to dualism in Christian theology', says Leidenhag rather lyrically, 'panpsychism is the leading lady of ecological philosophy' (*ibid.*, 140).

Humans have no problem valuing creation for human uses, or what Leidenhag calls 'instrumental' (*ibid.*, 141) valuing. She contrasts it with 'intrinsic' (*ibid.*) valuing, which means valuing creation for its own sake. But this does not mean creatures have an equal value among themselves. Citing Genesis 1:26, Leidenhag argues that humans have greater value. But this does not mean that humans should exploit creation. If creation is sacred and every part valuable to God, a stewardship metaphor works well. While thinking Christ was incarnated only once and as a human has led traditional theologies to treat creation instrumentally, recognizing the Spirit present throughout creation, a view panpsychism encourages, acts as a corrective.

Leidenhag wants us to view biblical references to non-human entities praising God more seriously. She cites several passages which, if taken less metaphorically than theologians have tended to, suggest panpsychism: Psalm 99:1 (earth shakes); Psalm 98:7 (sea resounds); Isaiah 42:10 (the sea, islands, and all beings in or on them sing praise); Jeremiah 12:4 (land mourns).

When eco-theologians talk of creation as community, says Leidenhag, they rarely understand that community requires true subjects. When Orthodox theologians talk of the cosmic Eucharist or liturgy, they are, intentionally or not, suggesting that subjectivity goes all the way down. Instead of viewing stewardship as managing property, we should view it as guardianship of non-human 'children', caring for them and raising them to flourish.

Paths forward

Minding Creation is a stirring and evocative book, suggesting several new ways to think about God, creation, capacities for spiritual experience at every level of existence, and the enchantment of the universe. There are several fruitful directions that Leidenhag's future work might pursue.

For instance, Leidenhag sees panpsychism's Combination Problem as the question of how micro subjects combine to form macro subjects such as human minds. Two hundred years ago, no-one had a clue about the nature of small physical entities. A hundred years later, scientists identified some of the subatomic particles that make up atoms and devised mathematical laws that explain how they combine and interact. Still, no-one had any idea what the smallest particles actually were. The mathematical laws were probabilistic, describing not how two particles *will* interact or combine, but how they *might*, and what the probability of each way is, including hints that consciousness might be involved. While all the physical mysteries aren't solved yet, one may hope that panpsychism's Combination Problem could likewise grow less murky in the coming years as work on consciousness develops.

Leidenhag is keen on *substance* subjectivism, meaning she thinks the smallest constituents of a panpsychist universe possess an intrinsic nature. This is where Leidenhag might open herself more to how some Process Theologians think about actualities as non-substantival series of occasions. They propose, in line with Buddhist thinking, that causally linked chains of experience are ever evolving through choices made in the light of past experiences and God's subtle lures. It is easier to imagine causal connections between experiences than to imagine a physical substance unchanging over time.

Some Open and Relational thinkers are wary of the term 'panpsychism', because 'psych' implies consciousness even in the most basic units of nature. Panexperientialism implies

the ability to apprehend, not necessarily cognition. As Thomas Jay Oord and Andrew Schwartz have written, ‘panexperientialism overcomes the Cartesian mind–body problem. Instead of separating mind from body by saying one is entirely mental and the other entirely physical, panexperientialism unites mind and body. It recognizes mentality and physicality as two dimensions of all existing beings’ (Oord and Schwartz (2020), 246). Oord also calls this ‘material-mental monism’ (Oord (2020), 56), which means that every event has both a material and a mental aspect.

Leidenhag’s claim that panpsychism could make eco-philosophy and eco-theology more robust is solid. Several decades ago, many scientists and philosophers frowned on the idea that non-human animals possess mentality. Today, thinkers consider many species able to respond in awareness, and wonder if some degree of mentality goes all the way down. These days, it seems acceptable to acknowledge that animals consciously suffer, perhaps more than humans in some ways. Many also assume that animals think, communicate, and sense things humans can’t (for example, bats emit and detect sonar). Some theologians speculate that all animals sense God’s presence, perhaps better than humans, who so easily turn away from God.

And it isn’t just animals. Trees, for example, may have a vastly slower form of mentality than humans. But some exist in communities of mutual aid by symbiotically connecting through their root systems with mycorrhizal (fungal) networks. How this functions is largely unexplained by science. Perhaps panpsychism can help illuminate the problem and offer solutions.

Leidenhag worries a bit that if Christians see incarnation as a one-time breaking through of the Divine into human form, they will miss Christ incarnate throughout all. Perhaps in her future work, she will explore this broader vision of incarnation. It can align nicely with the view of a passible God who shares with creation diverse suffering and joy, the Divine present with and within *all* of us. Whether one adopts *creatio ex nihilo* or rejects it, one can assume God knew that creatures would suffer. And a loving God might show the greatest love by sharing in that suffering rather than standing aloof.

In sum, Joanna Leidenhag has written a wonderful book. It explores panpsychism in new ways that both traditional and less traditional theists can appreciate.

Conflict of interest. None.

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