Religious Studies (2026), **62**, S18–S32
doi:10.1017/S0034412525000253

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Anselm on THAT, THIS, and panpsychism

Tim Mulgan[1,2]

[1]Department of Philosophy, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK and [2]School of Humanities, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
Email: tpm6@st-andrews.ac.uk

(Received 24 March 2025; revised 6 April 2025; accepted 7 April 2025; first published online 25 April 2025)

Abstract

This articles reimagines Anselm's claim that God is 'that than which a greater cannot be thought' [Hereafter: 'THAT']. The article first explores a variety of Anselm-inspired of what THAT is like, and how THAT relates to whatever (if anything) is not-THAT (hereafter: 'THIS'). THAT could be Anselm's creator God, a polytheist pantheon, or a single undifferentiated One/Absolute/Brahman. THIS could be a single possible world or a pluriverse containing many different real possible worlds. The article defends a principle of cosmic humility. It argues that, to counter our natural tendency to over-estimate our own importance, we should pay particular attention to non-human-centred, non-anthropomorphic interpretations of THAT. Humility favours plenitude about worlds and plenitude about creatures. God (or THAT) will create many worlds that (together) contain all valuable creatures. Humility also suggests that, within this optimal pluriverse, we should not expect to find ourselves inhabiting either a world that is cosmically special or a world where we are special. The final part of the article argues that, within contemporary philosophy of mind, this commitment to cosmic humility supports panpsychism over its rivals – especially dualism and materialism. If THAT did create THIS, then we are (probably) insignificant creatures living in a panpsychist world. The article concludes with some speculations on how thinking about THAT and THIS might also influence the *content* of panpsychism as well as the case for panpsychism.

Keywords: Anselm; Leslie; panpsychism; ananthropocentrism; humility

This article is part of a broader project that reimagines Anselm's *Monologion* and *Proslogion*.[1] In *Proslogion*, as he says himself, Anselm deploys a 'single argument' – the notion/phrase/term 'that than which a greater cannot be thought' [Hereafter: 'THAT'] (Holopainen 2020, 37–64). Anselm seeks to prove both that THAT does (and must) exist, and that THAT is as 'we' (i.e., Christians – specifically eleventh-century Norman monks) believe it to be. Anselm's notion of *proof* is psychological as much as logical (Holopainen 2020, 85). Anselm's proofs succeed if we cannot help believing his conclusions.

After *Proslogion*'s introductory prayer (chapter 1), chapters 2 to 4 prove that and how THAT exists; while chapters 5 to 26 prove what THAT is like, and how THAT relates to whatever (if anything) is not-THAT (hereafter: 'THIS'). Contemporary analytic philosophers skip the opening prayer, and seldom reach chapter 5. This is a pity, because we can learn a lot by reimagining Anselm's explorations of THAT and THIS.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Parts I and II outline my Anselm-inspired accounts of THAT and THIS. Part III argues that, within contemporary philosophy of mind, those accounts support panpsychism over its rivals.

Part I: THAT

Anselm and me

My academic home is consequentialist moral philosophy. My stock-in-trade is judgements of the comparative value of possible states of affairs. My earlier work on cosmic purpose assumes that such comparative judgements make sense and follows that assumption where it leads. It has led me to some strange places (Mulgan 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022).

Anselm also presumes humans' ability to make comparative judgements of objective value, which he links to the very nature of rationality: 'for a rational nature, being rational is nothing other than being able to distinguish just from not just, true from not true, good from not good, more good from less good' (Anselm *Monologion*, ch. 68 in Holopainen 2020, 27). For Anselm, the ability to judge comparative objective goodness is unproblematic and uncontroversial (Holopainen 2020, 27, 57; Sweeney 2012, 123, 143, 157–171). It is central to human rationality, and to the very possibility of communicating in a shared language (Campbell 1976, 197). In contemporary philosophy, by contrast, few things are more controversial. My experience teaching this material over many years is that Anselm's commitment to *objective* values is the greatest imaginative barrier facing contemporary non-religious philosophy students encountering *Proslogion* for the first time.

We cannot borrow Anselm's 'THAT' unless we too believe in an objective order of value that transcends our personal preferences. If, following Anselm, we seek to prove that THAT *must* exist, then we need *necessary* objective values that transcend the actual (physical) world entirely.

My project has two guiding principles drawn from my own previous work:

1. *Objective Values*: There are genuine necessary objective values; we have some reliable access to them; and THAT is the source, ground, foundation of those values.
2. *Humility*: We should explore non-human-centred, non-anthropomorphic interpretations of THAT.

I argue elsewhere that theism and objective values are *mutually supporting* (Mulgan 2016, 13–15, 47–62). Many familiar arguments for theism rely on objective values, often in unexpected ways; while theism, in turn, gives objective values much needed metaphysical and epistemological support. We need objective values to get to THAT; and THAT then grounds those values.

I also argue that our thinking about cosmic purpose must avoid self-aggrandizement, anthropocentrism, and what Jeremy Bentham calls 'caprice' (Mulgan 2016, 16–21). We should be wary of eliding our human perspective with the cosmic perspective, equating our values with God's values, over-estimating humanity's significance to the cosmic purpose, and inflating our ability to promote or influence that purpose. The nature of THAT, the reason why THAT produces THIS, and the underlying scale of objective values may all be non-human-centred. The real action may occur elsewhere in this universe, in another universe, or even in another possible world. The real cosmic values may be quite unlike anything we can understand, promote, or instantiate.

Exploring non-human-centred cosmic purposes and values is a necessary corrective to our natural tendency to give humanity too central a role. This article applies the same anthropocentric, de-centring approach to the interpretation of THAT and THIS.

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Why THAT must be thought to exist

In *Proslogion* 2–4, Anselm famously argues that THAT cannot be thought not to exist – because what *can* be thought not to exist is less great than what *cannot* – and therefore THAT *must exist*. This is the origin of the notorious modal ontological argument.[2]

Even if we agree that THAT cannot be thought not to exist, we still have two alternatives: either THAT can (and must) be thought as existing, or THAT cannot be thought at all.[3] Parodies of Anselm's argument demonstrate that we can *describe* many entities that cannot be thought not to exist – necessarily existent islands, evil gods, non-Christian Gods, necessary beings of limited power, and so on (e.g., Goldschmidt 2020, 15–17). Anselm insists that all other necessary beings are impossible; that only God is thinkable; and, therefore, that God alone exists necessarily. Philosophical attention therefore shifts from necessity to possibility. How do we know that THAT, alone of all describable necessary beings, *can* actually be thought to exist? What justifies the modal ontological argument's *possibility premise*?

Here is my Anselm-inspired reply. We know THAT *can* be thought, because we know it *must* be thought – because we (and all rational beings) are continuously thinking it, and must think it. The very activity of rational thought presupposes the confident making of judgements of objective comparative value. I cannot reason, deliberate, or organise my experience of the world without constantly deploying the notions of better and worse, good and not-good, greater and lesser. This deployment, in turn, presupposes some objective ranking that culminates in either (a) a greatest thinkable being; or (b) something greater than whatever can be thought. Anselm's phrase 'THAT' deliberately leaves both options open – allowing interpretations based on either perfect being theology or apophatic theology (Doyle 2016; Holopainen 2020, 1–3, 37–64; Kim 2023; Sweeney 2012, 110).

If you cannot think of THAT, you cannot reason. You need not think about THAT all the time. Indeed, most people (including most moral philosophers) never consciously think about THAT at all. However, if you cannot think of THAT *as existing* when the question is raised, then your rationality is in doubt. If you cannot think of THAT as existing, you cannot think at all; and we cannot talk together unless we implicitly invoke THAT.

This argument can be either Platonic/metaphysical or Kantian/transcendental. We can conclude either (a) THAT actually exists (Plato), or (b) we must think that THAT exists (Kant). Even this Kantian argument is more ambitious than Kant himself – because Anselm's ability to make judgements of objective comparative value is the foundation *of all possible rationality and all public language*, not merely of practical rationality or deliberation.

My Anselm-inspired argument would be extremely ambitious if it claimed to prove *on its own* that THAT *does* exist or that we *must* think of THAT whenever we deliberate. But it is much less ambitious – targeting only the modal ontological argument's *possibility premise*, not its *conclusion*. I seek only to demonstrate the *possibility* of THAT. The overall dialectic is as follows. We first borrow Anselm's claim that THAT either exists necessarily or is impossible. We *then* cite objective values to demonstrate the possibility of THAT. Our use of objective values does not demonstrate THAT's actual (or necessary) existence. But it does commit us to the coherence, intelligibility, thinkability, and *possibility* of something like THAT.

In short: We know THAT is possible because the very activity of rational thought presupposes the confident making of judgements of objective comparative value, which in turn presupposes some objective ranking of possibilities grounded in something like Anselm's THAT.

I hope to justify these bold claims elsewhere. Here, I assume THAT does exist (perhaps because it must), and then ask, like Anselm in *Proslogion* 5 to 26: What follows? What can we learn about THIS by thinking about THAT?

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What is THAT?

Anselm's THAT has all traditional Christian divine attributes: THAT is *omni-God* (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent); *personal* (conscious, living, rational, free, creative, loving); *non-physical* (spiritual, mental, transcendent); *simple* (undifferentiated, without parts); *independent* (depending on nothing outside itself, existing necessarily); *sovereign* (sole source, creator, and sustainer of everything outside itself).

Anselm's THAT is a creator God distinct from their creation. THAT creates THIS (separate from, and dependent upon, THAT). Other accounts of THAT and THIS are available. In principle, THAT could instead be:

1. A Polytheist pantheon of several distinct gods – none alone as great as Anselm's single Creator God, but together greater than any imaginable single God.
2. A single undifferentiated One/Absolute/Brahman.
3. The union of (a) a demiurgic divine artificer; and (b) the inert matter they sculpt into a universe.
4. A pluriverse containing many different real possible worlds.[4] Consider Leslie's influential axiarchism, where all good possible worlds exist, and this world exists *because* it is good (Leslie 2001; Mulgan 2016, 83–91, 2017). I interpret Leslie's optimal pluriverse as THAT. It exists because it is good – and we cannot imagine anything greater.

THAT and THIS

How does THAT relate to THIS? Consider five alternatives:

1. *Identity*: THIS is THAT. Nothing is not-THAT. Everything that exists is a part, aspect, interpretation, perception (or misperception) of THAT.
2. *Inclusion*: THAT includes THIS. Everything that is not-THAT is contained within THAT.
3. *Emanation*: THIS flows from THAT. THAT naturally gives rise to all that is not-THAT. THIS is an overflow, emanation, reflection, shadow of THAT.
4. *Creation*: THAT makes THIS. THAT deliberatively brings all that is not-THAT into existence.
5. *Independence*: THIS is independent of THAT. Something is not-THAT and doesn't owe its existence to THAT.

Each option is found in some major philosophical and/or religious tradition. Anselm's Christian THAT is a personal creator God. Monist traditions such as Advaita Vedanta and European Absolute Idealism endorse Identity. Many Neoplatonists treat THIS as an inevitable emanation from THAT. Other Neoplatonists – and some proponents of African Traditional Religion (Lougheed et al. 2024) – prefer creation *ex materia* where THAT moulds eternally pre-existing matter; while many theists in all traditions acknowledge logical, modal, or evaluative facts that are, in some sense or other, not wholly dependent on God.

Different accounts of THAT lead to different accounts of why and how THAT exists (or must exist), and how THAT relates to THIS. I explore several of these alternatives elsewhere (Mulgan 2016, 2017, 2019, 2022). Personally, I am sympathetic to Leslie's axiarchism as an account of THAT. However, in this article, for the sake of both simplicity and familiarity, I mostly follow Anselm's model of THIS and THAT – where THAT is a personal God who creates THIS which is distinct from God. I then focus on disagreements about what God would create. As we'll see, some alternative interpretations of THAT (including Leslie's axiarchist pluriverse) then re-emerge as interpretations of THIS.

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How should we think about THAT and THIS?

Anselm uses 'greater' and 'better' interchangeably (Holopainen 2020, 19). A single scale simultaneously measures: metaphysical excellence; degree of reality, being, or existence; independence; sovereignty; moral excellence; cosmic values; and ideal human values. Anselm's THAT is metaphysically, axiologically, and morally supreme.

Anselm has many opponents. Some deny all objective values, standards, or scales – whether metaphysical or moral. All values and comparisons are subjective. Others recognise some objective standards, but deny that a single scale covers both moral goodness and metaphysical greatness. (Perhaps THAT is metaphysically supreme but irrelevant to value; perhaps metaphysical greatness is objective while moral goodness is subjective; or perhaps THAT is morally perfect but metaphysically unimpressive.) Finally, some accept objective values, but deny even the possibility of THAT. For anything we can imagine, we can imagine something greater or better: there is no greatest natural number, no largest possible population, no best possible world, and nothing than which a greater cannot be imagined.

I defend objective values elsewhere (Mulgan 2016, ch. 2). I won't repeat that defence here. I simply note that, while following Anselm constrains our interpretation of both THAT and objective values, we still have many alternatives to Anselm's Christian God: non-Christian monotheism, monism, polytheism, axiarchism. Different accounts of THAT and THIS reflect different objective value judgements. Is it better to be solely responsible for everything outside yourself or to be such that nothing could exist outside yourself? Is it better to respond infallibly to reasons or to exercise unconstrained creative power? And so on. I have no idea how to adjudicate these disagreements in general. Instead, I use my two guiding principles to navigate them. I ask: What is the least human-centred interpretation that still yields intelligible cosmic values?

My principle of humility prompts several questions:

1. *Can reason understand THAT?* We should be humble about our ability to use reason to understand THAT at all. Anselm himself claims that God is *greater* than anything we can conceive (*Proslogion* 15). Any human interpretation of THAT is tentative. We should therefore pay particular attention to neglected unflattering interpretations.
2. *Does my tradition understand THAT?* Humility about human reason prompts many to fall back on revelation or authority. Many non-philosophical commentators regard this as *Anselm's* main insight! (Barth 1975). However, philosophers within particular traditions (religious or philosophical) must also be humble *in the face of religious disagreement.* I should be suspicious if my 'philosophically neutral' interpretation of THAT matches my preferred authority's teachings too neatly. I should be wary of dismissing *other people's* revelations as absurd, unmotivated, or unworthy of THAT. Of course, *taken literally*, other people's claims about THAT *are* absurd. But so are mine.
3. *Does THAT care for us?* We should be humble about *our relation to THAT*. We should not be too quick to conclude THAT cares for us, we are (part of) THAT's reason to create this world, we are central to the purpose of THIS, *we* can understand that purpose, and so on. THAT may be indifferent to THIS, unaware of THIS, concerned for THIS only in very general terms, concerned for every aspect of THIS, affected by the fate of the inhabitants of THIS, liable to suffer when harm befalls those inhabitants, and perhaps even willing to sacrifice for their sake. Anselm's God lies at the human-centred end of this spectrum. By contrast, some monist or emanationist interpretations suggest THAT is not even aware of THIS.
4. *Are we central to creation?* Humility pushes us toward larger pictures of creation, where what matters cannot even be imagined from the human perspective and nothing about humans even counts from the cosmic point of view.

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The most human-centred, least humble, interpretation pictures THAT as a person like us, who creates a single possible world with one physical universe whose central inhabitants are human beings created in the image of God. This is, more or less, Anselm's own view. It may be correct. But we should explore less flattering alternatives.

Part II: From THAT to THIS

Enough about THAT. What about THIS? I address two questions: Will God create one world or many? How will God populate worlds?

What world(s) is THIS?

Suppose God faces two choices.

- *Cats*: God contemplates creating cats. God has three options: (a) create no cats; (b) create all possible cats; or (c) create some cats. Under (c), God can create either (ci) only one cat; or (cii) several cats. Under (ci), God can create either (ci1) the best possible cat; or (ci2) some other cat. Under (cii), God can create either (cii1) all good enough cats; (cii2) some good enough cats; (cii3) the optimal *set* of cats (perhaps including individual cats not desirable in isolation); or (cii4) some non-optimal set of cats.
- *Worlds*: God now contemplates creating possible worlds (with or without cats). God has three options: (a) create no world; (b) create all possible worlds; or (c) create some possible worlds. Under (c), God can create either (ci) only one possible world; or (cii) several possible worlds. Under (ci), God can create either (ci1) the best possible world; or (ci2) some other possible world. Under (cii), God can create either (cii1) all good enough possible worlds; (cii2) some good enough possible worlds; (cii3) the optimal *set* of possible worlds (perhaps including individual possible worlds not desirable in isolation); or (cii4) some non-optimal set of possible worlds.

Which possible worlds will God create, realize, actualize? (More on cats later.) More generally, if THIS flows from THAT, is THIS a single possible world or a set of worlds?

I first identify three divisions of possible worlds:

1. *Choosable versus Not Choosable*: Which possible worlds could God create? (What *can* God make real?)
2. *Choiceworthy versus Not Choiceworthy*: Which possible worlds does God have sufficient reason to create, as opposed to decisive reason not to create? (What *might* God make real?)
3. *Chosen versus Not Chosen*: Which possible worlds has God created? (What *does* God make real?)

I next identify some alternative scenarios:

1. *One World Optimalism*: God creates (only) the best possible world. God has sufficient reason to choose the best world and decisive reason not to choose every other world. Only one world is choice-worthy. It alone is chosen.
2. *One World Unconstrained Voluntarism*: God's choice is unconstrained by pre-existing reasons. God both could and might create any possible world. All choosable worlds are also choice-worthy. God freely creates this world.
3. *One World Constrained Voluntarism*: God has decisive reason to not create some possible worlds, but there are still many worlds that God has sufficient reason to create.

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Some choosable worlds are choiceworthy; some are not. God freely creates this choiceworthy world.

4. *Theist Modal Realism*: God creates a *maximal pluriverse* where all possible worlds are real concrete entities (Almeida 2017a, 2017b). All choosable worlds are both choiceworthy and chosen.
5. *Plenitude About Worlds*: God creates a *non-maximal pluriverse* – containing several choiceworthy worlds that God has sufficient reason to create. God might create all choiceworthy worlds – all choosable worlds that are good enough considered in isolation. Or God might create the optimal *set* of choosable worlds. (Perhaps identical to the set of all worlds that are good enough in isolation. But perhaps not.) Or God might create several choiceworthy worlds, but not all of them. Or God might create some non-optimal set of choosable worlds.

Creating a single world and creating all possible worlds are limiting cases of creating a *set* of worlds. We can thus treat all God's options as varieties of plenitude about worlds.

This taxonomy presumes a personal God who chooses what worlds to create. If THIS instead *flows naturally* from THAT, then we have fewer alternatives. For instance, axiarchism cannot easily avoid some kind of Optimalism, because it cannot distinguish between choiceworthy and chosen. How can impersonal values 'choose' between competing sufficient reasons? THIS must be either the best possible world, the set of all good worlds, or the optimal set of worlds.

Humility favours plenitude about worlds. We should take seriously the possibility that our world is merely barely good enough, and far from the best; and that what makes this *set* of possible worlds optimal has little to do with anything *in this world.* We should explore larger pictures of creation, where we cannot even imagine what truly matters, and nothing about us counts at all from the cosmic point of view.

How does THIS relate to THAT?

THAT is the paradigm, standard, measure, source of goodness. For any X, the more X resembles THAT, the better X is. Prima facie, THAT is more likely to create, produce, emanate, or otherwise lead to things that are better rather than worse. If THAT explains why THIS exists, then the likelihood of X's existence increases with the value of X – which, in turn, increases the more X resembles THAT. In short: THIS resembles THAT – and THIS exists *because* it resembles THAT.

This tight connection between THAT and THIS allows us to argue in both directions. If we *observe* that THIS is (surprisingly) X, then we infer that X is good and THAT is perfectly X. Conversely, if we *believe* that X is good, then we can infer that THIS is probably X and THAT is probably perfectly X.

For instance, the connection between goodness and THAT explains why fine-tuning arguments mutually support Anselm-inspired ontological arguments. I argue elsewhere that fine-tuning arguments need very robust objective values (Mulgan 2016, 123–129). THAT grounds those values. Conversely, fine-tuning arguments teach us about the *content* of cosmic values. We know THIS contains a physical universe governed by regular, intelligible laws that is (remarkably) friendly to the emergence of rational, intelligent life. We conclude that THAT perfectly exemplifies rational, intelligent life, and that understanding is a key cosmic value.

Understanding is a compelling cosmic value for another reason. We need THAT to underpin human values. This favours interpretations of THAT where THIS exists *in order to be understood* – and thus it is no coincidence that some of THIS's inhabitants understand the values behind its existence.

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How will God populate worlds?

God now places cats within worlds. God has many options. God could put cats everywhere or leave some places cat-free. God could create a single cat in a single place, many identical cats in different places, or many different cats in different places. God could create infinitely many cats – if God has infinitely many places to put them.

Two options are especially salient. Under *Cat Optimalism*, God only creates the best possible cat – perhaps duplicating it in many different places. Under *Cat Plenitude*, God both (a) creates every possible kind of cat; and (b) ensures that every place is maximally cat-filled.

Cat Plenitude is undermotivated. It is trumped by *Creature* Plenitude, where God fills the universe with every possible kind of life. God will create dogs, cockroaches, and humans – even if all are clearly inferior to cats.

Leibniz famously combines One World Optimalism with Creature Plenitude (Adams 1994, 113-213; Mulgan 2016, 201–210). God creates the best possible world where life is *everywhere*: every possible step on the evolutionary scale is occupied; every possible kind of life is found somewhere; every possible scale (microscopic, planetary, interstellar, galactic) has its own lifeforms; and every planet, asteroid, comet, or star has its own thriving ecosystem.

Leibniz's comination of One World Optimalism and Creature Plenitude leaves many hostages to empirical fortune. Do we really find every possible kind of life in every niche in our universe? Combining Creature Plenitude with *Plenitude About Worlds* solves this problem. In an infinite pluriverse, every possible (desirable) distribution of possible creatures is found somewhere. Why create one world filled (only) with the kinds of life that can inhabit *that particular world*? Why not create infinitely many different possible worlds – a maximally rich pluriverse where every possible kind of life fills every possible kind of niche?

Observation thus favours plentitude about both creatures and worlds. Considerations of theoretical consistency might also prompt us to adopt plenitude about creatures if we have already endorsed plenitude about worlds. In addition, humility strongly favours creature plenitude. If God creates only the best possible world, then we inhabit the best world. If God creates only the best creatures, then we are the best. If God creates only significant creatures – only creatures whose presence enhances the choiceworthiness of a world – then we are significant. These are all comforting stories. We should therefore explore less flattering alternatives. If God creates a pluriverse, then we probably don't inhabit the best world. If God creates every possible kind of creature, then we are almost certainly not the best creatures – or even significant ones. Perhaps we are merely insignificant creatures who happened to emerge as a by-product of whatever makes this world choice-worthy.

My two guiding principles are in tension here. If we are not cosmically significant creatures, how can cosmic values matter to us? And how can we hope to understand those values? Doesn't humility undermine human access to humanly relevant cosmic values?

I borrow a solution from my earlier self – the distinction between *significant creatures* and *valuable creatures* (Mulgan 2016, ch. 12). Valuable creatures have some degree of cosmic value. They resemble THAT in some way to some degree. Valuable creatures are better than nothing. Significant creatures are valuable creatures whose value exceeds the threshold for relevance to divine choice-worthiness. Significant creatures contribute to the choice-worthiness of worlds they inhabit. They are part of the reason why THIS exists. All significant creatures are valuable. But not all valuable creatures are significant. The threshold for contributing to choiceworthiness is not the zero point on the scale of cosmic value. Some creatures are good-in-themselves, but not good enough to matter *at all* from the divine point of view. Perhaps we are among them.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I conclude with two principles for locating ourselves within THIS:

1. *Value*: Worlds that resemble THAT are more valuable – and therefore more likely to exist.
2. *Humility*: We should not expect to find ourselves in either (a) a special world or (b) a world where we are special.

We can see these principles either as bringing us closer to the truth, or as identifying new under-appreciated alternatives to explore.

Part III: Philosophy of mind

In philosophy of mind, theists and atheist have very different problems. Atheists have a problem with mind. How does mind fit into the natural, scientific world of matter? By contrast, theists (alongside Platonists, monists, axiarchists, and most other believers in THAT) have a problem with matter. How does matter arise from pure spirit? Why would a perfect non-physical God create something as messy and imperfect as a material world?

The shift from thinking of our physical universe as a self-sufficient, unsurpassed, closed system to seeing it as a dependent, imperfect, creation reorients philosophy of mind (Mulgan 2016, 78). Panpsychism's main competitors are now idealism and dualism, rather than materialism in its many forms.

In Part III, deploying our two principles for locating ourselves within THIS, I argue that, if THAT did create THIS, then we are (probably) insignificant creatures living in a panpsychist world.

Who could inhabit THIS?

Philosophy of mind principally concerns the inhabitants of this physical universe in this actual world. We want to know what kinds of creatures exist around here; what kind of world they inhabit; and (especially) what kind of creature *we are*. Consider the four main options in contemporary philosophy of mind:[5]

1. *Substance Dualism*: Each human being has a non-physical soul and a physical body.
2. *Materialism*: Human beings have (only) physical bodies with physical properties – because all that exists is inert matter with only physical properties.
3. *Panpsychism*: Everything that exists has both physical and mental properties.
4. *Idealism*: Human beings have (only) non-physical souls with spiritual/mental properties – because all that exists is minds and ideas within them.

If X is a live possibility in contemporary philosophy of mind as an account of our actual world – or, indeed, if X was ever a serious option for philosophers – then X is prima facie choosable. If we can imagine it, then God *could* create it – and (more generally) THAT could produce or include it. This inference is not infallible. As the literature on parodies of Anselm reminds us, we may *think* we can imagine things that are in fact internally contradictory, incoherent, or nonsensical. However, the inference from live philosophical option to choosable possible world is a reasonable starting-point. For humans, this gives us four main possibilities: humans with both soul and body (dualism), purely spiritual humans (idealism), material humans whose consciousness emerges from inert matter (materialism), and material humans whose consciousness evolves gradually from matter that was always sentient or proto-sentient (panpsychism).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I now explore several arguments supporting a non-human-centred interpretation of THIS where we are insignificant creatures living in a panpsychist world.

Value-based arguments for panpsychism

If THIS resembles THAT, then a particular kind of world is more likely to exist the more it resembles THAT, and therefore the more valuable it is. I will now argue that panpsychist worlds are more likely because they are better than non-panpsychist ones. In particular, panpsychist worlds lack the deficiencies of materialist and dualist worlds.

I begin with the *deficiencies of matter.* On most interpretations of THAT, inert matter is the possible thing that is most distant from THAT; the possible worlds that least resemble THAT contain uninhabited physical universes; those are thus the least valuable worlds; and, therefore, they are least likely to exist. If matter is the antithesis of THAT, why would THAT produce matter?

Historically, there are two main views about the value of matter:

1. *Negative*: Matter has negative value. Nothing with negative value can come from THAT. Therefore, matter does not come from THAT at all.
2. *Positive*: Matter has (some) positive value. Although it is very different from THAT, matter still resembles THAT to some degree in ways that count.

If matter has negative value, then either matter exists independently of THAT or matter does not exist. If matter is independent of THAT, then THAT is stuck with matter and must make the best of it. Idealists and panpsychists could both reply that this possibility is incompatible with the dignity of THAT. Instead, we should reject the existence of inert purely physical matter altogether. For idealism, all that exists is minds and ideas within those minds. For panpsychism, all that exists is something that is equally both mental and physical. We might call it 'matter', but it is very different from materialism's inert matter.

Materialists who don't simply reject THAT have two possible replies. They can either argue that independent inert matter *is* compatible with THAT or insist that matter is good. Both options are worth exploring. I focus here on the second.[6] If matter is good, then THAT can generate matter *if* THAT continues to produce until what is produced ceases to have any positive value. For instance, consider an Axiarchist pluriverse where all good possible worlds exist. If some purely physical properties of a universe are good-making, then some uninhabited universes might be good enough if they are well-ordered, intricate, law-governed, or beautiful. Material universes are then possible – but only if THAT produces the least valuable good worlds.

Panpsychists can reply that, because panpsychism's sentient (or proto-sentient) 'matter' is closer to THAT than inert or mindless matter, our actual world is still *more likely* to contain something with both mental and physical properties rather than only physical properties.

A second deficiency of materialism concerns *creature plenitude*. A possible world that begins with inert matter will have many uninhabited places, even if consciousness does eventually emerge in some places. By contrast, in a panpsychist world, every place contains some degree of sentient life, because all 'matter' is sentient. Therefore, even if inert matter has positive value, most materialist worlds will be much less valuable than otherwise similar panpsychist worlds – because the latter are much more 'full of life'.

I turn now to the *deficiencies of dualism.* Contemporary philosophy of mind presents materialism and dualism as opposites, with panpsychism somewhere in-between. However, in terms of THAT, dualism shares the deficiencies of materialism. Dualist worlds are less valuable than panpsychist worlds, and therefore less likely to be realised by THAT.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I begin with a new deficiency that is peculiar to dualism. Any dualist world differs from THAT in a way that monist worlds (panpsychist, idealist, or materialist) do not, because dualism combines two radically different kinds of substance. This makes dualist worlds very different from THAT on any interpretation that emphasizes THAT's unity or simplicity – as most interpretations of THAT do. If our standard of value is a unitary, simple THAT, then dualist worlds are deficient.

A second deficiency is that, like materialism, dualism requires inert matter. Why would THAT produce matter (and then unite it with soul) when matter-free alternatives are available?

Finally, like materialism, dualism also falls short regarding creature plenitude. Dualist universes are less full of life unless everything is ensouled. Of course, dualists could reply that everything in our world *is* ensouled. However, while this is conceivable, it still seems less parsimonious than idealist or panpsychist alternatives.

We now compare *panpsychism and idealism.* This final comparison is trickier. Is panpsychism or idealism closer to THAT? Our answer depends, in part, on what THAT is like.

All human language struggles to capture THAT. Does THAT possess perfect versions of our valuable properties, or transcendent properties that we cannot imagine? (Indeed, is THAT beyond the very idea of 'properties' altogether?) Anselm's Christian God is a person who is a non-physical spirit.[7] However, Anselm's God is not only THAT, but also something *greater* than we can conceive. Anselm's own text thus suggests two rival interpretations of THAT (Doyle 2016; Holopainen 2020, 1–3, 37–64; Kim 2023; Sweeney 2012, 110):

1. THAT is pure spirit/mind/consciousness. Mind is superior to matter. It is a better to be a person than a non-person. Therefore, THAT is a person without any body – pure mind and no matter.
2. THAT transcends all human dichotomies (mind/matter; physical/spiritual; personal/non-personal). THAT is beyond any excellence we can imagine.

If THAT is pure spirit, then the best possible worlds are purely spiritual ones. Idealist worlds are closest to THAT. By contrast, if THAT is beyond mind and matter, then arguably panpsychist worlds are most valuable – insofar as something with both physical and mental properties would most closely resemble THAT.

We have two parallel debates – competing accounts of THAT match competing accounts of ourselves. Which package of views should we choose? Can we resolve one of these two disputes without resolving the other?

One response is that thinking about THAT cannot help us decide between panpsychism and idealism. Both posit an underlying substance we do not really understand that resembles THAT in ways we cannot express. Therefore, we cannot use closeness to THAT to decide between them.

Another response invokes plenitude about worlds to admit *both* panpsychist and idealist worlds. Panpsychist and idealist worlds both resemble THAT in different ways; therefore, both kinds of world are valuable; therefore, both are (likely to be) real. However, we must then ask which kind of creatures *we are likely to be* – and where in THIS we should expect to find ourselves.

Panpsychism and humility

The combination of plenitude about worlds and humility threatens to turn value-based arguments on their head. If all good enough worlds are real, and if we should not expect to find ourselves in the best kinds of world, then doesn't humility favour materialism or dualism over panpsychism or idealism *as an account of our actual world*? If inert matter is the

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least valuable possible thing, then surely the most humble option is that our world contains only inert matter and that we ourselves are merely physical beings.

I will now argue, on the contrary, that humility favours panpsychism over all its rivals, because all non-panpsychist views present humans as special beings *within the actual world.*

Mind is a *problem* for materialists because, in an otherwise inert universe, we know that *we* are not inert. Unless they reject consciousness as an illusion, materialists must reply that human consciousness (somehow) emerges in a world of (otherwise) inert matter. Even if it succeeds in other respects, any materialist story thus presents humanity as special *within this universe*.[8]

The humility-based objection to dualism is even stronger. Ensouled creatures are metaphysically special – even more so than conscious creatures in a materialist world. Uniting soul with body requires divine (or at least miraculous) intervention. Substance dualism makes humans special inhabitants of an otherwise inert material world.

Panpsychism avoids such capricious self-aggrandisement. In a panpsychist universe, humans are nothing special. We are conscious – but so is everything else.

Humility also favours panpsychism over idealism. We are less special in a panpsychist world where, like everything else, we combine mental and physical properties than we would be in an *idealist* world where, while other things are only ideas within some mind, *we ourselves* are minds like THAT.

I have argued that panpsychism is the humblest option, and therefore particularly worthy of further exploration. However, as we'll now see, some panpsychist views are humbler than others.

Five distinctions within panpsychism

In this final section, I briefly address five questions within panpsychism: Is consciousness co-located or unique? Is panpsychism descriptive or explanatory? Is it direct or indirect? Is it external or internal? Is it self-aggrandising or self-effacing?

First Distinction: Is consciousness co-located or unique? What does it mean to say that our universe is 'filled with life'? Consider two extreme answers:

1. *Pantheism*: Every place is inhabited by God.[9]
2. *Panpsychism*: Every place is inhabited by something with some (possibly very rudimentary) mental properties.

How should we choose between these alternatives? Creature optimalism favours pantheism – because every place has the best kind of inhabitant; while creature plenitude suggests panpsychism – because it offers the widest range of degrees of awareness.

Instead of choosing only one option, we could instead combine them. Suppose *co-location* is possible. Multiple consciousnesses, persons, and agents can 'share' the same physical location, matter, or body. Especially relevant for our present purposes is the possibility that two consciousnesses at different ontological levels – such as God and a creature – might occupy the same body. This kind of co-location does not seem impossible.[10] It is something God could create and THAT could produce. And co-location would bring THIS closer to THAT.

Co-location allows us to combine the benefits of pantheism and panpsychism. If God can co-locate with lower levels of sentience, then God can be present everywhere *even though each place also has its own local inhabitants*. We thus get a more thoroughgoing instantiation of creature plenitude, where every single place contains every possible level of awareness.

I argue below that humility also favours co-location. But first I briefly introduce four other distinctions within panpsychism.

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Second distinction: Is panpsychism descriptive or explanatory? Descriptive panpsychism is (merely) a theory of mind – an account of human consciousness grounded in a story of what this physical universe is fundamentally like. *Explanatory panpsychism* then uses that descriptive theory to explain *why* this universe exists.[11] In this article, my focus is explanatory. I explore the idea that this world exists because panpsychist worlds are better (and therefore more likely to exist) than non-panpsychist ones. My three remaining distinctions operate within explanatory panpsychism.

Third distinction: Is panpsychism direct or indirect? Any explanatory case for theism (or any account of THAT and THIS) can be either direct or indirect. Consider fine-tuning arguments for theism (Mulgan 2016, ch. 4). We must distinguish our *evidence* of fine-tuning from the (inferred) *purpose* of that fine-tuning. Suppose our *evidence* is the fact that our universe appears to be remarkably fine-tuned for life. Our explanation is *direct* if we conclude that life itself is part of the cosmic purpose, and *indirect* if we conclude instead that life is merely a precondition or by-product of *something else* that *is* part of the cosmic purpose. Our universe could be fine-tuned in a way that makes life likely to emerge without being fine-tuned *for life*.

More generally, if THAT produces a universe that is P, we might conclude either that P makes a universe choiceworthy (direct) or that P tracks some other choiceworthy property Q (indirect).

Suppose our evidence is that our universe is panpsychist. A direct explanation would claim that creature plenitude itself is valuable. It is good that every niche is filled with every kind of life – and this is *why* every niche is filled. An indirect explanation would claim instead that life-filled universes are merely one good way to produce *the subset of possible lifeforms that are significant, choiceworthy, or cosmically valuable.*

Similarly, to explain the co-location of different levels of consciousness, we might either claim (a) that it is good in itself that *all* levels of consciousnesses are co-located, or (b) that co-location is merely one good way to ensure that we get *all cosmically significant* levels of consciousness.

Fourth distinction: Is panpsychism external or internal? If God creates the world because it is P, then we have an *external* explanation. Something outside the world brings it into existence. By contrast, we have an *internal* explanation if the world is P because it (somehow) 'bootstraps' itself into existence. (We could then either (a) treat this boot-strapping universe *as* THAT, or (b) deny that THAT exists.) Axiarchic explanation falls somewhere in-between. This world exists because it is P and because P is good. No *thing* outside the world brings it into existence; but nor does it bring itself into existence.

Each kind of explanation strikes its opponents as unintelligible. (How can there be a person outside the universe? How can a universe create itself? How can goodness make things exist?) However, as Robert Nozick once observed: 'Someone who proposes a non-strange answer shows that he did not understand this question [Why is there something rather than nothing?]' (Nozick 1981, 116).

Panpsychist explanations can be either external or internal. For theist panpsychists, God creates a panpsychist world because it is good; while some atheist panpsychists reply that perhaps consciousness boot-straps this world into existence. I have concentrated in this article on external explanations where THAT produces THIS. But if THIS is part of THAT, or if THIS is identical to THAT, then perhaps THIS does bring itself into existence.

Fifth distinction: Is panpsychism self-aggrandising or self-effacing? When explaining why the universe exists, we can give ourselves a starring role, a walk-on part, or no role at all. Consider an indirect explanation where this (panpsychist) universe exists so that it can

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wake up, become self-aware, and realise its true potential as a conscious, self-understanding cosmic mind. This indirect explanation is *self-aggrandising* if humanity is central to that cosmic purpose; and *self-effacing* if we are irrelevant to it. Direct panpsychist explanations fall somewhere in-between these two extremes. Human life is part of the cosmic purpose, but only alongside all other life.

Indirect panpsychism becomes *personally* self-aggrandising when its proponents argue that *they* belong to some *subset* of humanity that is especially crucial to the cosmic purpose. Perhaps your understanding *in particular* constitutes the universe's waking up; or your present activities are essential to the universe's future awakening; or the purpose of the universe is to produce cosmologists, philosophers, or billionaire space explorers (and you belong to one of these groups). In addition, an already self-aggrandising explanation is even more self-aggrandising if it is *internal* – if you claim that your actions or existence are somehow responsible for *making* the universe exist.

Unsurprisingly, humility favours self-effacing explanations over self-aggrandising ones. The most self-aggrandising explanations are indirect, but so are the most self-effacing ones. If only some life is significant, then we are either unusually significant or completely insignificant. If the universe exists to be understood, then perhaps true understanding arose in the distant past, will arise in the distant future, or is all around us without our knowing it. We should still value our own (comparatively feeble) understanding, but we should not presume that it is our God-given task to spread through the universe and wake it up.

We see now why humility favours co-location. Co-location introduces a new self-effacing possibility: not only am I not the most important kind of creature in the universe, but I am not even the most important creature *currently located in this body*. There is cosmically significant understanding going on right here. But *I* understand the cosmic purpose only in the same way that each of my neurons has understood this article.

I conclude that humility favours panpsychism – but only if panpsychism itself is as self-effacing as possible.

Notes

1. My re-imagining of Anselm owes most to Holopainen (2020), Leftow (2022), Sweeney (2012).

2. On modal ontological arguments: Goldschmidt (2020, ch. 4), Leftow (2022), Mulgan (2016, 175–187). On whether Anselm himself defends a modal argument: (contra) Holopainen (2020, 18); (pro) Leftow (2022).

3. The need to demonstrate the *possibility* of THAT goes back, at least, to Leibniz (Antognazza 2018).

4. I distinguish *pluriverse* (collection of possible worlds – some perhaps containing multiverses) from *multiverse* (many spatio-temporally isolated physical universes within one possible world).

5. My (very simplistic) taxonomy treats panpsychism and idealism as mutually exclusive. This is controversial, as some kinds of panpsychism are compatible with some kinds of idealism (Chalmers 2019; Goff et al. (2022)). My 'idealism' is probably closest to Berkeley's subjective idealism.

6. On the possibility that independent matter *is* compatible with THAT, within African Traditional Religion, see Lougheed et al. (2024).

7. Anselm himself spends half of *Monologion* (29–63) arguing that THAT is *three persons*. I set *that* complication aside here.

8. Materialists may object that this begs the question: if our consciousness really is reducible to inert matter, then we are *not* special. (I owe this point to an anonymous referee.) Panpsychists may reply that, by insisting on materialism in the absence of a fully worked-out reductionist story, materialists *in fact* treat human consciousness as special.

9. For simplicity, I elide pantheism – where God *is* the universe, multiverse, pluriverse (Buckareff 2022) – and panentheism where God *contains* the universe, multiverse, pluriverse (Meister 2017).

10. Co-location of two consciousnesses at the same ontological level – such as two human minds – is more controversial. Co-location of *agency* is also problematic. If I share my body with God, then who is 'really' in charge of that body? (Forrest 2016) I hope to address *that* puzzle elsewhere.

11. My descriptive panpsychism is also explanatory *in another sense*: it explains human consciousness.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Mulgan T (2026) Anselm on THAT, THIS, and panpsychism. *Religious Studies* **62**, S18–S32. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412525000253

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