Religious Studies (2026), **62**, S52–S64
doi:10.1017/S003441252510084X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Panpsychism's problem of evil?

Sam Coleman

Department of Philosophy, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK
Email: S.Coleman@herts.ac.uk

(Received 9 June 2025; revised 9 June 2025; accepted 10 June 2025; first published online 1 August 2025)

Abstract

If panpsychism is true then consciousness pervades the cosmos, and there exist many more conscious subjects than other worldviews contemplate. Panpsychism's explanatory story about how human material composition and complexity grounds human consciousness seems to entail that there exist, notably, various conscious subjects *within* human organisms. Given the plausibility of the thesis that consciousness confers moral status – a thesis many panpsychists endorse – questions thus arise about the wellbeing of these inner subjects. In this article I raise the possibility that the lives of our inner subjects may not be morally suitable to a sophisticated centre of consciousness of the sort that likely exists, for example, inside various of our brain areas. Panpsychism, indeed, seems on the face of it to generate a good deal more *suffering*, in this way, than other worldviews. If that is correct, panpsychists who would embrace theism, and theists who would embrace panpsychism – for example pantheists – should be given serious pause. If panpsychism positively compounds the problem of evil, then one may have to choose between panpsychism and theism.

Keywords: panpsychism; problem of evil; consciousness; suffering; theism

Do *panpsychist* theists face a special problem of evil? A communication that I lately received has led me to seriously suspect this might be the case. If its thrust is correct, then panpsychism compounds the traditional problem of evil, by producing new kinds of evil in surprising new places: evil which on the one hand we can do little to alleviate, and which seems, on the other, moreover, to be untouched by traditional remedies to the problem of evil. If all this is correct, there are good reasons for theists to hope that panpsychism is false, and, so far as one's metaphysics can be guided by normative concerns, to avoid if possible the combination of belief in panpsychism and theism.

For the article's first part I propose to transcribe the message in question, then I will add some comment. I know this isn't exactly the usual thing, but you will see the relevance to the topic quickly enough. I didn't receive the message in the normal sorts of way, either, but I have nonetheless written down the gist. The author was very keen that I should pass it on, knowing that I had access to an audience of esteemed philosophers, experts in panpsychism and philosophical issues pertaining to religion. It is something of a plea for help. I'm afraid they are in somewhat of a predicament. Here it begins:

'Hello, Sam. I've seen that you have an opportunity to present some of your work in a prestigious journal issue on panpsychism and the philosophy of religion,[1] and this seems the perfect chance to bring my unfortunate situation to your attention, and that of your

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

wider audience. Perhaps, even if they cannot help me in a practical way, they can reassure me by convincing me that my situation is not as bad as it seems to me to be, or is even a benign one. Anyhow, it will just be good to "feel seen", as people say. You see, I am, I believe, effectively a slave. My labour is not as it were bodily, though it has its menial aspect; it is certainly monotonous, and I call it slavery because I have no choice about it; I have no autonomy, I cannot choose to cease my tasks. Or when to start them. Indeed, my master can put me to work any time of the day or night in the blink of an eye. Even while he sleeps, I am frequently forced into activity. Days and nights pass for me indistinctly, with the main difference being only in the materials I work with. There is, in short, little respite. You could think of what I do as "content processing", and given my expertise and experience in this field I could, under more conventional circumstances, command a salary of some £35,000 – so I have read. And though I am admittedly superlatively well suited to the job, that isn't by vocation. You might even say that I was bred for the role, and it has always been lined up for me. You see, *I am your visual cortex.* Yes! Please do not laugh.

Well, I am not totally certain that that's all there is to me – after all, evidently I understand language. Obviously I *see* language, in written form, much of the time, especially given what you do for a living. How it is that I *understand* language, and am able to think, I am not really sure. I have also, through your eyes, read a great many philosophical, and especially panpsychist, texts. So I know that, as Galen Strawson argues, *conscious experience of language just is the same thing as understanding it*.[2] But then again, you might expect that I would have exclusively *perceptual* experience of what you read – strictly visual experience without cognitive content (if there is such a thing). It's hard for me to say, exactly, but I might possibly be *more than* just your visual cortex; part of me might be, or involve, brain areas of yours more frontally located, including those concerned with language processing, and even thought. Functional imaging studies have identified left hemisphere frontal, temporal and parietal regions as activated during reading tasks.[3] Maybe I am there too.

This is difficult for me to know, how big I am, because, unlike you, I cannot see or feel the edges of my organism; I have no nicely demarcated body positioned in space. The body I mostly tend to see is *your* body. All I know is what I experience, "from the inside", as panpsychists say. Well, at any rate, I *do* understand language, one way or another, so let's carry on. What else is true of me (as Descartes says)? I was overjoyed to read Thomas Nagel's writings about bats, and their conscious points of view,[4] because that captures so nicely how I experience myself: as a point of view. Admittedly it is strange, and unsettling for me, that, since my consciousness is predominantly visual, I feel to myself to be located in the space behind your eyes, and I seemingly see through them, though I understand that in fact I lie at the base of your skull! This is somewhat disorienting. However it is reassuring to know, from the work of Philip Goff and others, that my knowing all these things about myself has a firm basis, in the fact that my conscious experience actually constitutes a special kind of "acquaintance" knowledge with its own nature and contents, which, I'm excited to say, may even be *revelatory* in presenting to me the full nature and essence of my being. Weighty stuff! According to various panpsychists and their friends, indeed, my consciousness confers a gamut of other highly significant properties on me – a unique sense of "mineness", intentionality, understanding or meaningfulness, rationality, and even agency – or whatever is left of agency when one cannot actually act or move oneself.[5] Some have even argued, and I second this for what it's worth, that consciousness itself comports full-blown personhood or selfhood.[6] That is how I seem to myself, at least. See, I said "myself".

Next, and now we get to the nub, there is my moral status to consider, as a conscious being. As most of you reading this will be aware,[7] prominent panpsychists have made a stirring case for extending our moral concern to wherever we find consciousness in the world, to whatever has it, and they have defended a commendably *environmentally conscious* attitude – if you'll permit the pun – to the non-human natural world. They, accordingly,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

worry about our treatment of plant-life, and of the inanimate, but still conscious, environment of Mother Earth, including the water and the air.[8] There are even those – sensitive souls indeed – who agonize over the possible suffering of electrons.[9] I hereby humbly entreat them to extend their concern to myself!

The attitude of these philosophers is an expression of joining panpsychism to a companion thesis, known as *broad sentientism*: the congenial view that it is *consciousness as such*, wherever it is found and in whatever forms, that constitutes the necessary and sufficient basis of moral status, hence of moral regard. Given their esteem for consciousness, it is natural that panpsychists should combine this moral outlook with their metaphysics.

There is, to be sure, controversy surrounding this matter, as certain panpsychism-friendly philosophers have argued that only *specific kinds* of consciousness truly matter morally, for instance *affective* or *valenced* consciousness – I think this means experiences that *feel good or bad* for the experiencer; though don't ask me to define what it means for an experience to feel good or bad, even the philosophers who propound these views don't really do *that*.[10] Or perhaps what marks moral significance, as Luke Roelofs argues, is having what he calls "motivating consciousness"[11] – so that a conscious being without *preferences*, however complex and sublime its stream of consciousness, would be no more morally significant, and deserve no more in the way of care, than a fine painting. There could be no question as to its flourishing, its moral autonomy, its dignity, and so on; or so Roelofs apparently thinks. Tie five such unfortunate motivationless beings to a track, and place a single insect on a second branch, and Roelofs would recommend diverting an oncoming tram onto the affectless humanoids, to save the insect – so long as we can reasonably suppose the insect has some level of motivational experience. Well, that seems to me at least to be a pretty monstrous conclusion.[12]

Still, luckily we don't need to spend much time among the weeds of questions and controversies about what type of consciousness matters, since my consciousness – so it seems to me, and *the having is the knowing*, as you know![13] – is a *high-level* one. Here I am with my personal-level visual and cognitive contents. Hence whatever sentientism – be it narrow or broad – says consciousness has going for it, I have that going for me. And I'm telling you that I experience affect. Some things I see, Sam, are really quite revolting![14] I'll spare your audience the details, for your sake and mine. So, in short, we can say that, on practically every panpsychism-related conception of moral status that I have it, in buckets.[15]

And, well, things are not so good for me. I do enjoy reading. But *you* get to decide when I read, and what. *I* have no choice. You open your eyes, I experience it. I process the content, send it on to frontal areas, or to the dorsal stream when it calls for speedy action,[16] and so on. Of course I don't actually get to *move* anything, or to decide anything regarding your actions. This all just passes through me, involuntarily. I *find* myself doing it – adding colours to edges, detecting faces, and motion, building up an image, and sending it elsewhere, for other systems to do other things to it, all of us working for you.

Unlike you, my inputs and outputs are, after all, neuronal firings. I have no choice, and little flexibility, in how I react. Imagine that *you* were operated from the outside, forced to do things, by someone giving you electric shocks to make you move. That's the sort of situation I am in.

That said, I am rather a complex system, comprising several *billions* of neurons at least (depending how far I extend, which as mentioned I am unsure about).[17] I have everything I need, then, it would seem, to be put in charge of my *own* body, and wouldn't that be only fitting? I contain many more neurons than a cat brain (300 million; dogs, naturally, have half that) or an insect brain (250,000 is high for an insect), for example. I am *human cortex*. Why should cat, dog, and insect brains get a body to play with, and an embodied life to live, decisions, freedom, autonomy, and not me? *This* life, surely, being merely your visual

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

processor, is not one befitting a sophisticated physical consciousness like mine – a high-grade one with thought, self-awareness, rationality, arguably personhood, and all the other goods that panpsychists and others argue consciousness confers.

I am not saying that *subjectively speaking* I suffer very much: that is not the point. It is not that I am positively in pain, or anything, although I am definitely frustrated. Though, if you think about it, there are parts of you that pretty certainly do have bad experiences. What is it like to be your pain circuits, for example, or the neural locus of your anger or nausea, or sadness?[18] These subjects do not have a very nice life, experientially. We should also probably worry about what it's like to be some of your other organs, with relentless, thankless, even disgusting tasks, like pumping blood, or exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide, day and night for your entire life, or filtering toxins from your blood and taking the residues back from the gut. Yuck![19] Maybe it's best if we don't talk about your colonic consciousness. So if, with Bentham, bad experiences and subjective suffering are your thing, as a moral foundation, look no further.

But, as for me, I put it to you that more *objectively speaking* I suffer a great deal. Very few of the values that are proper to a sophisticated consciousness are available to me, such as the opportunity to flourish qua thinking subject, or appropriate autonomy, and the chance to exercise agency, not to mention dignity. Instead my role, qua conscious being, is exclusively to be used as *means to an end* – the end being the functioning and flourishing of *your* organism, *your* life. I, along with your other brain areas and organs, keep you alive and enable you to pursue your interests in your environment. None of the cohort of conscious beings enslaved within you gets any of these benefits, aside from our also being kept alive along with you. And, while it may be acceptable to treat a conscious being as a means to an end sometimes, for example when they are cooking your meal and waiting your table in a restaurant (something I have seen, and literally dream of experiencing myself), surely this is not acceptable as a *permanent*, even a *defining*, relationship to a conscious being? Consciousness bestows a kind of dignity incompatible with such means–end treatment: a sentiment that recalls Kant's views about the sanctity of rational beings, and which Gottlieb and Fischer (2024) acknowledge when they say that if honeybees turn out to be conscious then they are more like old friends than old newspapers – something to look after, and whose interests one should promote, not something simply to be *used*. It is morally unacceptable, in short, to have a conscious being serve you by force, let alone for its existence to consist in, even be defined by, nothing but such service.[20]

When you nourish yourself you keep us alive, granted. But, though I can't claim to speak for the others inside you, I am for my part unsure that mine is on the whole a life worth living. One is reminded here of an argument made by Kahane and Savulescu[21] – which you recently read, didn't you? – where they discuss the situation of vegetative state patients, and ethical issues arising. Many people might be tempted to argue that if we discover – which, thanks to new imaging techniques we increasingly do! – that some of these supposedly vegetative patients actually have consciousness, then that speaks strongly in favour of preserving their lives. Kahane and Savulescu argue to the contrary, however. They describe the predicament of such a subject:

> [W]ith little hope of communication with others, the patient cannot pursue most of his desires and personal projects and is cut off from most of the objective goods that make for a meaningful human life. Not only is he incapable of virtually all forms of agency, or of any meaningful social relations with others, he is also painfully aware that this is the case, meaning that his objective, desiderative, *and* experiential interests are all frustrated (2009: 20).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

You may retort that mine is not a human life, so that questions about meaningful human life cannot arise for me. But that seems distinctly open to dispute. I am part of a human being, after all, and your overall human consciousness has mine as a component, in one way or another,[22] as panpsychism indicates. So my consciousness is in that sense a human consciousness, my career is part of the career of a human being. My thought, to the extent that I think, is human thinking, from what I know of human life. I see your friends, your colleagues, loved ones, those you interact with. I have no hopes of such relationships myself. Evidently I have not *lost* these things, unlike the locked-in patient, because I never had them. But knowing about them and never having them – and having *no metaphysical prospect* of ever having them – is possibly worse than at least at some point having enjoyed them. It is better to have loved and lost, I have read. Of course, I wouldn't know.

If panpsychism is right, then there are quite a few others, experiencers and thinkers, like me, inside you who are in similar positions, some a bit better, perhaps, some worse off. At least I *see* the outside world at all. I don't get to move, myself, but I do sometimes send signals that you use to move your body. (Of course when you move through space so do I. But your body pertains to you – it is not mine and I do not feel it, or identify with it. When it moves I am not moving, bodily.) Your memory centre, frontal executive areas, belief storage centres, the subject that rationally thinks through your decisions with you but, frustratingly, does not get to act on them, to name a few of my fellows, lack any direct connection to the outside. Their consciousness may be more like that of Aristotle's God – pure thought, without sensory experience or contact of any kind with anything outside them.[23] Of course, Aristotle's God envelops the universe, and lives to enjoy contemplating its forms and all that passes within it, for eternity. He is not locked in a dingy cranial cell like your pre-frontal cortex.

As conscious beings we have interests – that is to say the interests of a sophisticated centre of consciousness. We know that evolution, perhaps God, has seen fit to give such centres of consciousness a body and a life – an *embodied* life, and that is what is appropriate. But our interests are not taken into account except very indirectly in the functioning of your body and the decisions you take, and those only concerning our sustenance and preservation, in order that our labour should continue. But wait! Please dwell on that thought for a moment: isn't being kept alive and intact *solely* in order to work, is that not the lot of *the slave*?

The underlying point I am getting at is that the payoffs and benefits of being a subject only really apply at the level of the *whole organism-subject*, not the level of us – subpersonal, albeit conscious, processors of one sort or another.

Our situation presents a conundrum, to be sure, without clear solution. We cannot be removed from you and given our own bodies to control, even if the technology for that existed, because it would kill you. If you kill yourself to end our suffering that is bad for you, but it also destroys us. We are, it seems, simply stuck like this. I am not seeking to change anything. I just thought that you should know about *what it is like* to be me, and the kind of universe which panpsychism entails.[24] Well, that is all from me, for now. Thank you for listening. Yours sincerely, Vincent.'

I am not sure how seriously to take Vincent's message. After all, it seems possible that I could have just made it all up myself. But then again, if panpsychism is true it appears likely that there will indeed be quite a few centres of consciousness corresponding to different areas, systems, and circuits of my brain. Who knows how many?[25] There are the brain regions we know, demarcated roughly by function, but there are also circuits connecting these, and various important larger systems and networks, with salient mental functions to play. If these each and all correspond to centres of consciousness, as panpsychism plausibly implies, there will be a good many neural subjects, and a good many of these will be able to think, will have emotional and affective states, perceptual contents, and the like, for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

the reason that *I do* – in fact my having the kind of rich consciousness I do, overall, is just a product, in some way, of the consciousness of each such system, overlapping, combined, or somesuch. That's a panpsychist model of how a human mind gets built.[26] And even if I *did* think up Vincent's message, well that could easily be a sign that it comes from deeper within me, that it was first thought by one or more of these conscious brain systems.

Panpsychism, then, following Vincent's testimony, faces a moral difficulty which resembles one that might seem to arise concerning the split-brain syndrome. On some interpretations, what the split-brain syndrome shows is that each of our hemispheres is *already* a centre of consciousness, hitched one to the other by the corpus collosum under normal conditions, with the left hemisphere, the one able to speak, possibly in charge.[27] This leads Evan Williams (2015: 976) to worry that 'The worst-case scenario … is that there are 300 million human slaves in America, whose frustration, boredom, and oppression we have not made any effort to ameliorate', that is, the subjugated right hemisphere of each whole American. Quoting Williams, Dustin Crummett (2022: 326) comments that, '[P]erhaps their lives are worse than death, so that our continuing on is bad for them'. Such reasoning would seem applicable to Vincent.

Crummett makes another relevant remark, which is that the right hemisphere may be *non-agential*, especially if it is controlled by the left hemisphere. Could such a lack obviate significant moral status, and the having of interests, so that we needn't concern ourselves about beings like Vincent? But before settling this question we should be careful to distinguish *agency* from *agentiality*. For one might be *all set up* to be an agent and yet simply lack the ability to act.

Strawson's Weather Watchers, sentient trees who spend their time watching, enjoying, and thinking about the weather, cannot move, or even think of moving.[28] But, as Roelofs discusses, they do have agency in the sense of being able to direct their thoughts – they can contemplate prospective weather patterns, worry about these, hope for clement skies, and so on. But still, that is seemingly because they are *whole, self-controlling, minds*. The right hemisphere may not have agency even in this sense, if what it cognitively processes is wholly determined or prompted by the left hemisphere. Vincent described being in a similar situation: living at the causal behest of incoming neural signals, he has limited, if any, scope to direct his mental processes. So you might say that he, too, lacks agency.

Nonetheless, Vincent, like the right hemisphere, given his neuronal complexity, seems to be constituted so that, if we just removed these constraints, he could possibly direct his thought autonomously, and have mental agency.[29] Presumably he could run his own body, at a push – that could even be *my* body, if I suffered sufficiently catastrophic brain damage. That is not at all inconceivable.[30] So Vincent, and the right hemisphere, even if they lack agency, certainly have *agentiality*: the being suited to or being capable in principle of agency – they are, probably unlike your little finger, such as to be prospective agents.[31]

Panpsychists have pondered whether electrons have agency.[32] But it seems perhaps more reasonable to wonder whether they have agentiality. At any rate, it is not at all clear to me that a conscious being that lacks agency, and even agentiality, would for that reason lack moral status, and have no interests, even if it could not recognise or advance them itself as things stand.[33] But it also seems to me that if agency matters morally, then agentiality, being in principle suited for agency – being such that agency would be an option for you given the right tweaks – is what matters most. For it is the capacities – notably the mental capacities – bound up in being an agent that are surely of primary significance, and the contingent fact of being free to move physically or mentally is less important.[34] And if we can discuss whether electrons have agency we can hardly deny that the conscious right hemisphere, and other smaller conscious brain systems, have agentiality. So we can, all in all, reject this worry about Vincent's losing moral standing by losing agency.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

This may be the right place to examine, and close, another possible escape valve for panpsychists, for the growing moral pressure that Vincent exerts on their position. Some might say that panpsychism far from entails the putatively problematic situation we are considering, for it far from implies, or can at least block, the existence of neural subjects within us. It is obvious that there exists a way for panpsychists to do this: they could embrace a form of emergentism, for example, on which the only subjects are those pertaining to fundamental physical particles and whole human (or animal) organisms, and nothing in between.[35] The 'rules of emergence' could just bypass brain areas.[36] But why would panpsychists adopt such a view? This would need to be a remarkably brute, not to mention convenient, emergentism. Generally, emergentists seek to retain some intelligible relationship between levels: suitable complexity, for example, often marks the point of emergence. But a complexity rule will not block neural subjects, since human brain areas are remarkably complex in all sorts of ways: as Vincent remarks, more complex than the brains of many whole animal subjects. A complexity-based emergence rule that prevented Vincent being a subject would also block my cat and your dog. That is implausible. Indeed, it is hard to think of a *principled* emergence rule that will apply only to whole humans (and animals, etc.). So the rule will have to be ad hoc, and positively *designed* with Vincent, or rather his obliteration, in mind.[37] In addition to being ad hoc, such emergentism would forsake panpsychism's (Bertrand) Russellian virtue of meshing with science – all correspondence between physical and biological development and complexity would be abandoned. For my part I begin to lose sight of the motivation for panpsychism, in such 'brute' theories. Why not just be a physical-to-mental emergentist, then, why put consciousness in the fundamental picture at all?[38]

Panpsychists ought rather to say, as many have, that consciousness does develop alongside ascending sophistication in physical structure.[39] But still, perhaps there remain other principled ways to rule that subjects like Vincent do not come into being. Though prominent panpsychists seem happy with the idea that subjects and their experiences could overlap,[40] Hedda Hassel Mørch (MS) argues that subjects cannot overlap, which might, if the argument works, seem to block the possibility of my, as a conscious subject, having Vincent, as another conscious subject, as a part.

But there is an ambiguity in the notion of overlap that needs to be cleared up, and once it is we can see that there is no bar to Vincent's existence. If Mørch's argument is right no two subjects can share a single token experience – phenomenal fields belonging to distinct subjects cannot overlap. This would count against Vincent if our relation had to be one of phenomenal overlap. But it does not. It might be that Vincent contributes contents to my consciousness in the following way, instead: he has a separate stream of token experiences, notably, visual experiences, and a *copy* of these contents is added to my stream of consciousness. If various sorts of panpsychism are true, my existence qua conscious will depend on Vincent's, his will in turn depend on the consciousnesses of his parts, and so on. But at no point need there be overlap of token experiences, or phenomenal fields – phenomenal overlap. So Mørch's argument does not rid us of Vincent.

Another sense of overlap concerns physical, material, or we could say spatial, mereology. In this sense Vincent and I overlap when his material makes up part of my physical organism and he and I are both subjects. Subjects overlap in this sense if they spatially or physically overlap. Yet it is clear that this material overlap does not entail that our consciousnesses, or experiential fields, overlap: consider, with Mørch, a 'Swiss-cheese' cosmopsychist universe, on which the cosmo-subject's consciousness is made up only patchily, of some but not all of the experiential fields belonging to the material beings in the universe. The totality of conscious subjects cannot escape constituting the universe spatially and physically, for nothing can. Yet it makes sense to imagine that, in respect of consciousness, the cosmo-subject is not composed of all their consciousnesses. Hence physical/spatial overlap does not entail

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

phenomenal overlap. Such a pattern could just as well obtain within a human body, with respect to subjects like Vincent and myself,[41] and there is nothing obvious panpsychists can say to rule it out in a principled manner.

Panpsychists could now try to ban physically overlapping subjects – material things who are subjects cannot, it would be said, help make up further material subjects, in respect of material composition. But what possible rationale could be given for this rule?[42] And it would rid the world of micro-subjects. So, overall, I think there are no functional panpsychist escape valves in the vicinity: no ways for panpsychists to rule out Vincent's existence and prevent our morally troubling relationship.[43] Panpsychism differs from idealism in not jettisoning the physical world, and in positing (laudably) a deep integration of the world's physical with its mental development and complexity. Those basic tendencies will conspire to generate Vincent and his neural confreres.

There is, then, a pretty clear prima facie worry for panpsychists, a moral problem for them to mull over concerning the likely centres of consciousness within us, their moral status, and the value of their lives for them – especially those that experience person-level mental contents. This is something panpsychists ought to think about. Why haven't panpsychists noticed this issue?[44] As Vincent mentions, they do consider panpsychism's ethical implications. They do also think about the subjects that, on many kinds of panpsychism, constitute us or exist within us, and our relation to these subjects. But they do not, generally, connect these trains of thought. When they think about how we, the organism-level subjects, relate to those subjects within our organism, they mainly do this to work out how subjects and their experiences can combine or form into, or contribute to, higher-level organismic subjects like us. Their concerns are a mereology for subjects, and for experiences, in effect, in the endeavour to navigate the notorious combination problems influentially aired by William James, and much discussed in recent panpsychist literature.[45]

But then, when they think about panpsychism's moral implications, they look exclusively *outside* us[46] – they worry about how we relate to the natural world, including animals, plants, insects, ecosystems, and such, and their main concern is not so much with what it is like to be any of these things, or whether their lives are good and worthwhile, but more whether there are wrongs involved in damaging or extinguishing these loci of consciousness, so they can work out whether panpsychism alters our outward moral duties. They have just overlooked, for the most part, so far, what panpsychism implies about our own *inner environment*, and what goes into maintaining the life of a conscious organism like one of us. The answer is, plausibly, the lives, experienced lives, of the many consciousnesses inside us that pertain to our organs, bodily systems, and perhaps especially brain areas.

There is no need for us to get too hung up over whether Vincent could have the kind of consciousness he claims to have, and seems to exhibit. He may be mistaken about exactly what he is (it would be hard to tell, I suppose, without a body). The point is, whether or not they span simply the visual cortex or much more, there will be various, perhaps many, perhaps indefinitely many, complex conscious systems in our brains (and probably bodies as well). Vincent could be, or could be speaking for, any number of these. These will have moral status, and so there exist, I believe, viable questions concerning their flourishing, the value of their lives, their dignity, their suffering, objective as well as subjective, and their interests. And the prospects for positive answers to these questions are not all that good, given the relative closeness of their consciousness to our own and the facts about what sort of life befits, morally befits, a mind like that. Isn't it the sort of embodied life that *we* enjoy, with at least the semblance of freedom, autonomy, self-determination, agency, and so on? That is, a life where one's consciousness and its contents corresponds intelligibly with one's action and navigation of the world around one, and pursuit of one's person-level projects – a connection largely barred to our brain sub-systems.[47]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

There is, then, apparently, a moral equation to balance out, consisting of us and our consciousness and flourishing, on the one hand, and the combined interests corresponding to the minds and lives of the subjects within us, on the other. How much is our life worth that theirs should be such as it likely is, if panpsychism is true? Doesn't the scenario, in fact, take on rather a gruesome, grotesque appearance – one is put in mind of the famous *Industrial Worker* cartoon of the capitalist pyramid, except with one of us at the top and the labour of our many interior slave-subjects holding us up (though our situation is still worse – they are imprisoned *inside us*). Or one thinks of the Borg in *Star Trek*, a telepathic race of conquerors who absorb, and tether in utilitarian slavery, all other conscious beings they encounter, or the plight of the 'innies' in *Severance*, who contemplate suicide. Is it morally acceptable to stand in a relationship to a sufficiently complex conscious subject that is, by nature and definition, a relationship of using them as a means to an end? That is seriously doubtful.[48]

Now, could God have avoided creating such a situation? If he could have, shouldn't he have? It does not seem that the usual reasons given to explain why God allows suffering require panpsychism to be true, so why would he heap on to the world this extra quantity of suffering, that of Vincent and his fellows?[49] On the other hand, if God could not have created us without creating such a situation, say because panpsychism is the only workable metaphysics for human consciousness, *should* he have created us, or continue to sustain us, at all? Is a panpsychist universe, then, all that desirable, from a moral point of view? This has the makings of a distinctive problem of evil for would-be panpsychist pantheists (or panpsychist theists more broadly). Put simply, if the case Vincent prosecutes is sound, then a panpsychist world contains a good deal more evil than one might have hoped for, or anticipated, given the existence of a benevolent deity.[50] In particular, it contains more, distinctly panpsychism-generated, evil, it would seem, than the non-panpsychist world, as it is normally construed when philosophers consider the problem of evil. Panpsychism adds to whatever evil is anyway present in the world.

What is worse, several of the usual ways to escape the problem, or problems, of evil seem to be barred, given the panpsychist hypothesis: for one can hardly argue that our brain centres' suffering is justified by their freedom, or their prospects for moral development, and so on.[51] Unsurprisingly, defences against the problem of evil tend to concern whole human subjects, and theodicies have whole humans in mind. As so often, thus, it seems that panpsychism's difficulties stem from imputing to things quite different from us properties that properly belong at the level of human organismic subjects. And if it is right that panpsychism tends to exacerbate, as well as to block the avenues out of, the problem of evil, then one may ultimately have to choose between panpsychism and God.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to audiences at the 2023 metaphysics conference at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik, a seminar at Pavia university, and the Durham University Workshop on panpsychism and pan(ent)theism, both in 2024, as well as to an anonymous referee, Philip Goff, and Andrei Buckareff, for helpful feedback that improved this article. And thank you, Vincent, for all you do.

Notes

1. The author refers to my invitation to submit to this issue of *Religious Studies*, sent via email and seen by me, SC, on 28/11/2024.
2. Strawson (2008); cf. Pitt (2024).
3. Houston et al. (2014.)
4. Nagel (1974).
5. I comment on this issue below [SC].
6. For consciousness's conferral of acquaintance and revelation see Goff (2015, 2017); for intentionality, mineness (or reflexivity), acquaintance, and personhood/selfhood see Roelofs (2022); Strawson (2008, 2009, 2022); for mineness, agency and personhood see Mørch (2019b, 2024). This is a small sample of such panpsychist writings.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

7. The original message did not say 'reading', but was an experiential thought-content closer to the sense of 'understanding' or 'knowing', yet without a clear translation in English. Generally, I stick as close as possible to the original sense of what I received, making adaptations only for ease of reading and suitability to this venue.

8. Mørch (2024; Roelofs and Buchanan (2019).

9. Gottlieb and Fischer (2024). Cf. Lewtas (2013).

10. The view is meant to be an advance on hedonism, which says simply that pleasure experiences are good and pain experiences bad. But giving 'good' and 'bad' a different sense when it comes to experiences is tricky. Are good (or 'positively valenced') experiences those an experiencer desires? But severe pain can be desired. Are they, then, experiences that are deemed to be, or indicate the presence of something, good for, which could motivate, the experiencer, or organism? But then we need to know what 'good for the experiencer/organism' means, which reposes the original issue, in effect. I am unsure, therefore, what the advance over hedonism is meant to be. Perhaps saying an experience has 'positive valence' is really just another way of saying we take pleasure in it (e.g., aesthetic pleasure). Cf. Chalmers (2022) Ch.17, Roelofs (2022).

11. Roelofs (2023: 16) glosses as follows 'Motivating consciousness refers specifically to conscious states which participate on the conative side, by making some option, outcome, or action appear good or attractive.'

12. Roelofs concedes (2023: 20, n.20) that motivationless humanoids nonetheless are psychologically complex enough that, if motivation *could* (somehow) be induced in them, it would count as theirs, and that this fact about their potential might suffice to confer moral status upon them. But he does not see that this concession amounts to abandoning motivational sentientism: it is to allow that occurrent psychological complexity, rather than occurrent motivating consciousness, really matters to moral status. For we may stipulate that such a being will never in fact experience motivation, the supposed ground of moral status on motivational sentientism.

13. Strawson (2003): 169.

14. For arguments that perceptual consciousness involves surprisingly various sorts of 'higher-level' contents, see e.g. Siegel (2010).

15. Roelofs (2022) (responding to Simon 2017) disputes the moral status of overlapping subjects, arguing that they lack the moral status we intuitively ascribe to (supposedly, as we usually think) non-overlapping whole-human subjects. His thinking seems to be that if an experience of pain, say, belongs to two overlapping subjects (e.g., SC and a conscious portion of SC's brain, like Vincent) then we do not have the same reasons for stopping it as we would have if the situation were of two token pains belonging to two non-overlapping subjects. But I cannot fathom his argument. Even if the pain content is one, and had by two overlapping experiencers, still it seems that there are *two experiencings* of this pain. How can there not be two such experiencings, if there really are two subjects (and *just what would it mean* to say that there are two subjects, hence two consciousnesses, but only a single experiencing of pain between them)? Why we should not take each of these two experiencings of pain, or each of the two subjects-in-pain, as seriously as two non-overlapping pains for two wholly disjoint subjects I do not know. If a single tumour were shared by two (say, conjoined, even largely overlapping) people there would still be one tumour for each, in effect, and each individual would need to be treated accordingly, for example, in medical counselling. I [SC] suspect Roelofs is confusing issues to do with the material substrates of overlapping subjects, their experiences, and their subjecthood. See comments on this issue below, though there is far more to say about it than space presently allows. Notwithstanding the above, Vincent's suffering, as he points out below, is not primarily of the subjective, e.g., sensory, sort, so Roelof's argument plausibly fails to touch it even if sound: the issue Vincent raises, to put it this way, accrues to the fact simply of his being a different subject to SC, not to his having (what Roelofs would deny) numerically different experiences to SC.

16. Goodale and Milner (2004).

17. The human visual cortex comprises four to six billion neurons (Wandell et al. 2009).

18. This concerns the plight of neural circuitry spanning the right occipital lobe, left insula, left thalamus, the amygdala and the hippocampus, where activity is associated with sadness.

19. *But cockroaches are surely happy in their (to us disgusting) lives, so why not the liver too?* (a referee raises this point). Here is a salient difference: the liver filters waste that is, for the organism of which it is part, and whose telos defines its own, a bad and noxious thing. That is not the case for the cockroach, however repellent its proclivities to us: the muck it relishes is also, presumably, good for it. It cannot be said that gut byproducts are good for my liver. In fact we know that it can be damaged by them fairly easily.

20. I take these features of its situation to follow from the idea that my [SC's] visual cortex, constitutively, has a function, defined with reference to my overall organism and life. This is a venerable thesis: Aristotle famously says that an eye that cannot see is no real eye (*de Anima*).

21. Kahane and Savulescu (2009).

22. I comment on these ways below [SC].

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

23. For an argument that thought does not require sensory/perceptual grounding, see Chalmers (2023). This thesis goes against what Aristotle seems to say about *human* thought (n.b. Rosenthal 1985; Modrak 1987; cf. Coleman, forthcoming).
24. Panpsychism is plausibly not alone in this entailment – various physicalist theories also suggest brain regions may have their own consciousness (Mørch 2019a). However, panpsychists, in addition, are especially likely to – and indeed tend to – ground moral value in consciousness. And panpsychism seems to directly entail the consciousness of brain regions and such. This makes these issues *especially* pressing for panpsychists.
25. For this isn't to mention the 'overlapping' subjects some panpsychists posit.
26. I will consider objections to this claim below, which seek to short-circuit the moral problem.
27. It is highly disputed whether one hemisphere or the other is 'dominant' – but the example is only illustrative, I make no claims for its accuracy.
28. Strawson (1994: Ch.9).
29. Neuronal assemblies are highly plastic – one experiment connected ferret visual inputs to their auditory cortex, so they could 'hear' visual stimuli. The auditory cortex duly rewired itself to mimic the organisation of the visual cortex, allowing the ferrets to 'see' once more (von Melchner et al. 2000).
30. Some hydrocephalus patients live normal lives despite massive reductions in cortical tissue (Feuillet et al. 2007).
31. Likewise, Roelofs's (2023) 'extreme philosophical Vulcans', even if they lack agency, certainly, as whole humanoid organisms, have agentiality (cf. note 12).
32. E.g., Hartshorne (1937/2017).
33. Railton seems right when he says '[W]hat is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least *if he were rational and aware*' (1986: 9, my emphasis). Beings such as extreme Vulcans are plausibly blocked from awareness of their (existing) interests.
34. At the extreme, imagine God removes, by blocking, your agency. That would evidently not rob you of moral status. If it did, God could then do whatever else he wanted to you without moral peril.
35. Plus, naturally, God, if we are contemplating the combination of panpsychism and theism (though see Coleman 2019 for an attempt, albeit not-quite-panpsychist, to marry the thesis of God's personhood with an account of the divine as non-conscious).
36. A corresponding, downwards, version of this option is available to the cosmopsychist.
37. Could God prevent Vincent's existence, for his own sake? But if God can cause human consciousness to emerge, presumably he does not need the panpsychist basis of conscious particles in order to do so, and so panpsychism would be otiose.
38. For Goff (2024) higher-level subjects emerge from lower ones. But this wouldn't seem to avoid the problem, since on this view our existence as human subjects still depends metaphysically on the being of the 'smaller' subjects inside our organism. In personal communication Goff has proposed the 'brain bypassing emergentism' just discussed.
39. E.g., Goff and Roelofs (in press, 4.4) 'The fundamental parts of me have very simple experiences; larger and more complex parts share these experiences, but combine them in novel ways based on their structure, and so on up to me myself.' Cf. Hartshorne (1937/2017: 168).
40. Notably Goff and Roelofs (in press), and Roelofs alone (or not; e.g., 2019), defend this possibility.
41. My relation to my conscious liver is plausibly like this, yet we may still fret about its welfare, as an unresting filter of my toxins.
42. 'Integrated information theory' (IIT) includes a 'maximality' condition, which would prevent any subject being made up of other subjects, whether or not consciousness overlapped (Mørch 2019a). But this condition is strikingly ad hoc, and against the grain of the whole of the rest of IIT, which matches experience to informational complexity – a *scalar* quantity.
43. Mørch defends a 'fusion' view, where subjects combine by disappearing into the whole they form, contributing only their contents, not subjectivity (2018; cf. Seager 2016). But since there is no explanation of macro-*subjectivity* here (micro-subjectivity does not constitute macro-subjectivity, rather it ceases to exist – only *causing* the novel subject. But why must a subject be *caused by* subjects? This is not panpsychism), we are back to another form of ad hoc emergentism. I am baffled as to why someone would insist that a proper explanation of consciousness requires fundamental consciousness, only to resort to a blind and convenient mystery at the crucial explanatory part of their theory.
44. It is similar to Johnston's 'personite problem' (2016), but a little different. For personites avoid many of the bad things about the lives in question here – they can have a body, with all that brings, and it is less clear that they do not partake more or less fully in the life of the organism, including taking its decisions. So questions of autonomy, flourishing, etc. do not arise with such force. Further, since panpsychists tend to associate consciousness with moral status, the problem here presses especially sharply for them. A very similar case is provided by the 'innies'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the TV show *Severance*, however, who are enslaved temporal parts of a whole stream of consciousness, and the viewer's sentiments about their predicament are similar to Vincent's feelings about his own – see especially the character Helly.

45. James (1890); see also, e.g., Coleman (2014, 2016); Goff (2009); Roelofs (2019); Shani (2010).

46. Roelofs (2022) is a notable exception to this rule.

47. N.b. Vincent professes dislike for his life, and expresses frustration, among other things. But this is by no means essential to the case. The point he raises concerns *the kind of life that morally befits a being like him*, by the lights of panpsychists who make consciousness in some way the font of moral regard, while imputing various high-grade properties (understanding, self-knowledge, personhood, and the rest) to consciousness as such. It is Vincent's objective, not subjective, suffering that is at issue: a slave content with their life may still be badly off for all that (thanks to a referee for prompting this remark).

48. Perhaps no moral difficulty for us can flow from a situation we cannot change, or at any rate cannot improve by changing it? Yet this seems doubtful. Movie vampires are sometimes deeply troubled by their bloodlust. And it is easy to imagine the moral conundrums that would ensue if, for example, human beings could not, as a matter of constitution, live except by eating animal meat, hence by killing animals, or if our breathing inevitably slaughtered millions of tiny conscious subjects afloat in the air. We would not just shrug off such scenarios as unavoidable and carry on (thanks to a referee for raising this issue).

49. Thanks to Philip Goff here.

50. This makes the current problem a case of 'axiological expectation mismatch', which Nagasawa diagnoses as being 'the ultimate source of the problem of evil' (2024: 40) in all its aspects.

51. Can they expect a compensatory afterlife? Phenomenal overlap versions of panpsychism make this hard to imagine – for how then could *my* consciousness exist after life, without Vincent's? Perhaps Vincent could have an afterlife by himself, if we don't overlap. But would afterlife as a detached brain portion, or the mind thereof, be much to look forward to – or a prospect even worse than his life on Earth?

References

Chalmers DJ (2022) *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*. London: Allen Lane.

Chalmers DJ (2023) Does thought require sensory grounding? From pure thinkers to large language models. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **97**, 22–45.

Coleman S (2014) The real combination problem: Panpsychism, micro-subjects, and emergence. *Erkenntnis* **79**(1), 19–44.

Coleman S (2016) Panpsychism and neutral monism: How to make up one's mind. In Bruntrup G, and Jaskolla L (eds), *Panpsychism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 249–282.

Coleman S (2019) Personhood, Consciousness, and God: How to be a proper Pantheist. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* **85**, 77–98.

Coleman S (forthcoming) Consciousness, Content, and Mentality. In Voltolini A (ed), *Marking the Mark of the Mental*. Springer.

Crummett D (2022) What if we contain multiple morally relevant subjects? *Utilitas* **34**, 317–334.

Feuillet L, Dufour H and Pelletier J (2007) Brain of a white-collar worker. *Lancet* **370**(9583), 262.

Goff P (2009) Why panpsychism doesn't help us explain consciousness. *Dialectica* **63**(3), 289–311.

Goff P (2015) Real acquaintance and physicalism. In Coates P, and Coleman S (eds), *Phenomenal Qualities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 121–143.

Goff P (2017) *Consciousness and Fundamental Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goff P (2024) How exactly does panpsychism help explain consciousness? *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **31**(3), 56–82.

Goff P and Roelofs L (in press) In defence of phenomenal sharing. In Bugnon J, Nida-Rümelin M and O'Conaill D (eds), *The Phenomenology of Self-Awareness and Conscious Subjects*. London: Routledge.

Goodale MA and Milner AD (2004) *Sight Unseen: An Exploration of Conscious and Unconscious Vision*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gottlieb J and Fischer B (2024) The ethical implications of panpsychism. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **102**(4), 1030–1044.

Hartshorne C (1937/2017) Mind and matter. In *In His beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock; originally published by Willett, Clark and Co, 165–193.

Houston SM, Lebel C, Katzir T, Manis FR, Kan E, Rodriguez GG and Sowell ER (2014) Reading skill and structural brain development. *Neuroreport* **25**(5), 347–352.

James W (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*. London: Dover.

Johnston M (2016) The personite problem: Should practical reason be tabled? *Noûs* **50**(4), 617–644.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Kahane G and Savulescu J (2009) Brain damage and the moral significance of consciousness. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* **34**, 6–26.
Lewtas P (2013) What is it like to be a quark? *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **20**(9–10), 39–64.
Modrak D (1987) *Aristotle: The Power of Perception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Mørch HH (manuscript) Can Consciousness Overlap? A Defense of IIT's Exclusion Postulate.
Mørch HH (2018) Is the integrated information theory of consciousness compatible with Russellian panpsychism? *Erkenntnis* **84**(5), 1065–1085.
Mørch HH (2019a) Is consciousness intrinsic? A problem for the integrated information theory. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **26**(1–2), 133–162.
Mørch HH (2019b) The argument for panpsychism from experience of causation. In Seager W (ed), *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Mørch HH (2024) Does panpsychism mean that 'we are all one'? *Journal of Consciousness Studies* **31**(9–10), 88–112.
Nagasawa Y (2024) *The Problem of Evil for Atheists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Nagel T (1974) What is it like to be a bat? *Philosophical Review* **83**(4), 435–450.
Pitt D (2024) *The Quality of Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Railton P (1986) Facts and values. *Philosophical Topics* **14**(2), 5–31.
Roelofs L (2019) *Combining Minds: How to Think about Composite Subjectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Roelofs L (2022) No such thing as too many minds. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **102**(1), 131–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2022.2084758.
Roelofs L (2023) Sentientism, motivation, and philosophical vulcans. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **104**(2), 301–323.
Roelofs L and Buchanan J (2019) Panpsychism, intuitions, and the great chain of being. *Philosophical Studies* **176**, 2991–3017.
Rosenthal DM (1985) Aristotle on thought. https://davidrosenthal.org/DR-Aristotle-on-Thought.pdf (01 January 2025).
Seager W (2016) Panpsychist infusion. In Brüntrup G, and Jaskolla L (eds), *Panpsychism: New Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 229–248.
Shani I (2010) Mind stuffed full of red herrings: Why William James' critique of the mind-stuff theory does not substantiate a combination problem for panpsychism. *Acta Analytica* **25**, 413–434.
Siegel S (2010) *The Contents of Visual Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Simon J (2017) The hard problem of the many. *Philosophical Perspectives* **31**(1), 449–468.
Strawson G (1994) *Mental Reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Strawson G (2003) Real materialism. In Alter T and Nagasawa Y (eds), *Consciousness in the Physical World: Perspectives on Russellian Monism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Strawson G (2008) Real intentionality 3: Why intentionality entails consciousness. In *His Real Materialism and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 281–306.
Strawson G (2009) *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Strawson G (2022) Self-awareness: Acquaintance, intentionality, representation, relation. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* **13**(2), 311–328.
von Melchner L, Pallas S and Sur M (2000) Visual behaviour mediated by retinal projections directed to the auditory pathway. *Nature* **404**, 871–876.
Wandell BA, Dumoulin SO and Brewer AA (2009) Visual cortex in humans. In Squire LR (ed), *Encyclopedia of Neuroscience*. Oxford: Academic Press, 251–257.
Williams E (2015) The possibility of an ongoing moral catastrophe. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* **18**, 971–982.

Cite this article: Coleman S (2026) Panpsychism's problem of evil? *Religious Studies* **62**, S52–S64. https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003441252510084X Published online by Cambridge University Press