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Research Paper

Panpsychism--Does it Fully Explain Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

Consciousness is a 'Hard Problem'!!

David Chalmers, an Australian thinker who coined the above phrase, went on to say, 'Consciousness is the most familiar thing there is, and yet the most mysterious and intractable thing there is too'.

No one knows where it resides, from where it comes, how it comes and where it goes when in a coma or death!

Scientists have proposed some theories, but they remain unacceptable in science because they leave many questions unanswered.

Panpsychism is a philosophical view that tends to solve the 'Hard Problem'; but does it really give a complete understanding of consciousness?

This paper explores Panpsychism, Consciousness and their interfacing!!

Keywords: *Consciousness, Hard Problem, Panpsychism, Immortality and Consciousness, Coma, Awareness*

Consciousness is a term that is still not fully understood by scientists worldwide. Even the doctors do not know from where consciousness comes and where it goes, and once gone (like in a coma), they can't predict when it will return. Science has progressed and uncovered numerous mysteries, but the mystery of consciousness still eludes explanation. Because of the mystery shrouding it, which makes its understanding difficult, scientists call it a 'Hard Problem'. Several theories have been proposed to explain it, but all fall short of clearing the mystery.

In one of my papers[1], I tried to figure out the meaning of consciousness, but despite deep research on consciousness spanning over science and spirituality, I could summarise all explored consciousness theories to the following conclusion:

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Consciousness is a widely researched topic, but a real understanding remains elusive. In scientific parlance, it is considered 'A Hard Problem'.

In normal parlance, we are conscious when others see us alert, able to think and work in a normal way. But when we become inert and are unconscious in a coma, even the doctors are unable to say when we shall regain consciousness. Why? Because no one on this earth knows what consciousness is, where it resides, how it leaves the body and how it comes back!!
The brain and mind do correlate with consciousness because the neural circuitry does have an impact on the working of our body, and even slight damage results in a very evident change in motor and mental functions. The motor and mental actions performed by the body happen only after the manifestation of consciousness, but how it manifests is not known.

It may or may not reside in brain circuitry. I say this because a major portion of the brain is still unexplored. If Neuroscience advances to find its location in the brain circuitry, then it would mean that consciousness is not immortal and dies with our death. But till then, we can assume it to be eternal, and it can reside even outside the body; maybe in Ether!!

Scientific research reveals what consciousness is not, but does not put forth its complete understanding.

Consciousness is an invisible non-material informational entity, which cannot be computed, which does not reside in the body and is actually a special kind of re-entrant signalling state; however, the re-entrant signalling state leaves much to be explained, viz., how the signalling state is achieved, what causes it and how it is constructed?

There are divergent views among consciousness scientists, the most appealing scientific theory is put forward by Roger Penrose and Hameroff, which posits the following views on consciousness –
"Elementary acts of consciousness are non-algorithmic, i.e., non-computable, and they are neurophysiologically realised as gravitation-induced reductions of coherent superposition states in microtubules. The respective quantum states are assumed to be coherent superpositions of tubulin states, ultimately extending over many neurons. Their simultaneous gravitation-induced collapse is interpreted as an individual elementary act of consciousness."

It appears that some scientists hold a view that consciousness resides in the Brain and manifests in special situations related to quantum reduction theories on the physics side and situations related to *coherent superposition states of microtubules* on the Neuroscience side.
We are not yet certain whether the theory put forth by Penrose and Hameroff is accepted by science, because already a lot of criticism has surfaced over that theory, and debates continue. Their theory is criticised because it fails to answer many questions.

The ***Orchestrated Objective Reduction (Orch-OR)*** theory by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff proposes that consciousness originates from quantum computations within cellular structures called **microtubules**. However, several major scientific and philosophical questions remain unanswered by their model:

- ***The Decoherence Problem*:** The brain is a "warm, wet, and noisy" environment. Critics argue that fragile quantum states would collapse (decohere) almost instantly, long before they could be orchestrated to form a conscious thought.
- ***The Hard Problem of Consciousness:*** Even if the brain performs non-computational quantum gravity calculations, the theory struggles to explain *how* those specific physical operations transform into a subjective, first-person experience (or *qualia*).
- ***Lack of Empirical Biological Evidence*:** While Hameroff and Penrose have pointed to links between anaesthesia and microtubule structures, there is a lack of direct, causal evidence that microtubule quantum processing is necessary or sufficient for conscious awareness.
- **Evolutionary Functionality:** Critics question whether quantum entanglement within individual neurons provides an evolutionary advantage over the well-established classical neural networks (like traditional synaptic transmission), leaving the purpose of quantum phenomena in cognition ambiguous.

Because the mechanisms of quantum gravity and cellular biology are highly complex, researchers actively debate and test the biological limits of the theory.
Thus, the attempt of Penrose and Hameroff does not convince the scientific community. The same fate is met with by other theories of consciousness. My above paper gives the details.
In my paper, the essence of all explored theories, while exploring consciousness through a spiritual and scientific lens, failed to have a complete understanding of consciousness, which can be achieved only by clearing the following doubts:

- *Thoughts lead to influencing the brain to signal the body to act when we are conscious. So, naturally, a question comes to mind whether there is a connection between Thought and Consciousness? We must strive to find an answer.*
- *Secondly, do thoughts trigger the action only in the Conscious state? Are thoughts the causing factors behind each action, or can action precede thoughts?*
- *Do thoughts and brain correlate? Do thoughts originate in the brain? How are thoughts created? Where are thoughts created? These are vital questions needing an answer.*
- *A person can perform motor actions while in an unaware state—sleepwalking- so does it mean that a person can be unconscious but still can move, does it mean that to define unconsciousness as being inert is wrong?*

- *Consciousness is awareness perceived by others. Why does proof of the manifestation of consciousness require an external observer?*
- *Where does consciousness reside, and how does it enter our brain to make our body conscious and alert? Is it hidden in hitherto unknown circuitry of the brain??*
- *If it resides in the brain, then it must perish with death; maybe it isn't, then it is immortal, and then it must outlive our body. If this is true, then my thinking of us as energy forms must be true? How do we go on to find proof that consciousness outlives our life?*

- *If it outlives our life, then it must reside somewhere; does it reside in the ether as a collective consciousness and jump into the brain through invisible stimulus?*

My exploration of the subject stopped at the above unanswered questions, and I found no way to carry on the exploration further. Then, I came across a term, 'Panpsychism'.

I dwelt on this, and I found this term intriguing and toyed with the idea that perhaps it could lead to some advanced knowledge about the explanation of consciousness.

This paper tries to explore whether Panpsychism could answer the above questions or could give a more plausible, accurate explanation of consciousness. Maybe this theory solves the 'Hard Problem' and takes the debate to a credible conclusion.

Before starting the exploration, let us first understand what Panpsychism means.

Meaning of Panpsychism

Panpsychism is a philosophical terminology. The dictionary meaning of Panpsychism is:

Panpsychism is a doctrine or belief that everything material, however small, has an element of individual consciousness.

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy[2] defines it as follows:

> *The word "panpsychism" literally means that everything has a mind. However, in contemporary debates, it is generally understood as the view that mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world. Thus, in conjunction with the widely held assumption that fundamental things exist only at the micro-level, panpsychism entails that at least some kinds of micro-level entities have mentality, and that instances of those kinds are found in all things throughout the material universe.*
>
> *We can distinguish various forms of panpsychism in terms of which aspect of mentality is taken to be fundamental and ubiquitous. Two important characteristics of human minds are thought and consciousness. In terms of these characteristics, we can distinguish the following two possible forms of panpsychism:*
>
> - *Pan experientialism—the view that conscious experience is fundamental and ubiquitous*
> - *Pan cognitivism—the view that thought is fundamental and ubiquitous.*
>
> *According to the definition of consciousness that is dominant in contemporary analytic philosophy, something is conscious just in case there is something that it's like to be it; that is to say, if it has some kind of experience, no matter how basic.*
>
> *Panpsychism is often caricatured as the view that electrons have hopes and dreams.*

> *However, whilst there have been some defenders of pan-cognitivism in history, it is pan-experimentalist forms of panpsychism that are taken seriously in contemporary analytic philosophy.*

Putting the thoughts expressed in the above definitions in simple terms, we can say that Panpsychism propagates that *mentality is fundamental and ubiquitous in the natural world.*
Panpsychism is echoed in our Indian religion, which says that God (in one sense, Consciousness) is present in each particle of the universe. In Hindi, we say ‘'कण-कण में भगवान''!!!

How does Panpsychism explain Consciousness?

We can also say that Panpsychism is the philosophical view that consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of the physical universe. It is not a product of the complex brain of living species. It serves as a philosophical bridge between empirical science and spiritualism by proposing that all matter possesses an inner, subjective, i.e., mind.

How consciousness manifests is explained by Panpsychism as follows:

> *Panpsychism is the view that consciousness is a fundamental, ubiquitous building block of the physical universe, rather than something uniquely generated by complex brains. It bypasses the "Hard Problem of Consciousness" (how non-living matter gives rise to subjective experience) by proposing that mindedness was already woven into the fabric of reality. Human and animal consciousness isn't magically created from dead matter. Instead, the complex consciousness we experience is the result of many smaller, simpler, fundamental conscious parts coming together and combining (often called constitutive panpsychism). The following two constituents of Panpsychism (Pan experientialism, i.e., conscious experience is fundamental and ubiquitous and Pan cognitivism—the view that thought is fundamental and ubiquitous) tend to bypass the ‘Hard Problem’ of consciousness. It sidesteps the physicalist trap by declaring consciousness a fundamental, irreducible property of the universe. Instead of asking how dead matter creates the mind, panpsychism proposes that conscious experience is built into the foundational building blocks of reality because consciousness is fundamental in each particle of the universe.*

Not only does Panpsychism bypass the hard problem by claiming consciousness as a fundamental entity present everywhere, but it also eliminates the following questions still unanswered by thinkers and scientists on thoughts and consciousness, as projected in my research on consciousness:

- *Where does consciousness reside, and how does it enter our brain to make our body conscious and alert? Is it hidden in hitherto unknown circuitry of the brain??*
- *Do thoughts originate in the brain? How are thoughts created? Where are thoughts created?*

- *Is there a connection between Thought and Consciousness?*
- *Do thoughts trigger the action only in the Conscious state? Are thoughts the causing factors behind each action, or can action precede thoughts?*

Panpsychism eliminates the above doubts, which still linger after the deep research into consciousness. Simply put, the following questions

1. *Where does consciousness reside*
2. *From where it comes and*
3. *Where it goes*

get answered by Panpsychism when it claims that consciousness is fundamental and present everywhere in the universe.

Panpsychism stands tall over other theories of consciousness

Proposing that thoughts and consciousness are fundamental and are present in every particle of the universe, panpsychism appears to stand tall over other theories of consciousness. Its view that consciousness is a fundamental, ubiquitous feature of the physical world seeks to resolve central mysteries in the philosophy of mind. It primarily addresses how subjective, qualitative experiences fit into our scientific understanding of reality.

Further, it bypasses the intractable issue of how non-conscious, mechanical matter (atoms, molecules) suddenly "gives rise" to subjective feelings. Positing that basic consciousness is an intrinsic property of fundamental particles removes the need for consciousness to emerge from unconscious physical stuff magically.

Not only that, but it also resolves the dualistic paradox of how a non-physical mind can interact with a physical body. If mentality is a core aspect of physical reality, the mental and physical are simply two sides of the same coin. Panpsychists argue that mentality is fully natural, in that it is fundamental to the universe, but not reducible to the physical. Thomas Nagel[3] goes on to say that panpsychism is "the view that the basic physical constituents of the universe have mental properties." A fundamental entity is neither emergent through natural processes nor infused into an organism by divine intervention, but exists as long as the universe has existed. In this way, panpsychism differs from other realist theories of consciousness, such as emergence theory, whereby mind emerges from the complexity of matter, or classical substance dualisms, whereby God gifts a soul/mind to some animals upon conception or embryonic development.

Keith Frankish[4] adds more clarity on Panpsychism:

> *Each subatomic particle is a tiny conscious subject. This solves the hard problem: brain and consciousness emerge together when billions of basic particles are assembled in the right way. The brain arises from the particles' dispositions to interact and combine, and consciousness arises from what the particles are like in themselves. They are two sides of the same coin – or, rather, since on this view consciousness is the fundamental reality underlying physical reality, brains are manifestations of consciousness. As it holds that there is a single reality underlying both mind and matter, panpsychism is a form of monism.*

Keith presents another side of the coin by claiming that panpsychism also fails to explain consciousness in totality. Keith posits:

> *There are problems for panpsychism, of course, perhaps the most important being the 'Combination Problem'. Panpsychists hold that consciousness emerges from the combination of billions of subatomic consciousnesses, just as the brain emerges from the organisation of billions of subatomic particles. But how do these tiny consciousnesses combine? We understand how particles combine to make atoms, molecules and larger structures, but what parallel story can we tell on the phenomenal side? How do the micro-experiences of billions of subatomic particles in my brain combine to form the twinge of pain I'm feeling in my knee?*

Panpsychism, as it stands, looks taller than other theories of consciousness, but does it explain it fully?

Does Panpsychism explain consciousness fully?

The above paragraph casts doubt via the Combination Problem. Panpsychists argue that complex minds are built by combining billions of tiny, subatomic instances of consciousness. However, there is no known metaphysical mechanism by which distinct fragments of experience merge to form a single, unified experience. Just as atoms combine into molecules, it is unclear how isolated conscious units "sum up" to create the unified pain you feel in your knee.

Even by making consciousness a universal property, panpsychism does not explain *why* or *how* highly complex, localised information processing—like that occurring in the human brain—gives rise to rich, subjective experiences.

In other words, while we understand how physical particles form molecules, but it is metaphysically unclear how the micro-experiences of billions of individual particles merge to create the singular twinge of pain or specific visual experience you feel. Simply put, adding experienced subjects together does not inherently create a brand new, single experiencing subject. Panpsychism leaves the exact nature of these fundamental conscious "building blocks" vague. It doesn't explain how the basic, vague awareness of a fundamental particle transforms into complex perception, self-awareness, or emotional thought.
The problem of how tiny conscious units combine to manifest a conscious experience seems to place Panpsychism in the same category as failed theories of consciousness.

Colin Mathers[5], having discussed the research of several Panpsychists, concludes as follows:

> *Having done a deep dive into philosophers' debates on panpsychism, I was very surprised to find that almost all of them think panpsychism refers to minds, even little selves, and then they get stuck in the combination problem: "How can lots of little minds combine into one big mind?" More importantly, this erroneous dualism leaves the contents of consciousness (thoughts, feelings, experiences) on the side of mind, and even most philosophers instinctively recoil from a version of panpsychism in which spoons and toasters have minds and, hence, thoughts, feelings, and*

> *experiences. This is why Strawson rejected panpsychism after writing an article about the need for it.*

The combination problem makes a formidable case against Panpsychism because it fails to bridge micro-experiences (like atoms) into a unified conscious self. It lacks empirical, testable predictions and creates the near-impossible *combination problem* of explaining how simple fragments synthesise into complex thoughts. Panpsychists argue fundamental particles have some basic form of awareness, but they still struggle to explain how that simple awareness translates into rich, qualitative perceptions like the "smell of a rose" or the "blueness of sky".

Neuroscientist Anil Seth[6] also holds the view that Panpsychism fails to explain consciousness. He argues that panpsychism—the view that consciousness is a fundamental, ubiquitous feature of all matter—fails because it lacks explanatory power and testability. Instead of solving the mystery of consciousness, it is a "metaphysical sledgehammer" that explains nothing about how or why specific conscious experiences happen. In his paper[6] he posits that

> *Panpsychism offers no useful insight into consensus explanatory targets for consciousness science. Asserting that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous does nothing to shed light on why an experience of blueness is the way it is, and not some other way. Nor does it explain anything about the possible functions of consciousness, nor why consciousness is lost in states such as dreamless sleep, general anaesthesia, and coma. In acknowledging that the putative consciousness of a single electron will be unimaginably different from the consciousness of a human being, we find the implicit concession that adopting panpsychism has no implications for explaining anything about subjective properties of consciousness.*

The Combination problem is the biggest hurdle for Panpsychism. How does the consciousness of particles in the universe unite to provide a subjective experience?

But a basic question remains about the fundamental assumption that consciousness is *fundamental and ubiquitous.* As pointed out by Seth, the assumption is not scientific because it is not testable. If every particle and object possess a minimal form of awareness, this property is functionally impossible to test, measure, or falsify. By offering no new positive laws or distinct physical predictions, critics argue that it halts scientific inquiry rather than advancing. Furthermore, Seth argues panpsychism is a philosophical "get-out" that offers little practical utility or predictive power. Because it posits intrinsic properties that might be fundamentally untestable, it risks stalling genuine scientific inquiry into how the brain actually generates subjective experience.

I totally agree with Anil Seth. It should be noted that the above argument is not the only view against consciousness being fundamental (existing as a basic block of reality) and ***ubiquitous*** (present everywhere), another view is primarily rooted in physicalism. These critics argue that consciousness does not precede matter but is instead a late-stage, highly specialised biological feature.

Another argument against consciousness being fundamental is that if every fundamental particle or atom were inherently conscious, we would expect to see observable evidence

of mentality in non-living matter. Evidently, we do not observe this to be true. In fact, the physical behaviour of atoms is fully explained by the laws of physics and chemistry with no need to invoke subjective feelings.

Panpsychism also suffers from what is called the 'D*isaggregation Problem'*. It fails to clearly define why some entities exist as isolated conscious subjects, where the boundary of a "self" lies in a universally conscious field, and why some things are vastly more conscious than others.

Physicist Sabine Hossenfelder[7] hammers the last nail in the coffin of Panpsychism (which holds that each particle is conscious). He argues that panpsychism contradicts the Standard Model of particle physics. Since the particles have quantum properties, anything that can happen will happen. If a particle exists in many variants, you'll produce them all – regardless of whether or not you can distinguish them. The result is that you see more of them than the standard model predicts.

Now, if you want a particle to be conscious, your minimum expectation should be that the particle can change. It's hard to have an inner life with only one thought. But if electrons could think, we'd have seen this long ago in particle collisions, because it would change the number of particles produced.
In other words, electrons aren't conscious, and neither are any other particles. It's incompatible with data.

All the above discussions lead to a pointer which discredits Panpsychism. Still, there is a theory of consciousness that lends it support. It is IIT (Integrated Information Theory), proposed by a famous neuroscientist, Giulio Tononi. Wikipedia[8] gives details:

> *Integrated information theory (IIT) was first proposed by Giulio Tononi in 2004, and it has undergone two major revisions since then. Tononi approaches consciousness from a scientific perspective and has expressed frustration with philosophical theories of consciousness for lacking predictive power. Though integral to his theory, he refrains from philosophical terminology such as qualia or the unity of consciousness, instead opting for mathematically precise alternatives like entropy function and information integration. This has allowed Tononi to create a measurement for integrated information, which he calls phi (Φ). He believes consciousness is nothing but integrated information, so Φ measures consciousness. As it turns out, even basic objects or substances have a nonzero degree of Φ. This would mean that consciousness is ubiquitous, albeit to a minimal degree.*

Tononi's theory tries to give a scientific outlook to panpsychism by taking a totally different approach from the scientific theory proposed by Penrose and Haemroff.

But does it solve the problems faced by Panpsychism?
Hedda Hassel Morch[8] throws some light on different aspects of Panpsychism:
According to IIT, consciousness is linked to *integrated information*, which can be represented by a precise mathematical quantity called Φ ('phi'). The human brain (or the part of it that supports our consciousness) has very high Φ, and is therefore highly conscious: it has highly complex and meaningful experiences. Systems with a low Φ, the

theory goes, have a small amount of consciousness – they only have very simple and rudimentary experiences. Systems with zero Φ are not conscious at all.

Giulio Tononi's Integrated Information Theory (IIT) posits that consciousness is a fundamental property of any physical system that possesses intrinsic cause-effect power and integrated information (quantified as \(\Phi \)). Because even simple physical substrates can have non-zero \(\Phi \), IIT risks slipping into panpsychism—the view that all matter possesses consciousness.

Panpsychism faced the biggest theoretical hurdles in the philosophy of mind: the ***combination problem***.

IIT Attempts to Solve the Combination Problem:

IIT attempts to bypass the traditional combination problem through its core axioms, most notably the **Exclusion Postulate**.

- ***The Principle of Exclusion:*** *An experience corresponds to the maximum set of mechanisms with irreducible cause-effect power. According to IIT, the system is conscious* only *at the level where \(\Phi \) is maximized.*
- ***Avoiding Blending:*** *Instead of micro-consciousnesses mechanically fusing together to build a larger mind, IIT claims that a highly integrated macro-system (like the human brain)* overrides *the lesser, isolated experiences of its smaller parts (e.g., individual neurons).*
- ***No "Summing" Required:*** *The conscious experience isn't an additive sum of smaller minds; it is an entirely new, single intrinsic cause-effect structure defined by its own maximal irreducibility.*

Thus, IIT tends to resolve the 'Combination Problem' faced by Panpsychism and appears as an improvised scientific version of the same.

But is it the final word on consciousness? Indeed, Tononi's theory is credible and is not only an improvisation over Panpsychism but it also has a scientific base. But it creates some other doubts:

- ***Lacks testability and falsifiability:*** *Sceptics challenge its practical testability, its tendency to attribute consciousness to simple mechanisms, and whether it truly solves the "hard problem" of consciousness. Science requires that the theories must be testable and falsifiable, but because \(\Phi \) cannot be precisely calculated for the brain, and because the theory accommodates varying levels of sentience, it risks becoming unfalsifiable and is not testable.*
- ***The "Dead Matter" Problem:*** *Many critics are uncomfortable with IIT's implication that non-biological, highly integrated systems with high \(\Phi \) (like optimised computer networks or digital diodes) might possess basic consciousness.*

IIT's postulates imply that any system—even a simple photodiode, a grid of logic gates (XOR gates), or the internet—could possess a tiny, non-zero degree of consciousness if it causally integrates information. Many critics find this version of ***Panpsychism*** *counterintuitive and implausible.*

Lastly, IIT theory has an explanatory gap to tide over the 'Hard Problem of Consciousness:

> *Many philosophers (such as John Searle or David Chalmers) argue that IIT fails to close the explanatory gap. Even if you prove that information is highly "integrated" in a system, critics argue you are still only mapping data or physical processes. They claim IIT does not adequately explain* why *or* how *integrated information translates into subjective, phenomenally-laden, first-person experiences (e.g., the feeling of seeing the colour red). The Hard Problem still remains alive!!*

Thus, we see that even Tononi's IIT theory does not explain all aspects of consciousness and cannot be taken to be the final word and 'Consciousness' still remains an elusive mystery to the scientists!!!!

We have come a long way in the discussions, and now is the time to summarise and conclude.

CONCLUSION

We started with the premise that 'Consciousness is a hard problem' and the existing theories stemming from science and spiritualism leave many questions unanswered, which were well brought out in the discussion. The philosophical theory of Panpsychism does try to bypass the 'Hard Problem' as it is defined, but it remains a failed theory, as new problems (mainly the 'Combination Problem') crop up against it. So, we are back to square one, and the phenomenon of consciousness remains shrouded in mystery. Tononi's theory, even though an improvisation over Panpsychism, still fails to be recognised as a scientific theory as it lacks answers to many doubts created by it, and the 'Hard Problem still remains!!

I conclude the paper with a post from a collection of posts by Steve[9]:

> *The mind wants conclusions and will insist on analysing life by any means and at any cost. The price you pay is a lack of conscious awareness, and this can even cause physical discomfort and mental suffering. The brain formulates thoughts in attempts to justify how the mind thinks, especially to conclude. But life is not something to conclude so that living is over and done.*

Jiddu Krishnamurthy's quote in this post goes on to say---
'***A mind that is full of conclusions is a dead mind; it is not a living mind. A living mind is a free mind, learning, never concluding***'

Rightly said that some questions remain meaningful when not concluded; 'Consciousness' is one of them.
So let 'Consciousness' be in our free mind and we continue learning, never concluding!!!!!!

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