

Book Review

Review of David Skrbina's Book: Panpsychism in the West

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ABSTRACT

David Skrbina's "Panpsychism in the West" presents the historical emergence of panpsychism within western philosophy: from the ancient Greeks, the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, and up to modern times. Skrbina gives a very comprehensive treatment, worthy of five stars despite my criticism. Nevertheless, I want to point out some subtlety that Skrbina missed, and this is not to detract from Skrbina's fine work. Skrbina writes about my favored panpsychists: C.S. Peirce; A.N. Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, and C. Hartshorne. He makes a very impressive case for panpsychism, taking us into modern time. His book is must reading. You can find this book at Amazon http://www.amazon.com/Panpsychism-Bradford-Books-David-Skrbina/dp/0262693518/ref=cm_cr-mr-title.

Key Words: panpsychism, western philosophy, ancient Greek, Renaissance, modern time.

First, the word game: It cannot be that we merely define systems into being, say materialism and idealism, leaving the systems identical in all respects except for the select definitions. The definitions by themselves don't automatically present something that is self evident. For example, renaming red into blue, and blue into red, gives us nothing. In the sense that we get hung up on prior definitions (and categories) we are playing only a word game, and getting no closer to the truth. Rather it must be that what we discover with our definitions is only a tension, and it is that somehow the tension is able to resolve itself. Therefore, truth is not defined into being. Truth is discovered as tension resolves itself.

Now, the meaning of panpsychism: Correcting for word games that are common to definitions of panpsychism (e.g, as Skrbina provides) gives us the most frugal meaning. In my view, awareness necessarily finds an agreement between an active (will-like) feeling that imprints on a passive (matter-like) substrate, until something self evident is revealed. The slightest feeling holds an awareness. Panpsychism is saying that some awareness exists in animals, plants, (rocks, worlds, and the universe). Because awareness is pervasive, awareness is more generally a property of matter as well as the entire universe. Hence, panpsychism is consistent with a vitalism where both active and passive constituents permeate the universe. An innate feeling takes the provisional into the universal, and revealing what is self evident.

Panpsychism finds a middle way between materialism and idealism. Because the validity of panpsychism is itself self evident, materialism and idealism are discovered as bodies of expressions that have not yet reached a sufficient threshold of self awareness, but this realization is getting far ahead. The bottom line is that we can in principle put both materialism and idealism on the psychologist's couch, revise their truth claims and recover evidence for panpsychism. It is with this revisionist attitude that I read "Panpsychism in the West". This revisionist attitude supports a universal grammar, something already noted by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl.

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Writing on the mutual interaction of mind and body, Skrbina (page 13) notes how this interaction is plausible: "Only in the naive intuitive argument that 'mind clearly exists', '(human) body clearly exists,' and 'I know that my mind affects my body and vice versa'. Unfortunately in the 400 years since Descartes no one has produced a satisfactory explanation as to exactly how this would work." This is again more confusion coming from the word game, and Skrbina forgets that Husserl fixed Descartes' view. What comes with self evidence does not require a necessary explanation. Rather it is philosophy that is a derivative of self evidence, and it is a presumed objectivity that questions the mind-body interaction that is found naive.

Skrbina (page 21) tells us that a "pantheism can be confused with panpsychism," and that pantheism is a "monistic concept of mind" that is closer "to a traditional theistic view-point". However, if panpsychism wishes to remain viable it must resolve itself with pantheism. Pure pluralistic panpsychism fails because a fragmented plurality forgets that it is only an imprint in something pervasive and immanent. Moreover, it must be possible for the plurality to reach a shared understanding, and this can only be achieved by way of the feeling of empathy.

Skrbina (page 9) picked up on the word game, noting that "functionalism [a class of materialistic monism] can be seen to shade into panpsychism." Then he (page 11) fails to note that idealism provides a similar loophole writing that "one can be an idealist without being a panpsychist" and while referring to Hegel as an example. Hegel was a trinitarian more than an idealist, and his system grew out of Schelling's transcendental idealism. Skrbina (page 115) places Schelling close to being a panpsychist, but where Schelling goes so does Hegel. Moreover, how Hegel describes life in the "Science of Logic" can only be seen as an endorsement of vitalism. Vitalism cannot be separated from the meaning of panpsychism, and we find nothing but the word game preventing the recognition of Hegel's panpsychism. Skrbina (pages 58, 60) connects the trinitarian concepts of the Logos and the Holy Spirit to panpsychism, so how he misses this is hard to fathom.

Skrbina (page 65) writes: "Monotheism was in direct conflict with panpsychism, and thus it effectively suppressed any advance in panpsychist philosophy. The Christian worldview, along with aspects of Aristotelian natural philosophy, dominated Western intellectual thought for about 1,300 years." However, Skrbina equivocates badly with the word "Christian". "Christian" is not to find its meaning from the most power hungry theologians that gave us the inquisition. The most authoritative theologians do paint a dualistic conception of God that has separated from God's creation, yes this is true. However, it is not the case that Thomas Aquinas (non-panpsychist) is more Christian than Saint Francis of Assisi (panpsychist). What is more important is that when we put Christianity on the couch we find that the mystics are closer to the heart of Christianity, and we find that Jesus was a panpsychist (at least according to trinitarian belief).

Skrbina makes several references to design arguments being used to justify panpsychism, referring to Patrizi (page 71), Gilbert (page 77), Campanella (page 79), Mauperuis (page 106), and Fechner (page 126). Skrbina (page 188) writes: "Darwin's theory of evolution initiated a series of new scientific arguments for panpsychism." Skrbina forgets the meaning of panpsychism and he misses the fact that Darwin's theory of evolution is opposed to design arguments. However, Darwinism does not escape the couch. Darwinism makes only a caricature of life, attempting to explain what is vital rather than describing something that can only be described. It is that felt vitality is a precondition for natural selection, it is not that natural selection explains the vital; this confusion comes from the word game. Moreover, monads are non-passive so they don't just go along for the ride provided by natural selection thereby making panpsychism redundant. The controversial movement of intelligent design provides the strongest arguments against Darwin's theory, and their evidence is turned into support for panpsychism once these folks are also led to the couch. Skrbina is strangely silent on intelligent design.

Skrbina (page 118) writes: "Schopenhauer thrust the concept of will into a central ontological role. Will, for him, was not merely the equivalent of human desire but was more generally a universal force, a drive, something that impelled all things and sustained all things." Skrbina (page 137) also correctly interprets Nietzsche's "will to power" as an endorsement of panpsychism. Nietzsche embroiled himself in the study of nihilism, not that he himself was a nihilist. Nevertheless, he was easy to associate Christianity with nihilism which led to a confusion that reached its high point with the remark "God is Dead." We find yet another example of the word game.

Skrbina writes about my favored panpsychists: C.S. Peirce; A.N. Whitehead, Teilhard de Chardin, and C. Hartshorne. He makes a very impressive case for panpsychism, taking us into modern time. His book is must reading. Nevertheless, a stronger case can be made with the couch.

References

David Skrbina, 2007, *Embracing Mind: The Common Ground of Science and Spirituality*, The MIT Press.