

Panpsychism without Subjectivity? A Brief Commentary on Sam Coleman's 'Mental Chemistry' and 'The Real Combination Problem'

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BIBLID [0873-626X (2013) 37; pp. 299-309]

In a review, Sam Coleman 2012a praised Panpsychism as 'hot stuff' and I agree with him, because Panpsychism offers a theoretically elegant (even if somehow radical) way of handling the hard problem of consciousness within a moderate physicalist image of the world. If one considers experience as a fundamental property on a par with fundamental physical properties, then there are only two theoretical options: Either experience is a strongly emergent property of certain complex structures or it is ubiquitous.¹ So if one wishes to avoid dealing with the problem of how the experiential magically emerges from the non-experiential, Panpsychism seems to be the only option. However, with Panpsychism, philosophers can easily get their fingers burnt by touching on the Combination Problem — as does Coleman himself in his attempt to solve it.

Opponents of Panpsychism present the Combination Problem as quite comparable to the problem of strong emergence. While one

¹ I consider Panpsychism or Panexperientialism to be a theory that claims the ubiquity of mental or experiential properties, respectively. Thus, I consider Panpsychism or Panexperientialism not to be about proto-mental or proto-experiential properties. This is mostly because I don't see much explanatory power in these notions: If proto-mental properties are not mental, then they are physical and the hard problem returns with full force. And if proto-mental properties are in some sense mental, then the concept is delusive because it merely conceals problems with fundamental subjectivity such as those faced in the Combination Problem. In what follows, I will show that Coleman's position faces similar problems.

may have a hard time trying to understand how and why certain complex physical structures suddenly give rise to conscious experience, there also seems to be no easy answer to the question of how a certain number of lower single states of subjective experience can be combined to result in a unified higher (and qualitatively new) state of consciousness. Coleman correctly emphasized these two essential points in his papers 2012b, 2013: (1) The Combination Problem has its origins in the notion of fundamental subjectivity, and (2) without its solution, panpsychism loses most if not all of its explanatory power. However, the solution Coleman offers in his articles is comparable to cutting the Gordian knot: If the impossibility of a ‘real combination’² of subjective simples lies at the heart of the Combination Problem, then the “essential part” of its solution is the ‘disposal’ of the notion of subjectivity on the fundamental level (2012b: 156). Now, having transformed subjectivity from a fundamental into a derivative, ‘structural’ feature (2013: 21) of certain organisms, nothing stands in the way of ‘real combination’ and the success of Panpsychism — or so Coleman claims.

In what follows, I will challenge Coleman’s attempt to solve the Combination Problem in two steps. In section one (I) I will provide a brief sketch of Coleman’s position which I will conclude by formulating three suspicions: (1) Coleman’s approach to solving the Combination Problem by removing subjectivity from the fundamental level and transforming it into a derivative feature moves his own position close to a reductive representationalist account of consciousness or (2) moves it close to an emergentist account of consciousness (both of which stand in opposition to Panpsychism³); and (3) Given his reductionist account of subjectivity, he also cannot adequately solve

² For Coleman, ‘real’ combination is different to mere aggregation because it gives rise to a unified whole. And it is also different from a kind of combinatorial infusion such as Seager 2010 proposes, since the combinatorial parts do not lose their identity in favour of the emergent whole. For detailed discussion see Coleman 2013, section 7.

³ As Coleman himself states: ‘Panpsychism [...] stands opposed to emergentism.’ (2013: 5) And further: ‘For how could the conscious, the felt, the sentient, derive from the dead, the unfeeling, the insentient? That is why we have an explanatory gap and why, so say the panpsychists, conventional physicalism [i.e. reductionism about consciousness, MB] should be abandoned [...]’ (2012b: 137)

the Combination Problem. In the subsequent section two (II) I will argumentatively flesh out these three suspicions to finally conclude that Coleman's approach to solving the Combination Problem fails for the given reasons.

I

The Panpsychist's Combination Problem is, roughly put, the name for the fact that we currently have no clue of how a combination of micro-experiences may result in full-blown conscious experience like ours. The problem is rooted — so the suspicion — in the impossibility of subjects summing. This means that even if we could make sense of the idea of physical ultimates having conscious experience, there nevertheless seems to be no easy answer to the question of how a combination of these subjective ultimates may result in a qualitatively new 'higher' subject (of the kind we take ourselves to be): Combinations of micro-subjects simply do not seem to entail the existence of macro-subjects.

Now, Coleman correctly locates the most problematic assumption (which he tags the 'First Assumption', 2012b: 148, 154, 156) at work 'behind' the Combination Problem in the postulation that 'phenomenal ultimates are themselves subjects of experience' (2012b: 144). This assumption is a result of what Coleman calls the 'Quick Argument' (2012b: 148f), which states that experience requires a subject of experience that lives through it. If there is something it is like to experience, then there is a subjective point of view for which it is like. According to Coleman this is an 'apparent truism' for which no philosopher⁴ has ever offered a convincing argument:

'The Quick Argument proceeds from a natural claim concerning phenomenal qualities, namely that where they exist they must be experienced by some subject. 'There cannot be experience without an experiencer', it is said. The next step is simply to apply this apparent truism to the panpsychist's ultimates.' (Coleman 2012b: 148, see also formulations on 152 and 153)

Even though one gets the impression that he somehow conceptually confuses the notions of phenomenal *properties* and phenomenal

⁴ Coleman references Strawson 2003 in footnote 18 as a current defender of this claim.

qualities,⁵ the stated goal of Coleman's critique of the 'First Premise' is the conceptual separation of two fundamental aspects of experience: (a) the phenomenal quality of an experience (or its 'phenomenal character') and (b) its being-for-a-subject-of-experience (or its 'subjective character').⁶ Now, if the impossibility of a real combination of subjective simples lies at the heart of the Combination Problem — as Coleman compellingly argues to the reader —, then a possible solution might be found, he suggests, in simply taking phenomenal qualities of experience as an intrinsic, fundamental, feature of ultimates, and transforming the subjective character of experience (its being-for-a-subject-of-experience) into a derivative, structural, representational feature of certain macro-experiential systems. In short: For the purpose of solving the Combination Problem, Coleman suggests assuming that the intrinsic nature of the panpsychist's ultimates is devoid of any subjective character, and he instead favours 'phenomenal qualities'. If we examine Coleman's positive characterization of phenomenal qualities, we see that they derive exclusively from the sensory qualities present in our everyday experiences. His examples are taken mostly from vision (red London bus) or flavour (lasagne, Sunday roast beef), even though he assures the reader that 'phenomenal colours [...] are really just analogues to the true phenomenal natures of the ultimates.' (2012b: 155) However, the essential feature of phenomenal qualities in terms of Coleman's goal is explained negatively: Phenomenal qualities do not have to (necessarily) manifest themselves in experience in order to *be*, but can exist without being experienced. Phenomenal *qualities* are — unlike phenomenal *properties* — 'properties of objects' in the first place. (2012b: 150) The

⁵ The claim that some special kind of qualities (namely phenomenal ones) cannot exist independently of a subject experiencing them is definitively something other than the claim that experience involves a subject of experience. The second claim is not about any kind of contents of my experience, but about the being of experience itself: it is about the question of what it is like to experience, hence about how my experience is in and as itself *for me*. To assume that some sort of *qualities* can exist *without being experienced by* a subject is different from assuming that *experience* can exist without there *being a subject for whom it is like to do so*. The first assumption concerns phenomenal *qualities*, the second phenomenal *properties*.

⁶ The conceptual distinction between 'phenomenal character' and 'subjective character' and their relationship is taken from Kriegel 2009 and 2011.

essential upshot of his explanation is that phenomenal qualities can be treated as objective qualities. Of course, if we then take ‘the question of how phenomenally-qualified items combine’ (2012b: 138) as an expression of the Combination Problem of Panpsychism, then, I suspect, we have found a reason for why Coleman presents his alleged solution in terms of cooking or painting (for detailed examples see 2012b: 140 and 157f).

However, given that the real combination of phenomenal qualities is unproblematic, Coleman still needs to say something about the subjective character of consciousness, its being-for-a-subject-of-experience: ‘We [...] need to say something about how genuine subjects, beings like ourselves, arise on the present picture.’ (2012b: 154) Here, Coleman makes an interesting move:

‘[S]ince subjects cannot combine into larger subjects, the only way to preserve the panpsychist anti-emergence principle when it comes to high-level subjecthood is to allow that, while quality is a fundamental affair, subjectivity must be susceptible of a reductive treatment.’ (Coleman 2013: 21)

And further:

‘Conscious awareness as we know it is therefore to be thought of as *phenomenal representation*, the representation of phenomenal quality by phenomenal quality.’ (Coleman 2012b: 159)

It is here that I detect Coleman’s most problematic claim, a claim that will finally lead — as I will show — to the collapse of his whole position and its central attempt to solve the Combination Problem. In the subsequent section I will dispute his reductionist claim about subjectivity by fleshing out the following three suspicions: (1) It is impossible to reduce subjective experience to a-subjective qualities and their representational relations without claiming that subjectivity is illusory (which I find deeply counterintuitive); (2) Every attempt of retaining the fundamentality of subjectivity within Coleman’s theoretical framework would require the notion of emergence (which runs counter to one of Panpsychism’s central premises) and (3) Even if we assume for the sake of argument that Coleman’s approach is sound, the Combination Problem would nevertheless remain unsolved in that it is perfectly conceivable (and therefore possible) that a representational state of phenomenal qualities exists without there being consciousness (in the sense we are acquainted

with). To this end, I begin with a brief sketch of Coleman's own 'positive' representational account of subjectivity.

II

As noted, Coleman's key move to solve the Panpsychist's Combination Problem consists in removing subjectivity from the fundamental, i.e. constitutive level, and transforming it into a derivative structural feature: 'Panpsychists hold, effectively, that all non-fundamental properties are structural: they are reducible to more basic properties plus arrangement of their bearers. That is the non-emergence principle.' (2013: 21) Thus, 'subjectivity must be susceptible of a reductive treatment.' And he suggests the following reductive picture of subjectival awareness:

'It is [...] the essentially *structured* (composite) nature of the phenomenally-qualified systems posited that enables them to be subjects of their own phenomenal qualities [...]. [...] Conscious awareness as we know it is therefore to be thought of as *phenomenal representation*, the representation of phenomenal quality by phenomenal quality.' (Coleman 2012b: 159)

And further:

'To be such a representational system is to be conscious in the way that we recognize each in our own case.' (Coleman 2012b: 160)

Now, to see the problem with this account it is necessary to first say something about the subjective nature of experience. I think I am not alone by holding to the claim that consciousness (or experience in the way we are acquainted with in everyday life) necessarily entails a subject of experience for whom it is somehow or other like to have this experience: If there is something it is like to be in a state of pain, then, necessarily, there is something it is like *for* someone or something to be so. Regarding Coleman's separation of the two central aspects of experience — phenomenal quality and subjectivity — it is important to emphasize that, whereas the phenomenal quality of an experience characterizes it just as the experience it actually is (in contrast to qualitatively different experiences), its subjective character (or the being-for-a-subject-of-experience of these qualities) is what makes the experience an experience at all: The feeling of pain is qualitatively different from the sensations you get while swallow-

ing chocolate, but what sense does the difference make if there is no one (no subject of experience) for whom the difference is manifest because there is nobody who actually feels the pain or tastes the chocolate?

Now, an essential feature of subjective experiences in general is their indubitability due to our direct acquaintance with them. This special kind of direct acquaintance of conscious experiences with themselves (call it primitive self-consciousness or subjectivity) is the reason for the distinction between a first-person and a third-person ontology, which provides the basis of most of the arguments against materialism, like the zombie-argument or the explanatory-gap argument. For example, when I taste a cold, clear and transparent liquid, thinking it is water and being told afterwards that it is not H₂O but XYZ, I was wrong about the *content's* being (in this case, that I tasted water). But I definitely was not wrong about the *experience's* being: I tasted a cold, clear and transparent liquid because I was immediately and *indubitably aware* of it by having the experience. This is even more obvious in cases where the content's being is strictly tied to its appearing in experience. Think of pain: what *appears* be pain to a subject *is* pain, because this subject cannot coherently deny its existence due to its immediate and indubitable presence in her experience. And vice versa, if she *denies feeling* pain, then she *denies* there *being* pain due to its indubitable absence in her experience. Thus there can be no doubt about the existence of an experience from a first-person perspective, irrespective of all other physical facts.

In the following I will show that this special character of consciousness poses a real problem for Coleman's representationalist account of subjectivity. Following Coleman, subjective awareness, i.e. awareness of phenomenal qualities, is an extrinsic, additional feature to the specific quality an experience might have. Combined with his 'non-emergence principle', which states that all structural properties are principally reducible to more basic properties and their relations, this implies that subjectival awareness logically supervenes on the complex arrangement of fundamental simples and their intrinsic a-subjective phenomenal qualities. This opens three ways of criticism.

The first is based on some strong intuitions we have about our everyday conscious lives and which relate to what has been said about our direct acquaintance with them. Given the correctness of

the presented assumptions about the immediacy and indubitability of the givenness of experiences for a subject of experience, conscious subjects who feel pain can never be wrong about themselves being in a state of pain, irrespective of whether the underlying representational structure implies the contrary. And the same is true vice versa. Subjectivity is simply not identical with this representational structure. Yet Coleman's strong reductionist claim about subjectival awareness being a structural feature seems to imply precisely this. There can never be a case where ultimates stand in the right relations to each other but fail to instantiate a point of view, i.e. a subject of experience, because in the reductionist account subjectival awareness follows logically from the underlying representational state (due to their identity). But this runs contrary to our basic intuitions about the being of our experiences. For example, it is perfectly conceivable (and, I assume, therefore possible) that subjectival awareness exists (I am in pain and I am certain of this fact) without the realization of the adequate representational state of phenomenal qualities. Or, vice versa, you can also never rule out a state that represents oneself as a conscious system (probably producing a verbal output like: 'I am conscious of your delicious lasagne'), but does not actually instantiate subjectival awareness (i.e. that there is nothing it is like to be me because there is no 'me'). I think the common antireductionist arguments (the explanatory gap, the possibility of zombies etc.) provide a fairly good basis for considering the subjectivity of consciousness (the one we are directly acquainted with in everyday life) as a fundamental feature, because it is the feature which distinguishes consciousness — as a phenomenon with a first-person ontology — from third-person extrinsic phenomena, which furthermore is the reason why it is neither reducible nor adequately explainable in terms of (third-person, extrinsic) structures and relations (this is what the hard problem is all about).

But if subjectivity — as I have tried to argue — is not only an essential but a fundamental aspect of consciousness, then the only way to save Coleman's position from the aforementioned problems (in fact, problems all reductionist accounts of consciousness face) would be to claim that subjectivity is an irreducible feature — yet not a feature of fundamental ultimates.

This brings me to the second aspect of my critique, which can be put rather briefly: Given we understand emergence as the sudden coming-into-existence of ontologically new properties,⁷ which preclude reduction to more basic ones, then subjectivity — by taking it as irreducible — would turn into an emergent property. But this option definitely is a no-go — and I assume Coleman would agree — in that it questions the whole project of Panpsychism, which is essentially based on the idea of smooth evolution and the lack of emergence.

Thirdly and finally — considering all that has been said — let us take another look at the Combination Problem within Coleman's framework. This third and last aspect of my critique is based — like the first one — on conceivability issues regarding micro- and macro-phenomena.⁸ Coleman's Panpsychism (or rather Pan-*proto*-psychism because he only claims the ubiquity of phenomenal *qualities*, not phenomenal *properties*) is a form of *constitutive* Panpsychism, which means that the micro-level facts (about phenomenally-qualified ultimates and their relations) constitute the macro-level facts (about conscious experience as we know it). As Coleman has convincingly argued, if constitutive Panpsychism claims the ubiquity of *experience* (and thus the ubiquity of subjectivity), then it faces the Combination Problem, because the micro-level facts about experiential ultimates (and their relations) do not entail the macro-level facts about consciousness: A set of micro-subjects simply cannot really combine to constitute a further, qualitatively new subject. Now, let us turn to Coleman's proposed solution to the problem.

If ultimates are no longer bearers of phenomenal *properties* (experience, subjectivity), but merely phenomenal *qualities*, then 'real combination' seems to be no big deal. And, further, if subjectivity is taken as a reductive feature, logically supervening on the representational states of the phenomenally qualified ultimates, then subjective

⁷ Or, in Coleman's own words: 'paradigm cases of emergence' are 'cases where the underlying properties cannot generate their product structurally, because inputting *what they are* [...] makes no contribution towards what results.' (2013: 18)

⁸ Here, I am mainly following Goff 2009 and his concept of panpsychist's zombies.

consciousness seems to be entailed by the facts about the phenomenally-qualified ultimates and their representational relations. Thus, given all the micro-facts, the macro-facts about consciousness come ‘free of charge’. But could this really be seen as a solution to the Combination Problem? I thoroughly doubt it, for reasons presented already in the first aspect of my critique: Given all the micro-level facts about qualified ultimates and their relations, it is nevertheless perfectly well conceivable (and therefore, as I assume, possible) that even though all the qualitative aspects of an experience (on the macro-level) are instantiated, subjectival awareness of the qualities is not, because subjectival awareness is not entailed by the micro-level facts. But if subjectival awareness is not instantiated, then neither is consciousness. The result would be a kind of panpsychic zombie (see Goff 2009), a being qualitatively identical to me, but lacking consciousness, because there would be no ‘me’ — so to speak — for whom it could be like to have those qualities present.

If we assume that the essential goal of Panpsychism is to make sense not just of the existence of phenomenal qualities manifest in experience, but also of the existence of an experiential, subjective, first-person perspective in the first place, then Coleman’s attempt to solve the Combination Problem with his (to my mind oxymoronic) version of an a-subjective, constitutive Panpsychism simply fails.

Conclusion

Coleman’s attempt to solve the Combination Problem fails for the reasons stated above. However, despite the Combination Problem, Panpsychism seems to remain a viable candidate for a theory of consciousness, since it attempts to apply fundamental subjectivity to a moderate physicalist view of the world. Coleman writes:

‘We really should want to say something remotely interesting about how minds come about, not simply take them so thoroughly for granted. It is not just that this position is implausible, it is that solving practically any problem in this way is fundamentally boring.’ (Coleman 2012b: 149)

But perhaps he is being too sensationalist. With respect to the Combination Problem, I do not see why Panpsychism should be ‘fundamentally boring’: The challenge lies precisely in searching for a

framework that handles the tension between fundamental subjectivity and objectivity, unity and diversity and the question of real combination. Coleman merely attempts to resolve this tension via a reductionist move and I do not see why that should be more interesting.⁹

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⁹ I would like to thank Wolfgang Fasching and the two anonymous referees of *Disputatio* for their helpful comments on a former draft of this paper.

