


BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Should panpsychists be supernaturalists?

Andrei A. Buckareff 

Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY, USA  
Email: [andrei.buckareff@marist.edu](mailto:andrei.buckareff@marist.edu)

(Received 19 December 2022; revised 10 January 2023; accepted 11 January 2023;  
first published online 23 March 2023)

### Abstract

Joanna Leidenhag's claim in her book, *Minding Creation*, that panpsychists should (a) abandon naturalism and (b) adopt traditional theism is evaluated and critiqued. It is argued that panpsychism is compatible with naturalism and does not commit one to any metaphysics of the divine, including traditional theism.

### Introduction

In *Minding Creation* (2021), Joanna Leidenhag cogently argues for the compatibility of panpsychism with Christian orthodoxy. She makes a compelling case for why Christians ought to prefer panpsychism over other options, such as emergentism and Cartesian substance dualism. And she offers a convincing argument for the usefulness of panpsychism for articulating a doctrine of creation.

There is much to praise about Leidenhag's book. It is a clear and engaging read. More importantly, she does an impressive job of offering her readers a well-informed tour of some of the landscape in both contemporary philosophy of mind and theology, particularly the points at which they intersect. In brief, Leidenhag offers her readers a highly original model of how to do analytic theology well.

While I could go on to offer detailed examples of the many virtues of Leidenhag's work, my role is that of a critic. Readers should keep in mind that to critique is not to debase. Rather, that an author makes claims worthy of taking seriously enough to take the time to respond should count as evidence of the value of their intellectual endeavours.

My focus in this note will be on the tenability of some interrelated claims Leidenhag makes about panpsychism and its relationship to naturalism and traditional theism,<sup>1</sup> such as the following claim:

[P]anpsychism is not merely compatible with belief in God, but . . . the structure of the arguments in favour of panpsychism invites or implies a theistic stance regarding the origin of the universe. That is, if a panpsychist philosopher follows through the logic of her own arguments consistently, she should abandon any lingering association with naturalism and instead adopt theism. (Leidenhag (2021), 50)

In what follows, I will try to clarify what some panpsychists have in mind when they express a commitment to naturalism. I will argue that there is no conflict between naturalism and panpsychism. Next, I will attempt to summarize Leidenhag's argument

for the claim that ‘if the logic within contemporary panpsychism is consistently held then it leads to theism’ (*ibid.*, 4). I will argue that there is not ‘a natural alliance between panpsychism and theism’ (even if they are compatible) (*ibid.*). I will conclude by briefly considering whether panpsychism is a natural ally of any other metaphysics of the divine.

### Clarifying the naturalist commitments of some panpsychists

‘Naturalism’ is an ambiguous term, as Leidenhag acknowledges. Alas, when she attempts to clarify what is meant by ‘naturalism’, rather than discuss how defenders of panpsychism have used said term, she discusses how some philosophers who reject panpsychism have defined ‘naturalism’. This strikes me as an unfortunate oversight on her part.

Leidenhag begins with *methodological* naturalism, which, in its strongest forms, takes the sciences as providing the only route to knowledge about the nature of reality. She takes methodological naturalism to lend itself to the acceptance of ontological naturalism, which most philosophers take as the claim that the only existents are the constituents of the universe, which is a closed system. Leidenhag asserts that a commitment to ontological naturalism ‘leads to physicalism’ (*ibid.*, 65). She adds that, ‘[i]n its negative form naturalism is a commitment to atheism (with negotiating room left for pantheism)’ (*ibid.*, 68). She maintains that ‘Panpsychism cannot be naturalistic in any of the senses outlined above’ (*ibid.*, 66).

*Contra* Leidenhag, I take it that panpsychism can be naturalistic. More specifically, panpsychism is *compatible* with versions of both methodological and ontological naturalism. Given that Leidenhag focuses a fair amount of attention to the work of David Chalmers, Thomas Nagel, and Galen Strawson (see *ibid.*, 50–60), I will stick to what these three have said about naturalism in the remainder of this section.

It is best to begin by getting clear on the species of naturalism with which panpsychism would be *incompatible*. Nagel is the only one of the philosophers mentioned who has critiqued naturalism. His target is not naturalism *simpliciter*. He critiques versions of methodological and ontological naturalism that would exclude the existence of entities that cannot ‘be fully explained by physical science’ (*ibid.*, 14). He refers to this species of naturalism as ‘materialist naturalism’ (*ibid.*, 13). What Nagel targets is christened ‘physicSalism’ by Strawson, which is ‘the view that the science of physics can fully characterize the nature of concrete reality, at least in principle’ (*ibid.*, 134). Panpsychism is clearly NOT compatible with naturalism *qua* physicSalism.

How defenders of panpsychism have characterized the versions of naturalism they endorse varies. Chalmers is well known for advocating ‘naturalistic dualism’.<sup>2</sup> His proposal is a version of property dualism on which phenomenal properties are fundamental. They are quiddities, being purely categorical. They contingently ground the dispositional properties of objects whose activation we measure in physics. Chalmers maintains that his view is naturalistic

because it posits that everything is a consequence of a network of basic properties and laws, and because it is compatible with all the results of contemporary science. And as with naturalistic theories in other domains, this view allows that we can explain consciousness in terms of basic natural laws. (Chalmers (1996), 128)

Chalmers’s account involves a commitment to modest versions of both methodological and ontological naturalism. Regarding methodological naturalism, Chalmers assumes that what we can know about consciousness is explainable in terms of fundamental entities and the laws of nature. And it is ontologically naturalistic given that everything

posited by his metaphysics of consciousness is a constituent of the universe. As he notes, 'nothing about this view contradicts anything in physical theory; rather, it supplements that theory. A physical theory gives a theory of physical processes, and a psychophysical theory tells us how those processes give rise to experience' (*ibid.*, 127–128).

Nagel evinces a commitment to methodological and ontological naturalism. That said, Nagel is not clearly a panpsychist. He explicitly endorses a version of neutral monism on which mental and physical properties are reducible to a more fundamental type of neutral property that 'explains both the physical and the mental' (Nagel (2002), 234). He writes that, '[p]anpsychism is, in effect, dualism all the way down. This is monism all the way down' (*ibid.*, 231). I will not dwell on the details of Nagel's metaphysics of mind, especially given the difficulties of knowing how best to understand his view.<sup>3</sup> What is important for my purposes is that he insists that the reason for accepting it, 'like the reason for believing in the reality of any other theoretical entities, will be inference to the best explanation'. He adds that, '[w]e hypothesize that there are things having the character necessary to provide an adequate explanation for the data, and their real existence is better confirmed the wider the range of data the hypothesis can account for' (*ibid.*, 233). The methods we should use for determining whether it is reasonable to accept this model of the mind are characteristic of the sciences. This is at least a modest methodological naturalism as he assumes that the epistemic standing of his account depends on how explanatorily fecund it proves to be with respect to various data. He rejects reductionism, but, as he notes, reducing everything to physics is not a requirement for scientific explanations. As for ontological naturalism, none of the existents he posits are non-natural or supernatural. They are the objects and properties that underlie everything in the physical universe. As Nagel notes, 'mind is not just an afterthought or an accident or an add-on, but a basic aspect of nature' (Nagel (2012), 16, emphasis added).

Finally, Strawson initially defines ontological naturalism negatively, as denying the 'concrete existence of anything supernatural or otherwise non-natural' (Strawson (2012), 126). More positively, he writes that his 'substantive conception of the natural' maintains that 'concrete reality is entirely physical in nature'. Hence, Strawson endorses a physicalist version of ontological naturalism (*ibid.*). He endorses what he calls a 'realistic species of methodological naturalism – the view that inquiry into the metaphysically contingent nature of concrete reality should always proceed as far as possible in accord with the methods of the natural sciences' (*ibid.*). As mentioned before, Strawson rejects what he calls 'physicism'. The watershed difference between Strawson and proponents of physicism is over whether physics can 'possibly convey the nature of everything that concretely exists' (*ibid.*, 134). Physics is limited in what it can tell us about the whole nature of concrete reality, according to Strawson. The fact of experience is 'the most certainly known natural fact' and 'the most certainly known physical fact' (*ibid.*). Realism about experience, Strawson argues, is 'the starting point of real naturalism' (*ibid.*). Elsewhere, he argues that if all stuff is physical and 'experientiality is a kind of stuff', then experientiality is physical and 'the most natural and parsimonious hypothesis is that all concrete reality is experiential' (*ibid.*, 320).

The sense in which all three authors have endorsed naturalistic views is minimally consistent with modest versions of methodological and ontological naturalism. While Chalmers presents us with a panpsychist property dualism, both Nagel and Strawson eschew any form of dualism in their metaphysics of mind.<sup>4</sup> None endorse the physicism that Leidenhag appears to assume is the outcome of endorsing naturalism. If I am right, then panpsychism is compatible with versions of both methodological and ontological naturalism.

## Should panpsychists endorse theism?

Suppose panpsychism is compatible with naturalism. That does not imply that naturalism is a commitment of panpsychism. It is not clear that *any* metaphysics of mind is necessarily ontologically committed to naturalism (for instance, one may be a physicalist about the minds of creatures while endorsing theism). On the other hand, it is not obvious that any metaphysics of mind implies an ontological commitment to theism.

Recall the rather strong claims Leidenhag makes about the relation between theism and panpsychism. She denies that panpsychism strictly entails theism (Leidenhag (2021), 173). But she asserts that ‘unbeknownst to most contemporary panpsychists, the arguments made in the recent turn to panpsychism invite or *imply* belief in a Creator’ (*ibid.*, 81, emphasis added). I am uncertain about what sort of relation Leidenhag wishes to pick out by the term ‘*imply*’. I assume it must be material implication, which, while weaker than strict entailment, is a stronger relation than the mere consistency of the conjunction of two propositions.

Leidenhag takes as her starting point the anti-emergence argument for panpsychism presented by Nagel (1979). Leidenhag takes it that the argument assumes the principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit* (‘nothing can come from nothing’) and the principle of sufficient reason. Nagel presents four premises ‘each of which is more plausible than its denial’, from which ‘[p]anpsychism seems to follow’ as the conclusion (*ibid.*, 181–182).

1. *Material Composition*: Any living organism is a complex material system.
2. *Non-reductionism*: Mental properties are not physical properties and are not implied by physical properties alone.
3. *Realism*: Mental properties are real properties of organisms.
4. *Non-emergence*: There are no strongly emergent properties of complex system.

William Seager succinctly summarizes Nagel’s reasoning as follows.

- P1. Consciousness is either a fundamental or an emergent feature.  
 P2. Consciousness is not an emergent feature.  
 C. Therefore, consciousness is a fundamental feature. (Seager (2017), 232)

Assuming for the sake of argument that Leidenhag is right that Nagel’s argument assumes the two aforementioned principles, it is natural to wonder what any of the foregoing line of reasoning has to do with theism.

Leidenhag maintains that the anti-emergence and cosmological arguments are isomorphic. Suppose this is correct. Both identify an ontological gulf between a particular state of affairs (specifically, an organism’s possessing mental properties and the universe’s existence) and some other state of affairs (specifically, an organism’s possessing physical properties and the universe’s non-existence). Leidenhag asserts that panpsychists rely on the principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit* regarding ‘the ontological divide between matter and mind when they reject [strong] emergence’ (Leidenhag (2021), 82).<sup>5</sup> But she argues that while the anti-emergence argument provides an explanation of why there are minds in the universe, naturalist panpsychists unreasonably stop short of asking why there is anything at all.

It would seem . . . that brute contingencies are unsatisfactory to the panpsychist logic; and yet without a Creator or a First Cause of some kind, this is exactly what the panpsychist is forced to claim with regards to the existence of the universe.

To avoid this inconsistency, panpsychists need to posit some necessary being, or adopt the theory that the universe itself exists necessarily. (*ibid.*, 83)

In the interest of clarity, I will represent Leidenhag's reasoning as a simple *modus ponens* argument.

- P1. Panpsychist reasoning rejects brute contingencies.
- P2. If (P1), then the panpsychist should posit a Creator of the universe or hold that the universe is a necessary existent on pain of inconsistency.
- C. Therefore, the panpsychist should posit a Creator of the universe or hold that the universe is a necessary existent on pain of inconsistency.

I will focus on the consequent of (P2), which is a disjunctive claim, and argue that accepting its truth does not imply a commitment to theism (but I will also question whether we ought to accept it as true).

Consider the first disjunct: 'the panpsychist should posit a Creator of the universe'. I will not rehearse the reasons for why the soundness of the cosmological argument would not commit one to theism. Those reasons should be well known to any readers of this journal. So even if we accept the truth of the first disjunct, nothing about its truth commits one to accepting theism. Thus, even if we grant that the panpsychist's assumptions and reasoning imply the existence of a Creator, it is not obviously the case that the Creator is the God of theism. In fact, if we duplicate the reasoning of the anti-emergence argument that Leidenhag endorses, then the Creator cannot be an altogether different kind of thing from what it causes, namely, the physical universe. A purely mental thing that is without any spatiotemporal location is very different from a universe that is extended (see Buckareff (2016)). Nagel notes that the problem with turning to theism to understand the natural world and our place in it is that it would not explain 'how beings like us fit into the natural world'. He adds that '[t]he kind of intelligibility that would still be missing is intelligibility of the natural order itself – intelligibility from within' (Nagel (2012), 26). A supernatural being will not deliver the requisite intelligibility.

Turning to the second disjunct, the claim that 'the universe is a necessary existent' requires some clarification. What kind of necessity does Leidenhag have in mind? It cannot be logical necessity given that there is nothing contradictory about the universe not existing. It must be metaphysical necessity.

The naturalist will take 'world' to pick out the universe. The supernaturalist takes 'world' to refer to more than the universe. The supernaturalist assumes that the existence of the universe requires an explanation. Assuming actualism about the metaphysics of modality, the naturalist assumes that the universe is all there is.<sup>6</sup> To talk about it as existing necessarily may seem a bit like a category mistake to the naturalist. The space of metaphysical possibility is provided by the universe. But is the universe's existence in need of an explanation? That suggests that it is contained or nested in something larger, the *world*, understood as being more than the universe. This is precisely what the naturalist denies we have good reason to accept. As for whether something could come from nothing, no one is asserting that. I do not have the space to discuss models of the origin of the universe in contemporary cosmology. But no naturalist argues that the universe as it exists came from nothing (but the theist does!). Thus, depending upon how we understand what is being asserted by the claim that the universe is a necessary existent, the second disjunct either makes a category mistake and is false or it is a commitment of naturalism that is consistent with our best cosmological models.

My interlocutor may worry that I have ignored the principle of sufficient reason. For now, I will answer the way Nagel does (echoing Wittgenstein): ‘All explanations come to an end somewhere’ (Nagel (2012), 22). The theist stops with a supernatural Creator God. The naturalist stops with the universe. What the panpsychist adds to this is teleology within the natural order, not outside of it (*ibid.*, 94).

### Is any conception of the divine more compatible with panpsychism?

I am denying that theism is implied by panpsychism. They are compatible with one another. Accepting panpsychism does not commit one to *any* conception of God. But certain conceptions of God fit better with panpsychist assumptions. Historically, some prominent proponents of panpsychism also endorsed views of God that may best be described as pantheistic (e.g. Baruch Spinoza and Josiah Royce) and some recent proponents of pantheism have also endorsed panpsychism, taking their commitment to both pantheism and panpsychism to be of a piece with one another (see, e.g. Leslie (2001); Sprigge (2006); Pfeifer (2016)).

Space will not allow me to explore the connections between varieties of panpsychism and pantheism (see Buckareff (2022)). One reason for endorsing pantheism over theism is that some versions of pantheism can deliver the sort of teleology Nagel claims is needed for a tenable version of naturalism without appealing to anything outside the universe. For instance, while he does not present it as a version of pantheism, Philip Goff’s (2019) agential cosmopsychism is arguably a version of pantheism that can explain the fine-tuning of the universe for life-permitting states of affairs to obtain. Goff’s proposal is simpler than other alternatives offered to explain fine-tuning, such as multiverse theory and theism, and it does at least as much explanatory work.

### Conclusion

My aim has not been to argue that Leidenhag’s general project is a failure. I have focused on a narrow set of claims she makes that I have argued are untenable. I deny that panpsychism *implies* a commitment to either naturalism or supernaturalism. That said, I think that considerations of parsimony and explanatory power favour rejecting supernaturalism in favour of naturalism.

**Financial support.** Work on this article was supported by a grant from the John Templeton Foundation (JTF grant #62683: ‘Panpsychism and Pan(en)theism: Philosophy of Mind Meets Philosophy of Religion’). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect any held by the Foundation or any of its representatives.

### Notes

1. Henceforth, I will use ‘theism’ to refer to traditional theism.
2. Chalmers does not endorse panpsychism outright, but he is at least sympathetic to panpsychism and defends it.
3. Nagel does not really help his readers given that, in *Mind and Cosmos*, he both expresses a commitment to neutral monism (Nagel (2012), 5) and describes his view as panpsychist (*ibid.*, 57). He then refers to the ‘proto-psychic’ (*ibid.*, 61) and ‘protomenta features of the basic constituents’ (*ibid.*, 63).
4. Nagel takes fundamental properties to be both protomenta and protophysical (the distinction between physical and mental is conceptual). Strawson (2008) endorses a powerful qualities theory on which the distinction between qualities/categorical properties and powers/dispositional properties is merely conceptual. Physical properties (whose manifestations *qua* dispositions we measure in the sciences) are also experiential properties (with which we are familiar ‘from the inside’). (For a proposal that best develops Strawson’s thinking about properties in a way useful for panpsychists, see Mørch (2020).)

5. Leidenhag does not label the panpsychists whom she contrasts with emergentists as *constitutive panpsychists*, but that is the view she has in mind when contrasting *panpsychism* with *emergentism*. She tends to underemphasize that some panpsychists endorse strong emergence. See Seager (2017) for an example of emergentist panpsychism.
6. I assume a version of actualism on which the truthmakers for metaphysical modal claims are the powers of objects in the universe (see Heil (2015)).

## References

- Buckareff A (2016) Theological realism, divine action, and divine location. In Buckareff A and Nagasawa Y (eds), *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 213–233.
- Buckareff A (2022) *Pantheism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chalmers D (1996) *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goff P (2019) Did the universe design itself? *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 85, 99–122.
- Heil J (2015) Aristotelian supervenience. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 115, 41–56.
- Leidenhag J (2021) *Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation*. New York: T&T Clark.
- Leslie J (2001) *Infinite Minds: A Philosophical Cosmology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mørch H (2020) Does dispositionalism entail panpsychism? *Topoi* 39, 1073–1088.
- Nagel T (1979) Panpsychism. In *Mortal Questions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 181–195.
- Nagel T (2002) The psychophysical nexus. In *Concealment and Exposure: And Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 194–235.
- Nagel T (2012) *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly Wrong*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pfeifer K (2016) Pantheism as panpsychism. In Buckareff A and Nagasawa Y (eds), *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 41–49.
- Seager W (2017) Panpsychist infusion. In Brüntrup G and Jaskolla L (eds), *Panpsychism: Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 229–248.
- Sprigge T (2006) *The God of Metaphysics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strawson G (2008) The identity of the categorical and the dispositional. *Analysis* 68, 271–282.
- Strawson G (2012) Real naturalism. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 86, 125–154.
- Strawson G (2020) What does ‘physical’ mean? A prolegomenon to physicalist panpsychism. In Seager W (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Panpsychism*. New York: Routledge, pp. 317–339.