



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

## Minding Creation: an overview

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### Abstract

The doctrine of creation is a teaching shared across many faith traditions that requires urgent inter-disciplinary attention today. Joanna Leidenhag's book *Minding Creation* considers how the philosophy of panpsychism might be beneficial to the Christian articulation of creation. This article is an overview of the book, in order to contextualize the four responses and author's reply that follows.

**Keywords:** panpsychism; creation; Christianity; Leidenhag

*Minding Creation: Theological Panpsychism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Leidenhag 2021) is a book about how recent debates within philosophy of mind may be of constructive use for the Christian doctrine of creation. Questions regarding the place of souls or minds within God's creation have always been a part of Christian theology. However, the Christian tradition puts forth no ecumenically agreed metaphysical view, such that a variety of possibilities continue to be explored and weighed today. In keeping with this tradition of open debate, this book investigates how the recent revival of interest in panpsychism by contemporary analytic philosophers might benefit Christian theology.

Panpsychism is a family of theories within philosophy of mind, which seeks to explain the existence of consciousness in the human person by positing a very basic form of mentality (psyche) as fundamental throughout the natural world (pan). Panpsychism is not a new idea; it is ancient, global, and has been a persistent, if minority, part of the Christian tradition. Panpsychism is neither a passing fad, nor an attempt to jump on some trendy philosophical bandwagon. Yet, the potential of panpsychism for Christian theology has never been fully realized. So long as panpsychism is disentangled from naturalism, then panpsychism offers significant advantages to Christian theology over competing ontologies. I refer to this disentangled form of panpsychism as 'theological panpsychism'. The basic idea is that when God created everything out of nothing, consciousness (souls, soul-stuff) was one of the first fundamental ingredients included right from the start, out of which all other things are made.

Neither panpsychism, nor any other ontology, can generate or even arbitrate between the central claims of the Christian faith. Panpsychism is compatible with a wide range of theological views; it cannot settle these disputes for us. Instead, the role of this dialogue between philosophy and theology is to find a suitable framework upon which Christian worship, biblical exegesis, and doctrinal claims can rest and be most clearly articulated. As such a scaffolding, panpsychism provides powerful resources for seeing creation as a cathedral of praise for the glory of the Creator.

While the teaching of creation *ex nihilo* describes how God relates to creation, the question of how this universe relates back to God depends, at least in part, upon what type of universe God has created. As such, the doctrine of creation is always, and must always, engage with other academic disciplines. There is a growing consensus that recent attempts to describe reality in exhaustively physical categories are insufficient in light of the undeniable reality of human consciousness. Furthermore, to separate humanity from the rest of creation in such absolute ontological terms runs contrary to the logic of both evolutionary and ecological thinking. Reductive physicalism and radical substance dualism are unlikely to prove beneficial to the quest for greater understanding of either ourselves or the wider world. What ontologies best walk the *via media* between these two unsatisfactory options? This book examines two such *viae mediae*, emergence theory and panpsychism.

In chapter 1, I argue that the expansive, if not imperialistic, tendency within emergence theory to become ‘emergentism’ stands on shaky scientific grounds, masks deep philosophical problems, and is in serious tension with belief in God’s transcendence. This provides impetus to turn to the second *via media*, panpsychism. Chapter 2 tells the story of the recent revival of panpsychism in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind through an extended military metaphor: first, a campaign, where Thomas Nagel, David J. Chalmers, and Galen Strawson put panpsychism on the map; second, the battle of dealing with objections against panpsychism; third, the brokering of a new alliance between panpsychism and theism. Although panpsychism does not entail belief in God, panpsychists typically use either the causal principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* or the Principle of Sufficient Reason to reject (super-strong) emergence theory. Therefore, it would be fitting and consistent for such panpsychists to extend the same reasoning to the universe as a whole and so affirm theism along the line of the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

Above I asserted that panpsychism has long been part of the Christian tradition. Chapter 3 provides a short historical interlude to reinforce this point by showing how Gottfried von Leibniz used panpsychism within his theological argumentation. Leibniz used panpsychism to argue for (i) the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, (ii) a view of creation as a single, comprehensive order, and (iii) a sacramental ontology. These arguments are the seeds for the more constructive proposals found within chapters 4 and 5. By highlighting how a classical theist such as Leibniz employed panpsychism in defence of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, this interlude further distances panpsychism from Process theology.

In chapters 1 and 2, the argument for the adoption of panpsychism within the Christian doctrine of creation has been rather cautious and defensive. It was only argued that panpsychism is a more philosophically robust and theologically flexible theory of mind than emergentism for Christian theologians to adopt. What theological benefits might panpsychism offer to Christian theologians? Chapters 4 and 5 assess the fecundity of panpsychism in two contentious areas of contemporary theological debate; namely, models of divine action and Christian responses to the ecological crisis. One might say that these chapters plant the three seeds gathered from Leibniz’s theology to see what might grow in contemporary soil.

The theology of divine action, or articulating how the Triune God acts in creation, has become a problem and even a ‘crisis’ in contemporary theology (Saunders 2002, 215). Chapter 4 unpicks the scientific, ethical, and theological challenges summarized by the epithet ‘interventionism’, and evaluates the responses put forward by Robert J. Russell regarding quantum indeterminacy, David Ray Griffin on divine persuasion, and Kathryn Tanner’s account of double agency. These are significantly different theological projects, and not directly compatible with one another. Yet, the theological flexibility of

panpsychism as an ontology is shown inasmuch as a panpsychist ontology would strengthen each of these models of divine action, and help each position overcome the criticisms that have been levelled against it. What panpsychism uniquely provides is an ontological 'space' for the personal and interactive presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling the depths of creaturely subjectivity and calling all creatures towards flourishing. Whereas Thales stated that 'all things are full of gods', theological panpsychism might instead affirm that all things are indwelt by God.

Chapter 5 turns to the second great challenge for any contemporary doctrine of creation: the environmental crisis. First, I draw attention to the fact that the vast majority of eco-philosophers have adopted or assumed a version of panpsychism. However, without an account of transcendence to complement this panpsychist eco-philosophy, the ethical intentions of this account cannot be achieved. Nature is not an end in itself, but a sacrament pointing towards the Creator. Second, I examine four prominent theological ways of articulating the relationship between God, humanity, and creation: (a) humanity as a microcosm of all creation; (b) humanity as bearers of the image of God and stewards of God's cosmic household; (c) humanity as conversation partners invited into the Trinitarian dialogue, or even as protagonists in the Divine drama on the stage of creation; and (d) humanity as sole recipients of salvation in Jesus Christ, towards which creation serves a purely pedagogical purpose. In each case these important articulations of the Christian faith become unnecessarily and unacceptably distorted into a gross anthropocentrism when human beings alone are seen to have the necessary ontology for a reciprocal, dialogical relationship with God. If this one ontological shift to panpsychism is made, then these central metaphors and claims of Christianity can shed their anthropocentric bias and be incorporated into an environmentally fruitful doctrine of creation. That is to say, panpsychism is a way to preserve (not replace) these treasured teachings of the tradition.

The majority of this book argues that panpsychism is a promising philosophy that might be constructively combined with Christian thought. In the final section of the book, we see that panpsychism is also a metaphysic which can arise from within the life of worship and biblical reflection. I argue for the remythologization of neglected aspects of the biblical witness and Church's liturgy where nature is depicted as praising, shouting, lamenting, and mourning. This 'remythologizing', is inspired by Kevin Vanhoozer's proposal – itself a deliberate contrast to Rudolf Bultman's demythologizing proposal – to view Scriptural depictions of God's acts as real instances of divine communication (Vanhoozer 2010). I am proposing the same with regard to scriptural (and liturgical) depictions of non-divine, non-human speech. The realistic, but still metaphorical, interpretation of such passages inaugurates creation into the moral sphere of society, the boundaries of which are governed by the ability to have a voice. In Christian theology this means that the boundaries of the Church as the universal body of Christ united by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit become truly cosmic in scope. A panpsychist ontology allows the creation to be considered as a congregation, an *ecclesia* before the Creator.

The last two chapters show that a panpsychist doctrine of creation has something of a call-and-response structure. The God who spoke creation into being and whose active indwelling presence calls all creatures into union (chapter 4) receives the praises and the groanings of created beings (chapter 5). Moreover, the theological employment of panpsychism need not be seen as an instance of theologians chasing after the coat tails of philosophy's latest fashion, but as a metaphysic arising out of the Christian community's scriptural and liturgical reflection. The conclusion of this research is that the revival of panpsychism within analytic philosophy of mind should be welcomed by theologians in the coming years.

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