Priority Cosmopsychism and the Advaita Vedānta

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Abstract

The combination of panpsychism and priority monism leads to priority cosmopsychism, the view that the consciousness of individual sentient creatures is derivative of an underlying cosmic consciousness. It has been suggested that contemporary priority cosmopsychism parallels central ideas in the Advaita Vedānta tradition. The paper offers a critical evaluation of this claim. It argues that the Advaitic account of consciousness cannot be characterized as an instance of priority cosmopsychism, points out the differences between the two views, and suggests an alternative positioning of the Advaitic canon within the contemporary debate on monism and panpsychism.

1. Setting the Stage

There is a somewhat robust tendency in contemporary analytic philosophy to revitalize the contributions coming from the philosophical and spiritual traditions originated in South and East Asia. Systems of thought that had previously been investigated out of mere historical curiosity or desire for archeological erudition are being brought back at the center of the arena, and picked up to tackle central issues in substantive philosophical research (e.g., Thompson 2010; Flanagan 2013; Garfield 2015). This paper aligns with this trend and builds on the following rationale. The combination of panpsychism and priority monism has recently led to the formulation of priority cosmopsychism, an account of the nature and grounds of consciousness whose main propositions appear to run on par with the canon of classical Indian philosophy known as the Advaita Vedānta tradition. My purpose is to reconstruct priority cosmopsychism, compare it to the worldview emerging from the Advaita Vedānta tradition, and determine whether the Advaitic account of consciousness can in fact

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be characterized as an instance of priority cosmopsychism. The goal of the paper will be strictly comparative, and the discussion will not dwell into in-depth considerations about the cogency of the views under scrutiny. However, we shall see that a proper exploration of the comparison might feed contemporary debate with original ways of looking at known issues.

The paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 will review the tenets of panpsychism, existence monism, and priority monism, and introduce the combination of panpsychism and priority monism leading to priority cosmopsychism. Section 3 will recapitulate the main theses of the Advaita Vedānta tradition, paying special attention to its take on Brahmanic consciousness, individual selfhood, and physical plurality. Section 4 will ask whether the worldview formulated by the Advaita Vedānta can be characterized as an instance of priority cosmopsychism, argue that it cannot, and provide an alternative positioning of the Advaitic canon within the contemporary debate on monism and panpsychism.

2. The Road to Cosmopsychism

Contemporary philosophy of mind is reviving an old solution to a well-known problem. The well-known problem is what we can neutrally call the Problem of Consciousness (POC): explaining how mind, subjective experience, and consciousness may arise in a world made entirely of mindless, non-experiential, and unconscious stuff. The old solution is Panpsychism (PP), the view that mind, consciousness and experiential properties are part of the fundamental furniture of nature, and abide everywhere in concrete reality (Skrbina 2005; 2009).

The master argument for PP runs as follows (Chalmers 1996; for a historically informed survey of other arguments for PP, see Seager and Allen-Hermanson 2010). Some macro-level entities (e.g., human beings) instantiate phenomenal properties, and all macro-level entities are plausibly aggregates of micro-level parts (e.g., atoms, cells). But this, the argument goes,

is surprising, because micro-level physical particles are non-experiential. How could something intrinsically phenomenal (the property of being conscious) be instantiated by something intrinsically non-phenomenal (aggregates of atoms and cells)? No doubt that complex entities routinely exhibit novel macro-level properties thanks to the aggregation of their micro-level parts. For example, I enjoy the macro-level property of "having a liver" because some cells in my body have relevant intrinsic properties and operate together in appropriate ways. However, according to the mainstream understanding of POC, "having a consciousness" and "being a subject of experience" do not rank among the properties that may obtain thanks to the aggregation of non-experiential parts.

Faced with POC, PP answers by proposing that micro-level physical entities themselves instantiate phenomenal properties. In short, macro-level entities such as living organisms are able to instantiate experiential properties because the micro-level entities that constitute them instantiate experiential properties. PP can therefore be formulated as the combination of two key claims (where the term "ultimates" designates, intuitively, the most fundamental systems of nature).

(PP1)   The ultimates of nature are micro-level entities (e.g., atoms, cells).

(PP2)   All ultimates of nature instantiate phenomenal properties.

By positing that phenomenal properties are common currency at the level of the minimal constituents of physical reality, PP accommodates POC: macro-level entities inherit their phenomenal properties from the phenomenal properties of their micro-level parts. Yet, the move comes with some costs. One is a price of intuitive appeal: the ascription of phenomenal properties to the ontological simples recognized by the natural sciences goes against the intuition that phenomenal properties may be exemplified only by complex entities

(e.g., biological systems endowed with an appropriate cognitive apparatus). But perhaps the most important issue is the so-called Combination Problem.

Suppose we accept that the ontological simples recognized by the natural sciences have phenomenal properties, and that the phenomenal properties of mereologically complex entities are derivative of the phenomenal properties of ontological simples. If the phenomenal properties of macro-level entities depend on the phenomenal properties of their micro-level parts, then the first-person phenomenology enjoyed by creatures like us should obtain out of some kind of "combination" or "sum" of the phenomenal properties inherent to our micro-level parts. But how could micro-phenomenal properties ever combine to yield (the complexity of) our mental life? Critics of PP argue that the problem of explaining how micro-phenomenal properties, states, or processes might merge to form macro-phenomenal properties, states, or processes is just as daunting as POC itself (e.g., Goff 2009). In this sense, PP's ascription of phenomenal properties to micro-level entities and the ensuing cost of rejecting an orthodox physicalist ontology (one where ontological simples have no phenomenal properties) do not seem to be traded off by an adequate explanatory gain. Therefore, PP should be abandoned.

At this point, there are two options for PP. One is to find a way around the Combination Problem while remaining committed to PP1 and PP2. The other is to bite the bullet and revise the theory. Let us focus on the second strategy. There are two main versions of monism in contemporary metaphysics (Schaffer 2014). One, Existence Monism (EM), argues as follows (Horgan and Potrč 2008).

(EM)   There exists exactly one concrete particular: the whole cosmos.

The other, Priority Monism (PM), argues as follows (Schaffer 2010).

(PM)   There exists exactly one *basic* concrete particular: the whole cosmos.

EM holds that the cosmos is the only concrete object token (i.e., there are no other concrete particulars besides the cosmos). PM holds that the cosmos is the only *basic* concrete object token (i.e., there may be many other *non-basic* concrete particulars). PM differs from EM in that it accepts, or is compatible with, the existence of a plurality of concrete objects, but maintains that the cosmos as a whole is ontologically prior to, or more fundamental than, the concrete objects it contains. To use a familiar metaphor, think of this the same way a circle relates to its semicircles, which could not exist qua semicircles without the circle itself.

In its standard formulation, PM is presented as a theory of the constitution of material objects and is not designed to apply to entities outside the realm of the physical (which, presumably, excludes phenomenal properties). However, consider the following manipulation of PP via PM. We expressed PP as the combination of the claim that the fundamental systems of nature are micro-level entities (PP1), and the claim that all fundamental systems of nature instantiate phenomenal properties (PP2). By assuming PM and its suggestion that fundamentality should be looked for "in the big picture" rather than among the smallest constituents of concrete reality, we can reverse PP1.

(PP1*)   There is exactly one natural ultimate: the whole cosmos.   [by PM]

(PP2)   All ultimates of nature instantiate phenomenal properties.

The upshot of the amendment is a hybrid view which takes the basic outline of PP and feeds it with PM. Following Mathews (2011), Jaskolla and Buck (2012), Shani (2015), and Nagasawa and Wager (2016), we can call such a view Priority Cosmopsychism (PC).

Parallel to PM's claim that there exists exactly one basic object token, PC maintains that there exists exactly one basic consciousness: cosmic consciousness. Once again, this is not to say that lower-level consciousnesses (e.g., human consciousnesses) do not exist. It means, rather, that cosmic consciousness is ontologically prior to lower-level consciousnesses and that lower-level consciousnesses are derivative of the cosmic one. Moreover, parallel to PP's claim that all ultimates of nature instantiate phenomenal properties, PC maintains that the physical cosmos, which taken as a whole is the one truly fundamental system of nature, instantiates phenomenal properties. PP claimed that micro-level ultimates instantiated the most fundamental form of phenomenality, and that macro-level phenomenality should be accounted for relative to the phenomenality of micro-level ultimates. Likewise, PC argues that the physical cosmos as a whole instantiates the most fundamental form of phenomenality (cosmic consciousness), and that the phenomenal properties instantiated by creatures like us should be accounted for relative to cosmic consciousness. Summing up, PC can be expressed as the combination of the following four basic claims.

(PC1)   There is exactly one natural ultimate: the physical cosmos.

(PC2)   The physical cosmos instantiates phenomenal properties (cosmic consciousness).

(PC3)   There are macro-level subjects of experience (e.g., human consciousnesses).

(PC4)   The phenomenal properties of macro-level subjects of experience are derivative of cosmic consciousness.

PC promises to improve on PP because it neutralizes both POC and the Combination Problem. POC is dealt with on par with PP: phenomenal properties are available to mereologically complex entities because they are part of the fundamental furniture of nature.

The Combination Problem is avoided because the type of phenomenality taken to be part of the fundamental furniture of nature is already macro-level: cosmic consciousness. By reasoning along these lines, PC does face the mirror image of the Combination Problem, one that we can call the Decombination Problem: giving a precise meaning to the expression "derivative of" appearing in PC4 and, correlatively, explaining how the conscious mental life exhibited by creatures like us may originate from cosmic consciousness. However, for proponents of PC the prospects for a satisfactory answer to the Decombination Problem are more promising than the prospects for a satisfactory answer to the Combination Problem (Nagasawa and Wager 2016 hint at some possible solutions), which should give PC a comparative advantage over PP.

Interestingly, PC appears to parallel central ideas in the Advaita Vedānta tradition (AVT), according to which the streams of consciousness of individual sentient creatures are grounded in a unique, universal consciousness known as Brahman. Both PC and AVT, in short, ground the phenomenal properties manifested in conscious experience on features of a broader, all-encompassing consciousness underlying all individual minds. But besides this coarse-grained resemblance, it is unclear whether PC and AVT can be characterized as variants of a single theory-type. Shani (2015) encourages the assumption of a deep parallelism between the two views. By contrast, Albahari (forthcoming) rejects it and builds on a few disanalogies between PC and AVT to argue against PC. Let us ask, then: is it the case that the worldview presented by AVT can be characterized as an instance of PC? If not, what specific account of the relationship between cosmic consciousness and individual consciousness is championed by AVT, and where would it situate in the logical space of the debate summarized in this section? To answer these questions, we need to review the tenets of AVT.

3. Advaita Vedānta 101

This section will provide a hyper-compressed summary of the following aspects of AVT: its central metaphysical claim (the affirmation of Brahman), its view of the physical world, its characterization of the relationship between the practical world and Brahman, and its account of the relationship between individual consciousnesses and Brahman. The summary will not go into the ethical and soteriological features of the Advaitic system (the notion that awareness of Brahman leads to happiness, moral perfection, and liberation from the cycle of transmigration), as they are not crucial to the comparison with PC. Besides the primary sources (Deutsch and Dalvi 2004), the secondary sources backing this reconstruction are Deutsch (1968), Isayeva (1993), Potter (1981), Rambachan (2006), and Sharma (2004). For a paper-sized introduction to AVT, see Menon (2006).

The essence of AVT's message is captured by the following verse from the *Vivekacūḍāmani* (Prabhavananda and Isherwood 1978), the treatise where Adi Shankara expounds the founding principles of the Advaitic philosophy: *Brahma satyam jagat mithyā, jīvo brahmaiva nāparah* ("Brahman is alone true, and this world of plurality is an error; the individual self is not different from Brahman"). The central propositions of AVT can thus be initially stated as follows. There is a fundamental reality underlying all objects and experiences (Brahman); Brahman is pure existence, pure consciousness, and pure bliss; only Brahman is truly real; belief in physical plurality and individual selfhood arises because of ignorance and confusion. Let us explore these tenets in a bit more detail.

The principle responsible for the appearance of common-sense reality is *māyā*. Through *māyā*, Brahman appears to the mind of individual knowers as the manifold world of practical (*vyāvahārika*) experience, i.e., as the familiar world of objects, properties, relations and events we accept as real as we go through our non-philosophical lives. But the world of practical experience does not have ultimate existence. It is dependent on pure consciousness

and disappears upon the attainment of knowledge (*jñānd*, *vidyā*). *Māyā*, in this sense, can be characterized as the principle whereby Brahman conceals (*āvarana-śakti*) and distorts (*viksepa-śakti*) its true nature within the mind of individual knowers. Importantly, there is no point at which Brahman creates or changes into common-sense reality. At the same time, the appearance of the practical world is not a figment of our mental activity, and AVT suggests that subjective idealism (of the *esse-est-percipi* kind as applied to human-like minds) is not a proper implication of the doctrine of *māyā*. On the one hand, the appearance of *vyāvahārika* reality is a feature of the activity of Brahman, which exists within Brahman and is not created by the individual mind. On the other, whenever an individual mind takes the appearance of the practical world as the appearance of something real, and ignores that it is in fact a mode of appearance of Brahman itself, it falls into confusion and ignorance (*avidyā*).

Only Brahman is real (*trikālābādhyam*, "that which cannot be denied by any other experience at any time") and reality is non-dual (*ekam evādvitīyam brahma*). The world of ordinary experience is thus *avivarta*, a superimposition on Brahman, and *sadasadvilaksana*, not fully describable in terms of either real or unreal. The terminology used by AVT is a bit tricky here, but the overall thesis is clear. The practical world is "not unreal" since its manifestation is a given, it occurs within Brahman and is not a creation of the individual self. Therefore: the practical world is "not unreal" because it enjoys objective appearance. But the practical world is "not real" either, since belief in the reality of the world of ordinary experience is eliminated once knowledge of Brahman is attained. Therefore: the practical world is "not real" because it is metaphysically nonexistent (its appearance is an empty one).

Brahman therefore appears as the world of physical plurality without undergoing an intrinsic change or modification, and practical reality is best understood as an illusory appearance that persists as long as Brahman is represented through the spectacles of *avidyā*. In AVT, the question of the relationship between Brahman and the practical world is initially

asked, and answered in terms of the theories of *vivartavāda* (the theory that effects are modes of appearance of their causes) and *satkāryavāda* (the theory that effects preexist in their causes). But as soon as the practitioner is ready to acknowledge the exclusive reality of Brahman, the representational errors of *avidyā* are removed (an operation termed *apavāda*, "de-superimposition"), the mind is led back to the undifferentiated fullness of Brahman, practical reality is rejected, and all questions about the relationship between Brahman and the physical world dissolve.

The appearance of our own mental individuality (*jīva*) is itself credited to *avidyā* and *māyā*. We appear to ourselves as individual doers (*karta*) and enjoyers (*bhokta*) of the practical world out of a natural condition of ignorance and confusion. AVT recognizes the first-person appearance of individual selfhood and physical objects. But it repeatedly stresses that from an absolute standpoint (*pāramārthika sattā*, "the plane of absolute existence"), individual minds as well as physical objects are empty appearances.

In order to overcome the *jīva* and attain liberation, subjects must acquire self-knowledge (*atma jñāna*), reach the highest stage of meditation (*nirvikalpa samādhi*), and experience the identity between their deep self (*Ātman*) and the pure consciousness of Brahman (*tat tvam asi*). Importantly, Advaitic accounts of the constitution of the *jīva* (most notably, the *pratimbra-vāda*, the "theory of reflection", and the *avaccheda-vāda*, the "theory of limitation") are not metaphysical accounts of the constitution of a real entity, but rather epistemic accounts of the factors that generate the illusion of the *jīva*. Consciousnesses other than Brahman are not accepted in the Advaitic ontology, and no account of the their constitution is given. By contrast, AVT simply attempts to illuminate how the internal workings of *avidyā* fabricate the fallacious "sense of separate existence" fueling the illusion of multiple individual selves.

With this in mind, we can encapsulate the worldview provided by AVT into four basic claims, structurally isomorphic to PC1-4.

(AVT1) There is exactly one (fundamental) entity: Brahman.

(AVT2) Brahman is not a physical entity instantiating phenomenal properties: it *is* pure consciousness.

(AVT3) Physical plurality and individual selfhood are illusory appearances: there are no real macro-level subjects of experience (e.g., human consciousnesses).

(AVT4) The apparent phenomenal properties of macro-level subjects of experience are derivative of Brahman.

4. A Different Kind of Psychism

The comparison between PC1-4 and AVT1-4 reveals that PC and AVT are connected by two important similarities and kept apart by two major differences. The two similarities are due to the correspondence between PC1 and AVT1 and to the correspondence between PC4 and AVT4. Both PC and AVT are committed to the existence of an underlying universal consciousness and see it as the ground for the mental life of individual subjects. Just as in PC the phenomenal properties instantiated by mereologically complex entities are derivative of the phenomenal properties instantiated by the cosmos, so for AVT the phenomenal properties of individual consciousness are derivative of the undifferentiated consciousness of Brahman.

However, as anticipated, there are also two major differences. The first difference (already observed by Albahari, forthcoming) emerges from the contrast between PC2 and AVT2. According to PC, there is a physical cosmos which, taken as a whole, functions as the instantiation base for cosmic consciousness, which in turn grounds the mental life of sentient creatures. For AVT, by contrast, there is no physical universe instantiating Brahman. Recall

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that, according to AVT, belief in the ultimate reality of the practical world is a form of ignorance. While PC takes off with the assumption of a physical universe, makes it instantiate cosmic consciousness, and thereby ground the phenomenal properties of mereologically complex entities, for AVT common-sense reality is ultimately inexistent and cosmic consciousness is not instantiated by anything physical (not even by anything "maximally physical" such as the material universe as a whole). Bottom line: the "cosmic" element inherent to PC is absent in AVT, which rejects PC's appeal to realism about the physical cosmos.

PC would perhaps come closer to the Advaitic picture if PC were construed as a thesis committed to idealist monism, i.e., to a variant of monism which rejects the dualism implicit in the idea that cosmic consciousness is a feature of a physical cosmos which, besides consciousness, possesses other features (e.g., spatio-temporal properties). Yet, the disanalogy would persist. For example, Shani (2015) does seem to construe PC in the idealist sense. He claims that space, time, and physicality are constructions *within* cosmic consciousness rather than features of a concrete whole within which universal consciousness is embedded. However, the same cannot be said about the brand of PC discussed by Nagasawa and Wager (2016), who construe PC precisely as the thesis that the (independently existent) physical universe instantiates cosmic consciousness. So the Brahman-based picture presented by AVT does not square with PC as a theory-type. Furthermore, even if one accepts that Shani's idealist rendition of PC avoids the dualism implicit in other varieties of PC and that this brings his brand of PC closer to AVT, Shani's view still appears to construe the physical cosmos as a real entity, albeit derivative of the background of cosmic consciousness. This stands in contrast to the straightforwardly anti-realist take on the practical world spelled out by AVT (I am grateful to Itay Shani for pressing me to clarify this point).

The second difference emerges from the contrast between PC3 and AVT3. PC assumes the objective reality of macro-level consciousnesses other than the cosmic one (e.g., human consciousnesses), and faces the issue of providing an explanation of how the mental life enjoyed by creatures like us may derive from the phenomenal properties instantiated by the cosmos (the Decombination Problem). AVT, by contrast, rejects the question, since it rejects the reality of macro-level consciousnesses, and regards the appearance of individual selfhood as an illusion that strikes us as veridical out of ignorance about the true nature of things.

Recall the different stances on plurality championed by PC and AVT. PC is compatible with the existence of a plurality of concrete physical organisms having each a private mind. In AVT, by contrast, the existence of any object or subject other than Brahman is rejected from the start. For PC, macro-level consciousnesses are part of the ontology and an account of their constitution in relation to cosmic consciousness is needed. For AVT, macro-level consciousnesses are ultimately non-existent and no account of their constitution is needed. What for PC is an issue requiring a metaphysical answer (explaining the constitution of a real entity) is translated by AVT into an issue requiring an error theory (explaining the emergence of an illusory manifestation). PC is compelled to explain how the reality of differentiated subjects of experience can emerge from the cosmic consciousness postulated at the base of the model. By contrast, AVT's task is to explain how, given the absolute, non-dual reality of Brahman, the deceitful appearance of the independent reality of individual selfhood can emerge. No doubt this is a major problem, one that threatens the cogency of the whole Advaitic system and appears to have no straightforward solution. Yet, it is fundamentally different from the Decombination Problem.

On these grounds, we can safely conclude that the account of consciousness surfacing from AVT cannot be characterized as an instance of PC. Placing the Advaitic view under the umbrella of PC would not do justice to the depth of the disanalogies just pointed out. This

leaves us with the question: what brand of metaphysics is defended by AVT, then? Emphasis on the claim that "Brahman alone is real" and on the ensuing unreality of any object or subject other than Brahman might seem to suggest that the Advaitic view is best characterized as a version of PC committed to EM rather than to PM. Therefore, one may hypothesize that AVT actually convey a form of Existence Cosmopsychism (EC), i.e., the view that the cosmos as a whole is the only concrete object token and that such a unique object token instantiates a unique cosmic consciousness (Brahman). However, even this option would be inappropriate. The reason is that EC can be expressed as the combination of the following three claims.

     (EC1)   There exists exactly one concrete particular: the physical cosmos.

     (EC2)   There exists exactly one consciousness: cosmic consciousness (Brahman).

     (EC3)   Cosmic consciousness is instantiated by the physical cosmos.

Yet again, in affirming that existence should be attributed exclusively to Brahman (AVT1) and in denying that the physical world is real (AVT2), AVT is bound to reject EC1 and EC3. Both the claim that the cosmos of common-sense reality enjoys objective existence and the claim that Brahman is instantiated by the physical cosmos run counter to the anti-dualist core of the Advaitic worldview.

     Hence, it appears that to capture the philosophical message of AVT one would need a super austere version of EC which suspends the commitment to EC1 and EC3 and preserves only EC2, stripped of the "cosmic" ingredient. Such a view, that we can tentatively call Absolute Monopsychism (AM), would reduce to the following principle.

     (AM)   There exists exactly one particular: a consciousness [Brahman].

On AM, a non-physical consciousness is the only existing particular, and the internal organization of this unique non-physical consciousness provides the basis for the fallacious appearance of individual selfhood and physical plurality. Perhaps there are other "isms" on the market which would fit the Advaitic view equally well, such as "absolute idealism" or "absolute mentalism". However, partly due to their complex historical lineage (Sprigge 2006), such labels appear looser than the precise thesis stated by AM. This, in turn, would yield the practical disadvantage of failing to provide a clear-cut, lightweight tool for the classification of the Advaitic view within current discussion on monism and panpsychism. Thus, for the present purposes, it is convenient to maintain that AVT are best characterized as presenting an AM-type metaphysics.

One is tempted to ask if, besides providing a blueprint for the correct positioning of AVT within the contemporary debate on monism and panpsychism, AM could also be useful to engage in substantive debate about the nature of consciousness. A minimally adequate analysis of the issue is far beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, as anticipated, the view does appear to come with a benefit. Like PC, AM neutralizes the Combination Problem. At the same time, by doing without a plurality of individual consciousnesses dependent on the cosmic one, AM dissolves the Decombination Problem as well, or at least relaxes its substantial grip by turning it into the issue of providing an appropriate error theory for the appearance of individual selves. In other words, the discussion switches from an analysis of how objectively existent macro-consciousnesses may form against the background of absolute consciousness, to an analysis of how the phenomenal appearance of (objectively non-existent) macro-consciousnesses or selves may arise within absolute consciousness. The thought is not completely alien to current debate. At least as far as its eliminativist side is concerned, it resonates with so-called "illusionist" approaches to consciousness (e.g., Dennett

1991; Rey 1995; Metzinger 2011; Frankish 2016). Whether this potential advantage is worth paying the price of dispensing with the physical world and with a plurality of individual minds is best left to further speculation.[1]

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