3. Reflections upon Mørch, consciousness, panpsychism and a teeny tiny bit of animal ethics

I have always found panpsychism (at least in the more philosophical and less spiritual sense) to be one of the more amusing solutions to the problem of consciousness. Intuitively, it feels ridiculous, but intellectually it is unavoidably more elegant and foolproof than a completely materialist stance, which usually – if not always – fails to answer the central question, and acts almost as it isn't there.

(Note that I'm using materialism and physicalism synonymously throughout this essay, referring to the simple standpoint that everything that exists must be physical, or it doesn't really exist)

Now let's dial back a bit – what even is this "central question" of which I speak? There are after all lots of questions to be asked about consciousness, but the one where I feel every firm materialist fails the most formidably is also the most basic one: what even is consciousness?

This is not inherently a question about the complexity of human thought, although we often assume consciousness to be a natural consequence of that (which I will be coming back to). It is a question of the *qualia*, the *sensation* of the thoughts being thought, and the sensory experience itself. Why and how do we *feel* the taste of food, instead of merely processing it.

A lot of materialists would call this differentiation delusional, stating that these are inherently the same thing, and the famous "zombie problem" is perhaps the most common rebuttal: Imagine, if you will, a world that looks and acts identical to this one, but where every human is a "philosophical zombie". That is – their brains are merely computers processing input and generating output. As long as you can conceive of this possible universe existing, and being different from ours, despite it being physically the same as ours, you inevitably agree that consciousness existing in our universe is a non-physical issue.

Another favorite of mine is "Mary's room": A girl named Mary has since birth been imprisoned in a black-and-white room. There are no mirrors, and she is forced to wear a black-and-white

costume of some sort, so she has never seen any other color. There is however a great library detailing every knowable physical property of light and color, including how our eyes and brain process these. So, by the time she has read it all, she knows everything there is to know – physically that is – about color, even though she has never seen any herself.

Now imagine that Mary is let loose into our colorful world. The question is: does Mary gain any new knowledge? It seems impossible that she already knew what the color red looks like without ever having seen it, but if we grant that she did gain new knowledge, does that not guarantee that conscious experience must be something non-physical?

There are, as always, counterarguments, but I don't want to dwell too long on my problems with consciousness and physicalism. Let's say we agree that a physical approach to consciousness is inherently faulty – what other alternatives are there? Religion is perhaps the simplest one, but there's also not too much to say about it. As mean as it is to say, I do view it as a bit of a cop-out.

Panpsychism as a philosophy, can also seem almost religious, but in the way Hedda Hassel Mørch, and many others like her presents it, it's almost more of an attempt to get as close back to materialism as possible, while still recognizing consciousness as something transcendent. Okay, so consciousness is not matter and energy, but could it be *like* matter and energy? Something fundamental that is spread out into the universe alongside those two? This is, if I'm not misunderstanding her completely, the "insides" of everything that Mørch describes.

Of course, one very obvious problem with this is why we don't observe consciousness everywhere, but only within living things, but there is a problematic leap within this objection: we don't really ever observe consciousness anywhere, outside our individual self. Of course I can observe a fellow human or animal react negatively to pain, but as established earlier, a philosophical zombie with the goal of self-preservation might act the exact same way, to benefit from my empathy. It's not like we don't already use this logic in regard to boiling lobsters or crushing insects.

We only project consciousness onto things based on how similar they are to us. Therefore, there isn't really that much of a bigger leap to suggest everything is conscious, than to suggest that every human is conscious.

At this point consciousness becomes quite abstract and hard to talk about. Something like the sun isn't observing the world around it, or processing thoughts the way we are, and I doubt someone like Mørch would claim so, so let's zoom back in and talk about what things might have conscious experience similar to that of humans. Most obvious in that category is animals.

Most people I talk to about this assume that animals experience consciousness on a sort of gliding scale, which usually correlates to how intelligent we perceive them to be. A dolphin or great ape is probably further up than a fly or amoeba for instance. In relationship to a panpsychist or non-materialist view of consciousness we can formulate that "consciousness arises or at least concentrates wherever information is being processed" and how much consciousness simply derives from how much information. This turns *information* itself into something reaching beyond the material, but is otherwise a very elegant and appealing solution, and is even pretty compatible with and similar to the most common materialist views.

This gliding scale is also very closely related to commonly held theories of animal ethics. If you are more conscious, you experience "more suffering per suffering" so to speak, and therefore a human life is worth more, but not infinitely more than an animal life.

This becomes problematic when we introduce machine intelligence into the system, which can process loads more information than humans, and way more efficiently. By the same logic that allows us to kill animals for food, should we allow robots to kill us if it furthers their goals? Would it not be more ethical for us to simply move out of the way for the more conscious artificially intelligent beings?

Another more frightening argument, that I heard recently, is that because animals rely more on sensory data in how they engage with the world, they might actually be more conscious than us, even if we grant that they are less intelligent. As humans, we can tell each other "the stove is hot, don't touch it", but most, if not all animals have way too limited language to communicate concepts in such a way, and therefore rely more on being scared of the heat itself. Evolutionarily, they might benefit more from consciousness than us, and therefore actually feel the pain more intensely, in the same way that a dog smells better than we do (smell as in sense smells with their nose, not emitting less stink, which they certainly don't).

To me, these thought experiments are fascinating, but I still – after all my criticisms – sort of favor something closer to materialism, perhaps purely based on intuition. Every view on the matter at hand seems far from perfect, and I suspect this is one of the philosophical fields

where most of the heavy lifting has yet to be done. This is why I think it's important to engage with seemingly fantastical theories like panpsychism, and take them seriously, because – as cliché as it is – I earnestly do believe the answer is somewhere in between.