It's About Time:
Reframing the Context of the Mind-body Debate
(Draft Version)

by Arthur Preston Smith, 4/8/08

Introduction

In arguing for his panexperientialist (panpsychist), "process" solution to the mind-body problem, David Ray Griffin presents the thesis that progress in the debate on it has been unnecessarily hindered by what he believes to be misconceptions that arbitrarily and unnecessarily restrict the scope of the debate — along with some egregious fallacies. Although you might not like the model he presents in *Unsnarling the World-Knot: Consciousness, Freedom, and the Mind-Body Problem* (Griffin 1998),[1] his case that it is about time for us to rethink the terms of the debate is a strong one. This essay continues where he left off.

I begin by identifying some of misconceptions that have hampered the debate, e.g., in recent years it seems almost axiomatic that the only two viable models the mind/matter relationship are monistic materialism and Cartesian dualism. Then I also argue, along with Griffin, that attempts to reduce the mind/matter (consciousness/world) dichotomy to a kind of property/substance relationship, is a category mistake. I then argue that the most useful model of the mind/matter dichotomy is that of self and other, which can best be defined in temporal terms, i.e., consciousness per se is first person, singular, present tense, and the world is third person, plural, past tense.

There is both good news and bad news in this model. The bad news is that we are not likely to find the origins of consciousness by studying the brain, although we can acquire a lot of other useful information about consciousness from it. The good news is that we have been studying consciousness for millennia in the form of introspection, a science that is probably best developed in Eastern meditation practices. We have also been studying it for a few centuries now in ordinary, empirical science. We really don't have to invent anything new. Leading edge neuroscience is a useful and promising extension to that age-old method for understanding consciousness in relationship to the world.

Misconceptions that Have Hindered the Debate

The Only Options Are Monistic Materialism and Cartesian Dualism

Of these, the most problematic is the proposition (or axiom) that the debate be limited to two models, monistic materialism and Cartesian dualism. The current scarcity of references to the ideas of Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant in contemporary debate is so conspicuous it almost seems Orwellian, the kind of historical revisionism that might be imposed by some sort of philosophical "Big Brother." This, of course, is not the case. The reason for the absence was given to me by the professor in my very first, undergraduate class in the philosophy of mind. Although Hume successfully refuted Berkeley, the panpsychist models of Spinoza and Leibniz were not refuted per se. What was refuted was their rationalist methodology of attempting to derive the entire universe via logic from first principles. Although not Orwellian, this explanation left me, with an uneasy feeling that some very important ideas had been lost in the shuffle.

The result of the reduction of this debate to only two alternatives is an intellectual Armageddon analogous to that of a nuclear war. Both sides are annihilated other, but neither wins. I will not rehash this debate here, as Griffin has already so, as have I, in my doctoral dissertation.[2] Furthermore, if you do not buy Griffin's and my arguments, I refer you to those that the materialists and dualists have made against each other. After reading them, I Berkeleyan idealism begins to look good by comparison, and panpsychism, which has survived the process relatively unscathed (largely because it has not been considered worthy of refutation), looks even better. Accordingly, I question the continued rationality of limiting the debate to two theories that have both been so thoroughly refuted. The time has come to rummage through the ash heaps of the history of philosophy and look for other alternatives that could be made to work better — with some major revision, of course.

Consciousness Equals Mind

This reduction of consciousness to a function of the rational mind led Descartes to the counterintuitive belief that his beloved little dog was nothing more than a machine fashioned by nature. One need not be able to think, rationally or otherwise, to be conscious. Even human consciousness includes various forms of subliminal awareness that takes place well below the level of conscious thought. This is a point that contemporary panpsychists (from William James forward) are quick to make. Although panpsychists believe Descartes's dog was, they do not believe that the little pooch could engage Descartes in philosophical discussion. This is why Griffin prefers to use the term "panexperientialism" over "panpsychism," to avoid the confusion that results when a "psyche" is imputed to a water molecule. Although panpsychism has some serious problems, this need not be one of them.

Having made this distinction, I will generally substitute the terms "consciousness" or "consciousness per se" for the capacity to perceive, observe, or otherwise know, and "the world" for the realm of entities perceived, observed, or otherwise known. I find these terms to be much more precise and useful than Descartes's categories of thought and extension in distinguishing consciousness per se and the things we are conscious of.

Human beings are conscious of consciousness (in any ordinary sense).

Setting aside mystical and other extraordinary experiences, human beings are not ordinarily conscious of consciousness — at least, in the same sense as we are conscious of body sensations, emotions, thoughts, processes, and physical phenomena that we experience. We do not know what consciousness, *qua* consciousness, is. All we know is that it seems to be some sort of capacity to be aware of something(s). This peculiar *epistemological* status of consciousness, i.e., that we are not conscious of it, naturally raises questions about its *ontological* status. Does consciousness exist? If so, what is it?

If we insist, along with Socrates, that the starting point of any rational discussion is to know what it is that we are discussing, then the entire notion of a science of consciousness appears to be a non-starter. Some philosophers (eliminative materialists) prefer to argue simply that it doesn't exist. But this is hardly the easy way out, as it implies that the person saying it is himself unconscious. His position is like that of the character in the Arabian fable, who, after being told by a soothsayer that he would die when his camel brayed four times, fell on the ground and exclaimed "I am dead! I am dead!" upon hearing the fourth bray. As the story goes, few people

were convinced. This is not to say that careful thinkers like William James had no reason two question *what we mean* when we say consciousness exists, as it certainly seems to exist in a very peculiar way. However, most of us, like Descartes, find consciousness easier to affirm than deny. Consciousness exists for us not because we are conscious *of it*, but because we are conscious *as it* — and this is where our feasibility study of the science of consciousness must begin.

Griffin's "emergence category mistake"

In accordance with the Socratic imperative of beginning by defining our terms, Western philosophy has attempted to define consciousness according to the categories of substance and attribute. In dualism, consciousness and the world are viewed as two independent substances: mind, which includes consciousness, as well as experiences such as thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, and matter, which consists of things that are extended in space. Each has its own set of unique attributes. Materialism retains the Cartesian notion of matter, but consciousness and other experiences considered mental by dualists, is viewed as either some sort of property or attribute of certain configurations of matter (i.e., living organisms), or else as an illusion. Conversely, idealism views the world as a property of consciousness, typically referred to as "mind" or "spirit," (with or without capitalization). The other model is panexperientialism (panpsychism), which attributes both consciousness and physical properties to a single substance, in monistic panpsychism, or a single *kind* of entity, pluralistic panpsychism.

The notion of emergence, i.e., the development of mentality out of materiality, or vice versa, is necessarily involved in materialism and idealism, and it is also acknowledged in contemporary dualism. With materialism, the underlying, self-existence is the material world, with consciousness being a property that emerged when matter took the more complex and dynamic form of higher organisms. With idealism, the underlying substance is consciousness (frequently capitalized, do denote Divine Consciousness), which existed first and created the material world. Like the materialists who believe consciousness is an illusion created from matter, some idealists correspondingly believe that matter is an illusion created by consciousness. Cartesian dualism (in its original form), involves both forms of emergence, with the entire material world presumably emerging from the Mind of God, and then human consciousness re-emerging in the world in complex living organisms. Only the panexperientialist model entertains the notion that neither consciousness nor the world isinconceivable without the other other.

It is therefore not surprising that it was Griffin, a panexperientialist, who pointed out that the doctrine of emergence itself involved a "category mistake of the most egregious kind." (Griffin 1998, p. 65) [3] The "emergence category mistake" to which Griffin referred was that of mistaking the relationship of *substance and property (or attribute)*, with that of *self and other.* The main point of Griffin's argument is that the relationship between consciousness and matter is closely akin to that of Sartre's "For-itself" and "In-itself" — with an important twist. The material world, which Sartre called "In-itself," is for Griffin a "*For another.*" In an earlier essay, Griffin elaborates as follows:

> When we think of a molecule as a nonexperiencing thing, we are thinking of it as experienced *by us*…. We only know it, insofar we know it at all, from without.

> But when we think of mind as an experiencing thing, we are thinking of it from within. We know what a mind is by identity, by being one. (Griffin 1988)[4*]

Although Griffin's purpose in making this observation was to support his case for panexperientialism, ours is to find a way make sense of consciousness, that peculiar notion that we find it as impossible to deny as it is to define.

Although consciousness *qua* consciousness may defy definition, there are informative ways in which we can look at it in relationship to the world, all of which are necessarily dualistic, and most overlap to some degree. One of these ways is Berkeley's two notions of what it means to exist: *percipere* (to perceive) and *percipi* (to be perceived), with conscious being *percipere* and the world being *percipi.* Another synonymous pair that is the less sensually oriented Greek *noesis* (knower) and *noema* (known). Yet another, less obvious pair is the temporal *present and past*, which we will address later.

Neither consciousness nor the world can be conceived as existing independently.

As long as we continue discussing both sides of this dualism in relationship to one another, we can define, understand, and further develop a science of them. It is only when we try to understand them separately that they become problematic. In fact, I don't think I would be exaggerating if I said that the fundamental riddle or paradox in modern philosophy stems from misguided attempts to define them separately.

We can start with Descartes, for whom both thinking and extended things exist independently. While most of his critics focused on the problem of explaining how they could interact, George Berkeley across the Channel noticed that the notion of matter, defined as an extended substance that exists outside perception by consciousness, was unknown, unknowable, and therefore a useless notion that is best dropped. But it was only a matter of time before Hume pointed out that Berkeley's notion of Mind or Spirit (whether capitalized or not) was equally problematic.

At the turn of the 20th Century, when William James criticized the vacuity of the notion of Spirit in British and German transcendental idealism, it was, to quote Yogi Berra, "déjà vu all over again." Unless we can say that the Consciousness is a something-in-particular, then it is nothing. At the very least, it is the enigmatic notion of no-thing in particular, and possibly nothing at all. However, James was smart enough to avoid inferring therefrom that we are unconscious. As a panpsychist, he had no need to conceive of either consciousness or the world as existing independently, as his "radical empiricism" extended the notion of experience to include both.

Back in Europe, Spinoza and Leibniz, who may have seen Berkeley's fate coming, went straight to panexperientialist models. Unfortunately for panexperientialism, Hume caught them in a different Cartesian mistake, this time one that Descartes made in his *Discourse on Method.* Descartes argued there that the medieval approach of learning about the world by deductive logic was flawed — not for its total lack of experimentation or observation involved, but because its original premises were often false. Hume argued that if you want to understand the universe you

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[*] In Griffin's panexperientialist model, the "In-itself" is actually an experiencing entity, and is therefore a "For-itself" in its own right. Vacuous actuality, or existence as a non-experiencing entity, exists only insofar as it exists for another.

need to observe it, at least once in a while. Shortly afterwards, panexperientialism disappeared from the scene until James revived it (albeit briefly) in the early 20th Century. Then it fell victim to a de facto consensus that science entailed materialism — and nobody really wanted to challenge the authority of "science" in the late 20th Century.

Since then, it has been déjà vu yet another time. It is easy to understand current stand-off between materialism and dualism has produced two losers and no winners. Materialists argue that one of Descartes's two substances can exist, and has existed, without consciousness. Dualists argue that the materialists are right, in that regard but that consciousness can also exist without a material world. At first it would seem like the materialists have a disadvantage, having only one impossible job to do, as opposed to the dualists' two. However, the problems facing materialists in explaining how they are sufficiently conscious to participate in the debate tend to level the playing field.

A Temporal Model of Consciousness

If you are used to thinking about consciousness in terms of a thinking substances, or as an emergent property of matter, the temporal model I am presenting here will no doubt seem strange. The idea that the consciousness *qua* consciousness is the present tense, and that the physical world is the past, is a drastic departure from the Artistotelian/Cartesian framework of the contemporary debate. However, it makes more sense if we, like Alfred North Whitehead, begin to understand the world as composed of processes and events, as well as substances and their attributes.

Whitehead's Bridge

Unlike some idealists, Whitehead never sought to deny the reality of the material world; he sought only to explain it. The gist of his argument was that it can sometimes be equally if not more useful to look at the world as composed of processes and events, instead of substances and properties.

When we do that, physical objects and their properties are no longer the basic building blocks of experience, but involve a great deal of abstraction, especially abstraction from time. Take the proposition "This stone is gray." It can only be true for us because innumerable molecular, atomic, and subatomic events repeat themselves enough for us to see the stone as such that its color fits our understanding of "gray." Hence Whitehead introduced the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," mistaking products of abstraction like gray stones for concrete entities.

Whitehead's critics argue that processes and events too can involve a lot of abstraction. But that does not mean that looking at the world as such is useless, especially when dealing with time-bound phenomena like efficient causation — especially in the form of what we call mind-body interaction.

Whitehead then defined the minimum actions that must occur for there to be an event, or, as he called it, an "actual occasion of experience." For this most rudimentary kind of event to occur, three things must take place. First, there must be a something given in experience to be experienced. This he called the "physical pole" of his dipolar occasions, and it consists of past events. Second, there must be a self, which is connected to "eternal objects," such as numbers

and geometric figures, which it can relate to what is given to it in its immediate past. Once this relationship has been determined, it becomes the new past or physical pole of the next occasion. It is this process of the many becoming one, and being increased by one, that drives what he called "creativity" in time.

Consciousness is a relationship of knowing self (noesis) to known others (noemata).

My purpose here is not to expound on Whitehead's philosophy but to show that, when we analyze experience in terms of processes and events, we can see that there must at minimum be both a knowing self (*noesis*) and (usually multiple) knowing others (*noemata*) for conscious experience to occur.†

At this point, I will ask you to set aside what you may have learned in school about consciousness and simply look at it as you experience it. Have you, as consciousness, as the knower *qua* knower, *ever experienced anything except the present*? In case you haven't noticed, the present never seems to go away. Moments come and go, but the present remains with us (or we remain in it). What I am suggesting here is that the present (and therefore the *noesis*) is not a moment, but the context in which moments arise. In itself, it is *non-local* in time or outside of time altogether, which is why some mystics call it the "Eternal Now."

It is harder to the physical world is entirely in the past. It may seem strange to say that the chair you see across the room is not there right now, something that never is, but once was. However, this is certainly so with the nebulae observed a million light years away through the Hubble telescope. With any event outside the body, there is a time lapse between the event and your experience of it, be they separated by light years or nanoseconds. Even events in the body take time to reach the brain.

The most problematic notion is brain activity itself. Is it the observer itself, that which we most immediately observe, or both? If it is both, what kind(s) of brain activity comprise the *noesis*, and which are *noemata*? How do we distinguish the two? Neuroscientists are no doubt very busy addressing these questions as we speak. However, according to this model, whatever is known is in the past. Just from introspection, we know we can observe sensations, emotions, beliefs, and thoughts.

Therefore, according to this temporal model, they lie on the physical side of the Cartesian split. MRI images really do depict what we were thinking and feeling at the time. On the other hand, once you remove processes such as thought, feeling, and belief from a thinking substance, little is left — so little left that calling it a substance is a misnomer, and misnomer it is. So in that sense, this model favors the materialists.

But dualism rears its ugly head again when we *observe* these so-called "mental" processes. Once again, there is a dichotomy of observer and observed, and consciousness re-emerges as distinct from matter, albeit not as self-existing substance. The brain activity we directly observe probably comprises all our knowledge of the entire physical universe most of the time. The only known exceptions are clairvoyance and telepathy, which are extremely rare and sporadic — and

† I believe the known, for practical purposes, is always in the plural. I can think of only one time when the past consisted of a single occasion, and that would be the Big Bang, which I'm not old enough to remember.

typically denied by materialists anyway. At this point, panexperientialism begins to look more attractive. Even idealism is back in the game, if it can be shown that observation affects the observed, as suggested by the collapse of wave functions into particles in quantum physics.

Implications for this Model for a "Science of Consciousness."

The model has both good news and bad news for those who would like to see a viable science of consciousness to develop. The bad news is that consciousness, at least in its ordinary human form, is inherently dualistic, in that it necessarily entails a relationship between a knowing self, existing in the first person, singular, present tense, and a world of known others, existing in the third person, plural, past tense. No science of the former by itself is possible, because the present becomes past as soon as it is known. In fact, the very fact of knowing it puts it into the past. It is simply a case of the paradox of self-reference; the knower cannot be known.

The good news from this model is that we have been studying consciousness all along — in the form of ordinary empirical science. When we study the external world, we are in fact learning what can and cannot be predicted to appear, or not appear, before consciousness.

It also gives a green light to neuroscientists who want to study the neural correlates of processes considered mental in the Cartesian dualist model, such as thoughts, emotions, sensations, and beliefs. Neuroscience can tell us a great deal about such experiences, which we have previously been able to know only by the direct experience of introspection.

A very useful example of this was the early neuroimaging studies of pain. Previously believed to be a simple sensation, involving brain activities primarily in the sensory cortex, pain was found to include activity in areas of the brain associated with emotions, direction of attention, and even higher cognitive capabilities. (Wall 2000)[5] This information helps explain how Buddhist meditators have been able to separate "suffering" from pain per se. Neuroimaging studies could reveal that trained meditators in pain would exhibit less-than-normal activity in areas of the brain associated with cognition, emotion, and attention, than untrained subjects. Similar breakthroughs could — and no doubt will — take place in cognitive and affective neuroscience.

In summary, I do not predict a very bright future for those who would have the science consciousness go in the direction of either denying its existence and its effects on the world or of elevating it to a self-existent substance. Instead, the best place to start in developing a science of consciousness it to be good empiricists and observe it as it appears: as an integral and essential aspect of a Universe that is both knower and known.

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[1] David Ray Griffin, Unsnarling the world-knot: consciousness, freedom, and the mind-body problem. University of California Press (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: 1998).
[2] Arthur Preston Smith. The power of thought to heal: an ontology of personal faith. Bell & Howell Information, (Ann Arbor 1998). Also available online, URL: http://www.noetichealth.com. Accessed March 12, 2008.
[3] Griffin, 65.
[4] Griffin, "Of minds and molecules: Postmodern medicine in a psychosomatic universe," in The reenchantment of science, David Ray Griffin, ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988). 151.
[5] Patrick Wall, Pain: The science of suffering. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000),,54 – 58.

