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## Book Review: Panpsychism In The West

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*Panpsychism in the West*, by David Skrbina. MIT Press, 2005 Pp. 314. \$35.00 (Cloth).

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In this interesting and useful book, David Skrbina aims to demonstrate that panpsychism, far from an outrageous and absurd view found in only a handful of thinkers, is in fact a position which has been widely held throughout the history of philosophy, and by some of its most eminent figures. This claim is entirely correct and, in tracing its appearance from ancient philosophy through to the present day he successfully establishes his thesis.

The book is very ambitious; its vast sweep amounts almost to a complete history of Western philosophy, as it uncovers varying types and degrees of panpsychism in (among others) the presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Hellenic philosophers, the renaissance, the early modern period, the vitalistic materialism of eighteenth century French thought and the German romantic movement, continuing through to such figures as Josiah Royce and William James in the nineteenth century, and Henry Bergson and A. N. Whitehead in the twentieth. The study ends with what is in effect a literature survey of the past fifty years or so as he notes how the problem of emergence in the philosophy of mind has led several modern philosophers, for example Thomas Nagel and Galen Strawson, to reconsider this long unfashionable view. In all this, Skrbina has done the history of philosophy a useful service, for it is perhaps inevitable that the historical canon of "great philosophers" both contracts and stagnates, but if our sense of our own history is to reflect more than our own ignorance and prejudice it is vital that the full range of past thoughts be kept open. For this reason his discussions of figures interesting in their own right, and once held in high regard, but now largely forgotten—figures such as William Gilbert, Joseph Priestly, Gustav Fechner, Herman Lotze, or Samuel Alexander (to name but a few)—are all extremely welcome.

The book is not without its weaknesses, however, many of which stem from its sheer scope. Given that he covers so much ground in only three hundred-odd pages all of the discussions are very brief, but such thumbnail sketches can have only limited value; at best they are tantalisingly incomplete while at worst they can be seriously misleading. For this reason the book is best thought of as a useful sourcebook for those seeking an introductory sketch of some of the less travelled regions of the history of philosophy (and in this respect it should be noted that it is well referenced) rather than a work of detailed interpretative scholarship in that history.

In this survey everyone gets a few lines and is thereby made to seem equally important, but one consequence of that is that key figures in the subject which one might reasonably expect would receive detailed discussion, in fact get badly short-changed. For example, surely a history of pantheism should contain a substantial analysis of Spinoza, but all we are offered is a handful of pages presenting the relevant textual evidence followed by a mere list of those commentators who think Spinoza is a pantheist and those who are inclined to deny this. Similarly, by any adequate standards, the precise determination of Leibniz's view is

a complex triangulation between idealism, pan-organicism and panpsychism, which needs must take into account the issue of to what extent, if any, his views evolved. But none of this emerges from Skrbina's briefest of reports of his monadism.

But if some figures get less space than they deserve, several get rather more. While agreeing with his basic thesis, it seemed to this reader that the pudding was rather over-egged, as though the author could hardly bear to admit that there had been *any* great philosophers of the past who weren't panpsychists. Since the swerve of atoms does not necessarily imply they are animate, the world-soul is not itself composed of many subsidiary souls, and teleology in nature is not the same thing as mental purpose, the case for including Democritus, Plato and Aristotle is at best doubtful. Certainly it would require much more argument than is given to really make the case. But if these inclusions are moot, others have no rightful place at all. For example, Locke is included simply because at one point in the *Essay* he says it is no contradiction to suppose that God might have annexed to certain systems of senseless matter the power to think (p. 92), while a passage from the *Critique* is taken to suggest that Kant toyed with the idea that if the noumenal nature of matter is unknown it may well be of the same type as that of mind whose inner essence *is* known (p. 110). This seems as tenuously relevant to panpsychism as it is mistaken about Kant.

To complain of lack of depth in a work of such broad sweep might seem churlish, for no doubt there is room in the history of ideas for wide panoramic sketches. However, the justification for such broad-brush approaches lies in the narrative they can spin, and here too Skrbina's work fails to deliver all that it might have done. This is partly because it is unclear what all the different positions which he locates really have in common. By his understanding a view counts as panpsychist if "however one conceives of mind, such mind applies to all things" (p. 2). But to say all things possess life, anima, soul, consciousness, purpose, will, rationality, experience or mind are each quite different claims. To be sure at no point does Skrbina deny this, but the very fact of grouping them together in a single narrative implies a certain commonality, and this is insufficiently defended or explained. Although he begins with a useful list of related but different philosophical positions, such as animism, pansensism, pantheism, and the like (pp. 19–22), and his last chapter gives a helpful nine-fold taxonomy of argument-types he has located for the view (p. 250), there is no classification of the varying different types of panpsychism or consideration of how they all relate to each other. We are given no sense of evolving or developing themes within the mass of data he uncovers.

This vagueness leads to confusion. For example, he defines panpsychism in individualistic terms as the view that each individual thing, for itself, enjoys experience or possesses mind-like being (pp. 16, 39). But this definition does not stop him from bringing in as relevant pantheistic systems or monistic philosophies which attribute mentality to the whole universe. For example, in recruiting Spinoza as a panpsychist, suggestions of a contradicting pantheism are dismissed in a sentence with the claim that for Spinoza, God or nature is in no sense a person (p. 88). To be sure, Spinoza says things in this vein, but he says many others of quite opposite import, and simply to leave matters like that is dangerously misleading. Similarly,

Schopenhauer finds a place in the list of pantheists without proper consideration of whether his Will, enjoying as it does a noumenal existence beyond space and time, can really be said to be individuated in each creation as the proposed definition of pantheism would require. Even St. Francis of Assisi, we are told, was a pantheist because "he saw the presence of God in all parts of nature, and thus he viewed all things as enspirited beings" (p. 61). But the second by no means follows from the first, at least not in the sense of panpsychism.

Skrbina's interest in panpsychism is not merely historical; he thinks the doctrine has received an unfair press. And in his last chapter he takes some first steps towards its defence. He locates a number of arguments that have been made against it in recent years, to which he offers responses. But once again the list of sources is more useful than the discussion, for his replies are too short to be of much service. For example, in response to an objection proposed by Colin McGinn to the effect that panpsychists do not really escape the problem of emergence since they must account for the different levels of mind associated with organic and inorganic matter, Skrbina simply says that panpsychists can allow *levels* of emergence rejecting only *radical* emergence (p. 260). While this is right, and perhaps even defensible, it raises deep questions about the real nature of the puzzle of emergence and the real difference between panpsychism and its rivals, difficult and potentially explosive issues which deserve more than three sentences.

While lack of space would be a sufficient reason for not getting into close consideration of the details of panpsychism, or assessment of the arguments for and against it, that seems not to be the real reason for the absence of such detailed discussion in this book. For in the last two chapters Skrbina reveals his view that panpsychism is a "worldview" and therefore that to think of it as true or not is to hold "a very restricted and almost naive form of realism" (p. 233). As though the materialist and the panpsychist are locked in competing Kuhnian paradigms, he asserts that there is no neutral perspective from which to speak of such positions or judge between them (pp. 17–18, 269). Yet in this absurd conclusion he fails spectacularly to learn the lesson of his own book, for one of the most striking things about the pantheistic philosophers he uncovers is precisely that they *were* philosophically engaged with their contemporaries. They fit seamlessly into the rest of the history of philosophy. In the end it seems Skrbina's allegiance to pantheism stems from the fact that it leads to "a more integrated, compassionate and sympathetic cosmos" (p. 268); that it sustains a perspective of positive values in which humanity finds itself in harmony with its environment, in contrast to the "isolating" and "manipulative" value system associated with materialism. But neither is this position adequately defended, for despite claiming that panpsychism has important axiological consequences (4), and listing numerous other thinkers who believe so too (pp. 223–34), the claim is never really proved. Yet it needs proof, for *prima facie*, for there is no contradiction whatsoever in holding that, despite a continuity between the highest forms of life and all other existence, value itself emerges in and pertains only to its highest form. Such indeed seems to have been the view of Samuel Alexander, although Skrbina's account of his thought is too brief to take in his doctrine of "tertiary qualities" (pp. 165–67).