

Book Review

Review of D. S. Clarke's Book: Panpsychism and the Religious Attitude

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ABSTRACT

Clarke writes much on the difficulties that humanists and universal mechanism have in explaining consciousness. There is basically no way to extend a one-way chain of forward causes and thereby solve the origination problem. That is, there is no way to explain a proto-mentality that has no adaptive advantage as the original mentality. Clarke argues that mentality must have been always present, that it is an eternal quality. And he also extends his insights into biological evolution. Clarke attributes mentality to all natural bodies exhibiting unity of organization and homeostasis. His view is a type of restricted panpsychism he calls "atheistic panpsychism". You can find this book at [Amazon](#).

Key Words: panpsychism, religious attitude.

In Chapter 1, Clarke describes analogical inferences. One could stipulate that all knowledge is based on analogy. Nevertheless, how we verify beliefs is important leading to induction and confirmation, leading further to possible deduction. But none of this diminishes the importance of analogical inferences, and regarding panpsychism attributing mentality to other forms is more than an idle homomorphism. Such reasoning is permitted if key attributes are identified. Regarding the attribution of mentality, Clarke writes on page 13: "panpsychism does not claim that macromolecules with appropriate unity of organization have pains or pleasures, nor indeed that they have any sensations whatsoever. The claim is only to the very indefinite conclusion that they have some form of mentality or other, that they have their individual perspectives on things marked by some qualitative aspects and some spontaneity over some duration of time, however brief."

Before presenting his own version of panpsychism, Clarke reviews the history of the subject. Panpsychism started with the Greek philosophers, most notably Aristotle. Aristotle advanced a restricted panpsychism extending to plants but permitting a sharp discontinuity between human and infrahuman souls. A more formal treatment of panpsychism as a comprehensive metaphysics came much later with the writings of Leibniz. On page 25, Clarke writes this on Leibniz's view: "The soul of a thing is alternatively referred to in the latter works as its monad, its principle of indivisible unity, and its entelechy, its vital, self-sustaining principle.... Leibniz thus claims a regress of parts within wholes, which in turn are wholes relative to other parts that are themselves composed of parts, as an animal is described in modern biology as composed of cells, which are composed of particles. If continued, this obviously leads to an infinite regress." Clarke also reviews Whitehead's process version of reality and metaphysics, which was later extended by Hartshorne. Clarke returns to David Chalmers' version of a restricted panpsychism, where information processing attributes are singled out as a basis for attributing mentality.

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In writing on Theism, Clarke tells us on page 129 "... that mentality can be attributed to the universe as the whole of which all individual bodies are a part." Clarke attempts to refute this view, however, while preferring his atheistic panpsychism. The theistic view finds some support in the views presented by Hartshorne and Whitehead. But Clarke is critical of John Locke's argument for God's existence, and he is critical of Richard Swinburne's argument for universal consciousness.

Then on page 131, Clarke makes his most controversial remarks: "Can attributions be extended to the universe as a whole? It takes only a moment to realize that the answer is obviously no. As Hume noted in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, the universe exhibits none of the features, not even that of unity of organization and homeostasis, that we appeal to in justification attributing mentality to natural forms. Far from exhibiting organization. Current astronomy describes it as a chaotic aggregate of galaxies grouped into clusters in which there is continual creation and destruction of both member galaxies and the stars belonging to them. Moreover, the organization of the universe, rather than increasing, seems to be dissipating as galaxies recede from each other. Clearly homeostasis has no relevance; the universe is a whole including everything else as parts, and hence there is no external environment to which it is related and against which it maintains itself. Just as obviously, there is no specialization of the parts that could be the basis for attributing some unified perspective, no central nervous system, no sense receptors, nor anything remotely analogous to these features that provide our initial basis for mental attributions. And so there seems to be no rational basis for universe-wide mental attributions, at least if this attribution is at all like that for natural forms. But if it is totally different from the attributions we make in everyday life, we have not the slightest idea of what it could be like. We have traded in any hope for justification in exchange for acceptance of a mystery..."

With words like "obviously", "clearly", "just-as-obviously", and "not-the-slightest", I can't help but question if Clarke belongs to the same world we all come to know and love. Or perhaps Clarke is unaware of the controversies in cosmology and including modern beliefs in intelligent design. But leaving the question of design unanswered, one does not need to go very far to find evidence of organization in the universe. In [The Life of the Cosmos](#), Smolin characterized the universe as a self-organized structure that is held in a low entropy state. And in [Cosmic Evolution: The Rise of Complexity in Nature](#), Chaisson comes to the same conclusion in as much as the universe evolved from a cosmic expansion that continues to this day, thus maintaining an energy flow from source to sink, as much as we can know. It is not only that the universe shows organization, it is also noteworthy that such organization, and prior actualization in the early universe, are/were necessary for life in as much that the universe gives the

appearance of being "finely tuned" for life (see [The Anthropic Cosmological Principle \(Oxford Paperbacks\)](#)). Both sun light and star dust are essential for life, and these substances are found in great abundance in our unique universe, and to an impossible degree as our universe seems to be one of a very many that were possible. The elements, and the organic chemicals and structures derived from the elements, are uniquely fit to support life (see [Nature's Destiny: How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe](#)). The unfolding universe, and the symmetries that have been broken in the process, have permitted life to evolve (see [Lucifer's Legacy: The Meaning of Asymmetry](#)). Nevertheless, it is true, that the world "outside" of us present challenges to us. It is not an easy process to evolve to the next level. Kauffman, in [At Home in the Universe: The Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity](#), describes the inside view as subcritical and the outside view as supracritical. Chaos is abundant in the perceived outside, but order manifest at the boundary between Kauffman's subcritical and supracritical.

We would be lost without the outside to challenge us. But while we are on this topic we might ponder where we are? Are we the inside looking out, or the forgetful outside looking in? Are we the inside or the outside? The question is perfectly symmetrical from our perspective, and an inside system cannot exist independent of an outside system. Contrary to Clarke's claim, there is ample evidence to extend the analogical argument to the greater universe, i.e., attribute mentality to everything "outside". It is only that we must allow for blind spots and sublime qualities that are beyond knowing. Such sublime qualities may be as much mentality as the deepest human thinker, and indeed, such sublime feeling may be the quality that all mentality springs from.

In the final chapter, Clarke is nevertheless sympathetic to what he calls the religious attitude and the "hope" that community prayer holds. On pages 166 and 167, he writes "... Why be moral? It seems clear that there is no other form of practical inference that will provide the answer. Such inferences must be either agent-heterogeneous or agent-homogeneous in form, and must have premisses expressing either individual or shared desires. These seem to be no third form of inference in which the shared desires are compared with the personal, nor is it possible to establish priority of one over the other. As many writers have emphasized, this is what makes the resolution of conflict between moral and individual demands often so very difficult. This difficulty would not exist if there were some form of inference we could appeal to in justifying the priority of the moral. It is here that the religious attitude, which may or may not be expressed through prayer, becomes relevant. Private prayer is often used to express individual hopes and desires for the future... In this plural 'we' form, ... prayer places priority on what is."

That Consciousness is eternal is held by atheistic panpsychism. And on page 169 and 170, Clarke tells us what this means, "... what alone is eternal for panpsychism is the existence of natural bodies with individually finite careers with a qualitative perspective accompanied by 'now' defining the past and present and a 'here' defining a location within an environment." While I part company with Clarke on this point noting that what is absolute is more inexpressible in relativistic terms and not a mere shell of the relative that is void of the subject, I was delighted to learn that as atheistic panpsychism underwrites the eternal it supports the religious attitude that brings a more hopeful future to all. It is only my observation that this conclusion can be found more directly, thereby describing all evolution as the creativity that springs from conflict between the individual and the shared. The question of "what are we, the inside or the outside"

returns. The question cannot be answered without much effort, but the two aspects are otherwise real in my view. And these two aspects come with two different imperatives, one imperative protects the individual while the other protects the community. Therefore, the conflicts that result are necessary, and there is reason to be hopeful.

References

D. S. Clarke 2003, *Panpsychism and the Religious Attitude*. State University of New York Press.