

Ensoulment or how panpsychism and animism can enhance social sciences

[This statement is inspired by the work of two philosophers, the Australian Freya Mathews and the Belgian Isabelle Stengers, to which I've added examples from my recent work.]

Panpsychism or animism attribute psychic dimension to all physicality. The emphasis lies on *psychic*. It's not just a matter of concern and controversy triggered by the object, of granting political status to scientific and technological issues. It's not just a matter of agency, of acknowledging that objects partake in social action and should therefore be called nonhuman *actors*, actants or co-producers. All of which is true of course and has been shown by the social sciences. Yet here we add another dimension and claim that all physical things are alive and have a psychic dimension. This claim involves two shifts in our mental or should we say philosophical framing.

First, the world becomes a vast field of consciousness. It is not made of Mind or *Geist* as idealists might have had it but nor is it made of pure, insensitive, dead matter, as "old" materialists might have had it. Rather, the world is filled with a felt-like consciousness - a consciousness that is not abstract, mind-like -, a perceptual wakefulness of all things. All things are present to themselves (they persevere) and all things spin out their own sensations and experiences into the world (they exist). Let me give you an example:

Wireless chipsets perform algorithms and allow signals to travel through noisy environments. They detect, package, split, correct and connect signals or perform DSP - digital signal processing. Still, it is not just agency and mediators we're looking at. Panpsychism emphasizes the chipset's own sense of the world as it perceives the urban environment as full of obstacles, as it intensifies relations at departure and arrival points. Hence, our shifting sense of internet's availability is actually, according to panpsychism, a fainter or vague version of the chipsets' own sense of a difficult environment for signal processing. This sensation of difficulty in DSP lies not with us - we perceive it vaguely - but with the chipsets. That is *their* experience. An impersonal, unsentimental, non-psychological, an algorithmic one, but an experience nevertheless.

To exist thus means that all things share in the field of consciousness. Some to a lesser degree, some to a higher degree, some passionately, some indifferently, some biologically, some algorithmically, but none are left out. That's the first shift.

Secondly, the world is responsive. Spirited matter answers our call if we give it the power to do so, if we create the right setting for it. Panpsychism honors *all* practices of invocation and response. Science is one of them but so are Earth-based rituals, fictional writing, pilgrim's incantations, conservationists' appeals, daily greetings or conjurations, and so on. To say that they are practices means that they do not rely

on sheer imagination. They are collective enterprises, technical, ritual, and they can fail. The world might not respond. The practice might need fine-tuning. Now, let me give you an example of such a practice:

A few years ago, with a collective in Brussels, we started what panpsychism would call a practice of invocation and response. We explored worn-down places in our daily environment and tried to discover the language of wear. What is wear? Scratching, stamping, abrading, unravelling, i.e. processes caused by rubbing bodies. What does it tell us? Wear tells us the ingenuity of industrial coating and designing. It tells us the intelligence of crowds and their habits, how wear - often unknowingly - gives us our bearings. So we have come to value wear. It has responded. It has reinvigorated and expanded our perception. And this might help us, in the long run, to resist the notion that our attachment to things such as worn-down places is based on mere sentimentality.

In other words, panpsychism and animism are not the latest academic fad. They are strategies of ensoulment. They give soul so things might resist. They grant spirit so matter might be treasured. Perhaps they *are* the latest step but then they are the latest step in getting away from Cartesian dualisms, in creating a contemporary monist philosophical frame. In any case, the stakes of panpsychism and animism are clear: can we invoke and trigger a response, a felt-like wakefulness that will resist destruction, or that, if we destroy, which we might end up doing, will allow us to know *what* we've destroyed? --- Thank you.

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