



Panpsychic city

Description

In my recent conversation, the openAI GPT-3 natural language processing (NLP) platform responded to my question about whether a city could be *conscious* with:

Yes, it makes sense to think that cities are conscious if you believe that all matter has a conscious mind. This is because cities are made of matter, and therefore they would have consciousness if panpsychism is true.

Philosopher David Chalmers makes the case that non-organic matter could have *mind*, if not consciousness. He doesn't write about cities, but refers to thermostats. A city contains many technical devices much more complicated than thermostats. But if thermostats are conscious then so are cities (independent of their human or organic occupants).

In his journey to vindicate a panpsychic view of the universe, Chambers indicates a proposition that most people would find easier to accept – information is everywhere. In *The Conscious Mind* he considers the ubiquity of information.

we find information everywhere we find causation. We find causation everywhere, so we find information everywhere (293).

The simple analogue thermostat is a basic case of a material non-organic object that deals in information. He aligns information transfer with experience.

The structure of experience is just the structure of a phenomenally realized information space (287).

Information, communication and experience

As a recent subscriber to C.S. Peirce's semiotics and its naturalistic interpretation via Thomas Sebeok, I prefer to think that it is *communication* that is all pervasive, less so *information*. It's even easier to think that wind, rocks and thermostats are caught up in networks of communications involving force and energy transfers than to think that they circulate information. So, I think communication and semiotic theories provide a better case for panpsychism. Chalmers' link with experience holds in either case though.

to say that thermostats have experience is not to say that they have much in the way of a mental life. A thermostat will not be self-conscious; it will not be in the least intelligent; and I would not claim that a thermostat can think. (295).

In *The Conscious Mind* he had already attempted to uncouple consciousness from cognitive complexity. In a scan of living organic matter from most to least complicated, we can't really identify a point at which an organism could be said to lack consciousness. Consciousness is not a feature that can be added or subtracted.

People who build thermostats don't assemble components that would give the thermostat consciousness. Chalmers thinks that rather than say a thermostat has experiences, it is better simply to say that experiences are associated (297) with it. In the same way we don't say that my brain has an experience but that *I* do. The brain is *associated with* experience.

Chalmers settles on experience within non-organic matter as

something like an unarticulated flash of experience, without any concepts, any thought, or any complex processing in the vicinity. (296).

As a philosophical pragmatist I would have to ponder what difference it makes to inhabitants, visitors, designers, managers and politicians to think of cities having flashes of experience, or even consciousness.

In his book *Panpsychism in the West*, philosopher David Skrbina, amongst arguments and counter arguments, provides a clue as to the practicality of a panpsychic world view.

Panpsychism has important ethical consequences. It argues that the human mind is not an anomaly in the universe, but that the human and the nonhuman alike share the quality of enmindedness. By virtue of this common and universal characteristic, we may come to know the universe more intimately and perhaps find ourselves at home in it. This in turn can serve as a basis for more compassionate and ecological values, and therefore of new ways of acting in the world. (6).

References

- Chalmers, David J. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

- Sebeok, Thomas A. *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
- Skrbina, David. *Panpsychism in the West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

Note

- Featured image is near the Spice Souk, Baniyas Road, Dubai, 2022.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence

Tags

1. cities
2. consciousness
3. panpsychism

Date Created

July 2, 2022

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark