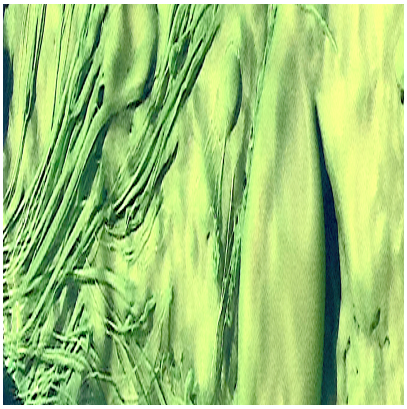


Panpsychism and pragmatism

Description

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The city as organism, living city, sentient city: these concepts invite reflection on the putatively intimate relationship between mind and matter â?? *panpsychism*. The pragmatic philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce was in a long line of influential philosophers who developed the theme of *panpsychism*. I have already attempted to explain the importance of Peirce in architecture and nature. See Peirce for Architects, Network Nature and some posts.

In his essay â??Manâ??s glassy essence,â?• C.S. Peirce delivers his argument about the primacy of mind in the constitution of the universe (panpsychism) with a discussion of *protoplasm*, â??the complex, translucent, colourless, colloidal materialâ?• within a cell membrane **(**OED**)**. It is common to think of this substance as the â??livingâ?• part of a cell. Peirceâ??s provocative point is

> â??â?¦ that protoplasm feels. We have no direct evidence that this is true of protoplasm universally, and certainly some kinds feel far more than others. But there is a fair analogical inference that all protoplasm feels. It not only feels but exercises all the functions of mind. Such are the properties of protoplasmâ?• (12).

Peirce speculated that scientists could synthesise such organic matter by chemical means, which is to say in ways that are explicable by the laws of physics and mechanics. So the ability of such mechanistically defined material to â??feelâ?•

> â??must be shown to arise from some peculiarity of the mechanical system. Yet the attempt to deduce it from the three laws of mechanics, applied to never so ingenious a mechanical contrivance, would obviously be futile. It can never be explained, unless we admit that physical events are but degraded or undeveloped forms of psychical eventsâ?• (20-21).

He thereby argues that the physical and the psychical (mind) are already bound together as a feature of the world.

Downward focus

Jonathan Beever and Vernon Cisney clarify Peirceâ??s contribution in their article â??All things in mind.â?• They explain that consciousness is only a problem or a mystery if we insist that it emerges from a combination of inert physical material.

> â??Thus, most of the attempts to delineate the nature of and boundaries between brains, minds, and consciousness have been focused *upwards*. They begin by assuming that consciousness is unique and special, then on the basis of that assumption, ask: *where did it come from, when, and why?*â?• (352)

The alternative approach is to reason in the opposite direction.

> â??rather than starting from the mystery and obscurity of conscious qualitative experience, this approach centers the nature of the world on mind and seeks to explain the existence of physical objects of experienceâ?• (364).

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So, Peirce and others start with the assumption that mind is already in the material.

> Despite this contemporary prevalence of upward-oriented study, there has been a recent reemergence of *downward*-directed focus. This focus worries not so much about the emergence of higher-order consciousness but instead about the depth of lower-level mindâ?• (352).

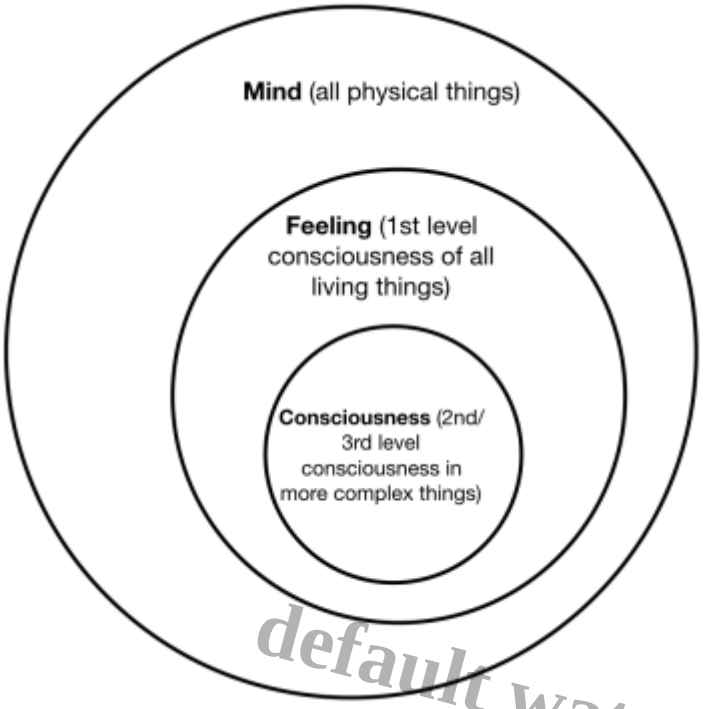
Pansemiotics

Peirce introduces semiotics to panpsychism. Signs and thought coalesce. He wrote in an essay *The art of reasoning*, â??We think only in signs.â?• I would have thought it sufficient to demonstrate the ubiquity of semiotics, that all things communicate, as a starting point for a mind-in-matter argument.

But Peirce starts with *feelings*, or what he termed Firstness, the raw quality of a thing. See my earlier blog post (and book) on the subject. Both his theories of semiotics and those of panpsychism draw on his notion of Firstness. For Peirce, â??The first is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anythingâ?• (248). He elaborated:

> â??What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence, â?? that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to itâ?• (248).

As summarised by Beever and Cisney and indicated in a simple Venn diagram, for Peirce all physical things participate in mind; all living things have feelings; more complex things with feelings have consciousness.



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So far in my reading on the subject I think the history of panpsychism indicates a range of systems and justifications, many of which could be regarded as idiosyncratic to the theorists putting them forward. This apparent variety is either a weakness of panpsychism (lack of agreement) or its strength: the determination by a raft of independent thinkers throughout the ages seeking to justify something most people believe, or want to believe is the case â?? we participate in something much better than transient residence in a soulless universe.

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Note

- Featured image is organic matter in a hot pool in â??â•¨Laugarvatnâ•©, â•¨South Icelandâ•©, â•¨Icelandâ•© (2012).

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. panpsychism
2. Peirce

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