

Philip Goff

Experiences Don't Sum

According to Galen Strawson, there could be no such thing as 'brute emergence'. If we allow that certain *x*'s can emerge from certain *y*'s in a way that is unintelligible, even to God, then we allow for anything: for something to emerge from nothing, for the concrete to emerge from the abstract. To suppose that experiential phenomena could emerge from wholly non-experiential phenomena would be to commit ourselves to just such a brute emergence, to enlist in the 'Humpty Dumpty army' for life, with little chance of honourable discharge. It is this revulsion for the notion of brute emergence which leads Strawson to hold that the only viable form of physicalism is panpsychism, the view that the ultimate constituents of the physical world (which I will follow Strawson in calling 'ultimates') are essentially experience involving. Unfortunately, panpsychism is also committed to a kind of brute emergence which is arguably just as unintelligible as the emergence of the experiential from the non-experiential: the emergence of novel 'macroexperiential phenomena' from 'microexperiential phenomena'.

Any *realistic* version of panpsychism must hold that certain macroscopic physical entities, at least human beings or parts of them, have conscious experience, conscious experience which is presumably very different from the conscious experience of ultimates. On the assumption that these experience-involving macroscopic entities are wholly constituted of physical ultimates — there are no souls — we must suppose that the experiential being of macroscopic physical entities is wholly constituted by the experiential being of physical ultimates. Strawson consents to all this. Somehow thousands of experience-involving ultimates come together in my brain to constitute the 'big' experience-involving thing that is the subject of my experience.

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But it is perfectly unintelligible how this could be. William James puts the point very vividly, in a passage referred to by Strawson (Strawson, 2006, fn 48):

Take a hundred of them [feelings], shuffle them and pack them as close together as you can (whatever that may mean); still each remains the same feeling it always was, shut in its own skin, windowless, ignorant of what the other feelings are and mean. There would be a hundred-and-first feeling there, if, when a group or series of such feelings were set up, a consciousness *belonging to the group as such* should emerge. And this 101st feeling would be a totally new fact; the 100 feelings might, by a curious physical law, be a signal for its *creation*, when they came together; but they would have no substantial identity with it, nor it with them, and one could never deduce the one from the others, or (in any intelligible sense) say that they *evolved* it. (James, 1983, p. 162)

Suppose that my brain is composed of a billion ultimates which have no experiential being. Strawson claims that if this were the case it would be unintelligible why the arrangement of these ultimates in my brain should give rise to experience. But now let us suppose that each of the billion ultimates that compose my brain is a subject of experience: that there is something that it is like to be each of the ultimates of which my brain is composed. Imagine that each of the ultimates in my brain feels slightly pained. It is unintelligible why the arrangement of these ultimates in my brain should give rise to some *new* subject of experience, over and above the billion slightly pained subjects of experience we already have. The emergence of novel macroexperiential properties from the coming together of microexperiential properties is as brute and miraculous as the emergence of experiential properties from non-experiential properties. Strawson's panpsychism is itself committed to the very kind of brute emergence which it was set up to avoid.

Epistemological Limitations

It is not intelligible to us how our 'macro conscious experience' might be constituted of the 'micro conscious experience' of billions of micro subjects of experience. But why should we not think that this is a reflection of our epistemological limitations, rather than the metaphysical reality? Perhaps when God attends to my conscious experience, he conceives of it as something that is constituted of the conscious experience of billions of micro subjects of experience, even though this is not revealed to me in introspection. The problem with this response is that Strawson's overall project is committed to our having, though introspection, a kind of transparent understanding of the

essential nature of our conscious experience which is inconsistent, or at the very least in tension, with this proposal. I will explain this in a little more detail.

There is an important sense in which Strawson is a Cartesian and an important sense in which Strawson is not a Cartesian. Descartes held that we are able to achieve a transparent understanding of the essential nature of physical stuff (i.e. its being extended) — let us call this a commitment to the *transparency of the physical* — and that we have a transparent understanding of the essential nature of our own mental states, which we may call a commitment to the *transparency of the mental*. It was his commitment to both the transparency of the physical and the transparency of the mental, and his ability to conceive of his mind and body as separate, which convinced Descartes that his mind and body must indeed be distinct.

Strawson is a non-Cartesian in that he denies the transparency of the physical. It is his denial of the transparency of the physical that allows him to identify mind and brain: ‘we have no good reason to think that we know anything about the physical that gives us any reason to find any problem in the idea that experiential phenomena are physical’ (Strawson, 2006, p. 4). It is because our physical concepts do not afford us a transparent understanding of the (complete) essential nature of physical stuff that it is coherent to suppose that physical stuff might turn out, as a matter of empirical fact, to be mental stuff.

But Strawson’s entire discussion is premised on a commitment to the transparency of the mental, or at least of *our own conscious experience*. In this paper, Strawson describes conscious experience as ‘the fundamental given natural fact’ (p. 4). In a previous paper, Strawson puts his commitment to our having a transparent understanding of the nature of our conscious experience more explicitly:

... we have direct acquaintance with — know — fundamental features of the mental nature of (physical) reality just in having experience in the way we do, in a way that has no parallel in the case of any non-mental features of (physical) reality. We do not have to stand back from experiences and take them as objects of knowledge by means of some further mental operation, in order for there to be acquaintance and knowing of this sort: the having is the knowing... we are acquainted with reality *as it is in itself*, in certain respects, in having experience as we do. (Strawson, 2003, p. 54)

In his commitment to our having a transparent understanding of the nature of our conscious experiences Strawson is a card-carrying Cartesian; and this commitment is not an unimportant background assumption. None of Strawson’s worries in this paper have any force

if we do not have, through introspection, a transparent grasp of the essential nature of our conscious experience. If we are not, in introspectively attending to the properties of our conscious experience, afforded a transparent grasp of the essential nature of those experiential properties, then those very properties might turn out to be *physicSal* (which is the name Strawson gives to those properties which physics does afford us a transparent grasp of) or functional properties under a different guise.

This is the claim of the orthodox a posteriori materialist: experiential properties, although *conceptually* distinct from *physicSal* or functional properties, turn out, as a matter of empirical fact, to be identical with such properties.¹ Brian Loar, an a posteriori materialist, expresses his conception of physicalism thus: ‘Physicalism is the thesis that, however odd it may seem, that quale (which I am now conceiving phenomenally) might, for all we know, be a physical-functional property’ (Loar, 2003, p. 121). The orthodox a posteriori materialist can agree with Strawson that there is an *epistemological* gap between *physicSal*/functional properties and experiential properties, and that, in this sense, the emergence of experiential properties from *physicSal*/functional properties is unintelligible, but will deny that this epistemological gap has *metaphysical* significance. As a matter of empirical fact, those very *physicSal*/functional properties which are conceptually distinct from experiential properties, turn out to be identical with experiential properties.

The conceptual gap between experiential and *physicSal*/functional properties only begins to have metaphysical significance if we suppose that introspection affords us a grasp of the essential nature of our experiential properties. For this seems to place limits on what those properties could *turn out*, as a matter of empirical fact, to be. The Cartesian commitment to our having a transparent understanding of the

[1] I say ‘orthodox’ a posteriori materialist because in a sense Strawson himself is a kind of a posteriori materialist, in that he wants to claim that physical stuff turns out, as a matter of empirical fact, to be essentially experience involving. But Strawson’s a posteriori materialism is a non-standard kind of materialism in that it is reliant on physical stuff having an irreducible phenomenal essence which is hidden from empirical investigation. In contrast, the orthodox a posteriori materialism of philosophers like Levine (1983), Loar (1990, 2003), Papineau (1993, 2002), Tye (1995), Lycan (1996), Hill (1997), Hill and McLaughlin (1998), Block and Stalnaker (1999), Perry (2001), identifies phenomenal properties with the kind of ordinary *physicSal* or functional properties which are straightforwardly empirically discernible. Other examples of the kind of non-standard a posteriori materialism Strawson advocates include Russell (1927), Eddington (1928), Maxwell (1979), Lockwood (1989), Stoljar (2001). See Papineau (2002, p. 85, fn 5), Loar (2003, pp. 114–15) for statements differentiating their position from this kind of non-standard materialism.

essential nature of our conscious experience is crucial for Strawson's argument.

But then this commitment to my having, through introspection, a transparent understanding of the essential nature of my conscious experience is sharply in tension, if not inconsistent, with my conscious experience turning out to be, in and of itself, quite different from how it appears to be in introspection: i.e. turning out to be constituted of the experiential being of billions of micro subjects of experience. Strawson claims that in introspecting one's conscious experience, one perceives that metaphysical reality '*as it is in itself*' (Strawson, 2003, p. 54). It is this that allows us to know that this reality is not constituted of physical or functional properties. How then could this metaphysical reality turn out to be in any way different, as it is in itself, from how it appears to us in introspection? Just as a commitment to the transparency of the experiential gives the epistemological gap between experiential phenomena and non-experiential phenomena metaphysical significance, so it gives the epistemological gap between microexperiential phenomena and macroexperiential phenomena metaphysical significance.

Phenomenal Parts and Wholes

Even if we could make sense of the idea of the experiential being of several distinct subjects of experience coming together to constitute the experiential being of some higher-order subject of experience, or at least suppose that there is some explanation beyond our ken, it can be shown that it is contradictory to suppose, in the way we surely must do if panpsychism is viable, that the experiential being of a higher-level subject of experience is significantly qualitatively different from the experiential being of the lower-level subjects of experience of which it is constituted.

Consider a physical ultimate that feels slightly pained, call it LITTLE PAIN 1. Consider ten such slightly pained ultimates, LITTLE PAIN 1, LITTLE PAIN 2, etc., coming together to constitute a severely pained macroscopic thing, call it BIG PAIN. The pained-ness of each of the ultimates comes together to constitute the pained-ness of BIG PAIN: an entity that feels ten times the pain of each LITTLE PAIN. The severe pained-ness of BIG PAIN is wholly constituted by the slight pained-ness of all the LITTLE PAINS.

Assuming the coherence of this, the experiential being of each LITTLE PAIN is part of the experiential being of BIG PAIN; the experiential being of the BIG PAIN is a whole which contains nothing other

than the experiential being of all the LITTLE PAINS. But it is a conceptual truth, as James rightly points out shortly after the passage above, that ‘as a psychic existent *feels*, so it must *be*’ (James, 1983, p. 165). It follows that for LITTLE PAIN 1 to be part of BIG PAIN is for *what it feels like to be LITTLE PAIN 1* to be part of *what it feels like to be BIG PAIN*. But what it feels like to be LITTLE PAIN 1 is not part of what it feels like to be BIG PAIN. LITTLE PAIN 1 feels slightly pained, BIG PAIN does not. The phenomenal character of LITTLE PAIN 1’s experience, i.e. feeling slightly pained, is no part of the phenomenal character of BIG PAIN’s experience, i.e. feeling severely pained.

In the same way, the experiential being of BIG PAIN is supposed to be wholly constituted by the experiential being of all the LITTLE PAINS. But to suppose that what it feels like to be BIG PAIN is wholly constituted by what it feels like to be all the LITTLE PAINS (if this comes to anything at all) must be to suppose that BIG PAIN feels how all the LITTLE PAINS feel and feels nothing else. But, by stipulation, this is not right. BIG PAIN feels a certain way that all the LITTLE PAINS do not: that is, severely pained.

Whatever sense we can make of experiences summing together, it is contradictory to suppose that the experiential being of lots of little experiencing things can come together to wholly constitute the *novel* experiential being of some big experiencing thing. Even the experience of a severely pained subject of experience is sufficiently different from the experience of slightly pained subjects of experience as to make it incoherent to suppose that the former could be formed from the latter. For the experiential being of some little experiencing thing ‘LITTLE’ to be part of the experiential being of some big experiencing thing ‘BIG’ is for what it is like to be LITTLE to be a part of what it is like to be BIG. But it follows from this that BIG feels how LITTLE does (even if it also feels other things). Correspondingly, for the experiential being of some BIG to be wholly constituted by the experiential being of LITTLE 1, LITTLE 2, LITTLE 3 ... (again assuming this makes any sense at all) can be nothing other than for BIG to feel how it feels to be all those LITTLES and to feel nothing else. Even if it is intelligible how experiential states can *sum* together, it is contradictory to suppose that they could sum together to form some novel conscious state.

If my experiential being were constituted by the experiential being of billions of experience-involving ultimates, then what it is like to be each of those ultimates would be part of what it is like to be me. I would literally feel how each of those ultimates feels, somehow all at the same time. Assuming that my experiential being is *wholly* constituted by the experiential being of a billion experience-involving

ultimates, then what it is like to be me can be nothing other than what it is like to be each of those billion ultimates (somehow experienced all at the same time).

But this surely cannot be right. My experience is of a three dimensional world of people, cars, buildings, etc. The phenomenal character of my experience is surely very different from the phenomenal character of something that feels as a billion ultimates feel.

Strawson's Response

Strawson is aware of the intuitive difficulties of making sense of the emergence of 'macroexperiential phenomena' from 'microexperiential phenomena'. He says the following:

Human experience or sea snail experience (if any) is an emergent property of structures of ultimates whose individual experientiality no more resembles human or sea snail experientiality than an electron resembles a molecule, a neuron, a brain or a human being . . . This is not to advance our detailed understanding in any way. Nor is it to say we can ever hope to achieve, in the experiential case, the sort of feeling of understanding that we achieve in the liquid case. The present proposal is made at a very high level of generality (which is not a virtue); it merely recommends a general framework of thought in which there need be no more sense of a radically unintelligible transition in the case of experientiality than there is in the case of liquidity. (Strawson, 2006, pp. 27–8)

Strawson seems to suppose that the fact that macroexperientiality and microexperientiality are both the same *kind* of thing, i.e. they are both experiential phenomena, implies that the emergence of the former from the latter does not constitute a 'radically unintelligible transition'. But it is at least not clear how the fact that microexperientiality and macroexperientiality are the same kind of thing makes the emergence of the latter from the former any more intelligible. Subjects of experience are just not the kind of things that could intelligibly join together to form 'bigger' subjects of experience, any more than non-experiential things are the kind of things that can intelligibly come together to form subjects of experience.²

[2] Perhaps what it is like to be the ultimates that compose my brain is very different from what it is like to be me. But it is difficult to see how this difference could have significance for the intelligibility of their experiential being summing. I take it that it is something about the nature of *experiential being as such*, rather than the nature of any *specific experiential being*, in virtue of which experiential phenomena are capable of summing, if indeed they are capable of summing. I take it that our having a transparent grasp of our own experiential being implies that we have a transparent grasp of experiential being as such. If there is some feature *f* of the nature of experiential being as such in virtue of which

Nor does giving this ‘general framework of thought’ help make the notion of the emergence of macroexperientiality from microexperientiality intelligible. The above passage seems not to explain this emergence, but rather to express a faith that *it must happen somehow*. How does this differ from the faith of the non-panpsychist physicalist that *somehow* experience must emerge from the wholly non-experiential? According to Strawson, the hypothesis that experiential being emerges from non-experiential being comes to *feel* intelligible to many physicalists only because their other commitments make it such that *it must be the case*, it being the only option in logical space which preserves all their prior commitments: ‘the notion of brute emergence comes to feel substantial to them by a kind of reflected, holographical energy. It has to be there, given these unquestioned premisses, so it is felt to be real’ (Strawson, 2006, pp. 18–19). Surely we could say the same of Strawson’s hypothesis that macroexperiential being emerges from microexperiential being: something we can make no intelligible sense of, but which is needed to keep the theory consistent.

Strawson goes on to suggest that working on our general metaphysics will help make this picture clearer: ‘The object/process/property/state/event cluster of distinctions is unexceptionable in everyday life but it is hopelessly superficial from the point of view of science and metaphysics, and one needs to acquire a vivid sense that this is so’ (Strawson, 2006, p. 28). But it is difficult to see how considerations of *general* metaphysics could help with the problems I have been describing. The unintelligibility of the emergence of macroexperientiality from microexperientiality is a reflection of the *specific* nature of experiential phenomena, rather than the general ontological categories they fall into. At the very least, Strawson is obliged to explain how reflection on general metaphysical concerns could help here.

Conclusion

In order to avoid the brute emergence of conscious experience in the physical world, Strawson supposes that the fundamental constituents of matter are subjects of experience. But it is unintelligible how ‘little’ subject of experience can sum together to form ‘big’ subjects of experience. Because of this, panpsychism does nothing to explain, in a way that does not appeal to brute emergence, the conscious experience of people and animals.

experiential phenomena are capable of summing, then, in having a transparent grasp of the nature of experiential being as such, we ought to have a transparent grasp of *f*.

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