

Bernardo Kastrup on Panpsychism and Cosmopsychism (<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep96>)

Michael Egnor:

In the popular press lately, there's been a lot of discussion of panpsychism and cosmopsychism. Today, we have an opportunity to talk about these topics with Dr. Bernardo Kastrup, here on Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News, where artificial and natural intelligence meet head-on.

Michael Egnor:

Greetings. Welcome to Mind Matters News. This is Dr. Michael Egnor. I have the privilege of having with us today, Dr. Bernardo Kastrup. Dr. Kastrup is a philosopher and a computer scientist, who has been leading a modern Renaissance of metaphysical idealism, which is the viewpoint that reality is essentially mental, as opposed to physical. The viewpoint that reality is essentially physical has really been the core of the materialist perspective over the past several centuries in science. But as Dr. Kastrup has pointed out, the past century in science really suggests that the mental perspective is much more fundamental to the natural world than the traditional materialist perspective. So, welcome, Dr. Kastrup. It's a pleasure to have you with us.

Bernardo Kastrup:

Great to be here again, Mike. It's my pleasure.

Michael Egnor:

Right. Thank you. There has been a great deal of discussion in the popular press lately about panpsychism and cosmopsychism. What are they? And what is your perspective on them?

Bernardo Kastrup:

Huh. To really do justice to philosophy in this respect, you would have to elaborate on the many variations of panpsychism and the many variations of cosmopsychism. I will boil it down just two, which are the main ones, what people usually mean when they use the words. Panpsychism, well, to be more accurately called constitutive panpsychism, it's the notion that at least some of the elementary particles that constitutes the universe, at least some of them, are fundamentally conscious. In other words, they have experiential states, fundamental experiential states, next to having fundamental physical properties, like mass, charge, spin, momentum, spacetime position, and so on. So, next to all of those physical properties, there is a fundamental experiential property to at least some of the elementary building blocks of the physical universe.

Michael Egnor:

Before we go further with that, I just wanted to point out that Aristotle, and particularly Thomas Aquinas, have argued that in order to have a mental state, at least in the natural world, that you must

have forms that are grasped by the mind through the senses, and that everything, St. Thomas famously said that everything in the mind was first in the senses. How can something like a particle have a mind if it does not have sense organs with which to grasp forms? Or would you disagree with St. Thomas that you need to have sense organs to have mind?

Bernardo Kastrup:

This is a long-term discussion in philosophy. The concept here is what philosophers call intentionality, the idea that mental states are about something else outside. So, if I think of a car, then I'm thinking about a car, that I can see you perceive in the screen of my perception. This aboutness, some say, is intrinsic to the possibility of there being mentality, of there being experience. I think most philosophers today would say that the experience does not always require intentional content. It doesn't always need to be about something else. You can have endogenous experiences. Sometimes, you have endogenous desire. Sometimes, you feel anxiety for no reason. And the anxiety, unlike fear, is not about something. It's just an experience that arises from within the core of our self.

Michael Egnor:

But if intentionality is not a part of those experiences, how can you describe them to me? That is, that I have to think about something. You certainly can't describe my own internal feelings, because they're my own internal feelings. I don't have them. How can they be referred to in a way that allows another person to think about them if they're not intentional?

Bernardo Kastrup:

It can't. They can't because for there to be communication, there has to be intentional content.

Michael Egnor:

Right, right.

Bernardo Kastrup:

It's the intentional content, those external references, that give us a common dictionary to be able to communicate and convey meaning to one another. So, from a constitutive panpsychist perspective, electrons couldn't share with each other their inner states, but it is not incoherent to think, at least not incoherent for this reason to think that an elementary subatomic particle could have an extremely simple endogenous experiential state.

Michael Egnor:

Well, how would one distinguish a simple experiential state from a, say, a more complex or sophisticated one? Certainly, the traditional Thomist way of looking at the soul, which would be sort of the core of the experiential state, is that it's metaphysically simple, that it has no parts. So, if one accepts the notion that a conscious state is a metaphysically simple thing, in itself, how could one be more simple than another?

Bernardo Kastrup:

You could imagine that experiential states do not require consciousness to be not simple, but it could entail consciousness being excited in different ways. For instance, a guitar string is always one guitar string, but it can be excited in many different ways and produce many different notes. So, you could

imagine that what we call experiential qualities, they are so diverse because they are different patterns of excitation of this one simple thing that we may call consciousness or psyche or soul.

Michael Egnor:

One way that consciousness has been defined, and of course the definition of consciousness is kind of a subtle question and a complex topic in itself, but one way it's been defined is, consciousness is intentional states or the capacity to have intentional states. What would you say to that?

Bernardo Kastrup:

I don't think this is a proper definition. I think if an infant is born and immediately thrown into an ideal sensory deprivation chamber, this infant wouldn't have intentional content. The infant wouldn't have perceptions. Instead of talking about intentional contents, maybe it's easier to talk about perceptions, things we can see, hear, smell, touch, and so on. But the infant would still have endogenous experiential states. It would still feel anxiety. It would still feel desire, presumably. So, you see, I'm not defending panpsychism, because I am terribly opposed to it. I think it's very wrong. I disagree with it, at the very fundamental level. But I don't think that the appeal to intentionality is the way to refute it. I think there are better, stronger ways to refute it, that have been discussed recently in the media.

Michael Egnor:

Could you explain please? What...

Bernardo Kastrup:

There is one I will be shot at for agreeing with, Sabine Hossenfelder, a very no-nonsense physicist.

Michael Egnor:

Yes.

Bernardo Kastrup:

I confess that I actually like her. Please don't shoot me.

Michael Egnor:

No, I do too. She's a very interesting person, and writes some interesting stuff. Yeah.

Bernardo Kastrup:

And her argument is, you see, for there to be even endogenous experiential states, like emotions and thoughts, there would have to be some form of variability. A guitar string produces a note when it's varying, when it's moving up and down. That's the excitation. It's a vibration. There is a dynamism. It's not purely static. It's very difficult to conceive of an experiential state that is completely static, like seeing only one color without any reference for you to be able to say that that's white instead of black. If you only see white, then there is no white. And her point is that the inner state of the elementary subatomic particles doesn't change. It's a fixed inner state. And if what we can measure physically is the appearance, the extrinsic appearance, or the image of the inner experiential state, then insofar as the image correlates with the inner state, a static image correlates with a static inner state, but that would be incoherent. That's her point of view, that you cannot have a static experiential state and therefore, subatomic particles, elementary subatomic particles, cannot have experiential states.

Bernardo Kastrup:

I think that's a valid argument. I would have another one. I would say, elementary subatomic particles don't exist. They are an epistemic tool, and physicists know this. An elementary subatomic particle is a particular pattern of excitation of a quantum field. That quantum field, that thing, although it's entirely abstract, it exists. And to use an analogy to explain this, if you see a ripple moving on the surface of an otherwise very calm lake, you can point to the ripple and say, "It's here. Now it's here. And now it's there." Presumably, you can measure it. You can say it's this high, it's this long, it's this large, it's moving with that speed. You can characterize that ripple with all kinds of physical constants, or not constants, but physical quantities that characterize the ripple as a physical entity. Yet, there is nothing to the ripple but the water of the lake. The ripple is just a pattern of excitation of the water. The water isn't even moving from left to right, it's moving only up and down. But the ripple moves from left to right.

Bernardo Kastrup:

So, a subatomic particle is just like the ripple. It is a ripple in the quantum field and as such, it doesn't really exist. It's just a way of talking about the pattern of excitation of the quantum field. But if the panpsychists bite this bullet, then you would have to concede that the consciousness that they want to put in at that level of nature, as a fundamental aspect of nature, would be spatially unbound, because the quantum field is spatially unbound. You cannot say that the ripple's conscious because the ripple doesn't exist. There is only the quantum field. So, you have to say the quantum field is conscious.

Bernardo Kastrup:

But now, you end up with universal consciousness because the quantum field, this is spatially unbound. It exists everywhere at the same time. And that makes it impossible for panpsychists to explain why you and I seem to have separate conscious in their lives. I can't read your thoughts. Presumably, you can't read mine. I do not know what's happening in the galaxy of Andromeda. So, I think that's a very strong argument against panpsychism.

Michael Egnor:

The other topic that has been quite a bit in the press recently has been cosmopsychism. How does that differ from panpsychism and how do you feel about that?

Bernardo Kastrup:

The problem of panpsychists, assuming that there can be this thing as a local experiential state attached to an elementary subatomic particle, I don't think this thing can exist. But assume it exists because that's what they do assume. Their problem then is to explain how the subjectivity of an elementary subatomic particle combines with the subjectivity of another, and then another, and then another, until those micro subjectivities somehow compose my conscious inner life that's supposed to arise by the combination of the experiential states of the myriad subatomic particles constituting my nervous system. This is called the combination problem. And there is no explicit and coherent way to make sense of this. It seems to be an appeal to magic, just as materialism is an appeal to magic. How does experience arise from something that is by definition, non-experiential? That's an appeal to magic. A similar appeal to magic is to say, "Well, subjects can combine and form seemingly unitary, macro-level subjectivities." I mean, nobody can coherently and explicitly think of how this could possibly happen.

Bernardo Kastrup:

So, to avoid this combination problem, some philosophers have moved to the exact opposite end of the scale. They say, "Well, you know what? There is only one universal consciousness." And by the way, that's much more consistent with physics as we know. It's much more consistent with quantum field theory, quantum electrodynamics and... Well, quantum field theory is the broader theory. But then, that's called cosmopsychism. There is only one universal consciousness. And the challenge that you have to face then, as a cosmopsychist, is to say, how does this one mind seemingly break up or decomposes into a number of individual subjectivities? Like you, me, my cats, the bacteria swimming on the lake. How does the one ground the many? This is called then the decomposition problem.

Bernardo Kastrup:

Now, my personal opinion is that we have a solution for the decomposition problem. It's not only conceivable, we have it empirically. It's called dissociation. And the combination problem is fundamentally impossible. It's an incoherent thing to say that fundamentally, these joint subjectivities can combine to form a united higher-level meta-subjectivity.

Michael Egnor:

What is the dissociation phenomenon that you refer to?

Bernardo Kastrup:

Oh, that's from psychiatry. I think that it's called dissociative identity disorder. For decades, we have known clinically that this exists. It used to be called multiple personality disorder. It's when one unified mind, because of trauma or something else, some other cause or factor, seems to fragment into multiple co-conscious but disjoint subjectivities, different sub-personalities. So, to say they do not have complete experiential access to the inner life of one another. They may know of each other's existences, but they cannot access each other's thoughts, perceptions, emotions, at least not bi-directionally. Clinically, we have known for a long time that this exists, but there has always been doubt about whether patients of dissociative identity disorder might be confabulating or lying. But over the past decade or so, neuroimaging has given us very objective evidence that this actually happens.

Bernardo Kastrup:

There was a study in Germany. A woman had multiple dissociated personalities, which are called alters in the literature. One of those alters claimed to be blind. And lo and behold, when they hooked her up to an EEG, when a sight-capable alter was in control, the visual cortex was active, as it's normally the case. But when the blind alter would assume control, even though the woman's eyes would be wide open, activity in the visual cortex would disappear. And that shows the literally blinding power of dissociation.

Michael Egnor:

That's fascinating.

Bernardo Kastrup:

Yeah. My claim is, at least on empirical grounds, disassociation provides us a very good analogy, a very good metaphor for what might be happening at a universal level. Leading this one universal consciousness that we hypothesize to becoming many, to becoming you, me, and my girlfriend downstairs, and my cats, and so on.

Michael Egnor:

That's absolutely fascinating, Bernardo. I thank you very much. This is intriguing. I thank Dr. Kastrup for joining us here on Mind Matters News. And thank you for listening.

Announcer:

This has been Mind Matters News. Explore more at MindMatters.ai. That's Mind Matters dot AI. Mind Matters News is directed and edited by Austin Egbert. The opinions expressed on this program are solely those of the speakers. Mind Matters News is produced and copyrighted by the Walter Bradley Center for Natural and Artificial Intelligence at Discovery Institute.