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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rāmānuja's cosmopsychist-panentheistic solution to the hard problem of consciousness

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen a renewal of interest in panpsychism as a solution to the hard problem of consciousness. This has, in part, also driven an increase in interest in classical Indian philosophical traditions among analytic philosophers of mind. Many of these cross-cultural studies pertaining to panpsychism (and cosmopsychism) have focused on one particularly influential school of Indian philosophy, Advaita (non-dual) Vedānta, the most famous proponent of which is Śaṅkara. In this work, we would like to consider the view of another influential philosopher and the school that developed based on his view – Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE) and Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) Vedānta. We argue that a cosmopsychist-panentheistic metaphysics that is motivated by Rāmānuja's views offers a solution to the hard problem that is preferable to other comparable views and could form the basis for a panentheistic conception of God that is compatible with the reality of the freedom of human selves.

Keywords: hard problem of consciousness; panpsychism; cosmopsychism; Rāmānuja; Vedānta

Introduction

Recent decades have seen a renewal of interest in panpsychism – the view that consciousness is fundamental and ubiquitous – especially as a solution to the hard problem of consciousness (Chalmers 1996; Rosenberg 2004; Freeman 2006; Strawson 2006; Skrbina 2009; Brüntrup and Jaskolla 2016; Goff 2017, 2024; Seager 2019). This has, in part, also led to an increased interest in classical Indian philosophical traditions among analytic philosophers of mind. Many of these cross-cultural studies pertaining to panpsychism have focused on one particularly influential school of Indian philosophy, Advaita (non-dual) Vedānta, the most famous proponent of which is Śaṅkara (eighth century CE) (Albahari 2019a, 2019b, 2022, 2024; Gasparri 2019, 2022; Hejjaji *et al.* 2023).[1] In this work, we would like to consider the view of another influential philosopher, and the school that developed based on his view – Rāmānuja (eleventh century CE) and the Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified non-dualism) Vedānta. We argue that a cosmopsychist-panentheistic metaphysics that is motivated by Rāmānuja's views offers a solution to the hard problem that is preferable to some of the other comparable views and could form the basis for a panentheistic conception of God that is compatible with the reality of the freedom of human selves.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we offer an account of the hard problem of consciousness from contemporary analytic philosophy. We then contrast it with what we call the *hard problem of the self* from classical Indian philosophy, and argue that these problems are distinct but related. We further argue that we should face up to the problem of consciousness by turning to the problem of the self. Following this, we contrast two classical cosmopsychist-panentheistic Vedāntic solutions to the *hard problem of the self* (HPS): Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta (SAV) and Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta (RVV). We then clarify the historical RVV with a modified, contemporary version, RVV*; which we then compare with SAV and Philip Goff's (2024) Hybrid Cosmopsychism (HC). We argue that according to the criteria that Goff proposes for what constitutes a theory of consciousness, RVV* and Goff's HC are preferable to SAV, and RVV* is at least as good as HC. We also briefly compare RVV* with Swami Medhananda's interpretations of two modern Vedāntins, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo (Medhananda 2022a, 2022b, 2024).

A note on terminologies: In all cases, SAV and RVV refer to interpretations of the historical philosophers/traditions. However, RVV* refers to a modern departure from RVV. As a consequence, this work is not a historical defence of RVV's significance now for the hard problem of consciousness, but an articulation of RVV based on Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita as interpreted by other scholars. RVV* is our own account of RVV, aimed at a dialogue with contemporary panpsychism. Although we offer a standard account of SAV here, it is also controversial.[2]

Two hard problems

In 'How Exactly Does Panpsychism Explain Consciousness?' Goff (2024) offers an account of how his hybrid cosmopsychism meets his account of what a theory of consciousness is required to do. He maintains that there are two constraints on a theory of consciousness:

> *The External Constraint* – the theory should be consistent with the empirical data (this constraint is in the background of causal exclusion worries).
>
> *The Internal Constraint* – the theory should avoid explanatory gaps, by ensuring that one could in principle deduce the facts of animal consciousness from the facts from which they strongly/weakly emerge (Goff 2024, 79).

He maintains that an account of the 'hardness' of the problem of consciousness 'can be traced to the difficulty of satisfying both of these constraints at the same time' (31). For our purposes here it is useful to examine an account of how we arrive at this position of a theory of consciousness, and the 'hardness' of it. We now turn to a historical and cross-traditional examination of two problems in the philosophy of mind.

The hard problem of consciousness

While the question of the relation of consciousness to matter has been of central interest to philosophers through the ages, since the mid-1990s, a particular articulation of the problem – the hard problem of consciousness – has gained currency in analytic philosophy of mind. Directed at the physicalists (and scientific) theories of consciousness, Chalmers (1995) drew a distinction between two problems of consciousness. First is the problem of explaining the mechanisms of various cognitive functions, such as reportability, discrimination, access to information, and so on, which he dubbed the (relatively) 'easy' problems of consciousness. These problems, he noted, seemed directly susceptible to the methods of cognitive science. On the other hand, there is the problem of accounting for subjective, conscious experience

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– the question of why some of these cognitive functions were accompanied by experience, 'why there is *something it is like* to entertain a mental image, or to experience an emotion?' (Chalmers 1995, 201, emphasis added) This, he called the 'hard' problem of consciousness (henceforth, HPC).

The explanandum that the HPC is concerned with is the subject-level consciousness of humans and other organisms (and artificial entities, if there are any that are conscious). Such consciousness is typically: (i) *phenomenal*: possesses qualities that have a *what-it-is-like-for-me* aspect accessible through introspective contrast (i.e. seeing green vs. blue), and subject contrast (i.e. for Anand vs. for Siddharth); (ii) the phenomenal component that accompanies an organism/artificial entity's intentional states.

It is common for philosophers to distinguish between the phenomenality and intentionality of consciousness; and often, the two problems are dealt with separately.[3] Nevertheless, a solution to the hard problem ought to explain phenomenal consciousness in a manner that does not render intentionality a mystery – a satisfactory account, in addition to explaining how and why human mentality sometimes has phenomenal consciousness, also ought to be able to explain how and why such phenomenal states are also intentional. Such phenomenal-intentional consciousness of subjects is what HPC is concerned with.

As noted earlier, the HPC is primarily directed at materialists. Anti-materialist arguments abound in the literature in philosophy of mind; and some of them have evoked a huge amount of responses and discussion (e.g. Jackson's (1982) *knowledge argument*, Searle's (1980) *Chinese room argument*, and Chalmers's (2010) *conceivability/zombie argument*). Chalmers (2003) uses these anti-materialist arguments to categorize the different positions in the debates surrounding HPC. While it may not be possible to discuss these in detail here, it is important to note that most of the early discussions around these arguments and the hard problem of consciousness focused mostly on various materialist positions and the debates over theories of conceivability. The *self* and its role in an answer to HPC hardly figured in these debates. However, with increased prominence of views such as Russellian monism and panpsychism,[4] there has been increased talk of the self in the discussion. One specific question featuring the self in such discussions is in relation to the twin problems of *combination* and *de-combination* of subjects facing panpsychism.

In the current discourse, two kinds of panpsychist views have been identified. First, one can hold that the micro-level is fundamental, which then entails that consciousness of macroentities such as human being, dogs, and cats derives from the consciousness of microphysical entities such as electrons and quarks. Such views are referred to as *micropsychism* (e.g. Strawson 2006). On the other hand, one might take the cosmos-as-a-whole to be the fundamental entity, with all other concrete entities deriving from the cosmos. On such a view, the consciousness of humans, dogs, and cats derive from the cosmos's consciousness. Such views are referred to as *cosmopsychism* (e.g. Shani 2015; Nagasawa and Wager 2016; Goff 2017; Shani and Keppler 2018).

Both micropsychism and cosmopsychism face the challenge of explaining how macro-consciousness (of humans and other conscious organisms) derives from fundamental consciousness. In the case of micropsychists, it takes the form of the *combination problem*, of explaining how micro-consciousness of electrons, quarks and so on combine to form the consciousness of humans and so on.[5] In the case of cosmopsychists, it is the *de-combination problem*, of explaining how universal consciousness de-combines and individuates into the multiple macro-consciousness.[6]

In both these, it is the combination/de-combination of subjectivity that is especially tricky. Subjects of experience seem to possess two characteristics – ontological *privacy,* such that its contents are not experienced by other subjects; and ontological *unity*, such that they are *single* thing in their very being, and not just as a matter of convention.[7] Given these features, combination of subjects seems impossible, claim the proponents of the subject

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combination problem. If a composite subject were to come into existence, in addition to the microsubjects, it would be a totally new fact, as Willian James (1890) famously noted. Similarly, the de-combination of the universal subject of experience into 'smaller' subjects also seems unintelligible.

The panpsychist discourse is thus forced to confront the challenge of explaining the human subject-of-experience, even if they do not discuss the self as such. If the question of the subject of experience is central to explaining what HPC is concerned with – intentional, qualitative subject-level phenomenal-consciousness – it seems fair to say that HPC is concerned with questions of both why at all there are selves, and why and how selves are intentionally and phenomenally conscious in the what-it-is-like-for-me sense. After all, HPC is not focused on explaining why there is phenomenal consciousness outside of entities that are subjects of experience. While views such as contemporary panpsychism posit consciousness at the fundamental level to explain human consciousness, the primary goal is not an explanation for the former but the latter. The HPC can hence also be understood as the question of why and how a self is intentionally and phenomenally conscious.

Thus, to address the twin problems of combination/de-combination facing panpsychism, we must inquire into the nature of subjects, which leads us to discussing the nature of the self. Such a discussion, it is hoped, would enable the panpsychist to explain how one can get from fundamental consciousness – micro-consciousness or universal consciousness – to non-fundamental, phenomenal-intentional consciousness of humans and other organisms, and thus provide a satisfactory answer to the HPC.

As Vaidya (forthcoming) notes, we can ask three kinds of questions about the combination/de-combination problems. First is the question of *modal coherence* – whether the very idea of combination of micro-conscious entities to form a macro-conscious entity (or analogously, the de-combination from a universal consciousness to a macro-consciousness) is a coherent one. Second is the question of *mechanical generation*, pertaining to the mechanisms that bring about such combination/de-combination. Finally, one can also ask the question of purpose or *metaphysical explanation* – why does such a combination/de-combination even occur?

Various classical Indian philosophies seek to answer some version of all the three questions. Our focus is on two Vedāntic views, Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita.

Consciousness in classical Indian philosophy

There exist a wide variety of views on consciousness among the various schools and subschools of classical Indian philosophy. The only wholly materialist school is that of the Cārvākas (Gokhale 2015); the others hold views that can be understood as forms of dualism, idealism, or panpsychism. Among these, among the most prominent are the various schools of Vedānta, many of which are also theistic. All schools of Vedānta are committed to the Upaniṣadic insight that the ultimate ontological ground of all reality is a single conscious entity, Brahman, with everything else – the universe of sentient and non-sentient entities – deriving from it. This allows for interpreting at least some of the Vedāntic schools as forms of cosmopsychism. Further, in laying out their metaphysics, these schools sought to answer some version of all the three questions: modal coherence, mechanical generation, and metaphysical explanation.

Here, a point to note: while a particular Vedāntic tradition may posit some kind of universal consciousness, and on its basis address the combination/de-combination problem, it may not necessarily address HPC, for it is not clear if the kind of consciousness they are discussing applies to HPC. For example, per the proponents of SAV, consciousness is to be distinguished from the content of consciousness. Metaphorically speaking, the light that illumines an object is different from the object that is illuminated. Consciousness is

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only the light, 'in itself it is devoid of any content or structure and can never become an object' (Fasching 2021, 679). Such an understanding of consciousness is different from how it usually is understood (as *qualia*) in discussions surrounding HPC.

Nevertheless, this does not mean SAV's theory of consciousness is not relevant to HPC. Typically, most Advaitins contend that the essence of Brahman is *prakāśa* (illumination/manifestation) (Gupta 2003, 103). Illumination consciousness here can be understood as subjectivity qua subjectivity – a locus of consciousness that experiences some *what-it-is-like* qualities, without reference to any specific qualitative content. Fasching (2021) argues that a solution to the HPC is dependent on a theory of illumination consciousness of the sort provided by SAV. That is, we need to think about the kind of consciousness SAV discusses to make sense of qualia in HPC. However, even if we were to agree with Fasching, it is not clear if SAV's theory of illumination consciousness alone can provide a satisfactory answer to HPC; nor is it clear that SAV is even the best Vedāntic view that can contribute to a theory of phenomenal consciousness. Other sub-schools, often in tension with SAV, such as Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, also employ the concept, and might be better suited for our purposes.

The hard problem of the self

Similar to HPC, one can formulate the HPS – the task of explaining how the self fits into a unified picture of reality, the kinds of knowledge that we can have of it, and how such knowledge can lead us to liberation. Some version of HPS has been the central intellectual problem for many classical Indian schools, including the various Buddhist and Vedāntic schools.

Vaidya (forthcoming) suggests that we can understand the HPS in terms of the illusion-trade-off question: which illusion, if any, should we accept – the self, consciousness or both? There are primarily two kinds of things that can be said to be illusory in HPS: (a) the self and (b) consciousness. Both these concepts, and other ones central to our purpose (such as 'reality', 'illusion', etc.) have been understood in various different ways across traditions.[8] These differences aside, if we were to foreground the *illusion trade-off question*, we can distinguish between four kinds of responses to HPS:

Asymmetric responses	Symmetric responses
Type-S Illusionism, that the self is an illusion, but consciousness is real.	*Type-D Illusionism*, that both the self and consciousness are an illusion.
Type-C Illusionism, that consciousness is an illusion, but the self is real.	*Type-R Realism*, that both the self and consciousness are real.

We may not have the space to expand on this taxonomy here; nevertheless, it provides a useful framework to understand and contrast various views, including SAV and RVV.

The metaphysics of RVV in contrast to SAV

Both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja accept that Brahman is realized as one's own *ātman* (or one's self). However, they interpret this claim differently.[9] The former uses numerical identity to explain the relation between Brahman and *ātman*. This entails that there is no *ātman* that is in any way distinct from Brahman. On the other hand, Rāmānuja contends that Brahman and *ātman* are distinct yet inseparable (*apṛthak-siddha*) and further characterize the relation in many ways, including as the relation between a substance and its inseparable quality. For this reason, Viśiṣṭādvaita is often translated as *qualified non-dualism*. Grimes

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(1990, ch. 2) offers the following alternative translation of the term: *the organic unity of the many in the one through individualized embodiment and enlivening*. This captures Rāmānuja's use of the internal relation of inseparability as a central feature of his metaphysics.

In addition to this, there are several differentiae that separate Advaita from Viśiṣṭādvaita:[10]

(i) There is a distinction between Brahman without attributes (*nirguṇa*) and Brahman qualified by attributes (*saguṇa*). Advaita contends that only the former is ultimately real, while Viśiṣṭādvaita contends that Brahman with an infinite number of positive attributes, along with the universe of sentient and non-sentient entities, are all ultimately real.

(ii) Both hold that there is a primordial self (*paramātman*). However, Advaita interprets the primordial self as non-dual consciousness, which in turn is the only ultimately real entity, Brahman. Viśiṣṭādvaita interprets the primordial self as the supreme person (*puruṣottama*); and characterize the primordial self as Nārāyaṇa (in union with his divine consort Śrī), with the universe as the 'body' of the supreme person.[11]

(iii) In Viśiṣṭādvaita the supreme person is both constituted by, and the possessor of consciousness. Consciousness without a self is impossible. In Advaita, consciousness without a self is possible since Brahman is pure non-dual consciousness. In terms of the taxonomy developed in the previous section, Advaita would be an instance of Type-S illusionism, while Viśiṣṭādvaita an instance of Type-R realism.

(iv) Per the Advaitins, all relations are unreal, for Brahman is the only real entity. Viśiṣṭādvaitins, on the other hand, consider various relations (and the relata involved) to be real. On this basis, they explicate the relation between Brahman and individual selves as one between *kāraṇa-kārya* (cause-effect), *ādharin-ādharā* (support-supported), *viśeṣya-viśeṣaṇa* (substrate-attribute), *śarīri-śarīra* (self-body), and *aṁśi-aṁśa* (whole-fragment). In contrast, per the Advaitins, only non-dual Brahman that bears no relations is ultimately real.[12]

(v) Viśiṣṭādvaitins disagree with Advaitins over the criterion for 'real'. For Advaitins everything that passes in time is unreal/illusory. Impermanence is the mark of unreality. For Viśiṣṭādvaitins impermanence does not entail unreality. For example, both material bodies and conscious finite selves are temporally bound and impermanent, yet they are real and inhabit a different kind of reality than what the supreme person inhabits.

We will now develop these points in more detail.

According to Rāmānuja, Brahman is not merely austere non-dual consciousness, as Śaṅkara takes to be the case. Rather, Brahman, is both the subject of consciousness and consciousness itself; further, the universe of sentient and non-sentient entities (*cit* and *acit*) is an inseparable attribute (*viśeṣaṇa*) of Brahman (Chari 1988, 272). Brahman can be thought of as having a layered reality: First is Brahman qua the ultimate substrate of all reality, the essential nature of which includes self-illumination, and is also that which illuminates everything. Brahman is further characterized a *ānandamaya* or of infinite bliss, the *antarātmā* or the indwelling self of all entities, and the material cause (*upādānakāraṇa*) of the universe – literally, the stuff that constitutes the universe of sentient and non-sentient entities (Chari 2008, 31).[13]

Second come the *jīvas* or sentient finite selves. The *jīva* is characterized as an attribute of Brahman. Just as the colour of the rose is not numerically identical to the rose, the *jīva* is not numerically identical to Brahman. In terms of the metaphysical categories that Viśiṣṭādvaitins adopt, an attribute and the substance of which it is an attribute are of distinct categories; on this basis, the finite self is also distinct from Brahman.

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However, it is also inseparable from Brahman, just as the colour of a rose is inseparable from the rose.

The knowledge possessed by such finite selves is conceptualized as a concrete attribute of these selves and referred to as *dharmabhūtajñāna* (an attribute that is also knowledge) (Chari 1988, 140–141). In contemporary analytic terms, *dharmabhūtajñāna* a can be understood as an intentional-phenomenological-cognitive-state that is an attribute of the self. This knowledge of an individual self, in its embodied state within a material body, can expand or contract depending on its *karma*.

Non-sentient entities (*acit*) are similar to sentient finite selves in that they too are inseparable attributes of the supreme person. This is true of the material body that is linked with finite selves (such as humans) as well. However, unlike finite selves, non-sentient entities do not possess knowledge (*dharmabhūtajñāna*) or intentional consciousness.

In summary, per Rāmānuja, Brahman is the ultimate substrate – the ontological ground – of the universe; the universe itself is an inseparable attribute of Brahman. Within this universe, there are finite selves that derive their illumination consciousness from Brahman and exist with phenomenal-intentional mental states. Their knowledge is limited and shaped by their *karma*. While these finite selves are attributes of Brahman, they themselves can double up as relative substrates of their bodies.[14] Brahman qua the supreme person, on account of being the substrate of the universe of conscious and non-conscious entities is ontologically distinct from them (for a substance is distinct from its attributes), while also being inseparable from them. Further, Brahman is the inner controller (*antaryāmin*) of all entities in the universe. In these ways, Brahman is the transcendent reality that in turn is immanent in and pervades all reality.[15]

It is important to note that the hierarchy that obtains in virtue of the dependence relation, as summarized in the table below, is with respect to perfections, and not with respect to being more or less real.[16]

Entity	*Rank*	*Differentia*	*Dependence*
Material Body	Low	Inner and outer transformation	Attribute of (and dependent on) a finite self
Conscious Finite Self	Middle	Essential nature does not change. However, the knowledge of any conscious finite self, in its embodied state, expands or contracts depending on its karma	Inseparable attribute of (and dependent on) the supreme person
Supreme Person	High	Transcendent	Non-dependent absolute substrate

Brahman, who is the supreme person, is thus the ultimate ground in a hierarchical, nested reality, where ultimately there is only one individual substance: Brahman-having-the-universe-as-its-inseparable-attribute. Nevertheless, the attributes are as real as Brahman qua substrate itself. To understand this aspect of Rāmānuja's view better, it might be useful to contrast it against Śaṅkara's.

Śaṅkara (and most Advaitins who follow him) hold that there are three levels of reality where one level is more real than another. There is unreality (*prāthibhāsika*), relative reality (*vyāvahārika*), and absolute reality (*pāramārthika*). The first is the most unreal, while the last is the most real.[17] However, the position of Śaṅkara and other Advaitins who follow him can be confusing, since they hold that Brahman, understood as non-dual consciousness, is fundamental and the only entity that is absolutely real. So, while Advaitins talk as if there are levels of reality, they are better understood as talking about different levels of illusoriness.

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When one looks at a rope and mistakes it for a snake, the illusion goes away as soon as you look away or when you look closely and realize it is a rope; similarly, per the Advaitins, the illusion of the material world and finite selves passes upon realizing that one's own finite self is identical to non-dual consciousness.

Rāmānuja, on the other hand, holds that there are different kinds of reality, although they are all equally real. The kind of reality an entity inhabits is marked by duration. The body passes with time; however, it is real as long as it lasts. Finite selves, each a fragment/attribute of Brahman, do not cease to exist even after the human's death. The supreme person, of which each finite self is an attribute, is itself beyond time.

Rāmānuja's conception of 'body' (*śarīra*) and its use as a metaphor for the universe in its relation to the supreme person is of central significance. Rāmānuja holds that 'body' means any entity which a conscious being is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes (Chari 1988, 50). Thus, 'body' refers not only to the material structure of a human being, but more broadly to any entity, whether physical or not, that a self can control and support. The relation between the finite self and its material body is homologous to the relation between the supreme person and the universe. The material body of a human self is dependent on the finite self just as a mode is dependent on the possessor of the mode, or an attribute is dependent on the substance of which it is an attribute. Thus, by analogy the universe is a mode of the supreme person who is its mode possessor (Barua 2010, 15).

The *śarīri-śarīra* (self-body) conception of the Brahman-universe relation allows Rāmānuja to posit the supreme person as the support in an *enlivening emanation* sense whereby he sustains the world and its inhabitants (this will be made clear shortly). By virtue of being its attribute and the source of illumination consciousness, each conscious finite self is metaphysically dependent on the supreme person for enlivening. The material entities, while not sentient, are still inseparable attributes of the supreme person. The supreme person is also the inner controller (*antaryāmin*) of the entire universe including every human self, just as a human being's self is the inner controller of the human's body.[18] It is Brahman that bestows upon every being, by virtue of being its controller, the power to act at all.

For Rāmānuja, the relation between the supreme person and the universe (as the substrate and attribute or mode possessor and mode) has both ontological and teleological dimension.

Aspect	Substrate-attribute relation
Ontological	An attribute cannot be realized apart from its substrate. Thus, the universe is the manifestation of the supreme person, and ontologically distinct from it, but cannot be realized without the supreme person. The supreme person is thus the *material cause* of the universe.
Teleological	Just as an earring's nature is not fully explained without reference to an earring bearer, from whom and for whom earrings exist, the universe is not fully explained without reference to the supreme person, the possessor of the universe, as a mode of it, from whom and for whom, the universe exists. The supreme person is the efficient cause of the material world.

These two dimensions of the Brahman-universe relation explicate what it means for Brahman to be both the material and efficient cause of the universe.

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Clarifying Rāmānuja*'s cosmopsychist-panentheism

So far, our presentation has been historical in the sense of aiming to offer an account of RVV that has basis in textual interpretation and historical scholarship. We now turn to an alternative account of RVV based on four guiding questions that are relevant to contemporary discourse around analytic panpsychism and panentheism, which we shall refer to as RVV*.

What kind of cosmopsychism?

Rāmānuja* is a cosmopsychist because he holds that all all-reality-considered-together (or the cosmos) is one conscious substance – Brahman or the supreme person with all its essential and non-essential attributes; the other entities in the cosmos derive their existence from the One. To clarify further, we would like to distinguish between two kinds of panpsychist claims, *actual* and *modal*.

> *Actual panpsychism*: everything is conscious.
>
> *Modal panpsychism*: everything can possibly be conscious even if they are not actually conscious at all times.

Since consciousness could have different meanings, these versions are not mutually exclusive. Rāmānuja* is an actual panpsychist (cosmopsychist) when consciousness is understood as illumination consciousness, for in this view, everything's inner controller is Brahman who is the source of illumination consciousness. However, Rāmānuja* is only a modal panpsychist (and not an actual panpsychist) when consciousness is understood in its phenomenal sense, for everything in the universe, by virtue of possessing illumination consciousness is potentially phenomenally conscious, while only some entities (humans, etc.) possess *dharmabhūtajñāna* or intentional-phenomenological-knowledge that is an attribute of the self (and are hence actually phenomenally conscious).

Drawing this distinction between illumination and phenomenal consciousness also allows us to examine and characterize Rāmānuja* in other useful ways. Rāmānuja* is a cosmopsychist about illumination consciousness, for he holds that the substrate of the cosmos-as-a-whole possesses illumination consciousness, from which the illumination consciousness of a finite-self derives. However, this does not entail that he is a cosmopsychist about phenomenal consciousness as well. For example, one might even have good reasons to be a micropsychist about phenomenal consciousness, wherein the phenomenal-intentional properties of finite selves derive from the phenomenal properties of microentities. Or, for any finite-self to have phenomenal consciousness, it must reside in that neighbourhood of reality where there are phenomenal properties, and it must have the capacity through its finite being to instantiate phenomenal properties (which it would by virtue of deriving its illumination consciousness from the Supreme person).

Thus, per Rāmānuja*, everything is dependent on and is a fragment of the cosmic consciousness, a singular entity, a single substance that exists with a nature of illumination consciousness, changeless and eternal. However, there are other realities – perhaps some neighbourhoods of Reality – that do change and instantiate phenomenal properties. What phenomenal properties and how they are realized depend on the reality a finite-self inhabits.

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What kind of panentheism?

Rāmānuja* is a panentheist because everything is dependent on, and *in* the reality that is Brahman, the supreme person. Rāmānuja was able, in part through his distinctive use of the metaphor of the 'body', to elaborate a theology according to which the universe is an inseparable attribute of Brahman, with Brahman also being the universe's material and efficient cause, as well as its inner controller. Brahman thus retains a causal asymmetry and independence in certain crucial respects (Barua 2010, 4). Rāmānuja* can adopt this position.

What kind of freedom?

Rāmānuja held that individual selves are agents, who can act freely. However, he also held that Brahman is the inner controller of all entities, including individual selves. How Rāmānuja reconciles the two, and to what extent he is successful, is a matter of debate (Ganeri 2014). The gist of his approach is as follows: Each individual self, by the power bestowed upon it by Brahman, is able to act freely as an agent. Brahman here is only an enabler. One way in which Rāmānuja does this is by holding that Brahman only gives consent (*anumati*) to an individual self's free actions. Such consent, while necessary, is not sufficient for the action to have taken place – the free choice of the individual self is a necessary component too. Rāmānuja draws an analogy to the joint-ownership of an asset by two persons – one cannot sell it without the consent of the other; nevertheless, if the first seller convinces the other owner and obtains the latter's consent, the credit (analogous to *karma*) is due to the former alone (*Śrī Bhāṣya*, 2.3.6.41, Raṅgācharya and Aiyangār 1965, 122–123; Ganeri 2014).

Rāmānuja* can borrow this framework and hold that Brahman is the energetic source of all action, by virtue of Brahman being the inner controller of all entities. However, Brahman need not determine how any individual will use their energy. Without Brahman's energy, all is lost. However, the supreme person's energy does not by itself make the events of the world happen as they do; rather, only finite parts of Brahman do this, by inhabiting a nested reality – a reality that is suffused by Brahman. The following analogy might help make this clearer.

The analogy of the electric bus for the self: we all inhabit a finite material bus in the ordinary world. The bus needs electricity to move or do anything at all – even resting and staying stationary requires energy. In receiving energy, we can choose what to do with it, be that good or evil. We are given energy by virtue of our nature; and the bus we inhabit is connected to something larger, that is energy. Our connection to energy is not one of numerical identity, but as a modification of a part or fragment of the totality of energy, The redness of a rose is not identical to what the rose is, in the way in which each of us are self-identical. Similarly, each of us is not identical to the totality of energy.

We have the choice to do what we want to do with the energy available to us, given our dependence relation. While we depend on energy for existence, nothing that comes from the totality of energy wholly determines what we do with it. We can use it to turn the bus left, right, go straight or around in circles. We can use it to stop the bus. We are in control of the bus, but without the energy we are dependent on we can do nothing, not even exist.

If anything can be done, it is because there is energy. Perhaps, what is done ought to be within the bounds of the laws that govern energy. However, energy does not determine what will be done.

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What kind of knowledge?

Rāmānuja conceptualizes knowledge as an attribute of the finite self, as encapsulated in the concept of *dharmabhūtajñāna*. Self and its knowledge are distinct yet inseparable. It is the nature of knowledge to reveal something about its object, but by itself it cannot know. It is the nature of the self to know what is revealed by its attribute, knowledge.

Since knowledge is only an attribute of the self, a self's knowledge can change over time without any change in the self's essential nature. Thus, Rāmānuja* ought to hold that the self's knowledge contracts and expands and gets modified in various ways, depending on the neighbourhood of reality that the self is located in, and the various causal networks it is enmeshed in at any given time. Change is real, and the attributes that change are also real.

A comparison of various cosmopsychisms

Goff (2024) characterizes his view as follows:

> According to hybrid cosmopsychism, there are basic laws ensuring that, in certain conditions, new conscious subjects – new phenomenal property bearers–emerge from the universe. But these strongly emergent subjects do not appear with their own phenomenal property instances; rather they 'inherit' phenomenal property instances which previously belonged to the universe. That is to say, there are phenomenal properties, P_1, P_2 ... P_n, and an emergent subject E, such that at time T1, P_1, P_2 ... P_n belong to the universe and at a later time T2, P_1, P_2 ... P_n cease to belong to the universe and instead belong to E ... At the moment E ceases to be a conscious entity in its own right – perhaps at the death of the organism – it relinquishes its phenomenal properties back to the universe. In this way, although there are strongly emergent *subjects* there are no strongly emergent phenomenal *properties*; rather phenomenal properties of the fundamental fields are transferred from the universe subject to emergent subjects, before being relinquished back to the universe (Goff 2024, 67–68, original emphasis).

Such a view, Goff notes, requires further principles to explain conscious subjects of humans and animals. He offers the following two:

> [*The Localization Principle*] says that we need a law determining that local subjects exist and only exist when certain precise conditions obtain. Which conditions? This is an empirical question, to be settled by our best theory concerning the physical correlates of local consciousness. [*The Thinning Principle]* says that we need a law ensuring that local subjects inherit a 'thinned-out' version of the experience contained in the spatial region they occupy, such that emergent subjects inherit only those aspects of experience that realize the right information structures (where the 'right information structures' are the ones introspection and neuroscience tell us correspond to human and animal experience) (Goff 2024, 71, emphasis added).

The localization principle explains why and how there are local subjects in some conditions (such as when there are humans and other animals) and not others (such as when there is a rock). Further, once the emergence of local subjects is explained, the thinning principle is aimed at explaining the phenomenal content that will be experienced by a local subject by way of inheritance from the universe's phenomenal content. Inheritance of phenomenal properties, mediated by the thinning law, is required to ensure that the right token phenomenal properties are now experienced by the local subject and not the universal subject.

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The view that we have proposed, RVV*, is different from Goff's in important ways. First, the limited subjects, unlike Goff's local subjects, do not emerge from the cosmic subject. Rather, the limited subjects derive their illumination consciousness – their ontic subjectivity – from Brahman, for Brahman is the only entity with illumination consciousness. On this absolute substratum of illumination consciousness, depending on the neighbourhood of reality that it inhabits and what it does with the energy it derives, a limited subject has the phenomenal properties that it does.

Ultimately, there is only one real individual-substance-thing, Brahman, that is of the nature of illumination consciousness, that is the inner controller and the 'energy' of all reality. However, this one individual-substance-thing has various attributes or modes as fragments of its 'body'; these attributes are not full individuals, for they are attributes of the only substance and cannot exist independent of the substance. Nevertheless, they are not wholly identical to the only individual, for they are its inseparable yet distinct attributes. These attributes of Brahman can in turn double up as the substrate of a further attribute. For example, the limited self is the substrate of attributes such as being a human being, being the bearer of experiences such as pleasure and pain, and so on. While these properties and the limited self's role as the substrate of these attributes are real, the limited self is still dependent on Brahman for existence and inseparable from it.[19] In contrast, in Goff's HC, each local subject strongly emerges as an individual from the cosmic subject. It may not be a fundamental entity; nevertheless, it is an individual to the extent that it could conceivably exist independent of the cosmic subject even if it is the case that in our actual world this is not the case.

Goff vs. Rāmānuja vs. SAV*

Based on the criteria that Goff outlines for a theory of consciousness, we can compare the three cosmopsychist views. First, it seems that SAV is the weakest, for it simply denies the reality of local or limited subjects and ultimately accepts as real only the single cosmic consciousness devoid of any relations. Phenomenal properties, including those that humans possess, are not absolutely real, but real only relative to the limited (and ultimately illusory) self that we are. Further, SAV's posit that the complex reality that we seem to inhabit is ultimately not real also entails that the knowledge we obtain through the sciences do not correspond to reality but are only relatively real at best. For these reasons, both RVV* and Goff's HC offer better prospects of a solution to the hard problem of consciousness.

RVV* and Goff's accounts are both prima facie equally compatible with science. In terms of their accounts of phenomenal properties that human subjects experience, the two views differ. As we saw in the previous section, RVV* accounts for this in terms of the neighbourhood of reality that a limited-self inhabits, while Goff (2024) accounts for it in terms of the phenomenal properties that a local subject inherits from the cosmic subject's phenomenal properties. At this juncture, we have no reason to think that one is better than the other.

It is on its account of the local subject that we think RVV* holds a significant advantage over Goff's HC. Goff is required to posit strong emergence to explain how local subjects come into existence from the cosmic subject. This would require further fundamental laws that prescribe the conditions under which such emergence can occur. RVV*, on the other hand, is not required to posit strong emergence, for the limited selves are not individual substances that have an existence separate from the supreme person, but only attributes of the supreme person that derive their illumination consciousness from the latter. To the extent that RVV* does not have to posit strong emergence and additional fundamental laws, it has an advantage over HC.

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RVV* also holds an advantage in terms of how well it can account for the possibility of human freedom. The limited-self derives from the supreme person only illumination consciousness; its phenomenal properties are derived not from the phenomenal properties of the cosmic subject – as is the case in Goff's view – but dependent on the neighbourhood of reality that it inhabits. More importantly, like the electric bus, the limited self has the freedom to decide what it does with the energy and the capacity to instantiate phenomenal properties, which is only partly determined by the neighbourhood of reality it inhabits. On the other hand, in Goff's view, the phenomenal properties of a human self are inherited from the cosmic self; and hence, it is not clear the extent to which a such a self has the freedom to act.

Other realist Indian cosmopsychisms

As noted earlier, while Advaita has been the school of Indian philosophy that was first brought into dialogue with analytic cosmopsychism, there are a few other works that engage with views of other philosophers and schools. Among these, the most sustained has been Swami Medhananda's works engaging the modern, realistic Vedānta of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo with analytic cosmopsychism (Medhananda, 2022b, 2022a, 2024). While an in-depth comparison between RVV* with these views would be most valuable, such an exercise is beyond the scope of this article. In what follows, we offer some points of similarities and differences, and possible ways in which RVV* might hold an advantage over these views.

Both Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo contend that contrary to the classical Advaitic view (of Śaṅkara), the world of plural individual selves and material reality are not ultimately illusory; rather, they are manifestations of the divine cosmic consciousness, wherein the individuation into plurality occurs on account of their divine play (*līlā*), through a mechanism of involution and evolution. To the extent that they are realist about the universe, they are similar to RVV and RVV*. However, there are some key differences. Swami Medhananda interprets both Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo's views as versions of *opaque* cosmopsychism – the conscious experiences of individual selves are not transparent to the cosmic subject (hence opaque). This, he contends, allows them to address the de-combination/individuation problem. Per Swami Medhananda (2024), the individuation problem arises only in the case of transparent cosmopsychism; only then will one have to explain how the same conscious experiences (of individual selves) be experienced by two subjects – the respective individual self and the cosmic subject. If one eschews transparency in favour of opacity, one does not need to contend with this problem.

However, in our evaluation, this is not the case. The de-combination/individuation problem arises in a different way in the case of opaque views. If, as noted earlier, the individual self enjoys ontological privacy – such that its contents are not experienced by other subjects – and is an ontological unity, how can it be a 'part' of or grounded in another unity (the cosmic subject)? Further, to address the de-combination problem, it is not enough to explain the mechanism through which such opaqueness comes about; one is also required to account for the very possibility of such opaque subjects deriving from other opaque subjects. Or, in the terminology we introduced earlier, the really hard part of the de-combination problem is the modal coherence question – is the derivation of ontologically private subjects from other subjects at all possible – and not just the mechanical generation question. Swami Medhananda does not address this issue in his interpretation of Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda's views.

RVV*, following RVV, can adopt transparency, and admit that an individual self's conscious experiences are available to the cosmic subject as well. This is not a problem, for the limited selves are not full individuals that have an existence separate from the supreme

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person but are only attributes of the supreme person that derive their illumination consciousness from the latter. Given this, they do not have to explain how ontic points of view de-combine or individuate. Further, RVV* could contend that because the conscious content of every individual self is phenomenologically unified, they are not 'shared' with other finite subjects (which are in turn phenomenologically unified qualities); nevertheless, all such phenomenologically unified content of individual selves are ultimately experienced by the source of all illumination consciousness – the supreme self.[20] This is what it means for individual selves to derive their illumination consciousness from the supreme self.

Conclusion

Philosophers across cultures have theorized about the place of consciousness in reality. Some of them have adopted sophisticated idealist and panpsychist positions, and on this basis, developed theologies and conceptions of God. We hope to have shown that one such view from classical Indian philosophy, Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, and RVV* motivated by it, offer the promise of providing an elegant cosmopsychist-panentheistic solution to the hard problem of consciousness. There is much fruitful work to be done in exploring the view in conjunction with analytic philosophy of mind and religion.

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Notes

1. There have been some works that look at modern Vedānta of Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda (Medhananda, 2022b, 2022a, 2024), and Pratyabhijñā Śaivism (Biernacki, 2024) as well; some of these are discussed later in this article.
2. For alternatives see Gasparri (2019, 2022), Vaidya (2020, 2022), Fasching (2021, 2022a, 2022b), Hejjaji, Sadasivan and Padmakumar (2023), Irwin-Herzog (2024).
3. An exception to this are the phenomenal intentionality theories (e.g. Mendelovici 2018).
4. See Alter and Nagasawa (2012) for more on Russellian monism.
5. See Goff (2009, 2016), Coleman (2014) for more on the subject combination problem. Also see Chalmers (2016).
6. See Miller (2018) for an articulation of the de-combination problem.
7. See Siddharth (2024) for more on ontological privacy and unity of subjects, and the role they play in the combination problem facing panpsychism. The problem carries over to the de-combination problem as well.
8. See Vaidya (forthcoming) for a summary of the various ways in which these concepts have been understood in Indian traditions.
9. See Grimes (1990) for an overview of Rāmānuja's objection to SAV.
10. These points are not to be taken as applying to every single figure in each tradition, but as general differentia that can help one initially see the difference between the two systems.
11. See Barua (2010, 12), Srinivasachari (1943, ch. 9) for more on the metaphor of the universe as the body of Brahman/God.
12. Srinivasachari (1943, 121), but these points do not apply to every single thinker in the tradition.

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13. When it is said that Brahman is the material cause of the universe, it is meant that the substance which transforms into the universe is Brahman, similar to how a clay-lump transforms into a clay pot and is the latter's material cause. Per Rāmānuja, the universe was already present in Brahman in a subtle form, as an attribute, prior to creation; and the creation of the universe was only a transformation of the universe from its subtle to the gross form. Importantly, the essence of the substance (Brahman) remains the same; only the non-essential attributes undergo transformation (for e.g. see Raṅgācharya and Aiyangār, 1964).

14. The conception of an attribute (*viśeṣaṇa*) that can also double up as a relative substrate is unique to Viśiṣṭādvaita. See Freschi (2018) and Siddharth (ms) for the explication of this concept by Veṅkaṭanātha (thirteenth century CE), the most prominent Viśiṣṭādvaitin after Rāmānuja. The authors would like to thank Elisa Freschi for pointing them to the significance of the concept of *viśeṣaṇa*.

15. It is important to note that our interpretation of Rāmānuja's metaphysics – wherein Brahman and the universe together constitute one individual substance, with them being ontologically distinct only in a way that a substance/substrate is distinct from its attributes – is not the only way his views have been interpreted. For example, consider Barua (2010) saying that per Rāmānuja, 'Brahman is intimately present in the world not by being spatially extended through it but by sustaining every finite object over which Brahman retains a causal asymmetry and independence in certain crucial respect' (4. Also see 17). Here, he seems to indicate that Brahman and the universe are not substantially contiguous, are distinct in a manner stronger than how a substrate and its attribute are distinct. While our justification for why we prefer our interpretation over Barua's is beyond the scope of this paper, see *Śrī Bhāṣya* 1.4.7.23 (Raṅgācharya and Aiyangār 1964, 225) and 2.3.7.45 (Raṅgācharya and Aiyangār 1965, 131) for passages that support our interpretation.

16. See Barua (2010, 12).

17. See Balasubramanian and Revathy (2014) for more on the Advaitic levels of reality.

18. See Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya* 1.2.4.19 (Raṅgācharya and Aiyangār 1964, 35).

19. See Siddharth (MS) wherein the Viśiṣṭādvaita notion of an attribute that can also double up as a relative substrate is characterized as quasi-individuals.

20. See Siddharth (MS) for a Viśiṣṭādvaita inspired view, which can be understood as building on RVV*, that addresses the various strands of the de-combination/individuation problem in further detail.

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