



Benedikt Paul Göcke and Swami Medhananda (Eds.).  
*Panentheism in Indian and Western Thought: Cosmopolitan  
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This volume takes on the laudable but almost impossible task of comparing panentheistic philosophies and theologies across a diverse range of Western and Indian thinkers. This task is laudable simply because comparative philosophy of religion is the admirable endeavour of seeking to understand and learn from other cultures, thereby humanizing and respecting cultures that have historically been dismissed or vilified. ‘Panentheism’ seems to be a concept crying out for such comparative treatment, not only as a word that has taken Western philosophy of religion by storm, but also because it was coined by German idealist Karl Christian Friedrich Krause in his description and appropriation of Indian philosophies (see Göcke’s chapter in this volume). ‘Panentheism’ is a concept born out of the dialogue between Indian and Western philosophies of religion.

However, this task is also almost impossible because, to my mind, the jury is still out on whether panentheism is a stable view which can be convincingly demarcated from classical theism and pantheism (see Mullins’s contribution to this volume for an excellent summary and possible solution to this problem). One cannot assume, therefore, that this 19th-century German term is an accurate or helpful description of the various views discussed across this volume. The most interesting and convincing essays in this volume are often those in which the author does not seem to care whether different views count as panentheistic and are as interested in identifying and understanding differences as similarities in their comparisons (e.g., the essays by Frazier, Gäb, Atzert, Medhananda and Rambachan). The less successful essays either stretched concepts to find similarities between Indian and Western thinkers or tried to argue that one or more of their interlocutors are definitely panentheists (e.g., Biernacki, Barua and Khalid, Rosenhagen, and Long).

That said, it is an interesting experiment to ask, as this volume implicitly does, whether a comparative approach to philosophy of religion further aggravates or alleviates the ambiguity of panentheism. I’ll return to this question at the end of my review. Readers might have been offered a clearer answer to this intriguing question if the essays had been logically ordered. Perhaps chapters dealing directly with debates around the definition and demarcation of panentheism could have been grouped together at the start, essays considering the use of Indian ideas in early modern Western philosophy in the middle, and those essays that discuss other topics only very tangentially related to panentheism collected at the end of the volume. This

is just one suggestion for ordering the essays – I’m sure there could be other equally good approaches. As it is, however, this reviewer can discern no logic to the ordering of chapters, which only adds to the confusion already somewhat inevitable in a collection of cross-cultural comparative essays of an ill-defined concept. But now it is time to turn to the chapters themselves, which should be judged independently of one another.

Loriliai Biernacki’s opening essay, “Abhinavagupta’s Panentheism in Dialogue with Contemporary Neuroscience: *Vimarsa* and Integrated Information Theory,” searches for points of connection between Abhinavagupta’s “non-dualist Tantric panentheism the Pratyabhijna, or Recognition Philosophy” (p. 6) and the five axioms of Tononi’s IIT (3.0): *Intrinsicity*, *Composition*, *Information*, *Integration*, and *Exclusion*. The first two of these only generate a rather vague level of connection, although Biernacki makes a great deal of it throughout the essay, in that both views are taken to support the reality of subjectivity (*Intrinsicity*) and the correlation between phenomenal structure and neurological structure (*Composition*).

With *Composition*, Biernacki’s argument runs into its first major hurdle – one I fear it never manages to get over – the diverging understandings of ‘materiality’ and ‘body’ in these two philosophical systems. As she admits, the neurological structure of the brain discussed in IIT and the map of the body composed of breaths, organs of knowledge, organs of action, which Abhinavagupta inherits from Samkyha, are “incommensurable worldviews” (p. 13). This problem places her identification of *Information* with the subtle body (p. 15) and of *Integration*, (the gathering of experiences into a single first-person perspective) with *vimarsa*, (translated as “reflective awareness” or “conscious reflexivity”) (p. 18) into jeopardy. For example, Biernacki argues (a) that the subtle body bridges the gap between Siva’s universal consciousness and one’s individual embodied self and (b) that *vimarsa* “embeds subjectivity in materiality” (p. 19). How so? It is not entirely clear. The only arguments I could find are that these metaphysical bridges succeed because the subtle body “is a body, after all” (p. 14) and because *vimarsa* has metaphorical connotations of “touch,” which give it a sense of materiality. A lot of metaphysical heavy lifting is, thus, being placed on the shoulders of rather flimsy linguistic overtones.

The strongest part of Biernacki’s argument comes near the end of this essay, where she offers *vimarsa* as a more natural comparison for Western notions of sentience and IIT’s understanding of consciousness – which disappears in deep sleep and is quantifiable – than other Indian terms for consciousness, such as *cit* or *samvit*, which denote an all-pervading, transcendent kind of consciousness. On the final axiom, *Exclusion*, Biernacki is a “disjuncture” because “*Exclusion* nixes the possibility of deity,” but instead corresponds to *Maya* (illusion of ‘I’). However, what Biernacki fails to acknowledge is that, whereas the limitation in *Exclusion* in Tononi’s IIT is taken as a real physical limitation on what is and is not conscious, for *Maya*, the limitation is only apparent because the limited, differentiated self is an illusion.

Ankur Barua and Hina Khalid offer an original comparison between Hinduism and Islam in the third chapter: “Embodying the Boundless: The Logic of the Infinite Cosmologies of Ibn ‘Arabī and Rāmānuja.” Such a comparison is not entirely unprecedented, we are told that 19th-century British orientalist described Sufis, such as Ibn ‘Arabī, as “Muslim avatars of a Hindu world” (p. 36). Barua and Khalid go into

significant depth in explaining the panentheism of each thinker. The point of congruity between them is summarised in the following way: For both thinkers, “the concept of the *infinite* should be explicated non-contrastively as *non-finite* and not contrastively as not-a-finite-thing” (p. 32). Many classical theists will query this as a sufficient demarcation for panentheism, particularly when the only further definition given is that “panentheism claims that finite individuals are rooted in, encompassed by, and suffused with God” (p. 39). Surely, classical theists and pantheists could both affirm such a statement.

The problem of demarcation is further pursued, with equally unsatisfying results for the traditional (Christian) theist, in the next chapter, “Viśiṣṭādvaitic Panentheism and the Liberating Function of Love in Weil, Murdoch and Rāmanjua,” by Raja Rosenhagen. Rosenhagen’s chapter is separated into two largely unconnected halves. The latter half consists of an excellent three-way comparison between Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Rāmanjua views on love (*bhakti*). All three thinkers are found to give love epistemic and soteriological importance, but with differing views on the role of attachment, the effacement of the self and its desires, and the role of remembrance and imagination in loving.

The first half of Rosenhagen warrants further discussion because it exposes some of the core tensions in the edited volume. Rosenhagen argues that since Rāmanjua does not fit Mikael Stenmark’s (2019) criteria for panentheism, then Stenmark’s taxonomy should be revised. This argument may seem sound enough; taxonomies can always be improved. However, it is telling that Rosenhagen never seriously considers the possibility that – if Rāmanjua holds that God and the world are ontologically distinct and that the world is asymmetrically dependent upon God, such that God is not ontologically dependent upon the world, as Rosenhagen supposes – then Stenmark’s ‘traditional theism’ label might be more suitable for Rāmanjua’s view. Rosenhagen’s reasons for insisting that Rāmanjua is a panentheist seem to be largely because the majority of contemporary interpreters have labelled him such – but, as with almost all other ‘panentheists’ – if their view cannot be meaningfully distinguished from traditional theists, then what work is this title really performing? Of course, such a question assumes a Western backdrop to the debate. In Western thought, panentheism’s *raison d’être* is to offer something different to traditional Christian theism – despite the latter’s belief in the ongoing creative sustaining action of a transcendent God who is intimately (omni)present to all creatures. In such a context, Stenmark’s demarcation works well. This, however, is not the backdrop of Indian thought; as Rosenhagen ably describes, Rāmanjua main concern is a demarcation from Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. What is the equivalent of non-panentheist ‘traditional theism’ in Indian thought? How does the notably different dialectic context change the question of whether Rāmanjua, or any other Indian thinker, can be accurately labelled a ‘panentheist’ in the Western sense of the term? Do we need an Indian-derived definition of ‘panentheism’ that is different to a Western derived definition? These are complex questions that cut to the heart of this volume, and indeed to comparative philosophy of religion more widely, and which need further thought.

For a number of reasons, I found Jessica Frazier’s essay, “Roots of Reality: The Philosophy of Foundation in Spinoza’s and Śrīnivāsa’s Monisms,” to be one of the best in this collection. Frazier uses her two chosen comparative figures to fearlessly

elucidate some of the biggest and oldest questions in metaphysics. Most prominently, these questions involve the nature of substance, but also touch on the unity of causation, the shape of the mind-body problem, questions of emergence, novelty and teleology, as well as the nature of the divine. In this way, Frazier comes at the question of panentheism from something of a side angle and, in so doing, gives justice to the historical contexts of both Spinoza and Śrīnivāsa. Frazier does not seem too bothered about whether Spinoza is labelled a ‘pantheist’ or a ‘panentheist’ – her main concern is that his monism should not be misunderstood or falsely maligned as a reductive materialism. Frazier concludes that both Spinoza and Śrīnivāsa “paint a picture of a reality in which all that is or happens, all momentum, all that evolves, emerges out of an underlying ordered nature from which the future continues to flow” (p. 112). And yet, she never appears desperate to establish this philosophical continuity but gives ample space to explore how Spinoza’s and Śrīnivāsa’s rather different intellectual contexts led to different solutions. According to Frazier, Spinoza emphasised the *Dependence Argument* for a foundational substance, while Śrīnivāsa focused on the *Coherence Argument*. This allowed the latter to develop a more satisfactory view of “multi-step causation over time” rather than a “single step inference relation” between properties and the foundation substance (p. 102). This reviewer found Frazier’s essay to be an exemplar for comparative philosophy of religion.

Sebastian Gäb’s “Divine Minds: Idealism as Panentheism in Berkeley and Vasubandhu” is a delight. Written in a clear and entertaining style, this chapter compares the Yogācārin philosopher Vasubandhu with the early-modern Christian, Bishop Berkeley. As with Fraizer, Gäb does not over-reach for continuity nor does he seem invested in recruiting these notable figures to the panentheist’s camp. In his analysis, it becomes clear that both Berkeley and Vasubandhu are idealists (all that exists is minds and their ideas), and that “God and *ālayavijñāna* play a structurally similar role in their respective idealisms” (pp. 132–133). However, neither Berkeley nor Vasubandhu turn out to be panentheists. Berkeley’s distinction between ideas and minds means that finite minds cannot exist within the mind of God. So, Berkeley cannot be a *panentheist* and he faces the problem of explaining where finite minds come from. For Vasubandhu, *ālayavijñāna* (store-consciousness) fits all the basic criteria of a panentheist God, with the glaring exception of being neither one, conscious, nor divine. So, Vasubandhu is not a *panentheist* – although he “may be a panenpsychist, if you will” (p. 131) – and he faces the problem of solipsism. As they stand, Gäb finds both these philosophical systems inadequate. However, he proposes that “a mash-up of Berkeleyan and Yogācārin ideas could produce a better, more convincing concept of idealist panentheism “which solves the problems facing each thinker” (p. 133).

Stephen Atzert’s erudite but fairly dense essay “takes as its point of departure Schopenhauer’s famous critique of pantheism, followed by a discussion of the model of origination he adopts, which consists of Will, Platonic Ideas, and the *principium individuationis*” (p. 138). Atzert points to similarities between Schopenhauer’s *principium individuationis* the concepts of *pañcaupādānakkhandha* and the *pañca samuppāda* in the commentaries of Viennese translator, K.E. Neumann. Atzert argues that, both in their metaphysical and soteriological functions, these three similar concepts “provide substantial alternatives to pantheism and panentheism” (p. 155).

Benedikt Paul Göcke's essay focuses on the "leading German Idealist" Karl Christian Fredrich Krause, who "was one of the first European philosophers [...] to appreciate, and draw upon, Indian philosophical and theological traditions" (p. 164) and who coined the term 'panentheism'. Göcke not only details Krause's appreciation for Indian philosophy, theology, history, and the Sanskrit – all of which he considered to be the origin and height of human civilization – but also outlines how Krause's distinction between the Om-Essence, Or-Essence, and Ur-Essence of God brings clarity and resolution to the apparent contradictions in panentheism, which claims that the world is both part of God but also distinct from God as created.

Swami Medhananda's essay evaluates Josiah Royce's dialectic argument in *The World and The Individual* (1990) for Absolute Idealism in contrast to, among other alternatives, Upaniṣadic Mysticism. Medhananda argues that, despite being a fluent reader of Sanskrit, Royce was misled in his assessment of the Upaniṣads by his reliance on Paul Deussen's 1898 interpretation, which was influenced by Śaṅkara. Medhananda argues that, if Royce had, instead, followed the 1890 interpretation of German scholar, George Thibaut, which was influenced by Rāmānuja, then Royce would have found an "Upaniṣadic panentheism" (p. 196) much closer to his own preferred vision of Absolute Idealism, and may have made Royce less sceptical about the possibility of mystical knowledge.

In the tenth contribution, Jeffery D. Long compares David Ray Griffin's ten core doctrines of Process philosophy with Sri Vivekananda's six tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta. Long (p. 229) briefly mentions the affinity of the panentheistic mind-body analogy to articulate the God-world relationship and a commitment to religious pluralism in both these systems. However, Long's focus (pp. 229–234) is on reconciling points of difference between the two systems. Process philosophy gives final epistemic priority to "hard core commonsense," whereas for Ramakrishna *vijñānī*, or mystical knowledge, is unassailable. Long attempts to reconcile this divergence through the "two truths" doctrine in Indian philosophy (p. 231), such that hard core commonsense view is a partial, but not false, perspective possible to non-enlightened humans and expressible in language, whereas *vijñānī* is the complete, enlightened, and inexpressible truth. This allows Long to hope for reconciliation between apparently contradictory views on topics such as free will, determinism, and the problem of evil. According to Long, whereas Process philosophy's partial perspective (first truth) emphasises creaturely freedom and limits the power of God, Ramakrishna's enlightened view (second truth) emphasises divine freedom and power and the determination of creaturely action, which Medhananda (referenced here by Long) associates with both sceptical theism and saint-making theodicies (pp. 232–233). This reviewer was left unconvinced that such straightforward disagreements can be coherently reconciled.

Ryan T. Mullins's "Panentheism, the Necessity of the Cosmos, and Divine Time" stands out as one of the best essays in this volume. It is a characteristically clear, pedagogically useful, well-researched, and creative essay. Mullins seeks to help panentheists solve the demarcation problem by suggesting that panentheists should (1) affirm the necessity of the cosmos to block a Jain argument for atheism, and (2) should have something distinctive to say about the nature of God. For the latter, Mullins suggests that panentheists should affirm a literal interpretation of the slogan

that “the world is in God,” meaning that God is time. All moments and objects are literally in God, and God is what allows for change. The claim that God is time is not a wacky armchair solution that Mullins has dreamt up on his own. He shows how this suggestion is found in Indian sacred texts, such as the Atharva Veda and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and debates within the Nyāya-vaiśeṣika school.

In the final chapter of this volume, Anantanand Rambachan suggests a similarity between Marcus Borg’s Christian panentheism in *The God We Never Knew* and Rambachan’s own apophatic understanding of his own Advaita tradition. Rambachan argues that, since God and the world are “not-two,” Advaita cannot be identified with pantheism, panentheism, illusionism or monism. Borg’s work provides little more than an opening gesture to cross-cultural comparison. Most of this essay is spent defending the author’s preferred understanding of Advaita as a celebration of diversity and affirmation of meaningful engagement with the world. Although Rambachan does not dwell on the topic of panentheism, this essay provides a good example of how interpretative questions of what counts as panentheism (or pantheism) are as complex and unstable within the living traditions of Indian philosophy as they are in Western thought, let alone in the work of cross-cultural or cross-religious comparison.

So, in conclusion, does a comparative approach to philosophy of religion aggravate or alleviate the ambiguity of panentheism? I have had some fairly critical things to say at various points in this essay, so it may surprise readers to learn that, as a result of reading this volume, I find myself of the view that the comparative approach to ‘panentheism’ is the best – perhaps even the only plausible – way for the debate regarding this problematic concept to proceed. This is for two reasons. First, the sheer range of perspectives discussed in a volume such as this, ostensibly under the heading of ‘panentheism,’ makes it impossible to pretend we are all clear on what ‘panentheism’ means; comparative philosophy of religion places this concept and many others, helpfully in question. Such suspense of clarity is helpful because – as many of the essays in this volume show – it puts us in a position to more attentively listen to the differences between traditions, sometimes thereby discovering new similarities along the way. Second, panentheism is not merely a good topic for comparative philosophy of religion because it is a point of unambiguous overlap between Indian and Western thinkers – but rather because it is a concept born out of cross-cultural exchange which, although potentially meaningless, opens up for debate a wide range of fundamental topics.

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