

The You-niverse:

What it means not to live, but to belong

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Imagine you are looking at your hand.

At first glance, everything seems ordinary, right? We have skin, bone, muscle and blood too. Yet hidden within your own hand is a story older than Earth itself. The calcium in your bones was once forged inside stars that had died off. The very oxygen in your haemoglobin was born in stellar furnaces billions of years before our own sun, Sol, existed. Every atom in your body has travelled across space and time before ever becoming *you*.

We tell ourselves that the universe is around us.

Yet it is inside us.

The science communicator and astronomer Carl Sagan famously observed that we are “star stuff contemplating the stars”. I find it to be one of the most poetic scientific statements ever made, but maybe it hints at something even deeper. If the universe has become capable of observing itself through us, how do we differentiate ourselves from the cosmos? Where is the threshold?

We spend our lives thinking and believing we are isolated beings. We often talk of nature as though we are outside it, same with society. We imagine the universe as this vast stage upon which human life briefly ever performs. So, what if we are wrong? What if we are not visitors, per se, in this universe at all?

Well, we are arguably a remarkable expression of the universe. This very concept has been debated countless times by philosophers, scientists such as myself, and spiritualists, and it is a growing topic inside the ever-expanding scientific study of the consciousness. There is a very intriguing astrophilosophical perspective called panpsychism. This beautiful and grounding idea follows that consciousness, or at least the potential for a subjective expressional experience, is a fundamental feature of our reality rather than a miraculous accident produced by just our brains.

While some may think that means that rocks have brains or electrons have personalities, what panpsychism states is that our consciousness is more like a mass or an electrical charge. It is a basic ingredient that has become richer and more complex as matter becomes more organised.

I understand that this sounds strange at first, but every scientific and major explanation of consciousness will be because it is beyond our scope of measurement.

Picture the stars above us in the night sky. What we feel superficially may feel unique, yet what we feel deeper on the inside is a larger broader connection to ourselves, an appreciation for this wonder that the stars make us feel. It's a sense of calmness and stillness. This appreciation is sometimes linked to the biophilia hypothesis; the principle that our love for animals and the environment stems from our very connection to them. And we are, whether that's through emotional connection such as domestic pets, or through the food chain or environmentalism. Everything is linked, one way or another, including to the universe.

If consciousness emerges entirely from unconscious matter, how do subjective experiences arise from electrical signals? How does chemistry become colour? Why do we see beauty in biology? How do we devise the unmistakable feeling of being us just through a simple collection of neurons?

Maybe the greatest mystery is not that consciousness may exist elsewhere in a primitive form, but that we assume it just begins from absolute nothingness. Science cannot answer this as it is out of its scope here on Earth, yet philosophy cannot settle this either. But both push and encourage us to remain curious, searching for the answer.

Whether or not panpsychism is not true, it has the power to remind us of something profoundly important; that we simply are not disconnected observers peering into a separate and indifferent universe. Every breath we take exchanges atoms with forests and oceans. Every heartbeat we have depends entirely on the stars that died and were recycled billions of years ago. Every thought, no matter if it is big or small, is carried by particles that have existed since the birth of the cosmos. And who knows, maybe one day

after we pass, the very atoms we have and exchange as of this second could align again in a different body; is that not us, who we are now right this second, just in a different vessel?

The boundaries between self and world are nowhere nearly as solid as we may think. Maybe this is the greatest illusion of all, that the universe is 'out there'. For we are not separate from reality, we are just simply reality becoming aware of itself. Perhaps when we look up at the night sky and gaze upon the thousands of stars looking down, when we feel that awe, it is not because we are looking at something foreign or indifferent. It is because we are looking at us, at home.

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