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Published online: 06 Nov 2021.

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Material culture and consciousness: a thought experiment

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology has become good at using metaphors for the person-like properties of material culture, seeing objects as accruing life-histories and biographies. This paper seeks to further this debate by introducing an old concept – known as panpsychism – which has experienced a resurgence in modern physics. It holds that sentience is a universally distributed property of the material world, meaning that all matter must be, to some extent, conscious. This theory is applied to an existing study of the person-like characteristic of early medieval swords, as a first step in understanding that all of the objects with which we deal may have some quality of consciousness. One implication of this is the seriousness with which archaeologists can afford to take animist beliefs.

For know that all things have wisdom, and a portion of thought. (Empedocles, fragment 110, as quoted in Skrbina 2017, 336)

Introduction: the mind–body problem

One of the more intractable issues of the human brain is the so-called 'mind–body problem', which tackles how we reconcile the physical world of matter with the enigmatic phenomenon of consciousness.[1] We know that consciousness must exist, because a higher sense of ourselves as beings in the world is part of our personal experience. Although consciousness can be defined as an awareness of self, it need not involve any sort of rich inner life. A sparer definition of consciousness is that there is such a thing as what it feels like to be a thing, be it a person, a hamster or a bat. Each of these experiences of the world is of a different quality, and distinct (Nagel 1974; Goff 2017, 1–3).

There are two principal solutions to the ancient conundrum as to where consciousness actually resides. Historically, by far the most dominant in Western philosophy has been 'dualism', René Descartes' (1596–1650) contention that mind is separate from matter: the reason why we have yet to

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physically locate our subjective consciousness is because it does not lie within the quotidian flesh from which we are formed. Likewise, Christianity divides the world between the body, a transient earthly vessel, and the soul, which is the domain of an eternal spirit.[2] The mind, or soul, clearly exists, but it stands apart from a Newtonian universe of inanimate matter driven by physical laws. The essence of what it is to be human resides in the mind, whilst the body is merely a piece of apparatus that has evolved to contain it (Thomas 2004, 82–83 and 131–133).

The second solution to this problem, following Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), is that the mind and the body are of the same substance (Fowler 2004, 104–106). Mentality is an aspect of the physical world, and subject to the same fundamental laws. If one accepts this, then the difficulty lies in getting from the stuff from which the human brain is made – and the electrochemical signals with which it operates – to locating where our subjective consciousness actually resides. The favoured answer to this has been to treat consciousness as a 'black box': there must be something in the critical mass of neurons operating inside our brains that sparks the phenomenon of first-person experience, it is just that we do not yet have any idea of where it came from or how it operates. The problem here is that we are conjuring one thing (subjective consciousness) from another thing (brain matter) which is of a completely different type. We are making lead out of gold, but this alchemy must obey the laws of physics, otherwise we are back to the Cartesian dualism of body and soul. As yet, however, we have no clear understanding of how this transformative mechanism actually works.

Perhaps consciousness is rooted within the very stuff of our flesh, or perhaps it is the ethereal spark of our intangible souls. A third solution neatly bypasses this quandary: sentience is a universally distributed property of the material world, and the complexity and density of the human brain merely renders the effects of this property more pronounced (Shaviro 2015, 19–20). To put it another way, all matter must be - to some extent - conscious.

An introduction to panpsychism

'Panpsychism' is the theory that all things have minds or a mind-like quality (Strawson 1994, 2006; Brüntrup and Jaskolla 2016a; Goff 2017; Skrbina 2017). Consciousness is a fundamental property of matter, just like gravity; as with gravity, consciousness is simply more manifest in some entities than in others. This idea was formulated in Ancient Greece, and it has a very long pedigree in the history of Western thought. Maligned throughout the Middle Ages by the dominance in Christian belief of the separateness of body and soul, panpsychism became resurgent from the sixteenth century onwards with the steady erosion of Church doctrines. It reached a zenith of popularity around 1900, but

for much of the twentieth century it was once again marginalised, outstripped by wider advances in the scientific method. In recent decades it has once again become the subject of sober scholarly enquiry.

Panpsychism is concerned with the quality of consciousness, but this should not necessarily imply any sort of active mental engagement with the world; more likely a passive experience of it, attenuated and dim. There are clearly different intensities of mental complexity, with intelligences such as hominids and dolphins at the apex and pots or chairs somewhat further down the scale (Figure 1). But this is a matter of gradation, rather than fundamental quality, with consciousness as its common currency (Skrbina 2017, 11–12). There is no proof that chairs or pots have an inner life, but then there is no objective proof that bats or cats, or even other human beings to ourselves, have an inner life

Figure 1. 'Chair and Ladder'. © Stefan Zsaitsits, 2019.

either (Thomas 2004, 171–175).[3] If we accept that human and cat entities do indeed possess consciousness, then accepting it of chairs and pots is only a matter of degree (Shaviro 2015, 40).

The renewed interest in panpsychism over recent decades is in part due to a similarly intractable problem in quantum physics. This is the 'uncertainty principle': matter remains in its potential state until it is somehow experienced or perceived by an external agent, at which point it collapses into the certainties of the physical world with which we are familiar. This sounds like nonsense, like the falling tree that only makes a noise if someone is around to hear it, but when matter is viewed at the atomic level it is perfectly true. In Copenhagen in 1926, an experiment was undertaken to establish whether light was formed of particles or waves. This was done by firing an electron at a screen with two slits in it, and a sensor on the other side: if the electron went through only one of the slits then it was a particle, if it went through both at the same time then it must be a wave. The result was that the sensor on the other side of the screen registered the electron as a wave, since it appeared to travel through both slits at the same time, rather like a wave of sound or water. However, once a detector was placed on the apparatus in order to observe the electron passing through the slits, the sensor on the other side of the screen started registering the electron as a particle. Once this detector was removed, the sensor once more started registering the electrons as waves. Impossibly, only when matter at the level of fundamental particles is *observed* does it resolve itself into a definite form. To put it another way, Schrödinger's cat is neither alive nor dead until we open the box and take a look. This experiment provides the first principle of quantum mechanics and describes a basic characteristic of all physical things (Feynman, Leighton, and Sands 1965, 1–11; Gribbin 1984).

The only reason why the building blocks of the universe do not fizzle into incoherent wave functions is because an external agent somehow observes them. This mystery lies at the heart of quantum mechanics, and a solution for it has long been sought. Panpsychism is now seriously advanced as a reasonable explanation for the existence of this omnipresent spectator, who perpetually resolves the uncertainty of elementary particles at a quantum level: since consciousness is common to all matter, so the argument goes, then matter itself provides its own witness (Brüntrup and Jaskolla 2016a, 1–3; Skrbina 2017, 255–263). For those who do not accept this model, the list of candidates for this universal witness grows short. Some have even suggested that this omnipresent spectator proves the existence of God (Southgate 1999).

If we admit objects to the realm of consciousness, it is worth briefly returning to the definition of this phenomenon advanced earlier: that there is such a thing as what it feels like to be a thing, which may encompass an awareness of self, but which need not involve any sort of rich inner life. If we also accept the relevance of the double-slit experiment in quantum physics, the consciousness inherent in matter may also involve some mysterious capacity to observe the

material world. This is an extraordinary thought, but should not mean that matter's consciousness bears any resemblance to our own common-sense awareness of ourselves as beings in the world. Perhaps it does, perhaps material objects have complex internal psychologies which remain forever entombed within impassive shells, condemned to perpetual awareness, but denied the capacity to process external stimuli or react to their surroundings. I sincerely hope this is not the case, since if true it is highly likely that much of the material culture which surrounds us would have long ago gone completely insane. In any case this is unknowable, and need not overly detain us here. It would be nonsense to claim that chairs or pots have thinking minds just like people do, but this does not liberate us from the assertion that these objects lie at least somewhere on the distant end of that spectrum.

My purpose in delving into the unfamiliar realms of theoretical physics is not to try and pin down the quality of internal experience or observational capacity that objects may have. Instead, it serves to emphasise that panpsychism is not some crank theory that I have wheeled out from the lunatic fringe. It now rates as one of the most serious and well-developed models for approaching the riddle of human consciousness more generally, and as a powerful tool in furthering the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics in particular. I am therefore content to go with the present scientific consensus that panpsychism is credible, and cannot at this time be easily dismissed (debate summarised in Goff, Seager, and Allen-Hermanson 2017). At the very least, therefore, it is sufficient basis for a thought experiment relevant to archaeology, and it is perhaps therefore surprising that so few students of material culture have paid it any heed. One of the only archaeologists to have done so is Piotr Bienkowski, whose concern lies in modern-day approaches to exhumation and the ethics of displaying human remains, to which he applies animist world-views in which the dead retain something of the consciousness or personhood of the deceased (Bienkowski 2012). This is thoughtful work, of considerable value in refining attitudes to skeletons in museums, but it is not extended beyond mortuary practices to encompass material culture more widely. It is my intention here to begin to address this gap.

Person-like objects in archaeology

It seems that archaeologists can now be open to the idea that all material objects possess a degree of consciousness, simply by virtue of their being material objects. But other than being an arresting notion as we ponder assemblages from the past, where does this actually get us in terms of furthering the quality of our interpretations? There are a number of directions in which this could be taken. For example, the realisation that objects have some mind-like quality adds weight to those who seek a parity of esteem ('symmetry') between active people and passive objects in our analyses (Witmore 2007). Similarly, the

spark of consciousness inherent within the material world may encourage us to accept that objects do indeed have some degree of intentionality, or 'primary agency', in the interactions that they have with us (Olsen 2003; Jones and Boivin 2010; Olsen et al. 2012, 13).[4] The implications – or otherwise – of this are far from clear, but in the space available I will confine myself to just one relatively well-established body of archaeological theory, the idea that material things can be regarded as living entities with person-like attributes. I will go on to argue that the theory of universal consciousness should encourage us to take this useful metaphor a little more seriously.

The idea that objects have lives, or 'biographies', has become a fixture in archaeological discourse over recent decades (Kopytoff 1986; Hoskins 1998, esp. 1–9; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Lillios 1999; Fowler 2004; Swift 2012; Cooney 2015; Shapland 2020). An object is conceived in the mind of its maker, before being 'born' (made) and entering a youthful, pristine state. An object might then 'learn' as it is adapted to better perform various roles, and experience life cycles of use, modification and repair, perhaps in social contexts very different from those for which it was first intended. The passing of time may be marked by patterns of wear and patina, before eventually the object either 'dies' (breaks) or is deliberately killed or sacrificed. Its afterlife may be one of casual abandonment, or structured deposition, such as in a grave or watery place. Or it may be reborn, reincarnated with its materials recycled to create its progeny. The value of the biographical approach has been to question meanings of objects as being fixed in time, form and space, and to broaden interest in the entire arc of their existence, and the marks this may have left upon them.

This concept of object biographies has been criticised as being too anthropomorphic, with the danger that we may lose sight of an object's non-human qualities. Applying the model of birth/life/death to an object can feel arbitrary, since objects can very often just not be doing very much, or have been forgotten, meaning that for long periods they are characterised by inertness and inactivity. They just sit there, being objects (Hahn and Weiss 2013; Knappett 2013). 'Object itineraries' have therefore been proposed, emphasising the routes through which things circulate, and the means by which they are moved (Joyce and Gillespie 2015). Similarly, 'multiple objects' seeks a more nuanced analysis of objects as being in a continual state of instability and becoming as they are interacted with by people, the environment and other objects (Jones, Díaz-Guardamino, and Crellin 2016). They 'come to life' when they are playing a role within human social relations, before 'dying' once they become inactive. In this way, objects accrue non-linear life paths, and can lead a number of different lives concurrently, depending on the social relations with which they may be involved (Joy 2009, 2015).

However we frame this approach, it remains a valid concept that objects live lives, although this is very far from pronouncing them as conscious entities. That would be animism, the belief that objects are in some senses infused with souls,

or, more accurately, that objects and natural phenomena (trees, stones, animals, rivers) become social beings with an interior life, by virtue of their interactions with the world they inhabit and the encounters that they make (Ingold 2006) This is not dissimilar to the concept of 'multiple object' biographies touched on earlier. Animism is not a monolithic system of belief, but rather an umbrella term for a socially contingent set of relationships, practices and perspectives (Harris and Robb 2012; Guenther 2015). These can be elusive, and their usefulness in archaeological discourse has been questioned (Insoll 2011), although some brief generalisations can nevertheless be made. A common characteristic is the attribution by humans to non-humans of an interiority, or spiritual essence, identical to their own. Hence, it is not through their souls that humans and non-humans differ, but through the physical make-up of their bodies. Non-humans therefore perceive themselves as humans because, despite their different out-ward forms, we all possess similar interior lives, or 'souls' (Ingold 2006; Descola 2013, 129–131). This is perhaps where animism and panpsychism diverge, since panpsychism holds that all objects have a degree of interior life, but nothing of the complexity of a human soul, and that the physical matter of which things are made (be they objects or people) is coherent with that spark of consciousness, rather than a container for it. Where animism and panpsychism find important common ground, however, is their rejection of the doctrine that life plays out upon an inert, insensate world.

Person-like swords in early medieval Europe

There are an increasing number of studies of objects from the archaeological record which are seen as having accrued names, voices, personalities, visual identities and life-histories, rendering them person-like or even animated (Figure 2). An example

Figure 2. Sword blades inscribed with names. Top: Sword of Orion, from Cotton Tiberius B.V., fol. 39 (mid-eleventh century). © The British Library Board. Bottom: tenth-century sword from Norway. © The National Museum of Denmark, accession no. 780 (Brunning 2019, 24).

of this concerns swords from societies across early medieval North-Western Europe (Androshchuk 2010; Pearce 2013; Burström 2015; Brunning 2017, 2019, 139–156; Sayer, Sebo, and Hughes 2019; see also Paz 2017). Famous swords had names, from Excalibur in the Arthurian myths to Hrunting in the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*; the ancient sword Curtana, remade in the seventeenth century, has been used in the coronation of British monarchs for at least last seven hundred years. Swords did not merely bear names, they may have earned them: some clearly accrued complex biographies as they passed from owner to owner, achieving famous deeds and becoming imbued with person-like agency. Contemporary iconography and literature give examples of swords which come to life and become capable of independent action, fighting and even singing on their own, in a manner not expressed for any other war-gear of the period (Brunning 2019, 142–151).

It has been suggested that the blades of early medieval swords were perceived as the 'body': the functional part of itself with which it performed its tasks, but also that part kept 'clothed' with a scabbard, known only to those with whom the sword had an intimate social relationship. The hilt was the 'face': highly variable in appearance and instantly recognisable on sight, and also that part most commonly embellished and which most clearly bore signs of age (Brunning 2019, 143). This phenomenon is also clearly visible in weapons from prehistory. Swords with anthropomorphic faces on their hilts have been recovered from Iron Age contexts across Western and Northern Europe (approximately fifth century BCE to first century CE), with 60–70 examples known (Stead 2006; Pearce 2013, 58–60; Bradley 2017, 149–150; Figure 3). These swords are seen as having a degree of 'personhood'; the stamps and markings found on many examples are interpreted as names or other aspects of their identity (Pearce 2013, 58–60).

Once their lives had come to an end, swords could be treated in a similar fashion to human remains (Bradley 2017, 124–141; Brunning 2017, 414). Some were primped immediately prior to being deposited in the ground or in a watery place,
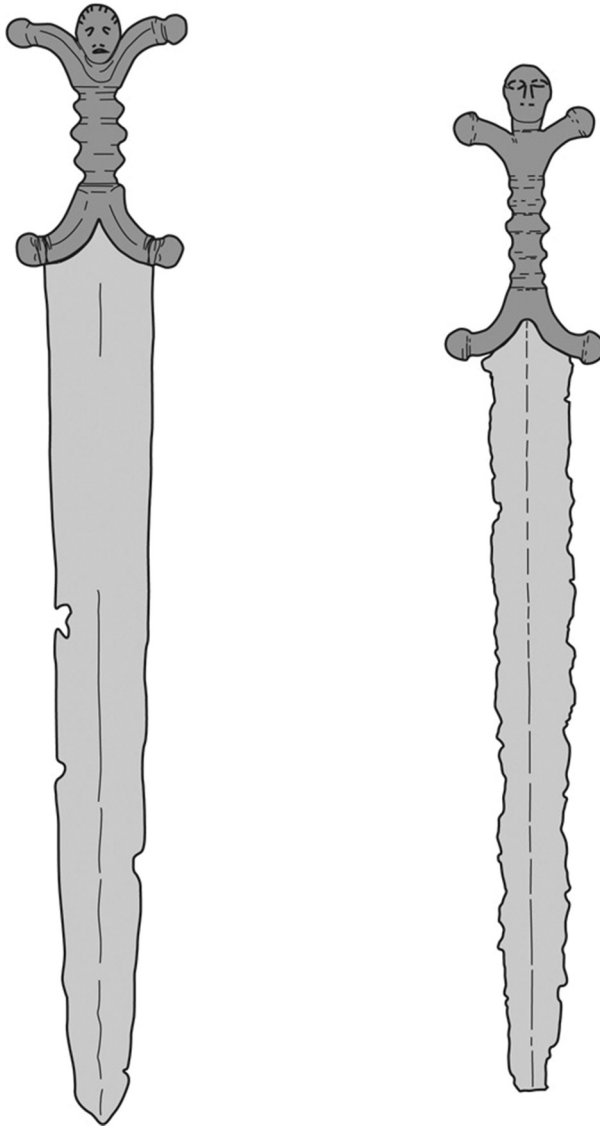
Figure 3. Two anthropomorphic swords from Iron Age England (Bradley 2017, 149).

gaining new fittings or being freshly sharpened, rather as one would clean and dress a corpse before burial. Other swords were 'killed', by being deliberately bent or broken, whilst others still were subject to fire, perhaps analogous to a cremation ritual. Such drastic treatment could be benign rather than valedictory. Many swords were crafted from fragments of other swords, and it is likely that such radical surgery could go beyond pragmatic recycling, and was intended to pass the lineage of one weapon down to its progeny.[5]

This act of making – or re-making – was evidently charged with meanings whose potency went well beyond that which we would typically associate with a specialist group of craftspeople. In early medieval society, smiths were perceived as social others, often marginalised to the fringes of the elite communities where they plied their art (Wright 2010; Birch 2011). Part of the reason why their craft was treated with such caution is because it involved bringing new material 'beings' – including swords – into the world, and imbuing them with life (Wright 2019). As well as making swords by recycling pieces of existing metalwork (some of which would have been perceived as the remnants of living objects in their own right), there is also persuasive evidence that smiths used the bones of living creatures as the source of carbon that they needed to turn iron into steel. It has even been speculated that this 'bone-coal' may have included the remains of people, perhaps those of fallen heroes or the fragments of ancestors quarried from a burial mound, whose fame and biography would have entwined with the character of the sword (Gansum 2004).

The belief that early medieval swords had many of the characteristics of people, including personality and even free will, ran counter to the Christian separation of body and soul. The accompanying notion that smiths could bring objects with their own life force into the world was abhorrent to the Christian doctrine of a single omnipotent creator-god (Wright 2019). The idea that swords were alive withered under the watchful eye of the Church, leaving it to modern-day scholars to sift this long-vanished set of beliefs, which we do with the utmost sincerity and rigour. I use the example of early medieval swords: I could instead have laid out research on any other aspect of animistic perception from the near or distant past, the lesson would be the same. Of course, swords were not really alive (we think to ourselves) no matter how dispassionately we approach the evidence, or how diligently we try to step outside any rational education that may have shaped our own present-day biases and world-views. But what if those medieval smiths were factually and irreproachably correct in thinking that swords had minds of their own. Would that not be a thing to ponder? I have deliberately chosen an example where people have projected anthropomorphic qualities onto a class of objects, rather than one where we can infer mind or agency upon an object in the present, because I think this is an important point to make. If this realisation allows us to take these beliefs a little more seriously, perhaps as seriously as they were doubtless taken in the past, it can only improve the quality of our interpretation of these material remnants and the societies that made them.

The blind man and his stick

If we accept that objects do indeed have a degree of consciousness, however faint, then there remains the question of at what level this is true. Does it apply only to the elementary particles which make up a sword, or to the entire sword

as a coherent object? If the former, are we dealing with matter at the level of quarks and bosons; if the latter, are we aggregating matter up to atoms, or is all matter derivative of a single unified consciousness which spans the entire cosmos (Nagasawa and Wager 2016)? This is known as the 'combination problem', and is much contested within the theory of panpsychism as a whole (Seager 1995; Chalmers 2016.).[6] We are familiar with the notion of many bricks making a wall, or many arcs forming a circle, but find the concept of many smaller minds forming a unified consciousness, like a hive of bees or the tentacles of an octopus, much harder to fathom (Godfrey-Smith 2016, 65–69). Yet the human brain seems to be its own conscious entity, even though it consists of billions of tiny neurons, each of which contains a portion of thought in its own right. Then again, it is not the case that the brain is an island of sentience insulated from its body, since the mind extends into the eyes, the viscera, the central nervous system, the limbs and beyond. Some degree of 'combination' of smaller units of consciousness may therefore be at play, although it is unclear how this works, and at what level – if any – this combination must end. From an archaeological perspective it therefore remains an open question whether we should conceive of a chair (for example) as its own conscious entity, whether we should instead think of its legs, back and seat as being imbued with separate consciousnesses, or whether we should go much tinier (elementary particles) or much larger (a universal consciousness field) in our estimation.

This combination problem, as to how one arrives at a conscious whole, evokes Descartes' riddle of the blind man and his stick (Descartes 1965, 67). The blind man's experience of the world does not end with his hands, but is extended through the stick, which becomes akin to an organ of sense in its own right. His mind understands the world through his hand, and his hand in turn understands the world through the stick. Where, then, does the blind man's self begin, if the stick is at once an aspect of the external world yet also an extension of his being? The mind is not separate from the body, but coherent with it. The blind man's mind has therefore become extended through the stick (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002, 5–6; Bateson 1972, 323–324; Paterson 2016, 22–30).

Archaeologists have made use of this theory of the 'extended mind' so as to better people's engagement with material things, and how they have become integral to many mental processes. A knot in a handkerchief can act as an externalised memory, or a religious artefact as a means of unlocking our sense of awe and wonder (Malafouris 2004; Malafouris and Renfrew 2010). Objects have become component parts of human cognition, but we can now take this a little further. The blind man's stick can be framed as an extension of his mind, but what happens if the stick is itself to some degree conscious and has a mind-like quality of its own? Perhaps the blind man is himself an extension of the mind of his stick?

To return to the case study presented earlier, it has been suggested that early medieval swords grew to become extensions of their owners' selves. Analysis of differential wear patterns has suggested that owners always wore their sword in its scabbard with the hilt facing the same way round each time (Figure 4). The plainer side always faced inwards towards the body, meaning that swords had a 'public face', a persona even, that they presented to the world. This would not merely have been a matter of using an ornate or bejewelled sword to display one's wealth: sword hilts were much more distinctive than this, not least because they were multipartite objects that were customised by their owners. Fittings could be added, removed or augmented over time to create a visually distinctive sword with fixings of different types, potentially using components from famous swords or heirlooms. Rings were commonly added, which have been identified as representing the oaths of loyalty sworn by warriors to their lords, who were termed 'ring-givers' in early medieval literature. In this way, a sword would become a physical record of its owner's life-history, its person-like identity intertwining with that of its wielder and becoming familiar on sight, much like a human face. In this way, swords could not only be like a person, but become part of a person, an extension of their wielder's identity (Brunning 2017, 414–415).

The warrior was conscious. His sword would have been person-like, and panpsychism demands that it was likewise at least minimally conscious. Such was the permeability between person and object in this example that the sword may have been as indivisible from the warrior's sense of

Figure 4. Sixth-century CE sword pommel from King's Field, Faversham, Kent. Note differential wear (compare A and B). © Trustees of The British Museum, registration no. 952.'70 (Brunning 2019, 68).

being in the world as the stick is indivisible from the blind man's experience of his surroundings (Fowler 2004, 11–22). Panpsychism allows us to conceive of both the warrior and his sword, or the blind man and his stick, as not merely extensions of the same self, but as parts of the same conscious whole.

Conclusion: taking objects seriously

Some past societies, including Viking Age Europe, considered that certain objects were living entities with personalities and minds. In contrast, the dominant paradigm for our own understanding of the world is that of rational, scientific thought. Yet we are now left with the possibility that these past societies were, in some senses, correct: objects do actually have minds, regardless of whether they are famous swords or cooking pots. Modern panpsychism in some ways tells us nothing new, it can be deemed a rational iteration of animism and it is as acceptable to the present-day scientific method as animism would have been to the belief systems particular to other human societies through time.

One lesson we can draw from this is not a new one, but it is nonetheless worth re-stating. It is that we would be wise to take a respectful stance in our engagement with a variety of animist beliefs amongst past societies, rather than attempting to unpick the intellectual foundations of these world-views (Alberti and Marshall 2009). Human beings everywhere imbue quotidian objects with personhood and agency, even in the rational, modern world and the dubious distinctions that it makes between subjects and objects, nature and society, people and things (Latour 1993; Hornborg 2006). Modernity itself is prone to generating objects which transcend this Cartesian divide, leading to those who self-identify as rational adults treating objects animistically, such as cars, the moon or favourite teddy bears (Brown and Thouless 1965). Of critical importance here is the genuine value of animism in sloughing off the modern dichotomy between people and objects, allowing us to re-orientate ourselves more closely with the profound interrelatedness of the natural world and all things in it, human culture and technology included (Latour 1993).[7] Broadening our awareness as to the non-humans with whom we share our precarious world, be they animals, plants or objects, may encourage us to treat them with a damn sight more respect than we do at present (Harvey 2005; Hornborg 2006; Ingold 2006; Alberti 2016). This is even more true if panpsychism obliges us to accept that it is impeccably true that these things exist with some modicum of a conscious state.

Many archaeological thinkers have sought to place objects on a more equal footing to human actors, to lend these objects a degree of agency, to trace the biographies of these objects' lives and to treat them as extensions of the minds of living people. These ideas are useful in allowing us to approach the

ways in which people in the past may have understood the world in which they lived, but they are open to the criticism that they are just-so stories which are not grounded in fact or the empirical method (Gosden 2005, 196). This risks patronising the people and societies that we study (Harris and Robb 2012). But now a very old idea – panpsychism – has been resuscitated by philosophers, put through the wringer of quantum physics and found to have some small value in helping us to explain the workings of the universe. This scientific credibility gives us permission to take the animist beliefs of past societies a little more seriously (Bienkowski 2012), and the person-like characteristics of objects very seriously indeed. We can quite legitimately think of objects as actually having a degree of consciousness, and for once allow the scales of metaphor to slip from our eyes (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Shapland 2017). This is worthwhile not merely to expand our interpretative horizons, although this is of course important (Gosden 2005, 196). If we start taking animists seriously, rather than attempting to rationally unpick these world-views, then we might actually learn something (Harvey 2005; Jones and Boivin 2010).

Archaeologists deal with the traces of a vanished past, seeking to reconstruct aspects of the societies who have dwelt upon the earth; but this is not all that we do. As long as the material remnants of these societies abide, then these fragments of past human existence continue to have consequences. The past lives on in the present, through the things that people have left behind (Barrett 2016). We do not need to bring the past closer to us, because in many senses it is already here. But there are still absences. We have the things, but we are lacking the people, for all that we appreciate that things are themselves remnants of actual human experience, albeit from long ago. And it is this absence of people that haunts us the most:

> What is missing is not the human subject, but the animation that links people, objects, animals, buildings, and landscapes. In short, what archaeologists really envy ethnographers for is their access not to people but to life. We deal with the dead. (Lucas 2012, 178–179)

But new advances in remote disciplines are starting to tell us that perhaps it is not quite as simple as that after all. I find it sobering, and perhaps rather moving, to admit that that the objects with which we deal are perhaps fragments not just of experience, but of consciousness left over from the long-vanished societies that we seek to understand. This paper is therefore offered as a fresh ingredient for archaeologists to ponder, and make of what they will, since the possibility that consciousness is distributed throughout the material record seems so very relevant to what we do.

Notes

1. The separation of mind and matter is widely debated in archaeological theory (e.g. Fowler 2004, 12–16; Knappett 2004; Malafouris 2004).
2. This is the Platonic version of Christianity. The Aristotelian legacy in Christianity is less dualistic.
3. I am sure that we have all met people like this.
4. To claim any deliberate action on the part of the objects is, of course, rather more problematic (Ingold 2014; Lindstrøm 2015).
5. A comparable example is Andrew Welton's study of Early Anglo-Saxon spearheads, which shows that the best examples were crafted from numerous carefully curated pieces of old iron – in some cases demonstrably sword blades – whilst spearheads formed from new iron tend to be of poorer manufacture (Welton 2016, 230–231). The deliberate re-use of old objects runs through other aspects of Anglo-Saxon material culture, for example in the curation of architectural fragments and building materials (Shapland 2015, 100–105).
6. Equally, archaeologists have long grappled with the multi-scalar nature of assemblages, working up from a single pot to ways of living across an entire archaeological period (Harris 2017).
7. For recent case studies in posthumanism, which transcend boundaries between people, things and technology, see Diaz-Guardamino and Morgan (2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Michael Shapland undertook his PhD research at University College London (UCL) on the subject of Anglo-Saxon tower-nave churches, the results of which he has recently published as a monograph (*Anglo-Saxon Towers of Lordship*, Oxford University Press, 2019). Since 2013 he has worked for UCL's commercial field unit, Archaeology South-East, where he records and interprets historic buildings and landscapes. He has published on elite power and cult in the early medieval landscape, and theoretical approaches to historic buildings. He also holds the post of archaeologist for Chichester Cathedral, and was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 2018.

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