Consciousness, Scientific Materialism and the New Idealism

Prof. Terry Hyland*

Like individualism and the belief in free will, the materialist worldview derived from mainstream science represents a sort of hidden curriculum of contemporary belief, the telos of Western (though not Eastern) culture. Scientific materialism – which holds that our experience of the world is generated by the brain yet somehow remains outside of us and is separate from and indifferent to human purposes – informs all aspects of life yet remains largely unquestioned. In recent years – thanks to the severe difficulties surrounding the hard problem of consciousness highlighted by David Chalmers (1996) – this uncritical acceptance has been challenged by thinkers who propose forms of neo-idealism. Arguments developed by Bernardo Kastrup (2014; 2021), Donald Hoffman (2019) and Steve Taylor (2018) – respectively labelled analytic idealism, conscious realism and panspiritism – claim that forms of idealism which locate the mental as the only source of reality and experience provide a

more parsimonious and philosophically satisfactory explanation of our knowledge about the world.

The intractability of the hard problem of consciousness – the difficulty of explaining how the material world identified by science can be reconciled with our subjective experience or what it is like to be something (Nagel 1974) – has produced some tortuous attempts to solve the dilemmas without surrendering its metaphysical foundations. Galen Strawson (2016), for example, has proposed a form of physicalist panpsychism according to which all material objects incorporate forms of consciousness. However, this thesis – apart from positing the implausible notion that primitive forms of life or even inorganic elements may be capable of experience – fails to solve the hard problem since it leaves open the question of how consciousness can possibly emerge from non-conscious material objects.

The idealist forms of panpsychism developed in recent years suggest ways of solving the hard problem of consciousness whilst avoiding mind/body dualism and overcoming materialism's principal flaws.

Steve Taylor (2018) has argued there are no satisfactory models of how the mind/brain connection can be supported, and he outlines the range of absurd claims – from epiphenomenalism to illusionism (58-64) – which have failed to solve the principal problems. In addition, there is now a good range of neuroscientific data which indicates that – contra physicalist assumptions – certain non-standard states of awareness (such as those produced by brain impairment, hallucinogenic episodes, or near-death experiences) result in *reduced* brain activity (*ibid*., 67ff.). Along with the glaringly obvious implausibility of looking in the brain for the neural correlates of the taste of coffee, the scent of a rose or the experience of a glorious sunset, the reduction of brain activity in transcendent states of awareness is the exact opposite of what is entailed by the materialist assumption that all experience is generated by the brain.

On the idealist accounts, the brain, rather than generating experience, receives and canalizes information from the transpersonal world of mind. Like whirlpools in the stream of consciousness, individual minds are a 'partial localization of the flow of experiences in the stream' (Kastrup 2014, 2). This idea of

subjective experience as individualised representations of transpersonal consciousness is further elaborated by Hoffman (2019) in his theory of conscious realism. Conscious realism makes a bold claim: consciousness, not spacetime and its objects, is the fundamental reality and is properly described as a network of conscious agents. Hoffman remarks that, given that 'evolution shaped our perceptions to hide the truth and to guide adaptive behaviour,' the key question is how are we to escape from the 'lifesaving fiction' (2019, 178-89) of both the everyday and scientific view of reality to arrive at a more accurate picture of the world. To answer this challenge it is necessary to return to foundations and to investigate conscious experience itself. The general thesis is supported by a mathematical model of consciousness which enables an understanding of reality without the 'headset of spacetime and material objects' (202).

Dispensing with the materialist 'headset' has far-reaching consequences for many aspects of education, culture and society. Providing an alternative perspective to scientific materialism is worthwhile in itself, and the notion of consciousness as fundamental

may, as Taylor (2018) suggests, lead to a transformation which 'deepens our connection to others through empathy and altruism' and helps to 'expand and intensify our awareness' (230) of the world and our place within it. The key idea here is that – if our minds are essentially localized 'segments of the broad, universal canvas of mind' (Kastrup 2014, 57) – this offers a powerful justification and validation for collective values and inter-subjective experiences of the world.

The new idealists point out that materialism is being undermined by science itself, particularly in quantum physics which implies that there is no observer-independent world and that – as Eastern philosophy has always held - all elements of experience are interconnected. Materialism posits a cosmos of isolated individuals alienated from an outside world of objects, and this perspective has helped to produce a culture of rampant individualism, aimless consumerism and the destruction of the planet. As Taylor (2018) concludes, 'moving beyond materialism means becoming able to perceive the vividness and sacredness of the world around us...

transcending our sense of separateness so that we can experience our connectedness with nature and other living beings' (231).

References

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*__Terry Hyland__ is Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Bolton and Director/Trustee and Lecturer in Philosophy at the Free University of Ireland in Dublin where he now lives. He has published widely on a diverse range of philosophy of education topics, with principal interests in vocational, affective and moral education.

Email: hylandterry@ymail.com

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8539-8211

Researchgate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Terry-Hyland

LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/professor-terry-hyland-00291666/