

Consciousness, Analytic Idealism and Buddhist Foundations: Exploring Non-Materialist Ways of Connecting Eastern and Western Spiritual Perspectives

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Abstract

Contemporary approaches to explaining the connections and reconciling perceived differences between spiritual and scientific interpretations of reality have tended to accept mainstream interpretations of physics, cosmology and biology. The resultant putative combinations of ideas – seeking to equate materialist with non-materialist worldviews – display anomalous, artificial and deeply problematic features. Instead of accepting the validity of scientific materialism – expressed in accounts offered, for instance, by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and, in a more secular context, Deepak Chopra and Fritjof Capra – the central thesis of this paper is that it is more plausible to question the foundations of materialism and argue for an idealist interpretation of both science, reality and spirituality as suggested in recent work by Bernardo Kastrup, Steve Taylor and Donald Hoffman. After exploring the central claims of these new interpretations of idealism – and their principal critiques of scientific materialism – arguments that such perspectives offer a richer, more cogent and more parsimonious method of linking Eastern and Western worldviews than the flawed materialist perspectives will be explained and justified.

Keywords: *materialism, consciousness, analytic idealism, panpsychism, Buddhism, spirituality, science*

Introduction

It is important to emphasise at the outset that the attempts of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and, in a more secular framework, Chopra and Capra to bridge the gap between the scientific and spiritual worldviews are admirable and valuable. Moreover, such reconciliation projects are crucially necessary at a time when, on the one hand, triumphalist scientism threatens to colonise every aspect of public culture and discourse (Sheldrake, 2017; Taylor, 2018) and, on the other, the commodification of spirituality through ‘McMindfulness’ continues to capture widespread public attention (Hyland, 2017; Purser, 2019). Acknowledging the value and importance of the reconciliation process, I would want to suggest an enhancement of this project by displacing the materialist connotations of the debate with, as will be argued, more appropriate idealist perspectives. Having outlined the key materialist components of the discourse being criticised, I will outline the neo-idealist ideas prior to examining the advantages and principal implications of such foundations for the core issues at the heart of the debate.

Materialist Connotations of the Science/Spirituality Discourse

An important caveat which needs to be entered at the outset is the acknowledgement that all of the accounts discussed here do clearly make a distinction between scientific materialist worldviews and the contrasting

spiritual perspectives. For example, the Dalai Lama's attempt to build bridges between modern science and Buddhism (2005) incorporates such observations as:

Buddhism and science share a fundamental reluctance to postulate a transcendent being as the origin of all things. This is hardly surprising given that these investigative traditions are essentially non-theistic in their philosophical orientations (89-90).

On the surface, this observation is, of course, perfectly correct. However, a clear implication here is that the two 'traditions' are equally valid and, moreover, even though they are different, it is possible to reconcile them. On the one hand, this represents a dualism which is contrary to Buddhist foundations and, on the other, there is a suggestion that the overriding materialism of the scientific method is justified on its own terms in its own domain and can be accommodated by an alternative spiritual perspective on reality. Some of these connotations are brought out the Dalai Lama's explorations in observations such as the following:

In cosmology, astronomical observations taken together with the theory of general relativity, which reformulated gravity as the curvature of both space and time, have shown that our universe is neither eternal nor static in its current form...These finding accords with the basic intuition of the ancient Buddhist cosmologists, who conceived that any particular universe system goes through stages of formation, expansion and ultimately destruction (ibid., 78-9).

In a similar vein, there is the assertion that 'if a hypothesis is tested and found to be true, we must accept it...likewise Buddhism must accept the facts – whether found by science or found by contemplative insights' (ibid., 25). Such assimilation strategies inform the well-publicised collaboration between the Dalai Lama and Richard Davidson at his University of Wisconsin laboratory which involved using fMRI and EEG technology to detect electrical activity in the brains of meditators (ibid., 151 ff.). Such quantitative measurement of mindfulness has gone hand in hand with its exponential growth in recent years (Baer, 2013) and has been the subject of trenchant criticism by practitioners and academics committed to foundationalist Buddhist ethics which are claimed to be radically at odds with such populist and commodified versions of contemplative practice (Grossman, 2011; Hyland, 2017, Purser, 2019). Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail below, such neuroscientific evidence is used to support the materialist worldview which mistakenly asserts that the mind is generated solely by the brain (Kastrup, 2014, 2021; Taylor, 2018).

Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) holds an especially esteemed place in the world sangha community as a lifelong Buddhist campaigner for global peace and justice and also one of the most famous public advocates of the power of Buddhist mindfulness for Western audiences. Like the approach of the Dalai Lama, the introduction of Buddhist principles to Western audiences has been accompanied by attempts to demonstrate the links between the *dharma* and certain modern scientific concepts and perspectives. For example, Hanh (2012) in explaining his ideas about no birth and no death makes reference to the first law of thermodynamics. As he explains:

With the law of conservation of energy, scientists have discovered that energy has the nature of no-birth and no-death: energy cannot be created and cannot be destroyed; it can only be transferred. Matter also has the nature of no-birth and no-death, since matter is in fact a form of energy. When Lavoisier said "Nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed", he made a statement which is very close to the Heart Sutra: "All dharma are marked with emptiness, they are neither produced nor destroyed (2012, 68).

Such an analogy is certainly powerfully persuasive and serves the useful purpose of justifying forms of spirituality in ways which might appeal to the minds of people educated in systems dominated by scientific paradigms. However, the use of such metaphors unwittingly lends credence to materialist perspectives which claim that the objective world of matter is ultimately all there is, and that subjective experience is an illusion or an epiphenomenon (as philosophers such as Dennett and Graziano do; see critique of such ideas by Kastrup, 2021,.51ff.).

In a passage comparing scientific and spiritual endeavour, we find the following observation:

Each of us needs a spiritual dimension to our daily life. If we lack a spiritual dimension, it may be very difficult for us to overcome the challenges and difficulties we encounter. As scientists we also need a spiritual life. This spiritual life should be based on evidence, which can be verified, not on esoteric beliefs which cannot be tested (ibid.,82).

Again, this serves as a valuable means of indicating that there can be evidence for spiritual as well as scientific claims to belief and knowledge but relies on the highly contested concept of ‘evidence’ which most readers would interpret as that gained by scientific and objective tests. Such tests are not appropriate in domains in which beliefs and principles are supported by transcendental and subjective experience.

Thus, notwithstanding the value of such parallels in the debate about science and spirituality, these strategies are too uncritical of mainstream physicalist science and give materialism far too much credibility. In much the same vein, Deepak Chopra’s debate with Leonard Mlodinow (2011) displays similar less than helpful tendencies. In a debate with the (in my view) strange title of *Is God an Illusion?*, the physicist, Mlodinow, and the spiritual teacher, Chopra, outline their respective worldviews on questions such as: ‘How did the universe emerge?’; ‘Is the universe conscious?’; ‘What is life?’; ‘What makes us human?’; and ‘Is there a fundamental reality?’. Mlodinow predictably offers a robust defence of mainstream scientific materialism on all these questions and Chopra answers with a spiritual perspective which includes such notions as the following.

In response to the central philosophical/ontological question of why is there something rather than nothing – which Martin Heidegger claimed was the ‘fundamental question of metaphysics’ (1959 edn, 7) – Chopra explains that:

The universe, including the void that precedes creation, is one system. The ground of existence is not inert emptiness but a dynamic field connecting all creation in a single totality, smaller processes in the quantum field hang together even when they are light years apart (Chopra & Mlodinow, 2011, 34).

On evolution we learn that ‘Spirituality holds that evolution is dominant in nature’ and that ‘Quantum leaps dominate in creation everywhere we look, but especially in the startling, beautiful novelty of life-forms on Earth. The cosmos is ruled by creativity’ (ibid.,35). In relation to time and objectivity, Chopra appeals to the same neuroscientific research used by Hanh in explaining and justifying the impact of meditation. He comments that: In recent experiments, Buddhist monks were shown to have brain waves that were twice as fast as the norm: 80 cycles per second instead of 40 cycles. Gamma waves are thought to be the brain’s way of holding the world together as a conscious experience. So Buddhist monks, by receiving twice the number of signals per second, are twice as awake or conscious (ibid.,73).

This is an overt endorsement of the materialist claim that consciousness is generated by brains, a position which, as will be explained later, is demonstrated to be unjustified and untenable by Kastrup, Hoffman and other philosophers and scientists who offer idealist interpretations of reality.

Chopra covers similar ground in the book of readings he co-edited under the umbrella concept of *How Consciousness Became the Universe* (Chopra, et al, 2015). Two examples give the flavour of the general approach. In a discussion of perceived reality and quantum mechanics, Chopra & Kafatos, claim that:

Our sense of reality is different from its mathematical basis as given by physical theories. Although nature at its deepest level is quantum mechanical and nonlocal, it appears to our minds in everyday experience as local and classical...Furthermore, if consciousness as an entity leave a physical trace, then laboratory searches for such a trace should be sought for in nonlocality, where probabilities do not conform to local expectations (2015, Kindle edn., loc.349-350).

This is, once again, a tacit endorsement of brain-state materialism accompanied, moreover, by a recommendation that we should search for consciousness in brain imaging. Such physicalist perspectives are anathema to idealist conceptions of reality which – in ways much more in line with the spiritual perspectives Chopra wishes to promote – view brains, and indeed all material objects, as mere outward representations of an underlying and all-encompassing mental universe.

Capra (1983) follows broadly similar lines in suggesting parallels between quantum mechanics, relativity and Buddhist and Taoist ideas. The thesis is informed by the conception that the:

[B]asic elements of the Eastern world view are also those of the world view emerging from modern physics. [This] tends to suggest that Eastern thought and, more generally, mystical thought provide a consistent and relevant philosophical background to the theories of contemporary science...a conception of the world in which scientific discoveries can be in perfect harmony with spiritual aims and religious beliefs (30).

As with Hanh's approach, connections are made between Eastern concepts of the impermanence of the constantly changing world and the vibrating energy of the quantum fluctuations out of which sub-atomic particles and waves emerge to form the material world. Much is made of the way in which modern theories of space and time – combined in Einstein's model of spacetime – resonate with ideas about the unity and temporality of all experience found in Taoist, Hindu and Buddhist perspectives. Certainly, such parallels may be useful but need to be located within the dynamically changing trends and perspectives in contemporary science, taking into account its many shortcomings (Sheldrake, 2012; Baggott, 2013) and failure to deal with certain persistent problems with the hard problem of consciousness having pride of place here (Strawson, 2016; Kastrup, 2014, 2017). Ironically, Stenger (2014) points out that Capra's analogies are based on scientific notions which are now outdated, and the key arguments do not take account of recent developments in physics (though, to be fair, Capra has attempted to update the science in recent editions of his work). What Stenger might have added to his critique - if he had been prepared to consider alternative perspectives to materialism – is that contemporary physics now questions the notion that spacetime is fundamental (Hoffman, 2019), and that quantum mechanics in particular seems to cast doubt on the idea of an observer-independent world (Taylor, 2019; Kastrup, 2014, 2021).

The overriding problem with all these East/West reconciliation models, however, is that they tend to support materialist worldviews which – as the critical commentators discussed below point out – are fundamentally flawed and offer distorted and mistaken views of reality.

Critiques of Materialism

As a useful preface to the principal critiques of materialism developed by neo-idealist thinkers, it is worth looking at the many problems of contemporary science in general. Of course, as the critics such as Sheldrake (2012), Kastrup (2019), and Taylor (2018) are careful to stress, the achievements of science over the last few centuries or so are mightily impressive. The world we live in today would be unimaginable without the spectacular scientific advances in medicine, physics, biology and general technology over the last few decades. As Sheldrake puts it, science has 'touched everyone's lives...its intellectual prestige is almost unchallenged. Its influence is greater than that of any other system of thought in all of human history' (2012,13).

Along with such achievements, however, comes the hubris and intransigence which Sheldrake's critique is intended to challenge and redress. A recent example of extremely pompous scientific triumphalism was demonstrated in Hawking and Mlodinow's *the Grand Design* (2010) in which the physicists set out to answer such questions as 'How does the universe behave?', 'What is the nature of reality?' and 'Did the universe need a creator?'. They assert that:

Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge (p.5).

Ambitious claims but – in spite of the recent remarkable discoveries at CERN in relation to the Higgs' boson and the detection of gravitational waves from the outer reaches of the universe – we need to maintain a sense of proportion and recognise scientific rhetoric for what it is. Philosophy is quite a long way from being dead and – as Nagel (2012) forcefully demonstrates in his recent critique of scientific materialism – science is not even close to solving all our problems or providing satisfactory answers to all the questions we might like to pose about humans and the nature of the cosmos we inhabit.

Indeed, according to the recent survey of contemporary physics by Baggott (2013), the current obsession with purely theoretical constructs such as superstring theory, parallel universes and cosmological explanations involving up to 11 dimensions – none of which is supported by a shred of observational or experimental proof – has led to a dominant methodology which may be described as 'post-empirical science' (p.xii). This state of affairs has resulted in a 'fairy-tale physics' which serves to divert attention from the range of serious unsolved problems in the field and, more importantly, has effectively transformed science into pure metaphysics which 'until and unless it can predict something that can be tested by reference to empirical facts, concerning quantity or number, is nothing but sophistry and illusion' (p.287). Further dents in scientific triumphalism have been revealed in recent discoveries linked to the accelerating rate of the expansion of the universe. This unexpected finding has led to scientists to posit (or, rather, invent) the notion of an antigravity force operating in empty space which has been labelled 'dark energy'. As Panek (2011) puts it:

This is not “dark” as in black holes or deep space. This is “dark” as in unknown for now, and possibly forever: 23% something mysterious they call dark matter, 73% something even more mysterious they call dark energy. Which leaves only 4% the stuff of us (p.xv).

What needs to be added to this picture are the unacknowledged shortcomings of the scientific materialist view of the world. Goff (2019) explains, in terms of an ontological conception of the cosmos, unvarnished materialism leaves much to be said. As he puts it, ‘physics tells us not what matter is but only what it does’ (p.125). Similarly, Kastrup (2021) reminds us that Bertrand Russell observed that ‘science says nothing about the intrinsic nature of the physical world, but only about its structure and behaviour’ (86). More significantly a contemporary of Russell, the physicist Sir Arthur Eddington, argued that ‘the only physical entity we have intrinsic access to is our own nervous system, whose nature is clearly experiential’ (ibid.). Given all this, Kastrup asks:

Might this not be the case for the rest of the physical world as well? Under this pansychist hypothesis, the explanatory gap disappears: consciousness isn’t generated by physical arrangements but, instead, is the intrinsic nature of the physical world. The latter, in turn, is merely the extrinsic appearance of conscious inner life (ibid.,87).

This view that the universe is fundamentally mental or experiential in nature – labelled analytic idealism by Kastrup, panspiritism by Taylor, objective idealism or cosmopsychism by Chalmers, and conscious realism by Hoffman – not only satisfies the parsimony demands of Occam’s Razor whilst avoiding the dualism of materialism and physicalism – but also neatly solves the hard problem of consciousness and provides a more satisfactory account of the nature of reality than scientific materialism. The full implications of this idealist version of panpsychism are discussed in the next section but at this stage it is worth outlining the key features of the idealists’ thoroughgoing criticisms of the nature and implications of materialism.

As already noted, science tells us nothing about the intrinsic nature of material objects since it is concerned only *quantities* – mass, spin, charge momentum, and so on which can be measured and labelled with concepts and numbers - whilst saying nothing about the *qualities* which we experience in the world such as colour, taste, smell and, at the root of the mind/body problem, subjective phenomenal experiences such as listening to music or appreciating a beautiful sunset. Moreover, Kastrup (2014) points out the crucial difference ‘between materialism as a *metaphysics* and scientific theories as *models*’ (10). Scientific materialism observes patterns and regularities in nature and constructs models which explain objects and forces – such as subatomic particles and negative electric charge – in terms of their relationship to other cognate constructions. Explaining and predicting how aspects of the material world operate relative to other aspects reveals nothing about the fundamental nature of everything in nature. The upshot of this, as Kastrup argues, may be expressed in the following way:

Capturing the observable patterns and regularities of the elements of reality, relative to each other, is an empirical and scientific question. *But pondering about the fundamental nature of these elements is not; it is a philosophical question* (ibid., 12, original italics).

Consequently, there is no bridge which can join and support the move from scientific materialism to metaphysical materialism. The scientific method is a foundation for knowledge about the cosmos – at both classical and quantum levels – but it does not justify metaphysical conceptions of reality and provides no evidence for beliefs in metaphysical materialism and so-called common-sense realism. We need to look elsewhere for this.

In addition to these shortcomings scientific materialism displays many flaws and shortcomings which are fully described by neo-idealist critics. Taylor (2018) outlines what he calls the ‘ten tenets of materialism’ (12-14, in italics below) and shows how their inconsistencies and weaknesses may be remedied by idealist conceptions (227-229, in bold)

1. *Life came into being by accident, through the interaction of certain chemicals.*

Life came about, not through accident, but as a result of the innate tendency of the universe – propelled by consciousness – to move towards greater complexity.

2. *Human beings are purely physical creatures with no “soul”, “spirit” or “life-force”*

Evolution is not accidental since, once life forms had evolved, there was an inbuilt tendency in natural selection whereby consciousness naturally brought about greater complexity (Hoffman, 2019).

3. *Humans are essentially vehicles for the propagation of our genetic material, and this is the primary motivation for our behaviour.*

Rather than being purely biological, human beings are, both mentally and physically, expressions of spirit or consciousness. It could be said that our physical bodies are the external expression and representation of universal consciousness, while our minds are an inner expression (Kastrup, 2014, 2019).

4. *All mental phenomena can be explained in terms of neurological activity.*

Our personal consciousness – our subjective inner life – is not generated by the brain but is a fundamental universal quality which our brains receive and canalize into our individual being (Sheldrake, 2012; Kastrup, 2015).

5. *Consciousness is produced by the brain so that when my brain and body cease to function my consciousness and identity will disappear.*

Because consciousness is not produced by the brain, it is plausible to assume that it will not come to an end following bodily death. Kastrup (2014) argues that ‘each one of us is a split-off complex of one medium of mind underlying all existence’ (192), and that, with the death of the physical body, the ‘dissociated alter’ which is our reified sense of individualized self, returns to the universal, transpersonal membrane of universal mind/consciousness.

6. *Human behaviour can be explained in genetic terms by reference to natural selection.*

Evolution needs to include the mental as well as the physical. The mind exerts a powerful influence on the body (e.g. with the powerful placebo and nocebo effects) and can bring about structural change. As Hoffman (2019) puts it ‘the laws of physics...do not describe an unconscious reality; they describe the dynamics of conscious agents, finite and infinite, projected into the language and data structure of the spacetime interface of *Homo Sapiens*’ (200).

7. *Living beings are isolated individuals, moving through space separated from each other.*

Although we are, as Hoffman argues, individual conscious agents, we are in touch with others in a dynamic web of interconnectedness. Kastrup suggests that, like split of psychic complexes of dissociated personality, ‘each conscious being is a segment of a broader membrane of mind’ (2014, 192), and it is this which allows for a level of intersubjective agreement about the world. For Taylor, we ‘share the same essence, and are therefore deeply interconnected. We express (and become aware of) this connection through empathy, compassion and altruism’ (2018, 229-230).

8. *The world exists out there, separate and independently of humans.*

Whatever is ‘out there’ can only be accessed through our senses, perceptions and consciousness. As in quantum physics, there is nothing definite until observed, and we need consciousness for this. Even scientific materialism does not posit any definite state of the outside world but suggests as a foundation energy, force fields or even, according to some physicists such as Tegmark, ethereal information or a Platonic world of mathematics (see Kastrup, 2021). All this comes very close to the notion of a mental universe proposed by Hoffman and Kastrup.

9. *Our normal state of awareness is objective and reliable enough to show us the world as it is.*

We can arrive at intersubjective agreement about the world but, as mentioned earlier, even science does not propose an objectively real and unchanging state of nature. Hoffman argues that we construct reality in the light of evolutionary survival strategies and that we should not mistake this reified illusion for an objective world. Kastrup reports Rovelli’s ‘relational quantum mechanics’ thesis which results in the notion that there is ‘no absolute, observer-independent physical quantities...the whole physical universe must be relative to the observer. The notion that we all share the same physical environment, must, therefore be an illusion’ (2021, 148).

10. *The fundamental laws of nature preclude any paranormal phenomena such as telepathy and related non-standard experiences.*

Dogmatic scientific materialism and triumphalism can close our minds to alternative possibilities of making sense of reality, particularly in areas such as transcendent understanding, ‘paranormal’ phenomena and precognition. Sheldrake (2012) outlines the many illuminating avenues of research which are closed off by such dogmatism, and Kastrup (2015) similarly argues for extra-sensory human possibilities which are too often dismissed by mainstream science.

Taken together, all these elements provide a general picture of the new idealism, but it would be useful to look more deeply at the fundamental theses proposed by leading proponents before returning to potential East/West parallels.

Idealist Foundations

Many of the shortcomings of materialism outlined above are fully illustrated in the long-standing ‘hard problem of consciousness’ (Chalmers, 1995, 1996), and it is in the search for a solution to this problem that the neo-idealist thinkers have constructed their most innovative and cogent arguments. Many of these arguments make use of the idea of ‘panpsychism’ (Hyland, 2021) though – as noted in the preceding sections – idealists tend to prefer their own terminology and ontology in relation to this phenomenon. Shan Gao (2014) offers a succinct identification of the contemporary background to accounts of panpsychism in noting that:

Consciousness is the most familiar phenomenon. Yet it is the hardest one to explain. There are two distinct processes relating to the phenomenon: one is objective physical processes such as neural processing in the brain, and the other is the concomitant subjective conscious experience (Kindle edn., loc..47).

Forms of panpsychism are thus introduced to make the connection between the objective and subjective aspects of reality. Philip Goff (2018) expresses the basic problem by noting that:

Nothing is more certain than consciousness, and yet nothing is harder to incorporate into our scientific picture of the world. We know a great deal about the brain, much of it discovered in the last eighty years...But none of this has shed any light on how the brain produces consciousness (p.5).

Galen Strawson (2006) – one of the leading exponents of a physicalist form of panpsychism – prefers to characterise the contemporary debate by declaring that:

Consciousness... [by which] I mean what most people mean in this debate: experience of any kind whatever...is the most familiar thing there is, whether it’s experience of emotion, pain, understanding what someone is saying, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or feeling. It is in fact the only thing in the universe whose ultimate intrinsic nature we can claim to know. It is utterly unmysterious (p.1)

Strawson then goes on to assert that the so-called objective and unmysterious nature of the physical world is, in fact, far from the truth. As he comments:

The nature of physical stuff, by contrast, is deeply mysterious, and physics grows stranger by the hour. (Richard Feynman’s remark about quantum theory — “I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics” — seems as true as ever.) Or rather, more carefully: The nature of physical stuff is mysterious EXCEPT INsofar AS CONSCIOUSNESS IS ITSELF A FORM OF PHYSICAL STUFF (ibid., original italics).

Although Strawson’s account does offer some sort of solution to the hard problem, Kastrup (2019, 2021) shows that it is open to all the problems of the Cartesian mental/physical dualism that bedevils scientific materialism and, moreover, is extremely unparsimonious in its implications.

In addition to the glaring inadequacies of the dualism which physicalist panpsychism merely perpetuates, there is the absurdity of positing a theory which involves consciousness somehow emerging from non-conscious material. Moreover, as Kastrup (2021) argues, from a philosophical perspective, ‘materialism is...unparsimonious – that is, uneconomical, unnecessarily extravagant – and arguably incoherent’ (9). He elaborates this notion:

As we have seen, matter is a theoretical abstraction of mind. So, when materialists try to reduce mind to matter, they are effectively trying to reduce mind to one of mind’s conceptual creations. This is akin to a dog chasing its own tail. Better yet, it is like a painter who having painted a self-portrait, points at it and proclaims himself to *be* the portrait (10).

Kastrup’s concludes with the observation that ‘materialism is a relic from an older naiver, and less sophisticated age...But it has no place in this day and age’ (ibid., 11).

However, the full idealist project needs to explain how the notion of a mental universe can accommodate our everyday assumptions that world really does seem to be outside of us and that our individual selves are separated from those of other minds. Kastrup (2019) proposes the much simpler and more parsimonious strategy which argues for an ‘idealist ontology consistent with empirical observations’, and which obviates the so-called mind-body problem of explaining consciousness. The position is summarised as follows:

spatially unbound consciousness is posited to be nature's sole ontological primitive. We, as well as all other living organisms, are dissociated alters of this unbound consciousness. The universe we see around us is the extrinsic appearance of phenomenality surrounding – but dissociated from – our alter. The living organisms we share the world with are the extrinsic appearances of other dissociated alters (57).

On this account, our subjective experience as dissociated alters – that is, individually segmented parts of an all-encompassing mental cosmos – is founded upon and supported by a robust metaphysical idealism which may be used to circumvent the false picture presented by physical science and the illusions of mind-body dualism.

Kastrup goes on to elaborate his thesis that the cosmos is mental and everything is mind by means of a series of ingenious metaphors and analogies which seek to explain the world revealed to us through experience in ways which are both cogent, precise, and more epistemologically and metaphysically satisfying than the mainstream materialist theories. We are asked to picture the ultimate primitive mind or cosmic consciousness as a 'thin, mirror-like membrane with some rigidity, but also some elasticity' such that the 'qualities of experience now correspond to the specific patterns of vibration of the membrane' (2014, *ibid.*, 138). There is, thus, 'nothing to reality but the medium of mind itself' (*ibid.*) and all our experiences of the world may be explained in terms of the vibrations and oscillations of the membrane of mind. Subjective individualised experiences of the world may be correlated with the ripples and loops of this membrane which brings about segmented islands of consciousness. The metaphor is thus intended to explain both why we seem to have limited control over the unfolding of events in the world and also why we seem to be separated from each other in terms of our individualised states of consciousness.

In other work, however, Kastrup (2015, 2016, 2019) is concerned to emphasise that both of these characteristics of subjective consciousness – lack of control and individual ego states – are actually largely illusory and, as such, present us with a confused and partial perspective on reality. In order to escape such confusion it is necessary to wield Occam's Razor forcefully and accept that everything is a modification of consciousness. As he explains:

I claim that we do not need more than consciousness to explain reality: *all things and phenomena can be made sense of as excitations of consciousness itself*. According to this more parsimonious view, the ground of all reality is a transpersonal flow of subjective experiences that I metaphorically describe as a stream. Our personal awareness is simply a localization of this flow: a whirlpool in the stream (2015, 13, original italics).

Following on from Eddington's assertion that the 'stuff of the world is mind-stuff' and Julian Huxley's idea that 'mind or something of the nature of mind must exist throughout the entire universe' (in Gao, 2014, 827), Mathews (2011) argues that 'a holistic or cosmological version of panpsychism, according to which the universe as a whole is the ultimate locus of mind, or of mind-like properties, can function as a rival to materialism' (.2). Like Kastrup's radical idealist perspectives, this position is taken to its logical conclusion by Hoffman (2017, 2019) in this theory of conscious realism.

Hoffman's startlingly radical thesis incorporates ideas and data from evolutionary theory, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, quantum physics and philosophy to establish a position which suggests that our assumptions about our knowledge of the objective world are mistaken and, moreover, that forms of consciousness are fundamental to everything that we may claim to know, think and experience. There are two principal aspects of Hoffman's approach: one drawn from evolutionary game theory which purports to explain why our perceptions of reality are mistaken, and another strand which attempts to move beyond the hard problem of consciousness by offering a conception of interacting conscious agents supported by a mathematical model of consciousness.

In dealing with the counter-intuitive notion that our senses deceive us as to the nature of reality – why would evolution, after all, not favour true perceptions of an objective world – Hoffman uses the metaphor of a computer interface (xii). The purpose of a desktop interface, he argues, is not to reveal the "truth" of the computer in terms of its various circuits, voltages and layers of software but to hide this truth to enable the pragmatic task of writing emails and completing internet research. This metaphor is then applied to evolution and our experience of the world in the following way:

This is what evolution has done. It has endowed us with senses that hide the truth and display the simple icons we need to survive long enough to raise offspring...You may want truth, but you don't need truth. Perceiving truth would drive our species extinct. (*ibid.*, xii-xiii).

This argument from evolution is reinforced by data from the field of evolutionary game theory to construct an operationally pragmatic theorem which Hoffman labels ‘Fitness-Beats-Truth (FBT)’ which is itself based on universal Darwinism by which survival, adaptation and reproduction trumps all other considerations. Applying game theory models to this construction (Prakash, et al, 2020), we arrive at the astonishing conclusion that ‘fitness drives truth to extinction’ (Hoffman, 2019, 61). This is expressed in the observation that:

What the FBT theorem reveals is that natural selection, however major or minor a force it may be, does not shape our perceptions to be veridical. Hoffman then goes on to demonstrate how this perspective influences – indeed, dramatically changes – just about every feature of human experience across all disciplines. 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’ (ibid.,178-9) 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.

After examining various speculations – most notably those proposed by Nick Bostrom and others – that consciousness may arise out of a computer simulation (see Hyland, 2019), Hoffman employs the Occam’s Razor mentioned in earlier sections to conclude (as Kastrup does also) that ‘all attempts at a physicalist theory of consciousness have failed’ (2019, 183). He reasons that:

Occam’s Razor, applied to the science of consciousness, counsels a monism over an amphibious dualism, a theory based on one kind rather than two...If we grant that there are conscious experiences, and that there are conscious agents that enjoy and act on experiences, then we can try to construct a scientific theory of consciousness that posits that conscious agents – not objects in spacetime – are fundamental, and that the world consists entirely of conscious agents (ibid.,182-3).

Hoffman accepts that this theory of conscious realism may be mistaken and, in the light of the need for verifiability/falsifiability, he offers a mathematical model of how conscious agents interact within networks (ibid.,203ff.), and comments that:

Conscious realism makes a bold claim: consciousness, not spacetime and its objects, is fundamental reality and is properly described as a network of conscious agents. To earn its keep, conscious realism must do serious work ahead. It must ground a theory of quantum gravity, explain the emergence of our spacetime interface and its objects, explain the appearance of Darwinian evolution within that interface, and explain the evolutionary emergence of human psychology (ibid.,198).

Given the enormity of this task, Hoffman insists that his theory goes beyond panpsychism to avoid any hint of a dualism which may, even remotely, allow for materialist conceptions of the world. All such materialist notions fail to acknowledge the limits of our interface and mistakenly take these as a picture of reality. As he expresses it, ‘We have finite capacities of perception and memory. But we are embedded in an infinite network of conscious agents whose complexity exceeds our finite capacities’ (ibid.,186-7). In the conclusion, he remarks (using the analogy of the simulated world created in the movie *The Matrix*):

What is spacetime? This book has offered you the red pill. Spacetime is your virtual reality, a headset of your own making. The objects you see are your own invention. You create them with a glance and destroy them with a blink. You have worn this headset all your life. What happens if you take it off? (ibid.,p.202).

Idealist Spirituality and Buddhist Principles

In removing what Hoffman calls the ‘headset’ of materialism we gain access to a radically transformed conception of reality, values and spirituality, a conception which is, arguably, much more sympathetic to Buddhist and Taoist perspectives than those of metaphysical and scientific materialism. Once we are able to entertain the notion of consciousness as fundamental, the sole ontological primitive, this 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.

This idealist vision allows for a radical re-interpretation of the East/West reconciliation strategies referred to above. The ‘Interdependent Co-Arising’ which Hahn (1999) describes as the ‘foundation of all Buddhist study and practice’ (221) makes much more sense when viewed through the idealist lens of overarching cosmic consciousness than the attempt to connect it with the laws of thermodynamics, evolutionary biology or cosmology. If we come to see ourselves as ‘whirlpools in the broader stream of mind-at-large’, as Kastrup (2015, 51) puts it, this has powerful implications for moral and spiritual beliefs. The universal *dukkha* of the first noble truth – and the fostering of loving-kindness and compassion in the face of this suffering – is far easier to understand and explain within the framework of an interconnected ‘network of conscious agents’ (Hoffman, 2019, 188) than it would be by seeking to locate such values in a materialist world of separate selves isolated from each other and from a cosmos which is pitilessly indifferent to human purposes.

In a similar way, the secular spirituality of Chopra and Capra, rather than being established on tortuous attempts to interpret Eastern conceptions of non-dualism and universal consciousness in terms of astrophysics and neuroscience would be much better placed if it was located within the framework of neo-idealist critical perspectives. Kastrup (2014, 207-8) suggests that his conception of the cosmic ‘membrane of mind’ is on all fours with Lao-tzu’s description of the *Dao* as:

Something formless, yet complete

That existed before heaven and earth, How still, How empty!

Dependent on nothing, unchanging,

All pervading, unailing.

Taoism, Buddhism and other Eastern spiritual traditions are, after all, amongst the original sources of non-dualist conceptions of the world. It surely makes far more sense to connect these insights with the idealist tradition of Western philosophical thought – as Hoffman connects his theory of conscious realism with strands of thought from Pythagoras and Plato through to modern thinkers such as Leibniz, Berkeley and Kant (2019, 195) – rather than attempting to align such spirituality with a materialism which posits sharp divisions between body and mind, between humans as isolated centres of consciousness and a shadowy outside world from which we are alienated. Notwithstanding the many references to the achievements of modern science in the Dalai Lama’s recommendation that Buddhists and scientists should ‘engage in collaborative research in the understanding of consciousness’ (2005, 146), there is an important caveat in the conclusion to his book. His Holiness makes the observation that ‘one can take science seriously and accept the validity of its empirical findings without subscribing to scientific materialism’ (ibid., 219).

This is exactly the crucial point made by the neo-idealists discussed above but the case needs to be fully worked out and justified by non-materialist or, ideally, anti-materialist conceptions and arguments. What needs to be emphasised is that, as discussed earlier, in spite of the impressive achievements of science and technology, science does not provide us with a veridical picture of reality and offers no basis for an ontological metaphysics about the nature of things. Moreover, it is well to note the many shortcomings and unsolved problems of science and – as the neo-idealist philosophers point out – the fact that quantum physics undermines materialism through its revelations that there is no observer-independent world and that all elements of the cosmos are interconnected and interdependent (Gao, 2014). Everything in the universe, as Carlo Rovelli (1996) asserts, must be considered as ‘relational’. 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 (Hyland, 2017). 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).

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