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## *Who Will Be the Scientists?*

*A Review of B. Alan Wallace's 'The Taboo of Subjectivity'*

In the emerging discipline of consciousness studies, the bright-line distinction is between third-person methodologies — honed to a fine edge by the physical sciences — and first-person methodologies — usually associated with such disciplines or approaches as phenomenology, introspection, and meditation. Proponents of each approach tend to marvel that their opponents can be so thick-headed, so downright perverse. Third-person methodologists maintain that since physical reality is (a) all there is and (b) causally closed, consciousness will yield its secrets to inquiry that follows the scientific straight and narrow. There is simply no need to traipse off into the tangled thickets of subjectivity, where lurk the wily monsters of bias and self-deception. First-person methodologists respond that their opponents, blinded by loyalty to an inapposite research program, reject the subjective and experiential qualities that are the very essence of consciousness.

Given an intellectual tradition still in recovery from Cartesian dualism, it is not surprising that this debate gets framed in ontological terms. Can the mental be reduced to the physical; experience to its neural correlates? Does consciousness 'exist' in any causally efficacious sense, or is it an epiphenomenon? Such questions, however, obscure a more pragmatic methodological issue. Does first-person inquiry have a methodology for arriving at useful and reliable knowledge of consciousness? More fundamentally, can it give a convincing account of what would count as 'useful and reliable knowledge'? Such questions are best approached at the level of epistemology. Issues regarding what is real can be postponed. Perhaps in the end they can be set aside entirely.

In *The Taboo of Subjectivity*,<sup>1</sup> B. Alan Wallace invokes the meditative traditions of Asia and various suggestive remarks by William James to claim that

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[1] **B. Alan Wallace**, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a Science of Consciousness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, ISBN 0195132076, 256 pp., \$29.95 (hereafter '*Taboo*'; page references not otherwise identified are to this book).

suitable methodologies for first-person inquiry are indeed available. He lays the blame for the failure of the Western tradition to develop such methodologies at the door of scientific materialism, which he views as a dogmatic degeneration of the original scientific impulse. As the title of the book suggests, he believes that science has suppressed the study of subjectivity, and has done so for indefensible reasons.

Since most of Wallace's arguments with respect to the shortcomings of scientific materialism have already been developed elsewhere (notably by Searle, 1992), the potential significance of *Taboo* has to do with the special perspective that Wallace brings to the debate. A professor of religious studies, Wallace spent some twelve years as a Buddhist monk and apparently continues to study with Tibetan Buddhist teachers. A prolific author and translator of Buddhist works on meditation and related topics, he has made himself into a spokesman for Buddhist teachings within the consciousness-studies community, both in articles (1999; 2001), and in plenary-session presentations at the biennial Tucson conferences on consciousness (from which he borrows the subtitle of his book).

The Buddha insisted that each individual must establish what is true for herself, without relying on authority or tradition (Rahula, 1974). This alone makes his teachings congenial to science. But the devil is in the details. Does Buddhism offer a workable methodology for first-person inquiry? Should meditation become part of the toolkit of consciousness investigators? Do Buddhist views on consciousness portend a new or extended understanding of what should constitute scientific inquiry into consciousness? As a practising, well-trained Buddhist, familiar with several of the canonical languages, Wallace seems well situated to address such issues.

## I

*'Dismiss whatever insults your soul.'* This epigraph, taken from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, opens the final section of *Taboo*. It captures well Wallace's own attitude. Like others before him, he is dismayed that many cognitive scientists consider experience irrelevant to making scientific sense of consciousness; that some deny 'the validity, and even the very existence, of their personal, inner life' (p. 161). Truly shocked at this position, Wallace has few kind words for its proponents ('the resistance'), whom he regards as dogmatic, naive, illogical, terror-stricken in the face of subjectivity, and (by implication) stuck in a 'preadolescent stage of psychological immaturity' (p. 83). How can their view of the world, disarmingly characterized by Searle (1992, p. 90) as 'in varying degrees repulsive, degrading, and disgusting', be countered?

In crafting an answer, Wallace distinguishes four elements or dimensions of the scientific tradition. The first is science *per se*, a 'discipline of inquiry' (p. 17) that relies on the disengaged observer, scepticism, and (often) experimentation to arrive at knowledge. The second is scientific realism, the philosophical conviction that science is not simply a methodology, but an approach to arriving at true knowledge of reality. The third is scientific materialism, which Wallace

characterizes variously as a dogma, an ideology, and a religion. And the fourth is scientism, which maintains that science alone can produce true knowledge.

As *Taboo* unfolds, this fourfold scheme mostly reduces to the distinction between science (which Wallace approves of) and scientific materialism. The scientific materialist holds that first-person experience is either a fiction foisted on us by folk psychology or a category irrelevant to scientific inquiry. For Wallace, this creed amounts to an intolerant belief system, whose contemporary triumph makes fruitful inquiry into consciousness impossible.

In the first part of *Taboo*, Wallace surveys Western thought to explain how such a misguided understanding can ever have arisen, let alone prevailed. On his account, scientific materialism originated in a genuine religious impulse: the wish to draw closer to the mind of God by reading in nature the record of his works. With the death of God in modern times, that impulse was perverted into dogma. Today scientific materialists treat the objective, material realm as sacred and the world of sensory appearances as profane. As the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued, safeguarding the sacred from contamination by the profane requires instituting taboos. The great taboo of scientific materialism is subjectivity; in effect (though Wallace refrains from using the term), scientific materialists regard subjectivity as sinful.

As history, all this is of course highly speculative. Wallace adduces enough evidence to titillate, but not enough to convince. Those who value first-person inquiry will find the analysis thought-provoking, and will come away with good anecdotes and examples to use as ammunition. Practitioners of scientific materialism, however, will see in it only an easily dismissed caricature of their views.

The real point of this analysis for Wallace is to lay the groundwork for his claim that scientific materialists take an irrational and dogmatic stand when it comes to first-person inquiry. To buttress this claim, he argues repeatedly that scientific materialism is bad science, ignoring the role that subjectivity has come to play in quantum physics and relying on blind faith in what science will one day reveal. Missing from this analysis (except for a single sentence in the book's closing paragraphs) is any sense that the practice of science — even for scientific materialists — may reflect the positive qualities of inspiration and awe associated with religion. As for the proud claim that scientific objectivity serves to protect the freedom of inquiry, Wallace dismisses this as a 'textbook account' of why scientific materialism triumphed (p. 164). The truth, in his view, is darker and more sordid: unreasoning commitment to a bastardized religious creed. The deeply damaging consequence is that the study of consciousness has been suppressed (p. 187):

[S]cience has not developed effective methods for exploring consciousness first hand, and the reason for this is that scientific inquiry has been constrained by the metaphysical principles of scientific materialism. This dogma allows science to explore only those facets of reality that conform to its creed; and the experienced mind is simply left out.

In other words, now that science has discovered the subjective realm, the dogmas of scientific materialism have become a serious impediment to the growth of

knowledge. Since consciousness is subjective at its core, understanding it requires first-person approaches. When science, thoroughly under the influence of scientific materialism, rejects such approaches, it blinds itself to what is obviously true and impoverishes our human capacity for discovering the truth.

## II

Histories of science often recount the story of Galileo's conflict with the Catholic church, in the person of Cardinal Bellarmine. The standard account casts Bellarmine as the villain — unwilling because of his dogmatic prejudices even to consider the evidence of Galileo's telescope that the universe could not be geocentric. As Searle points out (1992, p. 5), a common rhetorical move in debates on the role of science *vis-à-vis* consciousness is to cast oneself in the role of Galileo, with one's opponents so many Bellarmines, championing dogma over truth, ideology over empirical evidence. Wallace does not deny himself this pleasure (p. 141).

In the revisionist version of this quarrel Bellarmine comes off much better. In this telling, Bellarmine simply maintained that scientific observation does not demand ontological commitments; that it might be fruitful to *treat* the universe as heliocentric without claiming that this is the way things are (Rorty, 1979, pp. 328–31). Thus rehabilitated, Bellarmine becomes Wallace's natural ally (p. 20). Free science from the dogmatic ontology of scientific materialism, says Wallace, and the way lies open to develop a methodology both consistent with science and appropriate to the subjective realm of consciousness. For Wallace, this methodology is introspection.

Now, Wallace does not mean by introspection the largely discredited introspectionism practised by Wilhelm Wundt and others around the turn of the twentieth century. He critiques this kind of introspection on two grounds. First, it badly distorted experience in order to make it amenable to scientific analysis, destroying the object of inquiry in order to save it. Second, it lacked any way to break through the barrier to first-person inquiry noted by William James and confirmed by modern psychological studies: that the maximum time on which an observer can focus on a fixed object is about three seconds (p. 99).

At this point (Chapter Five of *Taboo*) Wallace introduces meditation. The Buddhist meditative traditions, he explains, taught ways to violate the three-second rule. Buddhist contemplatives learned to develop stable attention that could be sustained indefinitely, the very capacity that introspection in its Western guise is lacking. Able to free the investigating mind from disturbance, they could get clear on the introspective objects to which mind alone has access, just as a scientist can get a clear image through a microscope only if it is mounted on a stable platform, has adequate optics, and provides good illumination (p. 96).<sup>2</sup>

For this analogy to apply, a more fundamental question must be resolved: Can introspection give knowledge of consciousness? Is the relevant data even detectable in the visible part of the spectrum? Aware of the need to deal with this

[2] The Buddhist tradition itself uses a similar analogy (Wallace, 1999, p. 176).

issue, Wallace considers a variety of objections to the validity introspection. Here the argument begins to run into difficulty.

The most fundamental objection to introspection is that it is impossible in principle. One cannot carry out two cognitive operations at once — cannot be aware of one's own awareness. To this objection, Wallace replies (pp. 87–93) that one can practise introspection as *retrospection*: looking back on a mental event that has just taken place. But this proposed solution (also advocated in passing by James, as Wallace notes) will not do. Retrospection may give knowledge of the contents of mental states, and Wallace argues convincingly that this knowledge is as likely to be accurate as the content of external observations. Yet knowledge of the *contents* of consciousness is simply not the same thing as knowledge of consciousness itself. As Searle (1992, p. 98) puts it:

[O]ur idea of an objectively observable reality presupposes the notion of observation that is itself ineliminably subjective, and that cannot be made the object of observation . . .<sup>3</sup>

*Taboo* considers Searle's point in some detail, but never really comes to terms with it. Wallace seems not to appreciate that introspection depends on the intentional structure that assigns knower and known two completely different roles in the process of cognition. As long as such epistemological dualism operates, first-person knowledge of consciousness — in its defining role as subjective knower — will remain impossible.

Since this point is so central, it is worth considering what answers to it can be teased out of what *Taboo* has to say about meditation. For instance, Buddhist contemplatives seem to agree — on the basis of their own meditative investigations — that the content of an act of mental perception will normally be the previous moment of perception (p. 108). Yet this will not serve as an answer to the fundamental objection. The aim of Buddhist practice is not to arrive at theoretical understanding of the mind, but to end suffering. Meditative analysis supports this end in part by allowing the meditator to recognize that the content of her own mental experience is largely fictitious; i.e., based on self-deception. In this respect, at least, Buddhism agrees with cognitive scientists who speak of 'folk psychology' as delusory. Meditative retrospection gives adequate access to the contents of an individual's version of the prevailing folk psychology (i.e., it offers an answer to the question: 'What do I believe just happened?'). In this way it helps clarify and loosen the hold of conventional patterns of thought. Yet using contemplative inquiry in this way does not imply gaining access to the operation of consciousness itself.

Wallace reads his Buddhist sources as offering another, more subtle endorsement of introspection/retrospection as a source for direct knowledge of consciousness. Several of the meditative practices he discusses (pp. 103–12, 115–18)

[3] Wallace, who agrees with much in Searle's analysis, regards Searle's explicit rejection of introspection as backsliding: 'an abrupt withdrawal from experience back into the dogma of scientific materialism' (p. 155). But Searle, despite some confusing terminology, is making a methodological point, not an ontological one. He is arguing that the practice of relying on observations by a disengaged observer cannot be applied to investigate consciousness.

lead to experiences in which the contents of consciousness fall away and one arrives at ‘direct realization of the nature of awareness’ (p. 109; cf. ‘pure conscious experience,’ Shear and Jevning, 1999). Somewhat surprisingly, Wallace contends that such experiences of direct realization still rely on retrospection, with the proviso that in the absence of distinguishing content, the retrospected moment of consciousness can be regarded as identical to the present moment. If this were so, retrospection might indeed give immediate access to consciousness, or at least something very close to it. Yet the claim seems problematic. Wallace tells us that direct-realization experiences are *prior* to the structure of knower and known (p. 113), but introspection/retrospection presupposes just this structure. Again, retrospection depends on the temporal succession of moments. Will that succession remain when the contents of consciousness disappear? (Wallace, 1998, p. 234).<sup>4</sup>

If introspective/retrospective inquiry yielded specific knowledge of consciousness whose value even sceptics were forced to acknowledge, such epistemological qualms could perhaps be set aside. But Wallace offers no evidence that this is so. Surprisingly (it is, after all, a *first-person* inquiry he champions), he tell us nothing regarding his own experiences with cultivating a stable mind. Nor does he present discoveries made by Buddhist contemplatives, at least with regard to the workings of ordinary consciousness.

### III

Ultimately, Wallace does endorse an approach to knowing consciousness that departs from the dualistic intentional structure of introspection. He describes it as a ‘conceptually unstructured awareness . . . which is nondual from the phenomena that arise to it. . . .’ (p. 117). Wallace does continue to refer to conceptually unstructured awareness as introspective, at least in passing (p. 115), but this characterization cannot be assigned much weight, given the polar structure central to introspective methodology.<sup>5</sup>

Now, however, Wallace finds himself on the other horn of an epistemological dilemma. Since science relies on the methodology of the disengaged observer (p. 17), a conceptually unstructured awareness — valid and important as it may be — seems to have nothing to offer science. Wallace himself acknowledges this (p. 112): ‘The contemplative pursuit of conceptually unstructured awareness may appear to be solely a religious pursuit with little or no relevance to the science of the mind.’

[4] Wallace seems forced into this rather unattractive position by his endorsement of the view that self-referential awareness is impossible (Wallace, 1999, p. 179; 1998, pp. 273–83). Some Buddhist schools did take this view, but others took a contrary view. The point was hotly debated in the Tibetan tradition. For a book-length discussion, see Williams (1998). For thoughts on the significance of this issue, see Part IV below.

[5] Wallace confuses the issue further by using the word ‘introspection’ in an entirely separate sense to translate a technical term in Buddhist meditation theory (pp. 106–7). He translates the same term elsewhere (Lamrimpa, 1992) as ‘vigilance,’ and it might have been wise to keep that usage here.



In response to this challenge, Wallace offers the authority of William James, who, he tells us, was ‘keenly interested in a comparable mode of perception . . .’ (p. 112). But this does not get him very far, since James also maintained that such ‘pure experience’ was inaccessible (p. 114). Beyond this, Wallace makes the following argument (pp. 119–20): Non-conceptual awareness is said by contemplatives in many traditions to represent the highest state of consciousness. Studying this pure state of consciousness, if it truly exists, will surely help us get clear on what consciousness is in its essence. Whether it does exist cannot be conceptually determined, ‘but it may possibly be determined through one’s own experience’.

How can this alternative methodology be practised consistent with the observational stance inherent in the scientific method? The answer seems to be that it cannot, and that this does not much matter. Wallace maintains that the rediscovery of subjectivity is about to shake science to its foundations (p. 178). In such times of upheaval, ‘the relevant community of inquirers is in question’ (Rorty, 1979, p. 332). Ultimately, *Taboo* is best read as an extended argument that when the dust settles, the true community of inquirers in consciousness studies — the new scientists — will be the contemplatives.

And what of the scientists who insist on the distanced stance that characterizes the present scientific method? Their chief ‘collaborative’ task will apparently be to study the contemplatives, to better understand how they develop their skills (p. 178). To accept this role, cognitive scientists must reject the dogma ‘that the objects of scientific experience must be capable of being perceived by every competent observer’ (p. 174); they must, in other words, give up on the idea that they, as non-contemplatives, will have direct access to the data on which the basis of which the study of consciousness can proceed. They will do science in the third-person mode, just as in the past, but with a different and considerably more narrow focus.

#### IV

Viewed as an essay in crafting a new methodology appropriate to the study of consciousness, *Taboo* never really gets off the ground. As I have tried to show, its first proposed methodology, introspection, will not serve the purpose. And its second, conceptually unstructured awareness, simply asks scientists to take their seats in the audience while contemplatives take centre stage. If cognitive science still has a part in this scheme, it will be to reprise the role of handmaiden that philosophy once played to theology.

Yet buried within *Taboo*, and just beyond its staked-out field of discourse, a more attractive first-person methodology awaits excavation. If consciousness can operate self-referentially; if it can know itself *in the act of knowing*, the fundamental objection to introspection loses its weight. And if that referentiality is available in every moment of consciousness, then it will not be necessary to journey to the rarified heights of conceptually unstructured awareness to activate it.

Wallace is committed to the view that self-referential awareness is impossible (see note 4 above). But some of the sources he cites suggest to the contrary. For

instance, there is Searle's observation that conscious states such as moods are not intentional in structure (1992, p. 140). Then there is that famous analogy of William James: psychology, he observes, stubbornly investigates the still water in buckets it draws from the stream of consciousness, while ignoring the flowing stream itself (1890, p. 255). Finally, there is the methodology suggested by the Buddhist master Padmasambhava, as cited in *Taboo*: Question the nature of ordinary conscious activity not in order to arrive at answers, but to find knowledge in the process of questioning itself (p. 118).

Once one accepts that consciousness cannot be the object of first-person *observation*, the way is open to explore alternative first-person methodologies for knowing consciousness. Such methodologies may well abandon the model of distanced spectatorship at the heart of the scientific method. But they can stay true to the spirit of creative inquiry that inspires the best in scientists, philosophers, and other friends of knowledge. Shaped by Wallace's visceral reaction to the theories and assumptions that guide cognitive science on the one hand, and his commitment to observational methodology on the other, *Taboo* proves unable to guide us toward such a methodology. The rapprochement between science and contemplative inquiry on terms of greater interest to science, and more approachable by scientists, will have to wait a while longer.

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