

David Lorimer

The Need for a Noetic Revolution

Review of Alan Wallace's The Taboo of Subjectivity

Subtitled 'Towards a New Science of Consciousness', this is a landmark book¹ in consciousness studies in the grand tradition of William James. Indeed it is the kind of book that James would have written had he been updating his writings 100 years on. Its main thrust is that a quasi-religious commitment to the metaphysical principles of scientific materialism has impeded the development of a more integral science of consciousness that would treat subjective experience seriously as the complement to third-person research.

The book begins with the question: can science provide an adequate view of the entire natural world that includes only objective phenomena, 'while excluding the subjective phenomenon of consciousness altogether?' The answer must be no, as is becoming increasingly apparent within consciousness studies. However, there is a political dimension to this, as Wallace analyses further on: science monopolises what he calls 'epistemic authority' and can therefore be expected to resist a noetic revolution that puts consciousness and subjectivity back into science. A section on the ideology of scientific materialism unpacks the key assumptions: objectivism, monism, universalism, reductionism, the closure principle and physicalism. While these may hold up for the world of scientific materialism, they are lead to an impoverished understanding of reality as a whole.

The author sets out four related dimensions of the scientific tradition: science, scientific realism, scientific materialism and scientism. It is one of the strengths of the analysis that these are carefully teased apart but Wallace shows exactly how they inter-relate and how they are reinforced by the fact that most research is conducted within the metaphysical framework of this ideology. The result of scientific materialism in particular is the marginalisation of the mind, which led to behaviourism in the early years of the twentieth century and is now present in the eliminative materialism school of the Churchlands. The irony and indeed

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[1] **B. Alan Wallace**, *The Taboo of Subjectivity*, Oxford New York, 2000, 218 pp., £22 ISBN 0 19 513207 6 (hbk).

reductio ad absurdum of this position is that consciousness or mind is essential for its formulation. More generally, the sceptical approach of science is not applied to its philosophical assumptions as these remain for the most part unconscious.

An interesting historical chapter on theological impulses in the scientific revolution leads into the second part where Wallace explores the elements of a possible noetic revolution. Here, as I noted above, he takes his cue from William James and his point of departure from the inadequacy of a purely external third-person perspective on consciousness. James made pure experience primary, regarding mind and matter as secondary constructs and advocating a radical empiricism whereby all experience is included as data. Wallace points out that knowledge is provisional and context-dependent, hence all observations are theory-laden and all theories are underdetermined by the evidence; and even conceptual designations do not exist independently of consciousness. He chooses to discard scientific materialism rather than the mind.

In a chapter entitled 'Observing the Mind', he gives a critical history of introspection, commenting that virtually no progress has been made in this respect when compared with technological advance. As Alan Watkins put it at a recent seminar, human beings are still running on 200 million-year-old software. This is where contemplative disciplines come in. James spoke about the development of sustained voluntary attention, which most philosophers regard as impossible since they have no first-hand experience. He makes the interesting point that volition is intentional and is expressed in attention. This is not a trivial point when one considers, as the author does, that 2.4 million American children under twelve are on Ritalin treatment for ADD, a fact that is underpinned by the supposition that drugs are the best way to change states of mind, which encourages a passive or even victim image of the human being.

The other side of the coin is the development of contemplative practice, which has been reserved for the few until recently. In Buddhism, sustained mindfulness leads to absorption and the experience of joy, luminosity and nonconceptuality as intrinsic features of the mind. This is James's pure experience and Padmasambhava's conceptually unstructured awareness. The point is that experience is critical and provides the only yardstick of comparison. I was surprised to see no mention at this point of Ken Wilber's work, as he has done an enormous amount of work on the spectrum of consciousness within different traditions, as well as working on potential validation procedures for contemplative experience in his book *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (1998/2001). Wilber does not even appear in the bibliography.

The third part looks at the resistance to change with chapters on 'The Mind in Scientific Materialism', 'Confusing Scientific Materialism with Science' and 'Scientific Materialism: the Ideology of Modernity'. The titles were music to my ears and this is a superb exposition of the issues and problems. Again William James is prominent, with his three possible theories to account for the correlation between brain processes and mental events: the brain produces thoughts, permits or releases thoughts, or transmits them (see his Ingersoll Lecture on Immortality

for a detailed exposition). Although empirical neuroscientific research is in fact compatible with all three hypotheses, the metaphysical dogma of scientific materialism dictates that only the first theory can be taken seriously and funded. It also ignores or scorns fields like parapsychology that have arguably falsified the materialistic hypothesis of mind–brain identity. The first chapter also contains an excellent discussion of emergentism, showing the shortcomings of most arguments that regard consciousness as an emergent property of brain processes.

The next chapter illustrates the widespread confusion or conflation of scientific materialism with science. Machines are described in anthropomorphic terms which are then re-applied to human beings. Wallace gives examples from journalistic articles and textbooks, but reserves his main analysis for the philosophical conflations of John Searle, who does nevertheless reject some of the more crass materialistic approaches to consciousness but cannot finally extricate himself from its assumptions. This leads into the final chapter on scientific materialism as an ideology, which begins with a masterly statement of the overall view. If you disagree with this you must be either ignorant or irrational! However, as Wallace repeatedly observes, the astonishing thing is not materialism itself (as Crick maintained) but the fact that people ‘so enthusiastically embrace an unconfirmed speculative theory that utterly denies the validity, even the very existence, of their personal, inner life’ (p.161). The ethical implications of such a view have proved disastrous in the past and may do so again: rampant consumerism is incompatible with sustainability. In addition, the placebo effect is wholly unintelligible from the materialistic standpoint; nor is the study of mystical experience exempt when scholars like Steven Katz insist that contemplatives have no privileged position even in relation to their own experiences! The abnormal is recognised but the ‘supernormal’ is almost completely ignored.

In his conclusion, Wallace suspects that consciousness may be the cloud on the horizon at the end of the twentieth century, comparable to the ultraviolet catastrophe at the end of the nineteenth. From a contemplative perspective, the current scientific world-view is fundamentally flawed since it has failed to take into account the role and significance of consciousness in nature. He sees contemplation playing a mediating empirical role between science and religion as they overlap in the mind itself. Some of this work has already been started in relation to Sir Alister Hardy’s work and research on NDEs, but this is only a beginning. The way forward is a participatory world-view that draws on both inner and outer perspectives and this book is a major step along the way.²

Reference

Wilber, K. (1998/2001), *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (Boston, MA: Shambala / Dublin: Gateway).

[2] This review first appeared in *Network*, the journal of the Scientific and Medical Network, and is reproduced here by kind permission.