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Postmaterialism, Anyone?

Brian Martin, University of Wollongong, [bmartin@uow.edu.au](mailto:bmartin@uow.edu.au)

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Conventional scientific theories can't explain telepathy and precognition. Nor can they provide a convincing explanation for consciousness. The usual scientific assumption is that the material world is all there is. To explain anomalous evidence, should this assumption be superseded by a model in which consciousness is independent of matter?

**Keywords:** materialism, postmaterialism, parapsychology, consciousness, paradigms

## Prelude

In 1975, I had just submitted my PhD thesis in theoretical physics at the University of Sydney and was doing a bit of teaching while applying for full-time jobs. There was a new PhD student in the department, Sandy Donald, and we got to talking about psychic phenomena such as telepathy and psychokinesis. Reading other people's minds and moving objects through mental power alone cannot be explained with the usual laws of physics.

Sandy said he knew how it could be done. He described his ideas about past-directed negentropy, in which future order can be harnessed to affect the present. I was amazed. I had read about studies of psychic phenomena, and Sandy's theory explained many of their weirdest findings, though he knew nothing about these experiments.

I had been especially impressed by experiments carried out by Helmut Schmidt (e.g., 1969, 1974), coincidentally also a physicist. Schmidt set up a quantum random number generator by using the unpredictable process of radioactive decay to light up one of four bulbs. Subjects would try to guess which bulb would light up next. They did just a little better than chance, but the odds against the deviation being due to chance were billions to one. Call it psychokinesis or precognition, there was some influence on or knowledge of a random process that couldn't be explained with the laws of physics. In my view, that evidence for psi — psychic phenomena — was definitive by the early 1970s.

So what did physicists do? Just what historian-of-science Thomas Kuhn (1970) said about scientists solving puzzles within the dominant paradigm: they ignored the anomalies. Evidence for precognition and other psychic phenomena was dismissed, either assumed to be wrong or possibly to be explained as physics developed.

Sandy and I collaborated on a technical paper on thermodynamics and psi, and got it published in the new *European Journal of Parapsychology* (Donald and Martin 1976). There it sat. I didn't pursue studies in psi any further.

Others did. Although many mainstream disciplines, such as psychology, marginalise anyone who investigates psi (Cardena 2015; Hess 1992), there have been enough enterprising researchers to develop a thriving field. There are now many thousands of studies into psi, less to prove its existence than to probe its features. For example, studies show that psi effects seem just as strong regardless of distance between sender and receiver, and the sender can have an effect after the receiver has received a message.

Psi is only part of a wider picture. There are other anomalous phenomena, such as near-death experiences, that raise questions about the nature of consciousness. Recently, researchers in this wider area formed the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences (AAPS). The organisation has published three volumes presenting the case for postmaterialism.

### **Materialism and Postmaterialism**

In philosophy, materialism is the view or assumption that the material world is all there is. Closely related is the concept of physicalism, suggestive of the idea that physics is the foundation of reality. Physicalism says reality includes forces, like gravity, as well as material objects like electrons, while in practice materialism also includes forces.

An important facet of materialism is that consciousness arises entirely from physical processes, including biological ones, in the brain. Consequently, when the brain dies, so does the mind. In this picture, consciousness is an epiphenomenon, arising out of matter but having no effect on it.

Most research in the physical and biological sciences proceeds on the basis of materialism. Indeed, many scientists believe materialism has been proven.

Postmaterialism, in contrast, suggests there's something more than matter and energy, and that to explain all the evidence available, it's necessary to consider that consciousness exists separately or independently of the brain. This could be individual consciousness, or it could be collective. In this picture, the brain is analogous to a television set. When you watch a television screen, you see various things, but they do not originate in the set. If the set has a malfunction, the picture is fuzzy, distorted or lost entirely, but this does not mean the set is the ultimate source of the images, which exists independently. A better analogy is a computer hooked to the Internet: it can both send and receive signals; it is a transceiver.

Is the brain a sort of transceiver? Beyond this, is it possible that the material world, the world of our senses, is created by consciousness?

### **Spiritually Transformative Experiences**

Of the three volumes published by AAPS, it is easiest to start with the most readable one, the third, titled *Spiritual Awakenings* (Woollacott and Lorimer 2022). The book is an edited collection in which 57 scientists/academics each tell their personal stories of “awakening,” more specifically called Spiritually Transformative Experiences (STEs). The word “spiritual” sometimes is linked to religion but here more commonly used in the sense of transcendent. Each of the contributors experienced something of overwhelming significance and impact, out of the ordinary, giving a sense of meaning beyond everyday interactions with material reality. STEs have many common features. They are ineffable (unable to be fully expressed in words), and commonly include overpowering feelings of oneness and love, and lead to major life changes.

Many tell of their belief in a universal consciousness, with humans being vessels through which this consciousness manifests in a limited way. Many tell of finding the materialist picture in which the mind emerges from the brain to be inadequate, either before or after their STEs. These are powerful testimonies for there being something greater than human existence. For example, Athena Potari (2022), a philosopher, had an STE during a meditation session. A few small excerpts from her account give a sense of her awe and personal transformation:

What I ‘saw’ ~ realized in an indescribable living way, is that the entire world, or rather Being is one, alive, vibrating self-knowing consciousness. ... I felt expanded, free, no boundaries. I am vastness itself, a free-flowing spaciousness, all so light and flowing, pure freedom. ... Realizing the unity of our being overflowed my heart with so much love for everyone. For the first month, I would greet people, for example in the street or in shops, with so much warmth and care, feeling connected to them even though in ‘practical’ life they were total strangers. ... This awakening also entailed profound implications for my professional life.

I found these first-hand stories fascinating. Personally, I’ve never had any experience remotely similar, instead being always anchored in “everyday” reality. Still, reports show that some people can experience a different reality, and surely those of us not having had STEs can learn from those who have.

STEs might be dismissed as delusions, as the consequence of overwrought imaginations, or the wishful thinking of gullible adherents to evangelistic religions. The editors chose to highlight STEs of scientists and academics, many of them with advanced degrees and experience in their fields, presumably not the sorts of individuals easily duped or severed from their previous beliefs. In addition, scientists and academics have training in writing and expression, and thus are better able to tell their stories, as well as they can when words are inadequate. Many of them had their worldviews transformed, becoming researchers in areas related to STEs.

The editors provide a “background and overview.” They group STE accounts according to seven paths or occasions that led to them: spiritual practices, during or awakening from sleep, spontaneous, through “the word”, psychedelic experiences, near-death experiences, and psychic experiences. Each of the stories is limited to a few pages, so the editors must have imposed strict word limits.

Each story is amazing and revealing in its own way. Though the roads to STEs differ, STEs seem to require that the brain’s left hemisphere, controlling one’s sense of self, relinquishes its control, opening access to a different domain.

*Spiritual Awakenings* offers vivid testimony that materialism is inadequate to explain everything about the world, though of course materialists would beg to differ, attributing

STEs to the peculiar features of each person's own brain chemistry. More commonly, though, materialists simply ignore these reported experiences rather than trying to explain them by revising basic assumptions about the universe. This, perhaps, is the foundational challenge posed by postmaterialists: they treat STEs, and related evidence, as important phenomena that should be explained by science, as central matters of concern rather than irrelevant anomalies.

### **The Case for Postmaterialism**

For systematic arguments for postmaterialism, turn to the AAPS's first two volumes, each of them an edited collection. The first, titled *Is Consciousness Primary?* (Schwartz et al. 2020), consists of contributions by founding members of the AAPS. The second, *Expanding Science* (Beauregard et al. 2020), includes chapters relating to the emergence of postmaterialist science. Nearly every contributor has a PhD or MD or both. These are large, lengthy books, suitable for readers who want to delve into the arguments and evidence. Most of the chapters contain long lists of references, indicating the huge volume of relevant material. Some of the contributions are based on earlier publications, and many of them traverse the same ground, so there is some repetition in themes and evidence.

Postmaterialism is not a single unified perspective. There are various views about assumptions, methods and models. Nevertheless, so far as evidence is concerned, there are several recurring themes.

Evidence for psi — precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, etc. — is cited by many contributors. It is a long time since I read Helmut Schmidt's studies using quantum random number generators. Since then, numerous researchers have conducted thousands of experiments, revealing not just the existence of psi but also many of its features. One of the contributors to the AAPS volumes is Dean Radin who, in several books, has surveyed studies of psi as well as reporting on his own (e.g., Radin 2018).

The existence of psi does not prove that materialism is wrong because, after all, there might be an explanation with current physical laws, but despite decades of opportunity, so far there is no well-accepted theory. The idea of brains as transceivers, first suggested by William James, offers an explanation. If there is a universal consciousness, in which there is simultaneous awareness of everything at every time, then tapping into this consciousness can enable phenomena such as precognition. But this says little about the processes involved.

A different body of evidence, cited by many contributors, is near-death experiences (NDEs). Some people who survive a life-threatening condition, during which they are totally unconscious, later report remarkable memories. These often begin by viewing themselves from outside their bodies, called an out-of-body experience (OBE). NDEs also may include entering a tunnel, seeing a light, reviewing one's entire life, meeting with other beings and finally being instructed to return to their body. Most of these experiences are positive, including feelings of total harmony and love. Despite occurring within a few minutes, NDEs

often transform people’s lives, leading to lasting changes, including a greatly reduced fear of death. There is a considerable body of research on NDEs (Hagan 2017).

Pim van Lommel, a Dutch physician, led a study of NDEs in heart attack patients who were resuscitated, asking them whether they had any memories, which would have been of a time when their brains were recorded as having no activity — and some of them did. This research was published in *The Lancet*, and van Lommel later wrote a book (2010) in which he argued that NDEs cannot be explained by conventional science and that consciousness must exist outside the brain. Van Lommel (2020) contributed a chapter to volume II of the AAPS series.

Larry Dossey (2020) provides the most detailed account of “postmaterial medicine,” which involves people getting better without physical contact with the healer. He describes the difficulties of separating this type of healing, which he calls the telecebo effect, from the placebo effect, and presents some striking examples.

Even more controversial is reincarnation (Haraldsson 2020). Investigators have put a priority on studying cases involving children — who have limited life experience — who apparently remember past lives about which they could know nothing. In some cases, children report things that only later, after a detailed investigation, are determined to be true. Even so, cases of apparent reincarnation could be explained via psi.

Psi, NDEs, OBEs and psychic healing provide the most telling evidence against materialism. Also relevant are studies of reincarnation, terminal lucidity, mediumship and people who suddenly develop savant capacities. Different contributors give these different weights. For example, Charles Tart (2020) presents four forms of psi (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and psychokinesis) plus psychic healing as the “big five” before discussing OBEs, NDEs, reincarnation and other evidence as potentially supportive.

The common theme is that consciousness plays a central role in the universe, independently of matter. Philosophically, this can be in the form of dualism or idealism, as suggested by the title of Volume I, *Is Consciousness Primary?*

The contributors refer to a body of evidence, some of it obtained through rigorous experimentation, that materialism cannot explain. Hence, they conclude, a different, bigger picture is needed. Just as materialism is scientific, so is this bigger picture, hence the title of Volume II, *Expanding Science*.

## **Science**

Many of the contributors to volumes I and II comment on the nature of science, including assumptions, methods, paradigms and beliefs. They are acutely aware that mainstream scientists, those assuming that materialism is simply the way the world is, are dismissive of the possibility that nonlocal consciousness. However, postmaterialists, rather than reject mainstream science, instead try to be model scientists.

This is not new. Critics of psi have for decades accused parapsychologists of either being dupes of cheats or being frauds themselves. James Randi, a magician, became the scourge of psychics, exposing cheats (e.g., Randi 1982) but also discrediting careful researchers. Because some mediums and stage performers falsely claim to have psychic powers, scientists in the field have gone to extraordinary lengths to rule out the possibility of fraud and unconscious bias. The result has been that parapsychology has some of the most rigorous protocols in any field, far more watertight than those in physics or chemistry.

Along with their commitment to high-quality investigations, postmaterialist researchers model themselves on an idealised picture of scientific research. Many of the contributors cite Kuhn and discuss paradigms, but this is the extent of their engagement with the social studies of science. Post-Kuhnian sociologists have examined practices in research fields, finding that a range of social processes is involved in the construction of scientific facts (Hess 1997; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Pickering 1995). The idea of a single scientific method has been questioned (Feyerabend 1975).

Postmaterialists, perhaps to distinguish themselves from association with religious dogma or hucksters, seem to adhere to the idealised picture of science as presented in science textbooks. They relentlessly criticise scientists' adherence to materialism in the face of contradictory evidence, taking on the mantle of being truer to scientific principles. For example, Marilyn Schlitz and John Spencer (2020, 390–391), using the word “soul” for “mind” or “consciousness,” remark, “While it may be beyond the limits of science to directly access soul, it is not at all scientific to deny its reality.”

Several of the contributors quote famous physicists, especially quantum theorists, who questioned materialism. Stephan Schwartz (2020, 278) comments, “Max Planck was correct when he said, ‘Consciousness is the fundamental.’” Citing prestigious figures serves to associate postmaterialism with science, even though figures such as Planck, Erwin Schrödinger and Albert Einstein never undertook systematic studies of consciousness.

The concept of paradigms is valuable for understanding resistance to postmaterialism, but other features of conventional science are also relevant. Politically-oriented critics have pointed to the influence of power and wealth on research agendas, for example the influence of the military on funding and priorities, and the influence of pharmaceutical company funding on health-related research. Few areas of research are unaffected by these powerful influences: among the fields shaped by military agendas are computer science, education, entomology, communication studies and astrophysics (MacKenzie 1991; Noble 1991; Perkins 1978; Simpson 1994; Tyson and Lang 2018). Writers on postmaterialism rarely mention such influences on science.

It is plausible to argue that materialism is a useful belief system for keeping researchers and citizens oriented to serving the economy and the state rather than being “distracted” by the pursuit of spiritually transcendent experiences. Philosophical materialism has an apparent affinity to the sort of acquisitive materialism that underpins capitalist economies.

However, it might be risky for postmaterialists to become open critics of corporate and government influences on science because the ideology of neutral, objective science remains influential among both scientists and citizens. This ideology serves the interests of governments and corporations that seek to steer research to their own ends, even while they marginalise and attack scientists who challenge dominant research agendas.

## **Social Implications**

Postmaterialism constitutes a paradigm challenge. If it became the dominant perspective, what difference would it make? Most obviously, it would change the way scientists think about reality and, perhaps, the way members of the public think about their lives. Are there further implications?

As noted, most of the contributors to the AAPS books stick to “the science.” They see postmaterialism mainly in paradigm terms, perhaps analogously to the relation of relativity theory to Newtonian physics, namely an expansion of science to include anomalous evidence, but with no great significance beyond this. A few of the authors comment on social implications. Natalie Dyer (2020, 70) remarks that “If we were to discover that the same mind/awareness connected us all on a higher level, and that this was supported by scientific evidence, perhaps we would end up treating each other better.” Larry Dossey (2020, 374) says something is needed “that can inspire not only an intellectual appreciation of the wholeness implied in biological nonlocality and entanglement, but also something that can quicken the pulse and stir an ethic toward Earth that can counter the unbridled greed, selfishness and plunder that threaten us.”

The most developed assessment of the wider implications of postmaterialism is provided by philosopher Neal Grossman (2020). He notes that most people who have NDEs report a sense of overwhelming love and unity. He infers from this and other evidence that the universal consciousness is benevolent and, going further, that knowledge of this benevolence can transform social life. At the moment, only a few people having spiritually transformative experiences tell others about them. Many keep quiet for fear of being thought insane.

Grossman thinks that if more people felt freer about sharing knowledge of their transcendent experiences, this could lead to an upsurge of discussion and acceptance. This would be like the emergence of awareness of shared experiences of abuse, for example women talking about sexual harassment. Although postmaterialism is currently marginalised, Grossman thinks it is possible this could change. Furthermore, if people started sharing their experiences, this could change their behaviour and, in turn, change collective behaviour and social institutions.

I was reminded of the recent book by Richard Sclove (2022), *Escaping Maya's Palace*, in particular his claim that there is a scholarly taboo on acknowledging the possibility of psychospiritual development past ego-identification. Sclove's book transgresses the taboo by daring to connect insights from those who have transcended ego-identification with

contemporary history and critical social theory. The taboo relates to the marginalisation of research on postmaterialism. A key function of AAPS is to challenge this.

I had a darker thought. If postmaterialism becomes more accepted, it will be the basis for massive research efforts, as encouraged by quite a few writers, to gain a greater understanding of nonlocal consciousness. This sounds fine — if the research were carried out by disinterested and civic-minded investigators like those who set up AAPS. But there are others with different motivations. Militaries have investigated psi (e.g., McMoneagle 2002; Ronson 2006), seeking to weaponise capacities, and corporations will seek to commercialise them. Should we fear the development of a military-psychic complex or a psychic-industrial complex?

I was left with many questions. If consciousness is independent of material reality, and if this consciousness is collective and benevolent, how did it end up connected with the human species, one afflicted with pathologies including war, torture and unbridled greed and destructiveness? In other words, if consciousness is primary and based on love, what is the source of evil (Bartlett 2005)? What is driving human social evolution in the direction of major catastrophes, including climate change and nuclear war? These questions are commonly addressed by religious thinkers. Could postmaterialism become a new religion, based on training people to enable their access to god, aka universal consciousness?

These are speculative thoughts. Meanwhile, materialism remains hegemonic within most scientific circles. The three AAPS volumes provide a thought-provoking introduction to the evidence and arguments for postmaterialism. But how many scientists will take note unless they have their own spiritually transformative experiences?

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