

Guest Editorial

A Vision for the Society for Consciousness Studies

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ABSTRACT

This editorial is based on a presentation given by the author at the inaugural meeting of the Society for Consciousness Studies at The California Institute of Integral Studies on May 31, 2014. The author discusses the hegemony of materialism and some of the deleterious consequences of its entrenchment in the academy. In particular, research into the nature of consciousness is curtailed, those with demonstrated psychic abilities are oppressed, and little gets done to find effective interventions for resolving existential anxiety. The author's vision for the Society for Consciousness Studies is that: (1) it is a society that values open inquiry into the nature of consciousness; (2) its members can regard themselves as leaders who are guiding the direction of consciousness studies; (3) practical projects can be undertaken to advance the open study of consciousness; (4) the society can cultivate support for the discussion of existential issues, self-transformation, and transcendent states of consciousness; and (5) the founding of the Society for Consciousness Studies can be a turning point in the history of the study of consciousness.

Key Words: Society for Consciousness Studies, consciousness, materialism, existential anxiety, anomalous phenomena.

There was an article in the *Toronto Star* newspaper on Sunday morning, March 16, 2014. "Mental health services are strained as a growing number of teens show up at emergency rooms across Canada with self-inflicted injuries and suicidal thoughts, say pediatric psychiatrists." This is also a trend in the United States. Yet these teenagers do not have the "hallmarks of a psychiatric disorder. . . . Instead they seem to be suffering an existential crisis that is sort of 'I'm empty, I don't know who I am, I don't know where I'm going, I don't have any grounding and I don't know how to manage my negative feelings'" (Auld & Bailey, 2014, p. A3). So, we have some of our youth trying to cut, burn, and bruise their way out of an existential vacuum. And how do we, their mentors, respond to their anguish?

The structures of Western society — our governments, financial institutions, industry, health care systems, academic institutions, and so on — are based on a materialist doctrine. Materialist in both of the usual senses, namely, that our activity while alive is to pursue material well-being and the notion that all of reality can be entirely explained in terms of matter. The second of these, scientific materialism, assures us that reality is a meaningless, incidental, mechanistic, collocation of improbable events. So, one might as well get as many goodies as one can before being overtaken by senescence, chronic disease, and death. And if that is all too depressing to tolerate, then there are drugs that we can take to make us feel better. But is materialism a correct interpretation of the nature of reality?

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This is not the place to sort through the various definitions of materialism or the nuances of the debate which I have previously presented in various books and papers (Barušs, 1993; 2007; 2010). Let me just say that Pierre Gassendi, in the first half of the 17th century, reintroduced Greek atomism into early modern thought with the notion that matter is made up of continuously existent, indivisible atoms located within an absolute space and time (Fischer, 2014). In the 350 years since then, the infrastructure for mounting that sort of materialist interpretation of reality has collapsed. We now know that space is not fixed but is expanding at the rate of the Hubble flow. Determinism has disappeared since quantum events are stochastic in nature. Time is no longer a fixed linear stream, given that effects can temporally precede their causes in the case of delayed choice and presentience experiments. Elementary particles do not have continuous existence. In fact, particles do not have set positions in space until such time as one decides to look for their positions or those positions change depending upon what else one chooses to measure (Barušs, 2010; Kochen & Specker, 1967). These are not the kinds of properties of matter that lend themselves to a materialist ideology. So, materialism cannot explain matter. Materialism also cannot explain the existence of existential qualia, i.e., the sense of existence that people have for themselves. Materialism cannot explain anomalous phenomena such as the non-local properties of consciousness. Pierre Gassendi was an innovative Catholic priest who dared to challenge the received wisdom of his time, but this is no longer 1650. So why are we stuck with a medieval theory of reality?

The answer is the institutionalization of materialism in the academy and other bureaucratic structures in society. The academy is supposed to support open inquiry, critical thinking, and, in the sciences, dependence on empirical investigation. So why do logical reasoning and objective evidence frequently go out the window as soon as materialism is challenged? In fact, there is so much corruption in the academy that it is difficult to do research that does not conform to the prevailing dogma. In particular, those who dare to challenge materialism are frequently ridiculed, bullied, and extruded from the academy (Barušs, 2010; Jahn, 2001; Tart, 2009).

This persecution has led to a culture of fear. In my experience, students are afraid that if they choose to study anomalous phenomena for an undergraduate thesis, then they will not get accepted to graduate school. Professors are afraid that if they discuss the evidence for the survival hypothesis in class, then they will be censured in spite of their right to academic freedom. Researchers are afraid that if they appear to be challenging materialism then they will not receive funding for their research and their papers will not get published in mainstream academic journals. And these are not just paranoid fears. And this is just the short list of the ways in which the oppression manifests itself.

The hegemony of materialism held in place by intimidation has a number of deleterious consequences. One problem is that it impedes research into the nature of consciousness. For instance, if a researcher has to keep proving to granting agencies, journal and book editors, and university administrators that good mediums produce correct information, something that has been empirically well-established (Beischel, 2013; Braude, 2003; Schwartz, Russek, Nelson, & Barentsen, 2001), then she cannot move on to the next step of trying to determine whether or not dead people are the source of that information. The normal processes of science and critical inquiry need to be able to proceed uninhibited in the exploration of the nature of consciousness (Cardaña, 2014).

A second problem is that those who have demonstrated psychic abilities need to conceal those abilities, particularly from mental health professionals. Even belief in psychic abilities is formally a symptom of schizotypal personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There is still a widespread tendency to regard anyone who manifests or claims to have such abilities as lying, cheating, and as being mentally ill. The problem is that these abilities can be erratic, confusing, and frightening, particularly if they begin to manifest suddenly, as they sometimes do after near-death experiences, and the person for whom they occur is in need of some guidance for integrating them (Barušs, 2003; Atwater, 2011).

A third problem brings us back to the opening discussion about the occurrence of existential angst among teenagers. This is something that I understand from my own experience. I was in my second year of Engineering Science at the University of Toronto when I became so overwhelmed with existential questions that I simply could no longer sustain sufficient interest in engineering to continue with it. I switched to the New Program at the University of Toronto, which allowed me to take any course in any discipline that I wanted to take. So I took courses in philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and anything else that I could think of that could practically help me to answer my questions about the meaning of human existence. And, except for a course in existential philosophy and a course in Taoism, I found nothing that deepened my understanding of existential matters. I came to the conclusion that universities were a waste of time for anyone interested in learning anything meaningful about the big questions concerning life and, upon graduation, went to work for a friend of mine as a roofer.

I was halfway up the front of a roof one morning in a new subdivision in Calgary, when I put down my hatchet, climbed down the ladder, got in my van, and drove to the University of Calgary. I walked into the office of the graduate student advisor in the Department of Mathematics, and asked him if they would take me. I had decided that I needed to go back inside the educational system in order to try to make a difference. However, the only subject that I could stomach at that time was mathematics. So, I spent four years studying mathematics and writing a thesis in advanced logic (Barušs & Woodrow, 2013). Then I spent six months at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Then I decided to become an expert in consciousness and spent four years at the University of Regina getting a psychology degree. And then, for the past 27 years, in my consciousness courses at King's University College, I have been teaching students what I wanted to learn in the first place.

I have found that there is such a thirst on the part of students for information about existential issues, self-transformation, altered states of consciousness, life after death, and various types of anomalous experiences. I frequently get comments such as "This course changed my life," "This is the best course that I took in my four years at Western," "Every student should be required to take this course," "Don't change a thing," and so on. Students who have had anomalous experiences of various sorts are afraid to talk about them for fear of being regarded as being crazy. But in my classes, they often find a context to frame such experiences and a safe forum for their discussion. And students who regard themselves as skeptics and say that they have never thought about these sorts of things previously, frequently appreciate the opportunity to have their minds stretched.

But it is not just students who crave an open forum for the discussion of existential issues, anomalous phenomena, self-transformation, and so on. Robert Moore and I conducted a survey at the second Toward a Science of Consciousness Conference in Tucson in 1996. Of the 1000 participants who received the questionnaire, 212 completed it. We found that about one third believed that the world is a physical place and that strange things do not happen. One third believed that strange things happen but that they could in principle be explained in physical terms. And one third believed not only that strange things happen, but also that consciousness is ontologically primitive (Barušs, & Moore, 1998). Where are the two thirds of consciousness researchers who believe that strange things happen represented in the academy? Where is the one third of consciousness researchers who think that consciousness is primary represented in the academy? Is it just that everyone is afraid to speak up for fear of punishment?

My vision for the Society for Consciousness Studies is, first, that it is a society that values open inquiry into the nature of consciousness without automatic deference to a materialist ideology. I would like to see everyone empowered to conduct research into the nature of consciousness in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Second, rather than being marginalized in the academy, my vision is that we should see ourselves as leaders who are guiding the direction of consciousness studies. And rather than retreating from repressive institutions we should seek to transform them from within by asserting, as much as possible, our right to be part of them.

Third, there are practical things that we can do to support the open study of consciousness. By our numbers we can seek to protect those whose academic freedom is violated because they have chosen to challenge conventional ways of thinking about consciousness. We can provide resources for those who wish to teach courses about consciousness. We can create an endowment fund to financially support research into consciousness. We can create annual awards that recognize outstanding contributions to the study of consciousness. We can create a publications office to publish academic books and journals. We can create a communications office to disseminate information about consciousness to the public as well as to solicit financial resources for an endowment fund. We can actively network with other organizations that support our goals. And we can assist other academics and professionals who become interested in consciousness.

Fourth, because consciousness is closely tied to questions about the meaning of life, my vision is that we cultivate support for the discussion of existential issues, self-transformation, and transcendent states of consciousness that can have soteriological effects. Let us give something practical back to today's youth so that they not only find it unnecessary to end up in hospital emergency wards, but offer an inspiration to the rest of us with their wisdom, compassion, and existential equanimity. And, of course, this does not just apply to our youth. We can all use a healthier understanding of what it means to be human.

Fifth, my vision is that at the annual convention of the Society for Consciousness Studies 100 years from now, whoever is giving the keynote talk will say that the turning point in the history of the study of consciousness occurred as a result of the founding of the Society for Consciousness Studies.

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