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Research Article

Morphic Fields, Quantum Nonlocality and Neo-Idealist Conceptions of Consciousness: Towards A Unification

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Abstract:

The idea of morphic fields advocated by Rupert Sheldrake – though dismissed out of hand by scientists and philosophers committed to mainstream conceptions of epistemology and the nature of reality – has gained increased respectability and attention thanks to certain developments in science and philosophy. Within science, the idea that reality is non-local – based on ideas and experiments conducted by Alain Aspect and his team since the 1980s and acknowledged in the award of the Nobel prize for Physics to Aspect and colleagues, John Clauser and Anton Zeilinger, in 2022 – now presents challenges to the standard orthodoxy of reductionist and materialistic conceptions of our knowledge of the world. Such orthodoxy has long been criticised by Sheldrake and other independent-minded scientists and, with a fascinating sense of poetic justice, such findings seem to resonate with and help to endorse Sheldrake's notion of morphic fields. In addition, similar criticisms of materialistic and reductionist science have informed current debates about the nature of consciousness, and perspectives offered by scientists and philosophers such as Bernardo Kastrup and Donald Hoffman seem to echo many of Sheldrake's claims about the nature of reality.

Keywords: morphic resonance, quantum nonlocality, neo-idealist consciousness perspectives, Kastrup, Hoffman, Faggin.

Morphic Resonance

Sheldrake explains his theory of the habits of nature inspired by writers such as William James and A.N. Whitehead in terms of 'morphic resonance' which entails that 'patterns of activity resonate across time and space with subsequent patterns' (2013, p.99). This implies that some form of memory is active throughout nature which applies to 'all self-organising systems, including atoms, molecules, crystals, cells, plants, animals and animal societies…all draw upon a collective memory and in turn contribute to it' (ibid.). This core idea that the so-called laws of nature are habits rather than laws has been applied to such areas as the crystallization of new compounds, the ways in which animals learn new behaviour, and the growth of human intelligence (Sheldrake, 2009, 2023), all phenomena which appear to be influenced by a form of memory extending over time and space.

Such ideas have been criticised on a number of grounds, principally on their alleged lack of empirical evidence and non-falsifiability (Maddox, 1986; Blackmore, 2009). However, against such criticisms we need to place such widely accepted physical theories as string theory, and M-theory involving some 11 dimensions, which also lack any experimental evidence in support of them (Hyland, 2014). Such theories have been labelled 'fairytale physics' by Jim Baggott (2013) and which, he agues, have 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). It is also worth noting the fairly recent discovery or, perhaps a better description would be invention, of something called 'dark energy and matter' to explain anomalies connected with the evolution of galaxies and the expansion of the universe. 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).

All this means that there remains around 96% of the cosmos about which nothing is known for sure in relation to its fundamental laws, forces or constants, and this reflection decisively takes the edge off much orthodox scientific triumphalism and alleged objectivity.

As Thomas Nagel (2012) has argued:

The world is an astonishing place, and the idea that we have in our possession the basic tools needed to understand it is no more credible now than it was in Aristotle's day…The great advances in the physical and biological sciences were made possible by excluding the mind from the physical world…Mind, as a development of life, must be included as the most recent stage of this long cosmological history, and its appearance must, I believe, cast its shadow back over the entire process (pp.7,8).

Philip Goff (2019) makes the same point in arguing for forms of panpsychism on the grounds that orthodox science gives us only quantitative, mathematical entities thus leaving untouched and unexplained the felt qualitative nature of reality. As he puts it:

The reality of consciousness is a datum in its own right. If panpsychism offers the best explanation of that datum, then it is, to that

extent, supported by the evidence…the very properties that physical science characterizes behaviouristically are, in their intrinsic nature, forms of consciousness (pp.136).

Such approaches offer the most likely ways of dealing with the so-called hard problem of consciousness though, as will be suggested later, it is the new idealist rather than physicalist forms of panpsychism that seem to provide the most coherent and parsimonious explanatory frameworks (Hyland, 2021).

In addition to such powerful challenges to orthodox science, Sheldrake's critique of core features of materialistic, reductionist methods begins to acquire greater authority, as does his experimental evidence for his own theories collected in recent publications (Sheldrake, 2023). In a recent interview (Before Skool, 2025), Sheldrake discusses the irrational intransigence of much contemporary science – the exact opposite of what the search for truth is claimed to be – in denying many of his and other independent researchers' ideas about the operation of the extended mind in nature. This has meant that recent work which tends to confirm his ideas about morphic resonance – in such diverse fields as epidemiology, learning keyboard skills and completing crossword puzzles, all of which show signs of development and enhancement simply through habits of transmission – has been ignored or dismissed out of hand because of the inherent resistance of orthodox science to anything which does not fit easily into the current materialistic and reductionist world view.

Moreover, Sheldrake freely admits that – unlike many orthodox scientific practitioners – his ideas might be completely mistaken (as do Kastrup and Hoffman referred to later); it is just that his existing circumstantial evidence is dismissed out of hand in such a way that prevents further investigation. Such irrational, anti-scientific resistance to novel ideas has also been explored by Bruce Charlton (2012) who suggests that 'due to professionalization, science increasingly attracted careerists rather than truth-seekers' and, moreover, experience shows that 'truth seekers are typically resistant to bureaucratic organisation' which is the chief characteristic of contemporary science, whereas 'bureaucratic organization is intrinsically hostile to truth-seekers' (p.17). Similar sentiments marking the tragic decline of the 'real' science of the early physicists such as Einstein, Bohr and Schrodinger are also endorsed regularly and publicly by physicists such as Hans Unzicker (2022) and Sabine Hossenfelder (2025).

Quantum Nonlocality

A succinct definition of the phenomenon is as follows:

Quantum nonlocality, also known as quantum entanglement, is a phenomenon in which particles become correlated so that the state of one particle cannot be described independently of the others, even when large distances separate them. This means that measuring the state of one particle will instantaneously affect the state of the other entangled particles (Quantum Zeitgeist, 2024).

According to the principles of nonlocality, entangled particles appear to instantaneously affect each other, regardless of the distance between them (Bell, 1964). This phenomenon challenges the classical notion of spacetime as a fixed, four-dimensional fabric, whereby information cannot travel faster than the speed of light. The implications of nonlocality on spacetime are potentially profound. If entangled particles can instantaneously affect each other, this suggests that spacetime is not a fixed background but rather a dynamic and flexible entity shaped by the interaction of particles (Rovelli, 2016). Quantum field theory supports this idea, which describes the behaviour of particles in terms of fields that permeate spacetime (Weinberg, 2004).

Wood (2022) argues that the reluctance of some physicists influenced by Einstein's search for hidden variables which would explain quantum theory as part of a holistic superdeterministic theory has now been almost completely abandoned. As he puts it:

most researchers take the work of Bell, Clauser, Aspect, Zeilinger and their teams at face value. Entanglement is what it seems: The pair of particles is one unified system. For each individual particle, properties like spin and polarization really are undefined until the moment of measurement. In other words, reality has no fixed and predetermined state until you measure it. It's a dramatic conclusion that most researchers accept but still struggle to fully grasp (p.2).

Such ideas, especially the notions of interacting quantum fields and the end of the dominance of spacetime perspectives on reality, have direct parallels with evolving neo-idealist theories of consciousness. As physicist Basil Hiley (Infinite Potential, 2025) explained recently, classical physics tried to exclude the subject of mind and consciousness— and succeeded — but quantum mechanics ultimately revealed that the subject cannot be removed quite so easily. Following the insights of David Bohm and the idea of the implicate order, Hiley describes how mind and matter are not two things, but two aspects of the same underlying process. He argues that in quantum mechanics, not everything "exists" — only what can be measured explicitly manifests. What remains hidden is not chaotic, but simply unexplicated from the deeper implicate field. Thus, consciousness and reality are not separate but, rather, are woven from the same cosmic fabric. Such a framework has been further explored and elaborated by a number of scientists and philosophers espousing new idealistic theories of mind and consciousness.

Neo-Idealism and the Hard Problem of Consciousness

Susan Blackmore (2011) has defined the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness' in terms of the question: 'how can objective, physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience?'(p.25). Within philosophy of mind, this 'mind-body problem' goes back at least as far as Descartes and his infamous dualist analysis of the mental and physical worlds which leaves unexplained exactly how they may be connected (Searle, 2004). More generally it results in the long-standing problem of how to explain subjective mental phenomena such as hopes, wishes, intentions, etc. – or simply what it is like to be something (Nagel, 1974) – in

a world which, according to science, consists only of material objects, forces and processes.

Various forms of pansychism have evolved in recent years in the attempt to solve the hard problem of consciousness (Hyland, 2021). David Chalmers (1995), who is credited with identifying the 'hard problem' initially, has advanced a number of speculative solutions such as that the fundamental building blocks of the universe utilised by science – space, time and mass, for example – may have to be extended to include consciousness as a primary entity or universal property of everything in the cosmos. This is described as a 'nonreductive psychophysical' notion which supplements physical theories by explaining how 'physical processes are connected with and dependent upon the 'properties of experience' (2013, p.17).

This may be described as a physicalist or materialist form of panpsychism and, in this field, Galen Strawson has suggested that it is necessary to introduce some notion of subjective experience into existing physical theories. Real physicalists according to Strawson, 'must accept that experiential phenomena are physical phenomena' (2016, p.1), and supports the assertion concerning the emergence of experiential or consciousness properties from physical, non-experiential characteristics through, inter alia, the analogy of the emergence of the liquidity of water from non-liquid H2O molecules. A core aspect of this speculative thesis is that we do not know enough about the nature of the physical to argue – as dualists since Descartes and most post-Cartesian philosophers have held – that the physical and the mental are irrevocably distinct and irreconcilable.

There are, however, serious flaws in such physicalist approaches and prominent critics such as Kastrup and Hoffman – in addition to pointing out the shortcomings of all such materialistic strategies – have advanced idealistic conceptions which posit the notion that mind or consciousness is the sole ontological primitive and, thus, the fundamental basis of all knowledge, existence and reality. Kastrup (2014,2015) claims 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' (Kastrup, 2015,.p.13). In his most recent book on what he labels 'analytic idealism', Kastrup (2023,p.2) summarizes his thesis by observing that it embraces realism (there is an external world independent of our individual minds), naturalism (the external world unfolds according to nature's own inherent dispositions), and rationalism (human reason can model the regularities of nature's processes). So far such proposals are in line with much physicalist science. However, after demonstrating that such mainstream science tells us only about quantities expressed as mathematical formulae or numbers, Kastrup explains how the felt qualities of nature need to be accounted for by idealism. As he explains:

Analytic idealism infers that the external world is of the same ontic *kind* or *essence* as our individual minds. In other words, it posits that the world out there is mental (in the sense of being experiential, but not in that it comprises high-level, human-like cognition), identical in essence to our own individual thoughts and emotions, although not constituted by our thoughts and emotions (ibid.,p.3, original italics).

Such new forms of idealism – no less than the older philosophical forms expressed by Berkeley and Leibniz (Hyland, 2021) – incorporate the suggestion that our ordinary ways of seeing things present us with a woefully inadequate vision of reality. 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 (2019) uses the metaphor of a computer interface (p.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.,pp..xii-xiii).

Hoffman's theory leads to what he calls conscious realism. As he argues, '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' (2019, p.198).

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).

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 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 (Hoffman, 2019, p.198, italics added).

Neo-Idealistic Consciousness, Morphic Resonance and Quantum Nonlocality: A Suggested Unification Theory

If, as Hoffman ask us to, we remove the headset of virtual reality that is spacetime and its contents, the way is suddenly opened up to the possibilities of unifying quantum, idealist and morphic perspectives. A key unifying conception here is that of ***fields***: the

interacting and entangled fields of particles in quantum field theory, the field of consciousness which makes up the membrane of mind that is fundamental to all reality in Kastrup's theory, the field which comprises the network of conscious agents which provides the user interface to make sense of the world according to Hoffman, and the morphic fields which for Sheldrake incorporate that memory which informs the habits and processes of the natural world.

In his recent book, *Irreducible*, the computer physicist and engineer, Federico Faggin (2024), sets out a wealth of arguments in favour of the idealist hypothesis that consciousness, not physical matter, should be regarded as the fundamental ontological primitive. Faggin is adamant that the findings of quantum physics demonstrate the shortcomings of materialistic reductionism in scientific endeavour. As he argues: 'I think that to be able to unify physics, we must abandon the current approach and open ourselves to a new vision'. New concepts are needed which can only spring from a fundamentally different conception of Field and Law than the materialist presumptions' (pp.164-5). Faggin goes on to suggest that:

I also felt that the solution to the "hard problem of consciousness" was hiding within quantum physics. I began to look into quantum information and into proposed theories in which physical reality could derive from such information (ibid.,p.166).

On this basis, Faggin has developed Quantum Information-Based Panpsychism which posits the notion that 'the phenomenology of conscious experience is exactly that of a pure quantum state, making such states the ideal representation of qualia' (p.167).

This notion aligns well with Kastrup's (2023) idea that our experience of the world is generated by that all-embracing field of subjective experience and consists essentially in excitations of this field which we may describe as the fundamental membrane of mind in nature. As he summarises his thesis:

According to Analytic Idealism all there exists in nature is *one* subject – one field of subjectivity – whose excitations are, well, *everything experienced*. The whole of nature *is* that one subject (p.152, original italics)

In a broadly similar way, the network of conscious agents described mathematically by Hoffman just *is* the field of consciousness which, according to Kastrup, is what generates the experiential states of our own individual minds, and also aligns well with the morphic fields which for Sheldrake carry the habits of nature which apply to all forms of self-organising systems. Indeed, in an earlier essay, Kastrup (2012) has discussed in some detail ways in which his own ideas resonate with those of Sheldrake. Initially, he thought that Sheldrake's endorsement of minds as 'objective and causally-effective fields just like electromagnetic fields' was too attached to a materialist/reductionist perspective. However, on closer reading of the work, Kastrup was able to discern approximations to his own conceptions of idealism about epistemology, science and the cosmos. As he explains:

When one looks carefully at the phenomena Sheldrake describes to motivate his ideas, one quickly realizes that they all equally support idealism. In fact, I'd go as far as to suggest that an idealist interpretation is simpler and requires less abstractions. You see, morphic fields are conceptualized as memory fields shaped by habit. Now, very few things are more intrinsic to what we call mental activity than memory and habit. Therefore, when Sheldrake talks about the habits of nature he is flirting with the idea of nature itself being mental. The idealist hypothesis is that all of existence is simply 'excitations' of the medium of mind, which would be entirely consistent with all of Sheldrake's observations of habit formation in nature: Mental excitations simply 'flow' more easily through previously traversed, 'softened' paths, something we all know from personal, direct experience. Morphogenesis can be interpreted as the result of the mind-medium of nature shaping itself the way it has 'learned' to shape itself before, without need for postulating objective morphic fields (2012, p.2).

In the unification of all these, essentially epistemological, ontic and metaphysical, idealist perspectives it is possible to glimpse viable alternatives to the sterile orthodoxy which has been labelled a fairytale approach to scientific enquiry which has simply failed to answer foundational questions in relation to consciousness and its place in the universe (Baggott, 2013; Unzicker, 2022). Faggin (2024) offers us a fitting mission statement with which to characterize such alternative scientific visions as he comments:

After having analysed for a long time the fundamental parts of which physical reality is made, a small portion of humanity is ready to move away from the materialism of classical physics to the holistic vision offered by quantum information. Quantum information is compatible with the existence of a profound spiritual dimension of reality that in the past has been fuelled by myths and religions. In fact, we are beginning to realize that the behaviour of the whole cannot be explained only by the behaviour of its parts, because reality, unlike what we imagined, is not made of separate parts and is not as objective as we thought (p.281).

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