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Research Article

Terror Management, Consciousness, And Death: Exploring Secular Spiritual Perspectives as Alternatives to Orthodox Religious Doctrine

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Abstract:

Terror Management Theory (TMT) is based mainly on the work of existentialist writers – notably that of Ernest Becker's book The Denial of Death – which posits the notion that much of human behaviour is driven by the need to cope with the knowledge of our own mortality. The construction of coping strategies – typically religious and ideological beliefs which come to be held in ways which isolate them from rational criticism – serves the purpose of both explaining the impermanence of human existence and supplying reasons for living, often with some form of life after death perspective. It will be suggested that such constructions are less rational and coherent than recent neo-idealist theories of consciousness, especially those which are linked with secular spirituality by scientists and philosophers such as Bernardo Kastrup, Donald Hoffman and Rupert Spira. Conceptions of consciousness advanced by such thinkers will be explored before examining the implications of such notions for perspectives on death and its possible aftermath.

Keywords: Terror Management Theory (TMT), Death, Afterlife, Secular Spirituality, Consciousness

They call you death-	**They call you death.**
Our troubled journey's end.	**I dreamt that you were there.**
Our fearful souls	**the final meeting point**
You dutifully attend.	**Of those who were.**
They call you death	**They call you death.**
The host that welcomes all.	**I asked for you, my dear.**
Regardless of notoriety,	**We met long ago**
Everyman shall fall.	**And now you are here.**
Death – Mohammed Mia (2020). Quantum Poetry (Philosophy of Doubt) p.23	

1. Death and Terror Management Theory

Death, like the sun, cannot be looked at steadily - *Francois de La Rochefoucauld* (1678)

In *The Denial of Death* (1973/2020), Ernest Becker explores how an innate fear of mortality fuels our actions and desires, and goes on to explain how our uniquely human self-awareness creates an ongoing internal struggle—we consciously recognize our individuality and bond with the universe, yet must grapple with the inevitability of death. Inspired by this general perspective, Terror Management Theory (TMT) has developed, both theoretically and empirically, over recent decades, and there is now a large body of studies which seek to link TMT to all aspects of human life and culture. As Clay Routledge & Matthew Vess (2019) explain in their handbook of TMT:

Because humans strive to survive but possess the requisite intelligence to understand the inevitability of death, they construct and invest in cultural structures to symbolically or literally provide perceptions of self-transcendence – a feeling that people have an essence that does not die with the physical body (p.387).

Central to such cultural constructions are supernatural beliefs about the afterlife and, in this sphere, organized religions take pride of place. As Cynthia Vinney (2024) explains:

Believing in religion may provide a chance at literal immortality, but beyond that, it can provide a cultural worldview that brings meaning and purpose to life and can alleviate mortality salience (p.3).

Such perspectives go quite some way in explaining human intransigence in relation to religious, political, cultural and ideological views. According to the core principles of TMT, the construction of and allegiance to cultural worldviews (such as religious, political or philosophical beliefs) and the building of self-esteem mechanisms together help individuals to cope with the contingencies of a life that is temporary and impermanent (Rouledge & Vess, 2019, pp.2-3). Glenn Hughes (2023) expresses the basis thesis as follows:

I think it is accurate to say that a denial of death pervades human culture, and that it is one of the *deepest sources of intolerance*,

aggression, and human evil. The notion of immortality systems is an especially useful diagnostic tool. It is easy to spot people (including oneself, of course) clinging to absolute truths in the way [Becker] describes–and it is not hard to understand why they do. It is not just anxiety over physical vulnerability. It goes deeper than that. We all want out lives to have meaning, and death suggests that life adds up to nothing. People want desperately for their lives to really count, to be finally real. If you think about it, most all of us try to found our identities on something whose meaning seems permanent or enduring: the nation, the race, the revolutionary vision; the timelessness of art, the truths of science, immutable philosophical verities, the law of self-interest, the pursuit of happiness, the law of survival; cosmic energy, the rhythms of nature, the gods, Gaia, the Tao, Brahman, Krishna, Buddha-consciousness, the Torah, Jesus (pp.2-3, italics added).

This is quite a radical statement which needs to be unpacked in terms of religion and spirituality, but it offers a graphic characterization of the crucial role that the denial of death features in human evolutionary development and, indeed, in the reproduction of human intolerance, evil and suffering.

Beliefs in creator gods – especially those who are able to exercise control over human lives – and cosmic purposes, values and meaning would seem, on the face of it, to answer deep psychological human needs. No doubt this is why the first gods to be worshipped – such as those concerned with maintaining order and life cycles in nature – can, as Dawkins (2012) argues, be interpreted as primitive attempts to answer fundamental questions about the natural world, about animals, trees, the sun and the moon. Such supernatural explanations of the world – though gradually replaced since the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods with rational, scientific accounts – still cling on stubbornly due to persistent psychological needs for security, control and reassurance, and these tend to be satisfied by religious belief. In later work, Dawkins (2017) suggests that arguments that religions satisfy our curiosity about the universe or help us to manage our fear of death are too simplistic and need a more precise Darwinian explanation. He comments:

'What is the survival value of religion?' may be the wrong question. The right question may have the form, 'What is the survival value of some as yet unspecified individual behaviour, or psychological characteristic, which manifests itself, under appropriate circumstances, as religion?'. We have to rewrite the question before we can sensibly answer it. (p.256).

A tentative answer to the question is provided – not strictly by simple heredity or genetic evolution – but by the reproduction of group selection practices which involve the inculcation of beliefs to preserve and maintain group reproduction. Dawkins concludes his hypothetical account:

Ordinary genetic selection sets up childhood brains with a tendency to believe their elders. Ordinary straight-down-the-line Darwinian selection of genes sets up brains with a tendency to imitate, hence indirectly to spread rumours, spread urban legends, and believe cock-and-bull stories in chain letters…I believe that religion, along with chain letters and urban legends, is one of a group of phenomena explained by this kind of non-genetic epidemiology, with the possible admixture of non-genetic Darwinian selection. If I am right, religion has no survival value for individual human beings, or for the benefit of their genes. The benefit, if there is any, is to religion itself (ibid.,p.265).

A related, though slightly different account, of the origins of religion is offered in comprehensive and graphic detail by the late philosopher, Daniel Dennett (2006) who assigns himself the formidable task of explaining the origins and persistence of religious beliefs in human groups throughout history. Like, Dawkins, Dennett is also interested in the way religious groups bind together their members and suggests that there is some evidence that 'individual fitness is apparently subordinated to group fitness in religions' (p.185). Such fitness is interpreted in evolutionary terms as the capacity to adapt to changing conditions in order to survive and reproduce. In addition to this evolutionary story, Dennett advances the highly original thesis that it is not so much beliefs in religions (in gods, rituals, sacred texts) but the belief in belief which largely accounts for their continued survival (and, incidentally, many other political, social and cultural groups). As he puts it:

Once our ancestors became reflective (and hyper-reflective) about their own beliefs, and thus appointed themselves as stewards of the beliefs they thought most important, the phenomenon of *believing in belief* became a salient force in its own right, sometimes eclipsing the lower-order phenomena that were its object (ibid.,pp.200-201, original italics).

Certainly, this thesis would explain the persistence of many religious and supernatural beliefs (such as astrology, folk medicine, urban legends, conspiracy theories, etc.) in the face of overwhelming evidence demonstrating the falsity of such beliefs. TMT aligns well with such perspectives but – prior to drawing out some important connections with contemporary secular spirituality – it would be useful to provide a background in terms of philosophical discussions of the hard problem of consciousness.

2. Consciousness – Physical and Mental Perspectives

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. A number of solutions in the form of reconciliation strategies have been proposed in relation to the hard problem including the idea that there is no serious problem since

the mind and mental events are simply what the brain does (hence a form of extended materialism; see Dennett, 1991) or, alternatively, that all material objects are imbued with forms of consciousness which evolve more fully within complex systems. This latter view is what one popular contemporary strand of panpsychism has largely come to mean and – in its materialist or physicalist form – has been championed most prominently by Galen Strawson (2006, 2016).

Shan Gao (2014) offers a succinct identification of the contemporary background to accounts of panpsychism in noting that:

Consciousness is the most familiar phenomenon. Yet it is the hardest one to explain. There are two distinct processes relating to the phenomenon: one is objective physical processes such as neural processing in the brain, and the other is the concomitant subjective conscious experience (loc. 47, Kindle edn.).

Forms of panpsychism are thus introduced to make the connection between the objective and subjective aspects of reality. Philip Goff (2019) expresses the basic problem by noting that:

Nothing is more certain than consciousness, and yet nothing is harder to incorporate into our scientific picture of the world. We know a great deal about the brain, much of it discovered in the last eighty years...But none of this has shed any light on how the brain produces consciousness (p.5).

2.1.Physicalist Solutions of the Hard Problem

Galen Strawson (2006) – one of the leading exponents of a physicalist form of panpsychism – prefers to characterise the contemporary debate by declaring that:

Consciousness... [by which] I mean what most people mean in this debate: experience of any kind whatever...is the most familiar thing there is, whether it's experience of emotion, pain, understanding what someone is saying, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or feeling. It is in fact the only thing in the universe whose ultimate intrinsic nature we can claim to know. It is utterly unmysterious (p.1)

Strawson then goes on to assert that the so-called objective and unmysterious nature of the physical world is, in fact, far from the truth. As he comments:

The nature of physical stuff, by contrast, is deeply mysterious, and physics grows stranger by the hour. (Richard Feynman's remark about quantum theory — "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics" — seems as true as ever.) Or rather, more carefully: The nature of physical stuff is mysterious except insofar as consciousness is itself a form of physical stuff (ibid)

Attacking the problem from an alternative conception which foregrounds the fundamental place of mind and consciousness in human evolution, Donald Hoffman (2019) argues that 'space, time and physical objects are not objective reality. They are simply the virtual world delivered by our senses to help us play the game of life' (p.xv). The ultimate claim of Hoffman – justified in terms of mathematical arguments rooted in evolutionary facts – is that, contra the physicalist case, it could be that 'consciousness does not arrive from matter...instead matter and spacetime arise from consciousness' (p.xviii).

2.2. Idealist Solutions of the Hard Problem

Bishop George Berkeley – though actually favouring an empiricism in the form of Hume and Locke – was highly critical of the notion of abstract ideas which were embedded in its conception of how we perceive the external world (Huxley, 1897; Blackburn, 2001). As Blackburn explains the 18th century arguments, Locke had contended that our knowledge of the material world is gained through our sensations of solidity, colour, extension, and so on, but – since our sensations do not resemble the properties of the real world – how can they give us true knowledge of that world. Blackburn (2001) expresses the position as follows:

If solidity disappears from the real world, what is left? Berkeley's own answer to this is notorious: nothing. His world retreats entirely into the mind – the doctrine known as subjective idealism (p. 246).

As the Christian Bishop of Cloyne, Berkeley was subsequently keen to add that we could be sure that our knowledge of the world was indeed veridical since all things are present in the mind of God. This move was not, however, favoured by the secular arch-pessimist philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, whose metaphysics was founded on the notion that the world and our place in it was dominated by the blind, striving will to live which is the ground of all being (Hyland,1985). However, Schopenhauer (1819/2004) broadly endorsed the basic idealism of Berkeley in thinking that the 'true philosophy must be idealistic' since 'the world which is extended in space (that is, the objective, material world in general) exists as such simply and solely in our idea'. He elaborates this thesis:

For nothing is more certain than that no man ever stepped out of his own skin in order to identify himself directly with things that are different from him; but everything of which he has certain, and therefore immediate, knowledge, lies within his own consciousness…Only consciousness is immediately given; therefore the basis of philosophy is limited to facts of consciousness, i.e., it is essentially idealistic (p.13).

In the 20th century this idealistic turn was followed by William James whose idea was that in the origins and history of the cosmos there is no clear cut-off point at which consciousness or subjective experience suddenly appears out of a past which contains no such experience. He thought that 'experience was present at the very origin of things' (1897/1983, p.152), and was, thus, a fundamental feature of nature. Similar ideas were put forward by A.N. Whitehead whose vision – following the monism of Leibniz and Spinoza – was founded on the idea that mental entities may emerge from non-mental ones in the sense that 'the many become one and are increased by one' (1978, p. 32). Annika Harris (2019) discusses the problem of explaining how mental qualities emerge naturally from non-mental ones without resorting to mystical 'New Age' mythology or endorsing absurd views about the

consciousness of worms, bacteria or smart phones. She explains that self-evidently there are different forms and levels of consciousness – from the minimalist mental states of animals and plants to the sophisticated subjective experiences characteristic of humans – and it is a mistake to conflate all the various forms of experiential states in nature, especially if this involves the anthropomorphism which involves attributing mind-states to plants and animals. Harris observes that:

Unfortunately, it seems quite hard for us to drop the intuition that consciousness equals complex thought. But if consciousness is in fact a more basic aspect of the universe than previously believed, that doesn't suddenly give credence to your neighbour's belief that she can communicate telepathically with her ficus tree. In actuality, if a version of panpsychism is correct, everything will still appear to us and behave exactly as it already does (p.83).

There is a warning here not to conflate human consciousness with the consciousness of other sentient beings, and also not to define consciousness solely in terms of our limited conceptions of what consciousness means for us. Such fundamental category mistakes are what Bernardo Kastrup (2020) points to in his re-reading and re-interpretation of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. It is of crucial importance, he argues, to distinguish between the consciousness of all animals which consists in raw awareness or brute experience of nature, and human self-awareness based on abstract 're-representations' of experience and 'levels of meta-consciousness' (pp.32ff).

Amidst the diverse range of panpsychist perspectives referred to above it is possible to discern a number which lean more towards the Berkeleyan interpretation of the grounds of knowledge and experience than the standard materialist versions alluded to by Chalmers and Strawson. This trend is both rational and understandable in terms of a determination to follow the Occam's Razor principle of 'simplest is best' to its logical conclusion. Bruenstrap advocates such as a position as a form of 'ontological simplicity' (2016, pp.2ff) which may be justified by Bruno's famous dictum that even if the basic idea turns out not to be true it is, at least, well conceived. Strawson, as already noted above, favours a more physicalist conception of monism but agrees with the drive for a precise and simple naturalistic explanation and description of conscious experience.

However, stemming from the metaphysical and ontological perspectives of Berkeley, Spinoza and 20th century philosophers such as Russell and Whitehead, it is arguably the idealist conceptions of consciousness that are now at the forefront of the debate in this sphere (Harris, 2019; Gao, 2014). As Goff (2019) summarises the current state of play:

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 (p.115).

He goes on to demonstrate – utilising the work of Eddington and Russell on cosmology and the nature of matter – that physicalist explanations cannot ultimately provide an answer to the hard problem and the nature of consciousness. The upshot of this is the formulation of a non-dualistic conception of the nature of experience and the world in which the 'very properties that physical science characterizes behaviouristically are, in their intrinsic nature, forms of consciousness'. Moreover, this form of panpsychism 'gives us an elegant way to unify mind and matter, and thus to avoid altogether the irresolvable dispute between dualism and materialism' (ibid., pp.136-7). The two leading proponents of this neo-idealistic approach to the problem of consciousness are, as alluded to above, Kastrup (2014, 2023) and Hoffman (2017, 2019), and it would be useful to examine the key ideas of each in turn before examining the ethical and other spiritual, philosophical and practical implications of this perspective identified by thinkers such as Steve Taylor (2018) and Iain McGilchrist (2012, 2021).

Kastrup (2021) reminds us that Bertrand Russell observed that 'science says nothing about the intrinsic nature of the physical world, but only about its structure and behaviour' (p.86). More significantly a contemporary of Russell, the physicist Sir Arthur Eddington, argued that 'the only physical entity we have intrinsic access to is our own nervous system, whose nature is clearly experiential' (ibid.). Given all this, Kastrup asks:

Might this not be the case for the rest of the physical world as well? Under this pansychist hypothesis, the explanatory gap disappears: consciousness isn't generated by physical arrangements but, instead, is the intrinsic nature of the physical world. The latter, in turn, is merely the extrinsic appearance of conscious inner life (ibid.,p.87).

This view that the universe is fundamentally mental or experiential in nature – labelled analytic idealism by Kastrup, panspiritism by Taylor (2018), objective idealism or cosmopsychism by Chalmers (1995), and conscious realism by Hoffman (2019) – not only satisfies the parsimony demands of Occam's Razor whilst avoiding the dualism of materialism and physicalism – but also neatly solves the hard problem of consciousness and provides a more satisfactory account of the nature of reality than scientific materialism. The full implications of this idealist version of panpsychism are discussed in the next section but at this stage it is worth outlining the key features of the idealists' thoroughgoing criticisms of the nature and implications of materialism.

As already noted, science tells us nothing about the intrinsic nature of material objects since it is concerned only quantities – mass, spin, charge momentum, and so on which can be measured and labelled with concepts and numbers - whilst saying nothing about the qualities which we experience in the world such as colour, taste, smell and, at the root of the mind/body problem, subjective phenomenal experiences such as listening to music or appreciating a beautiful sunset. Moreover, Kastrup (2014) points out the crucial difference 'between materialism as a metaphysics and scientific theories as models' (p.10). Scientific materialism observes patterns and regularities in nature and constructs models which explain objects and forces – such as subatomic particles and negative electric charge – in terms of their relationship to other cognate constructions. Explaining and predicting how aspects of the material world operate relative to other aspects reveals nothing about the fundamental nature of everything in nature. The upshot of this, as

Kastrup argues, may be expressed in the following way:

Capturing the observable patterns and regularities of the elements of reality, relative to each other, is an empirical and scientific question. But pondering about the *fundamental nature of these elements* is not; it is a philosophical question (ibid., p.12, original italics).

Consequently, there is no bridge which can join and support the move from scientific materialism to metaphysical materialism. The scientific method is a foundation for knowledge about the cosmos – at both classical and quantum levels – but it does not justify metaphysical conceptions of reality and provides no evidence for beliefs in metaphysical materialism and so-called common-sense realism. We need to look elsewhere for this.

Like Kastrup's radical idealist perspectives, this position is taken to its logical conclusion by Hoffman (2017, 2019) in this theory of conscious realism. Hoffman's startlingly radical thesis incorporates ideas and data from evolutionary theory, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, quantum physics and philosophy to establish a position which suggests that our assumptions about our knowledge of the objective world are mistaken and, moreover, that forms of consciousness are fundamental to everything that we may claim to know, think and experience. There are two principal aspects of Hoffman's approach: one drawn from evolutionary game theory which purports to explain why our perceptions of reality are mistaken, and another strand which attempts to move beyond the hard problem of consciousness by offering a conception of interacting conscious agents supported by a mathematical model of consciousness.

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 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).

This argument from evolution is reinforced by data from the field of evolutionary game theory to construct an operationally pragmatic theorem which Hoffman labels 'Fitness-Beats-Truth (FBT)' which is itself based on universal Darwinism by which survival, adaptation and reproduction trumps all other considerations. Applying game theory models to this construction (Prakash, et al, 2020), we arrive at the astonishing conclusion that 'fitness drives truth to extinction' (Hoffman, 2019, p.61).

After examining various speculations – most notably those proposed by Nick Bostrom and others – that consciousness may arise out of a computer simulation (see Hyland, 2019), Hoffman employs the Occam's Razor mentioned in earlier sections to conclude (as Kastrup does also) that 'all attempts at a physicalist theory of consciousness have failed' (2019, p.183). He reasons that:

Occam's Razor, applied to the science of consciousness, counsels a monism over an amphibious dualism, a theory based on one kind rather than two...If we grant that there are conscious experiences, and that there are conscious agents that enjoy and act on experiences, then we can try to construct a scientific theory of consciousness that posits that conscious agents – not objects in spacetime – are fundamental, and that the world consists entirely of conscious agents (ibid.,182-3).

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 (ibid.,203ff.), 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 (ibid.,p.198).

Given the enormity of this task, Hoffman insists that his theory goes beyond panpsychism to avoid any hint of a dualism which may, even remotely, allow for materialist conceptions of the world. All such materialist notions fail to acknowledge the limits of our interface and mistakenly take these as a picture of reality. As he expresses it, 'We have finite capacities of perception and memory. But we are embedded in an infinite network of conscious agents whose complexity exceeds our finite capacities' (ibid.,pp.186-7). 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).

3. Death and Its Aftermath

If we apply these neo-idealist conceptions of consciousness to TMT and its inherent perspectives on death and its aftermath, it is possible to offer alternative explanatory frameworks which are both philosophically and scientifically plausible. Moreover, such views align perfectly with Eastern spiritual perspectives from the general Vedantic, Daoist and Buddhist traditions which have provided answers to the most profound questions about human existence for millennia.

As mentioned earlier, although there are plausible evolutionary, social and ethical explanations for the emergence of religious

thought and practice, the capacity for humans to appreciate their own mortality foregrounded in TMT is, arguably, a crucial element in understanding the religious impulse. Not only does it provide a meaning and purpose for life, religion offers comfort in times of crisis, social solidarity in religious communities and, of crucial importance, helps people to cope with the knowledge of their own deaths along with comforting visions of forms of afterlife. However, the fact that such forms of life are at some distance from rational criticism, have little to support them except blind faith, and tend to foster dangerous fundamentalist beliefs and behaviour (Harris, 2010; Dawkins, 2006) must surely count against them. As Hughes (2023) expresses this, the major systems emerging from the denial of death have resulted in forms of life characterized by 'the deepest sources of intolerance, aggression, and human evil' (p.2). Moreover, there are more rational, ethical and coherent systems of belief available in contemporary neo-idealist and secular conceptions of spirituality which have the advantage of having – not just more philosophical and scientific justificatory support – but also far fewer absurd and questionable grounds of belief.

It is interesting, and surely not coincidental, that all the neo-idealist theorists and practitioners discussed above ground their arguments in some form of spiritual, holistic perspective to explain the nature of reality and human experience. Even Hoffman – arguably the most positivist and orthodox scientist of the neo-idealists with his mathematical model of consciousness and experimental programme – suggests that his theory of conscious realism leads to forms of secular, naturalistic spirituality. As he observes:

I also think that conscious realism can breach the wall between science and spirituality. This ideological barrier is a needless illusion, enforced by hoary misconceptions: that science requires a physicalist ontology that is anathema to spirituality, and that spirituality is impervious to the methods of science...conscious agents combine to create more complex conscious agents. This process eventuates in infinite agents with infinite potential for experiences, decisions and actions. The idea of an infinite conscious agent sounds much like the religious notion of God, with the crucial difference that an infinite conscious agent admits precise mathematical description (Hoffman, 2019, pp.199-200).

Similarly, Kastrup (2015) conjectures that his thesis that the world is 'the manifestation of mind-at-large' is essentially a 21st century version of Berkeley's 18th century idealist thesis that all experiences of the material world are simply appearances in the mind of God. As he puts it:

All nature – from atoms to galaxy clusters – is an outside image of God's conscious activity, in exactly the same way that a brain scan is an outside image of a person's subjective experiences...What theologians call Creation is the 'scan' – the outside image, symbol, metaphor, icon – of God's ongoing, conscious, creative activity. Creation is an active thought, the icon of an evolving idea in the mind of God (2015, pp.49-51).

It should be noted here that – as he explains in other writings – the concept of 'God' employed here by Kastrup is akin to that used by Spinoza and later Einstein whereby it needs to be understood as being on all fours with nature or the cosmos. In fact, Kastrup's general thesis of analytic idealism leads him to identify parallels with the non-theistic Eastern philosophies of Daoism and Buddhism. Referring to the Daoist writings of Lao-Tzu, he observes that the notion of 'something formless yet complete that existed before heaven and earth' might well serve as a 'description of the membrane of mind' (2014, p.207).

Kastrup (2014, pp.207-8) suggests that his conception of the cosmic 'membrane of mind' is on all fours with Lao-tzu's description of the Dao as:

Something formless, yet complete
That existed before heaven and earth,
How still, How empty!
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,
All pervading, unfailing.

In a similar vein, Iain McGilchrist employs the Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, or emptiness, to characterise humanity's search for meaning in the cosmos, and connects this with his general thesis about brain asymmetry and the fundamental nature of consciousness ((2021, pp.1885-1889). Taoism, Buddhism and other Eastern spiritual traditions are, after all, amongst the original sources of non-dualist conceptions of reality. It surely makes far more sense to connect these insights with the idealist tradition of Western philosophical thought – as Hoffman connects his theory of conscious realism with strands of thought from Pythagoras and Plato through to modern thinkers such as Leibniz, Berkeley and Kant (2019, p.195) – rather than attempting to align such spirituality with a materialism which posits sharp divisions between body and mind, between humans as isolated centres of consciousness and a shadowy outside world from which we are alienated.

All of this highlights the crucial difference between the new idealist (or non-physicalist) philosophers and scientists and their standard mainstream counterparts. Physicalists tend to be dualists: they separate body and mind, the mental and the physical, minds and the world. The neo-idealists, on the other hand are – like mainstream Eastern thinkers – radically non-dualist, monistic thinkers espousing the primacy and unity of the cosmos within consciousness. As Kastrup (2023) puts it in his most recent book on his philosophy of analytic idealism:

The notion that a physical cause produces a mental effect presupposes some form of *Dualism*, the view that there are physical things distinct from mental things. But Analytic Idealism denies Dualism. All 'physical' causes – such as the glass of wine you drink and the needle you stick into my arm – are *merely dashboard representations of mental states*…'Matter' – all 'matter' without exception

– is merely what mental states look like from across a dissociative boundary (pp.124-5, original italics).

Another core element of dualism – central to the principal concerns of this paper – is the sharp distinction between life and death, a disjunction which has resulted in the vast array of speculative, irrational and absurd myths about what happens after physical death.

3.1. Neo-idealism, Eastern Spirituality and Perspectives on Death

In many of his popular writings, Thich Nhat Hanh – in seeking to re-interpret Buddhist concepts in the light of modern physics – translates the notion of no coming, no going/ no birth, no death by means of the first law of thermodynamics and the notion that energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed or transferred, acting as the principle of conservation of energy. As Hanh (2012) expresses this:

Nothing is born and nothing dies – there is only manifestation...Nothing can pass from non-being into being, and nothing can pass from being into non-being. Being and non-being are only ideas... Ultimate reality transcends all notions, such as being and non-being, birth and death, coming and going, before and after, good and evil, subject and object (p.84).

This radically non-dualist account of experience and reality is common to almost all Eastern wisdom traditions – Vedanta, Buddhism, Daoism, Sufism, and Shaivite Tantrism – and is foregrounded in the neo-idealist accounts of consciousness described above. The implications of this perspective for conceptions of death and the afterlife also achieve a common consensus in such philosophical and spiritual worldviews.

Rupert Spira (2017) draws mainly on the Advaita Vedanta tradition in his teachings on consciousness, non-duality and death. The notion that, as Kastrup, Hoffman and McGilchrist similarly espouse, there is only one fundamental reality – consciousness or awareness of which we are all manifestations – informs his perspective on death and the afterlife. Since the true self (Atman) is unchanging and eternal, death is perceived as a transformation rather than a termination. As Spira writes about the eternal and infinite nature of consciousness:

In order to manifest a world, the eternal infinite nature of consciousness must be downgraded to time and space so that thoughts and perceptions may occur. It is thought and perceptions that bring eternity and infinity out of being into apparent existence. Eternity gives birth to time within itself; infinity unfolds space within itself. However, at no point does consciousness ever cease being dimensionless consciousness. From consciousness's point of view it is eternal and infinite (2017, pp.154-155).

Turning to philosophy of science and mind, Kastrup offers a similar vision in terms of his model of individual consciousness as localizations of the larger membrane of mind-at-large (Kastrup, 2026). Espousing the non-dual understanding of life as a temporary localized and dissociated manifestation of universal consciousness, death thus becomes the end of dissociation and a return to an all-embracing cosmic awareness. Drawing on case studies of near-death experiences and mind-altering substances, Kastrup argues that the reduction of brain activity in such instances – precisely contradicting the physicalist conception of consciousness as an outcome of brain activity – represents a dissociative process that actually expands and enriches mental experience and brings us closer to the universal membrane of mind (2019, 2021).

Death is, thus, the ultimate dissociative process and results in the complete ending of the ego and the self, though not necessarily the 'I' that we have carried with us since birth. As he expresses this notion:

There must be a continuity of your most fundamental sense of 'I' even as your ego is dismantled and the 'story of you' is no longer identified with. Although you will realize, as physical death unfolds, that you have never truly been the narrative of your ego, you will never lose touch with the naked sense of 'I' that you feel right now (Kastrup, 2014, pp.198-99).

Hoffman's theory of fundamental consciousness results in a broadly similar conception. On this account, our subjective awareness is simply an element, an icon on the vast screen of consciousness constructed by a network of conscious agents (2019). At death, the headset of physicalist space and time is removed to reveal, as with Kastrup's thesis, the full wonder of that fundamental consciousness which undergirds everything. However, unlike the Kastrup thesis, the subjective awareness for Hoffman does not survive the end of the icon on the desk top of life. This is because Hoffman does not place individual conscious experience at the core of his worldview. As he explains, the theory of conscious realism:

Claims no central role for human consciousness. It posits countless kinds of conscious agents with a boundless variety of conscious experiences, most of which we cannot concretely imagine…When we die, do we simply slip out of the spacetime interface of Homo Sapiens? I don't know but we have the theory of conscious realism, and the mathematics of conscious agents (2019, pp.199-200).

On this account, given that we are essentially avatars operating within the vast cosmos of consciousness, perhaps physical death – the final removal of the spacetime headset – can best be imagined as 'stepping out of the virtual-reality interface' (ibid.,p.200). In more recent interviews, Hoffman has foregrounded his preference for the mathematical underpinnings of fundamental reality to argue – in alignment with Godel's famous incompleteness theorem – that the search for meaning within the membrane of cosmic consciousness is in principal unending (Ferriss, 2023). Thus, death within this perspective means the transition from a localized subjective awareness to an eternal and infinite process of cosmic consciousness seeking to understand itself through countless operational modes.

Similar perspectives are to be found in McGilchrist's profound and nuanced studies of the human brain which leads him – like Kastrup and Hoffman – to posit conceptions of death in terms of a transition from localized to all-embracing consciousness, from tiny whirlpools in the general cosmic stream of mind to mind-at-large (McGilchrist, 2025). Moreover, all of these perspectives on consciousness and death are fully aligned – indeed anticipated by millennia – within the core teachings of Hindu, Daoist and

Buddhist philosophy (Quantum Spirituality Lab, https://www.youtube.com/@QuantumSpirituality-lab).

4. Coda: Death, TMT and Contemporary Spirituality

There can be no unequivocal and incorrigible perspective on questions about death and any putative afterlife for the simple reason that no incontrovertible data on the topic is – and perhaps never will be – available to us. In the light of this, we can look to other criteria for judging the value and efficacy of theories and arguments in this sphere of discourse. In addition to, as Hoffman and Kastrup correctly observe, neo-idealist perspectives on reality and consciousness offering the most parsimonious accounts of the states of affairs we call life and death, there are also compelling arguments that they are far more conducive to a more ethically enlightened and socially progressive answer to the quest for meaning and purpose than alternatives drawn from mainstream religious traditions noted in the TMT literature. There is also the added bonus that such neo-idealistic conceptions can be supported – unlike most religious views – by well-established scientific principles.

It was mentioned above in the introductory section that TMT seems to be naturally linked to dogmatic and unquestioning beliefs in religious and ideological doctrines. Since there are so many flaws and shortcomings of such beliefs – not least the fact that none of them stand up to critical scrutiny (Harris, 2006; Stenger, 2008) – this alone would be enough to count against them as worthwhile recipes for living. However, we may add to such serious deficits the long history of suffering and harm caused by, in particular, the monotheistic faiths. Sam Harris (2006), for example, sets out in graphic detail

some of the terrible consequences that have arisen, logically and inevitably, out of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, the catalogue of horrors could be elaborated upon indefinitely. Auschwitz, the Cathar heresy, the witch hunts – these phrases signify depths of human depravity and human suffering that would surely elude description were a writer to set himself no other task (p.106).

Harris suggest that such horrors can be explained mainly by the nature of blind and irrational faith itself – unquestioning belief without a shred of evidence. As he puts it:

The question of how the church managed to transform Jesus' principal message of loving one's neighbour and turning the other cheek into a doctrine of murder and rapine seems to promise a harrowing mystery: but it is no mystery at all. Apart from the Bible's heterogeneity and outright self-contradiction allowing it to justify diverse and irreconcilable claims, the culprit is clearly the doctrine of faith itself. Whenever a man believes that he need only believe the truth of a proposition without evidence – that unbelievers will go to hell, that Jews drink the blood if infants – he becomes capable of anything (ibid.,p.85).

In a similar vein, the egregious dangers and crimes of fundamentalist Islam and Zionism have been well documented by historians, as have the horrors of dogmatic ideological beliefs that have supported and justified totalitarian regimes under communism and fascism (Harari, 2011; Hobsbawm, 1994).

In addition, it is important to address and challenge the 'terror' which is central to TMT ideas and practice. Such terror and irrational fear is largely caused by the false and questionable beliefs indoctrinated within religious faiths about the possibility of judgment, punishment and banishment to hell in the afterlife. Indeed, it was, arguably, such religious fear-based dogmatism and irrationalism which recently caused a small group of peers in the British House of Lords to defeat the generally popular Bill designed to allow the terminally ill to choose a merciful death under the law (The Irish News, 2026). Such fear is well documented in science and philosophy (Dennett, 2006; Schopenhauer,1819/2004), and literature is awash with the terrible torments inflicted on people by religious brainwashing about sex and punishment in the last judgment (Hegarty, 2018). All of this fully justifies Dawkins' indignation that:

our society, including the non-religious sector, has accepted the preposterous idea that it is normal and right to indoctrinate tiny children in the religion of their parents, and to slap religious labels on them – 'Catholic child', 'Protestant child', 'Jewish child', 'Muslim child', etc. (2006, p.339).

As against such absurd unjustified irrationalism, the secular spirituality principles espoused by the philosophers and scientists explored earlier have much to recommend them on intellectual, moral, and emotional wellbeing grounds. As the Nobel Prize-winning theoretical physicist, Richard Feynman, observed, 'we are not separate from the universe, we are the universe, temporarily organized' (2025). On this account, human awareness is likened to the universe observing itself, a process which is never ending since the stuff we are made of – including our consciousness – returns to the source from which it came. Carl Sagan, similarly endorses the notion of transformation of humans in line with the first law of thermodynamics (Cosmic Wisdom, 2024), and cognate notions linked to scientists such as Einstein and Bohr are commonly found throughout the philosophy of physics (TheSimplySpace, 2023). Granted there is a fair degree of speculative material here but, arguably, the central ideas have far more philosophical and theoretical support – and are certainly far less irrational and patently absurd – than the standard religious elements of TMT.

Moreover, all such metaphysical and spiritual notions linked to modern physics are ethically and socially progressive, which is more than can be said for mainstream religious beliefs. Everything in the universe, as Carlo Rovelli (2021) asserts, must be considered as 'relational'. Materialism posits a cosmos of isolated individuals alienated from an outside world of objects, and this perspective has helped to produce a culture of rampant individualism, aimless consumerism and the destruction of the planet (Hyland, 2021). Advocating for a conception of 'spiritual science' Steve Taylor (2018) concludes that 'moving beyond materialism means becoming able to perceive the vividness and sacredness of the world around us...transcending our sense of separateness so that we can experience our connectedness with nature and other living beings' (p.231).

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