

Review of: "Consciousness, Neo-Idealism and the Myth of Mental Illness"

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Review: Consciousness, Neo-Idealism and the Myth of Mental Illness

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If space and time, as sages say

Are things that cannot be,

The fly that lives a single day

Has lived as long as we.

Song, T.S. Eliot (1907)

I am grateful to Hyland for his review, giving me another reason to revisit Szasz – in the context of new work Hyland cites on consciousness. Metaphor looms large in this article, as it does in Szasz and some of the authors cited, not least writers on spirituality such as Kastrup. My declaration of interest is that I have worked as a psychiatrist for over 30 years and am triggered by descriptions of mental health conditions (Szasz bitterly resented mental *disorders* as a “weasel term”) as either myth or metaphor. Hyland quotes Robin Murray’s doubts about schizophrenia being a brain disease, rightly identifying the toxic effects of city living (van Os calls this urbanicity) and migration – the latter conferring six times the risk of developing schizophrenia. To these two, I add the social and biological disadvantages of psychosis (a real and distressing condition in 1% of the population across the world) are multiple across a (significantly reduced) lifetime. Within mainstream psychiatry, we know that migration of itself explains only part of psychosis: racism, discrimination/exclusion, higher potency cannabis, poverty with other inequalities and traumatic events are the real drivers of the pathway to psychosis. That said, evidence points to a proportion of psychosis, though less than 10% (Legge et al, 2021), with genetic not environmental aetiology. So, I understand psychosis as neither myth, malingering, medically constructed or metaphor. Mental health conditions occur, recur, persist and are as real as migraine – another condition that Szasz would discount following normal autopsies. In functional neurological conditions alone, his arguments on malingering are undermined by contemporary investigations (Edwards et al, 2023). All that said, I concluded Hyland came not to praise Szasz but to bury him.

Following his summary of Szasz, Hyland moves to the hard problem of consciousness. He writes of panspsychism defining this as “all material objects are imbued with forms of consciousness which evolve more fully within complex systems”. Having set out these ideas he cites Hoffman’s contention that “consciousness does not arrive from matter... instead matter and space time arise from consciousness”. Again with the metaphors and juxtapositions. But here is a paper tiger here too: trying to understand “in a world where science tells us consists only of physical objects”. It does not. This is of itself an example of subjective experience within physical theories. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle (we cannot know both the position and the speed of a particle) is underlined by the act of measuring changes the nature of what precisely we seek to measure. This is to disagree with Chalmers that physical properties are dependent upon the properties of experience” – their measurement is subverted by them, not determined. Up to a pint, I can agree with the contention he argues, built on Kastrup and Taylor, that conscious cannot be simply located in the brain; and that (our) human brains are indeed individual filtering mechanisms within the cosmic consciousness. If your brain hurts at all of this, these ideas are made flesh in contemporary cinema: *The Matrix* (1999) and *Interstellar* (2014). This latter film, though it bends quantum physics to achieve narrative resolution, makes clear that only artificial intelligence (TARS not HAL) could understand the black hole but it took human consciousness to identify a data source as originating from humans rather than extra-terrestrial life.

I don’t think Hyland’s discussion of right-left brain or a single consciousness (collective memories of Jung anybody?) add much to these ideas. Certainly autism and schizophrenia have poorer executive function and some psychopathological experiences in common but the arguments here don’t convince. Unitary theories of mental health conditions are emerging (Caspi and Moffitt, 2018), and whether as clinicians or people who encounter psychological distress in ourselves and others, we keep our minds, sorry consciousness, open to new ways of seeing the world, though we should interrogate them with the same uncertainty caveats argued above. When Hyland uses the contentious “diagnosis” of dissociative identity disorder (DID) as an example, McGilchrist’s left/right hemisphere arguments unravel. Psychological trauma damages consciousness, thinking, personhood, emotions and more, and DID makes Szasz’s arguments for him as likely “medically manufactured” – with a lot of help from Hollywood (Byrne, 2001). Stephen Hawking speculated in his *Brief History of Time*, “if we do discover a Theory of Everything... it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would truly know the mind of God”. Hyland’s conclusion goes beyond this hyperbole and quotes Kastrup: “all Nature – from atom to galaxy clusters – is an outside image of God’s conscious activity”. My subjective experiences will not allow me to agree. I agree that there are many who will monetise and exploit the “spiritual” aspects of our mental health and (a term new to me) McMindfulness is a timely example. And while I acknowledge the comfort that conventional and unorganised religions bring to many people with mental health conditions (and physical diseases), I remain unconvinced that spiritual practices will expand our understanding of the ideas in this paper.

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