Commentary

Consciousness, Neo-Idealism and the Myth of Mental Illness

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Over a long career in the psychiatric profession spanning six decades, Thomas Szasz has forcefully argued that mental illnesses are mythical since all medical diseases are located in the body and, thus, have somatic causes. This has been accompanied by a scathing and coruscating critique of the whole mental health profession, particularly those psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists who collude in and exploit the alleged mythology of counterfeit mental disorders and often (unwittingly or deliberately) justify coercion, oppression and pharmacological manipulation of so-called 'mental patients' in the name of 'treatments'. Although there has been a measure of support for this approach in recent years – especially the emphasis on the social context of mental illness and the complexity of mind/body dualism – the main thesis has tended to be misunderstood and undervalued. However, recent critiques of the scientific materialist paradigm within philosophy of mind and consciousness studies can help to illuminate the key arguments in this sphere and provide a foundation for work in the mental health field. After examining the main tenets of Szasz's thesis, the work of neo-idealist philosophers and scientists such as Kastrup, Hoffman and McGilchrist will be utilised to present an alternative re-imagining of the central problems. The neo-idealist concept of consciousness as an ultimate primitive combined with the work of McGilchrist on the ways in which the divided brain serves to shape reality can be utilised to produce a perspective on mental health and illness supported by a solid foundation in neuroscience and philosophy of mind.

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Introduction: Szasz and Mental Illness

> *Our only health is the disease*
>
> *If we obey the dying nurse*

Whose constant care is not to please

But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,

And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.

The whole world is our hospital

Endowed by the ruined millionaire

Wherein, if we do well, we shall

Die of the absolute paternal care

That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

T.S. Eliot (1944). *Four Quartets*. (London: Faber, p.18)

In the original exposition of his views about the 'myth of mental illness', Szasz (1961/1974 edn) helpfully summarises his principal arguments in the form of propositions and assertions which he obviously wants to establish as axioms. The key ones can be summarised as follows:

- Strictly speaking, disease or illness can affect only the body; hence, there can be no mental illness.
- "Mental illness" is a metaphor. Minds can be "sick" only in the sense that jokes are "sick" or economies are "sick".
- Psychiatric diagnoses are stigmatizing labels, phrased to resemble medical diagnoses and applied to persons whose behaviour annoys or offends others.
- Those who suffer from and complain of their own behaviour are usually classified as "neurotic"; those whose behaviour makes others suffer, and about whom others complain, are usually classified as "psychotic".
- Mental illness is not something a person has, but is something he does or is.
- If there is no mental illness there can be no hospitalization, treatment, or cure for it...
- Personal conduct is always rule-following, strategic, and meaningful...
- In most types of voluntary psychotherapy, the therapist tries to elucidate the inexplicit game rules by which the client conducts himself; and to help the client scrutinize the goals and values of the life games he plays.
- There is no medical, moral or legal justification for involuntary psychiatric interventions. They are crimes against humanity. (pp.267-8)

Szaz's substantial argument is that:

> Mental illness is a myth. Psychiatrists are not concerned with mental illnesses and their treatments. In actual practice they deal with personal, social and ethical problems in living...the concept of mental illness also undermines the principle of personal responsibility..For the individual, the notion of mental illness precludes an inquiring attitude toward his (sic) conflicts which his "symptoms" at once conceal and reveal. For a society, it precludes regarding individuals as responsible persons and invites, instead, treating them as irresponsible patients (ibid., p.262).

In later work, Szasz explains that, when we claim that a person has a mental illness, we 'misidentify his strategic behaviour as a bodily disease' (2008, p.25). Consequently, he continues:

> If we limit the use of the term ***illness*** or ***disease*** to observable biological – anatomical or physiological – phenomena then, by definition, the term ***mental illness*** is a metaphor. Mind is not matter, hence mental illness is a figure of speech. The idea of two kinds of diseases, one bodily, the other mental, is an unintended product of the scientific revolution: the imitation of science called "scientism". ***Hysteria, schizophrenia, mental illness*** and ***psychopathology*** are scientistic, not scientific, terms (ibid, p.25, original italics [here in bold]).

In all his work, Szasz is concerned to point out *ad nauseam* that activities of allegedly mentally ill people such as malingering, faking, lying and impersonation have been successively condemned, sanctioned, reified and medicalised (and de-/re-medicalised) by professionals in the field. He is particularly scathing about pioneers such as Charcot and Freud who – in the case of the former – founded a whole practice on the testimony of confessed malingerers and – in the case of the latter – endorsed faking and lying as mental illnesses (1974, 2007, 2008).

Although Szasz's thesis has helped to throw light on the importance of social context and the complex problems of mind/body dualism in the characterisation of many so-called mental disorders – especially the increasing medicalisation of deviant behaviour through the collaboration of orthodox medicine and the pharmaceutical industry (Pasnau, 1987; Baker & Menken, 2001) – in general, the reactions to Szasz have ranged from professional ostracism to astonishment, obfuscation and bewildered dismissal on the part of the psychiatric/psychotherapeutic establishment (Borelli & Schaler, 2000; Boysen, 2007). However, recent philosophical work on the hard problem of consciousness – particularly that informed

by new idealist conceptions of the nature of reality and our knowledge of the world – can serve to illuminate the key issues he was concerned with.

The Hard Problem of Consciousness

The claim by Szasz that 'mind is not matter, hence mental illness is a figure of speech' (2008, p.25) goes to the heart of the debate in relation to 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. 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 contemporary 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 (2018) 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).

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).

Materialist and Idealist Solutions to the Hard Problem

Panpsychism has emerged as a key component in attempts to solve the hard problem of consciousness which consists in explaining the existence of non-materialist subjective experiences in a world which mainstream science insists is made up of purely materialist elements. Although contemporary interpretations of panpsychism are, in the main, utilised in trying to solve problems of consciousness, the concept has a long history with diverse and widespread uses and applications.

David Chalmers (1996) outlines the 'easy' problems of consciousness, that is, how to map brain functions onto human thinking and behaviour. Such 'easy' problems include the integration of information by a cognitive system, the focus of attention, and the reportability of mental states, but such essentially functional processes leave us with the question of 'why the performance of these functions is accompanied by experience' (p.5). This is is labelled by Chalmers the 'central mystery' (ibid) of consciousness and gives rise to the 'hard problem' of how to understand and explain the undisputed existence of subjective mental states in a world which science tells us consists only of physical objects.

Physicalist Panpsychism

In later work, Chalmers (2013) 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' (p.17).

To make headway on this, as Strawson [5] argues, 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' (2006, 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. Making use of arguments by Eddington and Russell, Strawson asks 'on what conceivable grounds do so many physicalists simply assume that the physical, in itself, is an essentially and wholly non-experiential phenomenon?'(ibid., p.3).

Idealist Panpsychism

Although physicalist materialism has been the foundation of science since the Enlightenment it has not gone unchallenged within philosophy where idealist theories of knowledge, truth and reality have been around since the Ancient Greeks. Shan Gao [7] has produced a fascinating philosophical history of panpsychism which demonstrates how thinkers from the pre-Socratics, through Plato and Aristotle, and

down through the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods to current philosophy of science have advanced theories which propose that the natural world is imbued with, and indeed dependent upon, some form of conscious or mental element. However, in order to avoid the mind/body dualist black hole some form of monism needs to be considered, and Occam's Razor has led many thinkers – notably Leibniz, Berkeley and, in more recent times, Russell and Whitehead – to consider seriously the notion that, as Philip Goff [8] puts it, 'consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of physical reality' (p.112).

A principal materialist move is to assert that – since it is generally assumed that consciousness is generated by the brain – it is simply a matter of time before cognitive neuroscientists provide data which will solve the hard problem. However, as Steve Taylor (2018) has argued at length, there are no satisfactory models of how the mind/brain link can be supported, and he outlines the range of implausible claims – from epiphenomenalism to illusionism (pp.58-64) – which have failed to solve the principal problems. In addition, there is now a good range of neuroscientific data which indicates that – contra the physicalist assumptions – certain anomalous states of awareness (such as those produced by brain impairment, hallucinogenic episodes, or near-death experiences) result in *reduced* brain activity (ibid., pp.67ff.).

Along with the glaringly obvious implausibility of the notion that there might be neural correlates of the taste of coffee, the smell of a flower or the sound of falling rain, the reduction of brain activity in transcendent states of awareness is the exact opposite of what is entailed by the materialist assumption that all experience is generated by the brain. The realisation that metaphysical materialism has to be abandoned as an explanation of consciousness represents a courageous step but such a move has been made by Francis Crick's former colleague, Christof Koch (2014) who argues that the 'emergence of subjective feelings from physical stuff appears inconceivable' and that, rather than being produced by the circuitry of the brain, consciousness is 'inherent in the design of the universe' (p.28).

Moreover, as Bernardo Kastrup (2014) points out, there is a 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 and issues only in *quantities* not the *qualities* of phenomenal experience. Explaining and predicting how aspects of the material world operate relative to other aspects reveals nothing about the fundamental aspects of nature. The analytical idealism proposed by Kastrup as a more cogent alternative is claimed to

solve, or rather, dissolve the hard problem by positing a form of idealist panpsychism by which consciousness is the ultimate primitive.

The explanation of why we seem to be separate from the world and other beings is couched in terms of the idea of dissociated mind states drawn from well established psychological studies. The brain, rather than generating experience, receives and canalizes information from the transpersonal world of mind. Like whirlpools in the stream of consciousness, individual minds are a 'partial localization of the flow of experiences in the stream' (2014, p.82). This idea of subjective experience as individualised representations of transpersonal consciousness is further elaborated by Hoffman (2019) in his theory of conscious realism.

Following Occam's simplest is best doctrine, the next logical step is to posit the idea that, as Donald Hoffman (2019) prefers to say, it is consciousness itself – not spacetime, forces or material objects – that forms the fundamental basis of the cosmos. Hoffman 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). His ultimate claim – 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). Labelled 'conscious realism', this theory 'claims no central role for human consciousness' but 'posits countless kinds of conscious agents with a boundless variety of conscious experiences' (p.201).

Hoffman is acutely aware of the monumental cognitive dissonance which may result from considering such ideas but insists that it is simply an extension of the ideas of Galileo and Darwin. Moreover, the notion that reality is constructed through the interaction of conscious agents is supported by a robust mathematical model (pp.203-5) which underpins a process whose objective is to show how everything that we claim to know can be derived ultimately from the theory. He concludes his thesis with the following challenge:

> 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? (p.202).

Idealism, the Divided Brain, and Consciousness

The lifelong work of Iain McGilchrist (2012, 2021) on the divided brain can supplement and illuminate many of the principal issues outlined above. In relation to idealist perspectives on the nature of consciousness, McGilchrist is in broad agreement with the perspectives of Kastrup and Hoffman though he would describe both the problems and their solutions in a slightly different manner to those advanced for conscious realism (Hoffman) or analytic idealism (Kastrup). McGilchrist (2021) reviews favourably the intellectual history of panpsychism – identifying, in particular, the work of the Ancient Greeks, Schopenhauer and, from more recent times, James, Dewey and Bergson – and summarises the position as follows:

> In sum, it seems that (1) mind and matter have a close relationship; that (2) we cannot logically dismiss the existence of consciousness; and (3) ought to be unwilling to dismiss the existence of matter; that (4) they are not so distinct that they cannot interact; that (5) neither are they identical; and yet (6) may be aspects of one and the same reality. Nonetheless (7) they are not equal, in that there is reason to believe that consciousness is prior ontologically to matter (pp.1630-31, Kindle edn).

He makes a point of emphasising the importance of quantum physics with its discovery of wave/particle duality, superposition and non-local entanglement (Rovelli, 2021), observing that the 're-admission of the observer's consciousness into the description of the cosmos is a change of unequalled significance in the history of science (McGilchrist, 2021, p,1631), and goes on to outline the importance of this perspective in relation to understanding consciousness in living organisms.

Exploring evidence and arguments along the lines outlined by Kastrup and Taylor discussed above, there is an insistence that consciousness cannot be simply located in the brain. Reviewing a wide range of clinical research with brain damaged people or those with severely limited brain activity who still maintain normal levels of conscious awareness, McGilchrist seriously questions whether 'neurones let alone brains are necessary for awareness' (ibid., pp.1637ff.). Rather than generators of phenomenal consciousness, the idea is that brains may be transducers or receivers of consciousness and 'there are tantalising clues that what enables consciousness to cohere in the brain may be aspects of quantum field theory' (ibid., p.1654). Stemming from the principal thesis that consciousness is an ultimate primitive proposed by neo-idealists, we are asked to think of human brains as individual filtering mechanisms within the vast expanse of cosmic consciousness. There are parallels here with a broad range of Western

and Eastern philosophical thought – from Schelling, Bergson and Schopenhauer to Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu spiritual notions (ibid., pp.1680-1695) – and also intriguing connections with the theoretical interpretations of quantum mechanics proposed by Schrodinger, Pauli and Bohr.

In support of these general ideas, McGilchrist quotes the Nobel prize-winning scientist, George Wald, who (like Eddington before him) was of the view that 'the stuff of which physical reality is composed is mind-stuff. It is Mind that has composed a physical universe that breeds life, and so eventually evolves creatures that know and create...In them the universe begins to know itself' (ibid., p.1691). In a similar vein, McGilchrist concludes by expressing his own position in the following terms:

> Suppose that I am right and that everything is ultimately part of one consciousness, that individual consciousnesses are never wholly separate from the whole – much as vortices in the stream, or waves in the sea, are visible, measurable and truly distinguishable, but not separate from the body of water in which they arise – then the individual correctly perceives a self, but a self that is connected to the whole: wholly a self and wholly a part of the whole (ibid., pp.1694-5).

In addition to this perspective, the core work on the asymmetric brain – in particular the different features of the left and right hemispheres in terms of function, scope, attention and perspectival focus – adds an important dimension to both the neo-idealist case and the nature of mental health and illness. The divided brain is found in all forms of organic life and is clearly central to evolutionary development connected with survival and reproduction. McGilchrist's work goes further than the standard accounts of brain science and human development by identifying the differential roles of the left and right hemispheres in all forms of life. As he puts it, 'we can only know the world as we have shaped it by the nature of our attention' (2012, p.9), and the different hemispheres – though collaborating in the process of responding to the world – display quite different forms of attention, focus and objectives. This observation is elaborated as follows:

> The left hemisphere, as in birds and animals, pays the narrow-beam, precisely focussed attention which enables us to get and grasp: it is the left hemisphere that controls the right hand with which we grasp something...The right hemisphere underwrites sustained attention...not in the service of manipulation, but in the service of connection, exploration and relation...One way of looking at the difference would be to say that while the left

> hemisphere's ***raison d'etre*** is to narrow things down to a certainty, the right hemisphere's is to open them up to possibility (ibid., pp.11-13).

In his most recent work, McGilchrist (2021) summarises the chief differences between the left hemisphere (LH) and right hemisphere (RH) in terms of their scope and functions:

> The LH is principally concerned with manipulation of the world; the RH with understanding the world as a whole and how to relate to it...the LH deals with detail, the local, what is central and in the foreground, and easily grasped; the RH with the whole picture, including the periphery or background, and all that is not immediately graspable...the LH aims to narrow things down to a certainty, while the RH opens them up into possibility....the LH tends to see things as isolated, discrete, fragmentary, where the RH tends to see the whole...the RH is essential for 'theory of mind'...and essential for empathy...the LH is unreasonably optimistic, and it lacks insight into its limitations. The RH is more realistic, but tends towards the pessimistic (pp.46-51).

Neo-Idealism, the Myth of Mental Illness and the Divided Brain

Applying all these neo-idealist perspectives to the ideas of Szasz on mental illness, it is possible to illuminate a number of key aspects of the argument and throw some light on contemporary debates in the general field. In relation to the core assertion of Szasz that 'mind is not matter, hence mental illness is a figure of speech' (2008, p.25), we can refer to the non-physicalist thesis of the neo-idealist case outlined above and say that, to be sure, mind is not matter but insist that matter is itself mysteriously complex and cannot be considered as the ultimate ground of phenomenal reality or experience. Thus, both matter and mental illness can be regarded as types of metaphor for alluding to phenomenal consciousness which is the ultimate primitive and ground of all experience. The prior ontological status of consciousness as suggested in the work of Hoffman, Kastrup and McGilchrist is not something that Szasz could have conceived of. Similarly, the importance of the neuroscientific research on the divided brain was not available to Szasz, and it can be seen to throw important light on the key arguments about the sociological and cultural origins of mental illness.

If mental illnesses are more accurately described as consisting in 'personal, social and ethical problems in living' (Szasz, 1961/1974 edn., p.262) then the important questions concern the various features of phenomenal consciousness which give rise to such problems. As transducers of consciousness, brains in

both humans and animals have evolved to enhance survival and reproduction by means of developed instinct, forms of attention, and reasoning. In terms of understanding mental illness, standard practice – as Szasz's work graphically illustrates – has been dominated by the physicalist, mechanistic medical model influenced almost exclusively by left-brain functions in relation to both objects of study and forms of investigation. In criticising such strategies, Taylor (2018) comments that:

> There appears to be a growing consensus that the materialist approach to physical and mental health – one that treats the body as a machine and sees mental disorders as neurological problems that can be "fixed" through drugs – is seriously flawed. Increasing numbers of medical practitioners are moving towards more holistic approaches, with a greater awareness of the importance of environmental and psychological factors (p.224).

In terms of McGilchrist's work, this could be translated into an overemphasis on left-brain functioning and neglect of the right-brain holistic perspectives which incorporate empathy and the wider contextual, cultural and interpersonal factors in everyday living. It is in this sphere that Szasz's critique of the scientism and the re-medicalisation of mental disorders come to the fore. Changes in, for instance, ideas about schizophrenia, hysteria, anxiety, or depression have typically come about – not because new empirical evidence has been brought forward – but as a result of different constructions by psychiatrists and therapists (or the influence of the pharmaceutical industry, Boysen, 2007). Thus, hysteria may at one stage be seen as an instance of 'malingering' and at another as 'psychogenic illness' (Szasz, 2008, pp.26-8), and manic depression becomes bi-polar disorder caused by imbalances of neuro-transmiiting chemicals, even though there is very little empirical evidence to support this thesis and growing evidence that the use of pharmaceuticals may actually worsen the health of patients diagnosed with depression or psychosis (Whitaker, 2010, pp.66ff). Similarly, in the case of schizophrenia, the diagnoses and suggested treatments have been revised regularly over the years. The world famous expert in this field, Robin Murray, admitted in a recent interview (BBC, 2012) that:

> Fifteen years ago he believed schizophrenia was a brain disease. Now, he's not so sure. Despite decades of research, the biological basis of this often distressing condition remains elusive. Just living in a city significantly increases your risk (the bigger the city the greater the risk); and, as Murray discovered, migrants are six times more likely to develop the condition than long term residents (p.1).

In fact, this 'social' explanation of mental illness is becoming increasingly popular – Stone (1998), for instance, notes the recent 'social skills training for schizophrenic patients' (p.339) – and it is interesting to note just how close this new paradigm is to Szasz's original proposal that mental illnesses should be re-classified as simply 'problems in living' (1960).

The work of McGilchrist is directly relevant here. He argues that:

> Mental illnesses and brain diseases are sometimes discussed as they were like mechanical faults. But they are not. It's not that the mind 'doesn't work' properly, as if a component has ceased to function...Brains and minds are living, constantly adapting, interconnected systems. And they are conscious. A brain disease or mental illness, then, is a change in a ***person's*** whole way of being in the world (2021, p.459, original italics [here in bold]).

More significantly, McGilchrist suggests that there is much of value to be learned from studying conditions such as schizophrenia and autism which 'have many overlapping features, as well as sharing a genetic basis' (p.461). In particular, both categories of disorder seem to display 'right hemisphere deficits' which include symptoms such as 'impairments in the sense of the unity and integrity of the body...emotional indifference, passivity and a lack of initiative', and a tendency to 'confabulate' (ibid., pp.460-480). In summary, he contends that:

> The testimony of people with schizophrenia and autism provides us with articulate accounts of what living in the left hemisphere's world feels like, when most fully expressed. Such accounts help to make sense of apparently disparate phenomena around us, and give us a perspective on our unexamined assumptions about the fabric of reality.. (ibid., p.553).

this general framework of re-classifying and re-interpreting mental illness and disorder it is also useful to consider the potential insights of the neo-idealist thesis about consciousness as the ultimate primitive of all awareness and experience. If brains are – in Kastrup's terminology, like whirlpools in the stream of consciousness and individual minds are a 'partial localization of the flow of experiences in the stream' (2014, p.82) or, as McGilchrist puts it, 'much as vortices in the stream, or waves in the sea of consciousness' (2021, p.1695) – then the disturbance of functioning observed by clinicians might be re-interpreted as interferences in the the connections between individual conscious minds and universal consciousness which is the ground of all experience. It was noted in earlier sections that Kastrup (2021) argues that all living beings are 'merely dissociated mental complexes – 'alters' – of this fundamentally unitary universal mind' (p.94). He goes on to explain how:

> This is akin to how a person suffering from dissociative identity disorder also manifests multiple disjoint centres of awareness. The boundary of dissociation is what separates us from our environment and each other...As experienced from the inside – that is, froma first-person perspective – each living being, plus the inanimate universe as a whole, is a conscious entity. But as experienced from the outside – that is, from a second- or third-person perspective – our respective inner lives present themselves in the form of what we call matter, or physicality (ibid., pp.94-5).

Against this background we can add to McGilchrist's left/right hemisphere dysfunctions the notion of failures in connection between individual and cosmic consciousness as potential causes of mental disorders.

Conclusion: Neo-Idealism, Spirituality and Lessons for Future Practice

Notwithstanding his general thesis about the myth of mental illness, this did not prevent Szasz from continuing throughout his long life to practice psychiatry as a professional counsellor committed to the displacement of the 'medicalization of malingering' (Szasz, 2008, p.1) by treating patients as 'choice-making animals' (ibid., p.112). What the neo-idealist and asymmetric brain literature can illuminate and enhance in relation to ideas about this perspective emphasising the social and cultural causes of mental disorders is a broader, more holistic vision founded on the notion that consciousness, not material or physical reality, is the ultimate primitive and ground of all experience.

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-idealist thinkers 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 contends:

> 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).

In a similar vein, 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). Taylor's critique of materialism and support for a similar thesis about consciousness as the ground of all being results in a 'spiritual worldview [which] tells us that our lives are meaningful and purposeful' (2019, p.230).

All this is relevant to current psychotherapeutic approaches to the treatment of mental disorders which make use of Buddhist mindfulness strategies to enrich diagnosis and treatment (Segall, 2003; Epstein, 2007). There are characteristics of mindfulness applications which align with the general thesis outlined above which might serve to avoid the worst features of the medicalisation criticised by Szasz (Hyland, 2012). However, the commodified versions of mindfulness – labelled 'McMindfulness' by critical commentators (Purser, 2019; Hyland, 2017) - which seek to exploit the popularity of the new spirituality for ulterior purposes can only exacerbate the key problems outlined earlier. In order to advance the

perspectives on consciousness and human wellbeing advocated above such mindfulness applications will need to keep faith with their spiritual origins in Buddhism which emphasise the interconnectedness of all life and the virtues of compassion and loving kindness as guiding principles (Hyland, 2015). Taylor's take on 'spiritual science' provides a fitting conclusion in this respect. He observes that:

> Spiritual practices and paths can help us by expanding our awareness...by helping us to transcend the limited awareness that gives rise to the materialist worldview...Spirituality wakes us up, opens us to the aliveness and sacredness of nature, and reconnects us to the world. When we experience the world in this way, we truly move beyond materialism (2019, p.231).

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- Meeting the challenges of existential threats through educational innovation: a proposal for an expanded curriculum. *British Journal of Educational Studies (review),* March **2022**
- Consciousness, Analytic Idealism and Buddhist Foundations: Exploring Non-Materialist Ways of Connecting Eastern and Western Spiritual Perspectives; *Advances in Social Science and Culture*, 4 (2), 56-71, **2022**
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