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## Artistic Expression and New Philosophical Models of Consciousness: Images of Neo-Idealist Perspectives

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### Abstract

*The connections between artistic expression, philosophical perspectives and scientific theories have been evident throughout art history and revealed in painting, literature, sculpture and architecture. Restricting the exploration to painting in all its forms, this article is concerned principally with the interrogation of links between philosophical studies of consciousness and images which may emerge from recent neo-idealist metaphysics which posit the notion that consciousness – not the physical world of matter - is the sole ontological primitive. After examining five principal theories of art - Mimetic or Realism, Expressivism, Formalism, Institutional Theory, and Postmodernism – the article seeks to understand the role of non-representational painting in relation to knowledge and its connection with the world. Following this, recent neo-idealist theories of consciousness – such as those proposed by Bernardo Kastrup and Donald Hoffman – are outlined and connected with forms of artistic expression. Finally, Hoffman’s particular theory of “conscious realism” which posits entities subsisting below spacetime is explored in terms of its realisation in the form of images and patterns.*

**Keywords:** philosophical models of consciousness, painting schools, artistic expression, neo-idealism, conscious realism

### 1. Introduction: Art and the World

James Young’s (2001) exploration of the connections between art and knowledge was guided by the notion that:

every item properly classified as a work of art can contribute to human knowledge. In other words, I maintain that all artworks possess cognitive value (p.1).

However, this general notion needs to be located within the various philosophies of the function of artistic activity and products, especially their particular stance on the relationship between the work of art and the outside world. Young goes on to contend that:

artworks have cognitive value, I mean that, like scientific hypotheses and historical narratives, artworks can provide an

understanding of aspects of reality. If so, like science and history, art must represent the aspects of the world into which it provides insight. Reality can be represented in a variety of ways. Consequently, the epistemology of art involves an investigation of the types of representation and an account of the type employed in the arts (p.23).

J.W.R. Purser (1937) provided an account of the artistic endeavour which sought to explore in depth the concept of truth within the disciplines of art, science and philosophy. After considering the oft quoted idea that ‘truth is to the philosopher what beauty is to the artist’, Purser proceeds to contend that:

If there is any truth in art, it is obvious that the definition of truth cannot be the common one of “agreement with facts”. Art is not a copy of nature. It does not correspond with what one might call the “historical truth” (p.8).

However, in the broad field of aesthetics, philosophers have sought to identify artistic truth and – against the background of what Young calls the ‘epistemology of art’ – it would be useful to explore this general category against the background of five main philosophies of art (Malhotra, 2023, pp.1-8).

### 1.1. Mimetic or Realism

The Mimetic or Realism philosophy posits that art’s primary function is to imitate or represent reality faithfully. It contends that the value of art lies in its ability to capture – in the spirit of Keats’ famous assertion in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* that “beauty is truth, truth beauty” – the truth and beauty of the natural world. Examples of paintings within this functional category would include the portraits of Da Vinci and Vermeer and the landscapes of Constable and Landseer. Thus, in the famous painting – *The Milkmaid* by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) – we are presented with a typical domestic interior of the period. Malhotra claims that this realistic approach consists in ‘striving to replicate the real world with unparalleled precision’ (2023, p.2) yet, if we look at the Vermeer below, we are reminded that the imagination and feelings of the artist must also be taken into account. As Purser (1937) insists, imagination is a core element of any sphere of art independently of any particular styles or fashions so the notion of representing life with graphic precision must – even within this mimetic sphere – be modified by the faculties of human consciousness.



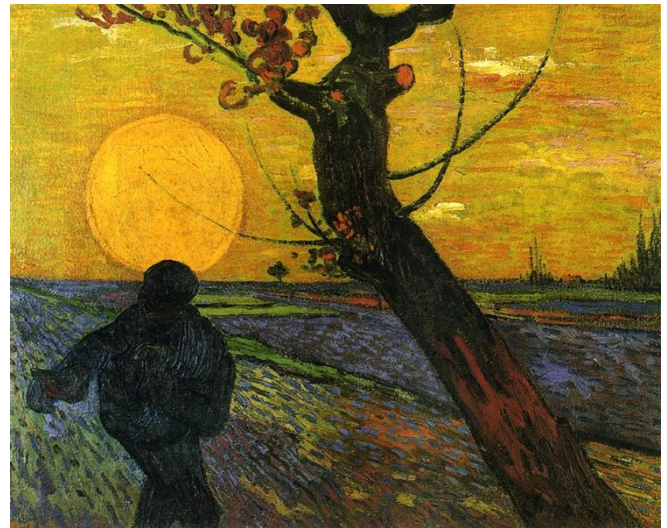
*The Milkmaid* – Jan Vermeer (1632-1675)

### 1.2. Expressivism

Malhotra notes that expressivism:

emphasises the artist’s emotional or psychological expression as the primary purpose of art. According to this view, art serves as a means for artists to convey their inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences, inviting viewers to connect with the artist on an emotional level (2023, p.2).

Examples of this style would include work by Van Gogh, Munch and Toulouse-Lautrec. Very strong colour, drastically simplified outline and dynamic composition is well illustrated below in Van Gogh’s *Sower With the Setting Sun*. The painting ‘transcends mere representation and delves into the realm of emotional expression, aligning with the core principles of Expressivism’ (ibid, p.3).



*Sower With Setting Sun* – Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890)

### 1.3. Formalism

This style emphasizes compositional elements such as shape, line, colour, texture and other perceptual qualities rather than pure content. Formalists ‘believe that art should be analyzed and appreciated based solely on its visual or structural aspect’ (Malhotra, 2023, p.4). The movement emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a response to post-impressionism and is typically realised in works by Kandinsky (below), Jackson Pollock and Paul Cezanne.



*Composition VII* by Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)

### 1.4. Institutional Theory

The Institutional Theory of art asserts that something becomes art when it is designated as such by the institutions and practices within the art world, such as museums, galleries, and critics.

According to this view, the context and the role of the art world are paramount in determining what qualifies as art. Examples from this milieu would include Marcel Duchamp's infamous Fountain (illustrated below), a standard urinal transformed into an art object by simply placing it in a gallery. Dadaism and Pop Art typified by the work of Andy Warhol would be located in this broad category, as also would much of conceptual art, the contents of the Modern Tate and the entries for the Turner Prize. The art historian Jeanne Willette (2012) characterized the movement as follows:

Art was relative, contingent, and dependent upon the existence of institutional space. The art institution was more than a physical one of museums and galleries, it was also a product of reading about art by an art audience, writing about art by art historians and art critics and current conversations about art—art discourse, all of which contributed to the “making” of an artist or a work of art through naming and designation. With the work of these two writers, “art” was disconnected from its traditional moorings—beauty and Greek art. Suddenly art could be anything; an artist could be anyone; the audience could be everyone; art could be anywhere. All the “institution” had to do was to acknowledge the presence of the artifact and “art” was “made.” (p.2).



*Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)*

### 1.5. Postmodernism

Informed by the work of thinkers such as Derrida and Lyotard (Sim, 2013) this philosophical perspective that emerged in the late 20th century, challenges traditional art conventions and questions the existence of a single, objective meaning in art. It emphasizes the multiplicity of interpretations and often incorporates elements of past styles, recontextualizing them to blur the boundaries between high and low culture. Its eclectic nature means that it shares many elements and art products with the formalist and institutionalist positions and, in recent times, collages, video and cinema have been favoured as means of creative expression. In terms of painting the work of Roy Lichtenstein would be a good

example of the postmodernist turn. Like Warhol and Duchamp, there is a denial of all convention and celebration of the prosaic features of everyday life and popular culture.



*Whaam! – Roy Lichtenstein – Tate, 1963*

## 2. Art and Consciousness

The philosophies outlined above are all concerned – in their different ways – with the relationship between human consciousness and the artistic endeavour. The more representational and mimetic schools would tend to be inspired by a realistic or physicalist conception of our connection with the world informed by the idea that we are able to gain a veridical view of reality by simply using our senses and powers of observation. Expressivism and Formalism, on the other hand, seek to go beyond mere sense-data observation to create a fusion of imagination and extra-sensory conscious visions. In addition to the work of Kandinsky and Lichtenstein mentioned above, the work of Turner and the later French impressionist painters would also share this imaginary post-realist vision. If we connect post-realist consciousness with artificial intelligence (AI) generated pictures, we might arrive at images such as the one illustrated below:



*Image of Consciousness generated by ChatGPT-4*

## 3. The Hard Problem of Consciousness

We can extend this idea of artistic endeavour following changes in views of reality and consciousness by examining the work of neo-idealist philosophers and scientists who have tried to solve the famous ‘hard problem of consciousness’ (Chalmers, 1995).

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.

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. More generally it results in the long-standing problem of how to explain subjective mental phenomena such as hopes, wishes, intentions, emotions, or just ordinary sense data – as Nagel (1974) puts it, simply what it is like to be something – 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).

### 3.1. Solving the hard problem of consciousness

Having rejected dualism and materialism as solutions to the mind-body problem, Searle (2004) suggests that:

The general character of the relation of consciousness to the brain, and thus the general solution to the mind-body problem is not hard to state: consciousness is caused by microlevel processes in the brain and realized in the brain as higher-level or system features. But the complexity of the structure itself, and the precise nature of brain processes involved, remains unanalyzed by this characterisation (p.110).

However, the problems set out by Searle here have been described by Chalmers (1995) as merely 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 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.

### 3.2. Physicalist Panpsychism

Andrew Thomas (2019) has examined the fascinating notion that consciousness is somehow correlated with heat in the sense that ‘if it’s cold, it’s not conscious’. This suggestion follows from the conception of consciousness as information processing, and the idea that – since higher active processing is necessarily linked to higher temperatures – it is plausible to posit a threshold of a ‘minimum 15 watts of heat for a human-level consciousness’ (p.160). Such a conception seeks to preserve scientific orthodoxy on the mind/brain explanation of consciousness but does not really solve the hard problem. Chalmers has advanced a number of speculative solutions such as that the fundamental building blocks of the universe utilised by science – space, time and mass, for example – may have to be extended to include consciousness as a primary entity or universal property of everything in the cosmos.

This is described as a ‘nonreductive psychophysical’ notion which supplements physical theories by explaining how ‘physical processes are connected with and dependent upon the ‘properties of experience’ (2013, p.17).

To make headway on this, as Strawson 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 H<sub>2</sub>O 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). Citing Eddington:

‘To put the conclusion crudely’, he says, ‘the stuff of the world is mind-stuff’—something whose nature is ‘not altogether foreign to the feelings in our consciousness’. ‘Having granted this’, he continues, ‘the mental activity of the part of the world constituting ourselves *occasions no surprise*; it is known to us by direct self-knowledge, and we do not explain it away as something other than we know it to be—or, rather, it knows itself to be. It is the physical aspects [i.e. non-mental aspects] of the world that we have to explain’ (ibid.,p.13, original italics).

In later writings drawing on recent work in quantum physics, Strawson (2016) re-asserts the position that, although we all know intimately and at first-hand what mental experience and consciousness is, the ‘nature of physical stuff, by contrast, is deeply mysterious, and physics grows stranger by the hour’. He goes on to observe that:

The nature of physical stuff is mysterious *except insofar as consciousness is itself a form of physical stuff*. This point, which is at first extremely startling, was well put by Bertrand Russell in the 1950s in his essay “Mind and Matter”: “We know nothing about the intrinsic quality of physical events,” he wrote, “except when these are mental events that we directly experience.” In having conscious experience, he claims, we learn something about the intrinsic nature of physical stuff, for conscious experience is itself a form of physical stuff (pp.1-2, original italics).

### 3.3. 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 (2014) 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 (2019) puts it, ‘consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of physical reality’ (p.112). However, to rule out the absurdity of defending the mental capacity of rocks and viruses, philosophers holding this view have naturally had to enter the caveat that there are different levels of consciousness of which our own subjective experience may be a limiting case.

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).

#### 4. Art and Conscious Realism

If we follow Hoffman in removing the headset of materialism and spacetime we arrive at fundamental reality which is described as conscious realism constituted by a network of conscious agents. 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 (Hoffman, 2019, pp.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 and comments that:

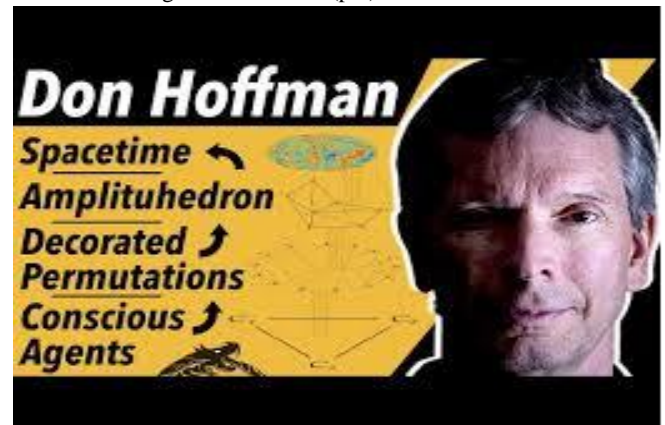
Conscious realism makes a bold claim: consciousness, not spacetime and its objects, is fundamental reality and is properly described as a network of conscious agents. To earn its keep, conscious realism must do serious work ahead. It must ground a theory of quantum gravity, explain the emergence of our spacetime interface and its objects, explain the appearance of Darwinian

evolution within that interface, and explain the evolutionary emergence of human psychology (Hoffman, 2019, p.198).

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’ (Hoffman, 2019, pp.186-7).

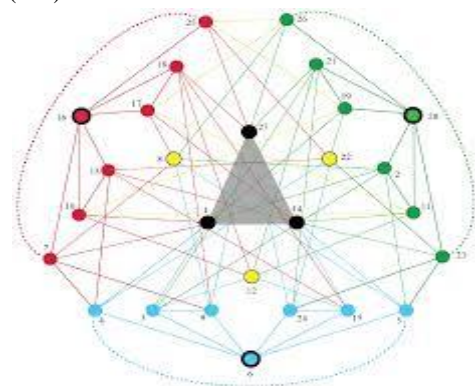
In later work, Hoffman and colleagues (Hoffman, Prakash & Prentner, 2023) connect their theoretical models with recent work in quantum physics which seeks to explore the nature of reality below the level of spacetime. As they observe:

Physicists tell us that spacetime lacks operational meaning for distances smaller than the Planck length, roughly 10<sup>-33</sup> centimeters, or durations shorter than the Plancktime, roughly 10<sup>-43</sup>s. They recognize that classical spacetime is not a fundamental ingredient of the world, but a construction consisting of more fundamental degrees of freedom (p.2).

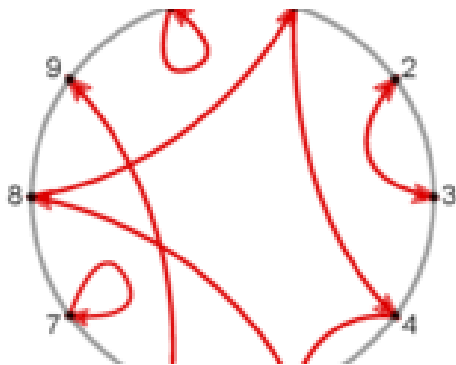


If spacetime is doomed and the world is formed by a network of conscious agents, what then lies beyond this constructed picture of reality. We are informed that:

As it happens, theoretical physicists have recently peered beyond spacetime and discovered new structures beyond spacetime, such as the amplituhedron and cosmological polytope. They generate spacetime and quantum theory by projection. The essence of these structures, their invariant physical content, can be derived from what is known as “decorated permutations” (in non-supersymmetric theories helicities, or masses and spins, are also required (ibid)



*Fusions of Consciousness (Hoffman, Prakash & Prentner, 2023)*



Decorated Permutation (ibid., pp.19-23)



Images of amplituhedrons created by Chat GPT-4

## 5. Hoffman, Kastrup and Consciousness

A core feature of Hoffman's thesis is that human evolution has resulted in mistaken and illusory visions and perspectives of what is real (Riddle, 2023). 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

((2019, pp. xii ff.). 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, 2017), we arrive at the astonishing conclusion that 'fitness drives truth to extinction' (Hoffman, 2019, p.61). This is expressed in the observation that:

What the FBT theorem reveals is that natural selection, however major or minor a force it may be, does not shape our perceptions to be veridical (ibid., p.71).

If we add to this perspective the notion that spacetime is an illusion and that as Bernardo Kastrup (2014, 2017) has argued, the material world is simply what consciousness looks like to us from our limited perspective, we begin to arrive at a dynamic and complex theoretical model of how creative artists may interact with the world. Arguing against attempts to circumscribe consciousness by positing various forms of physicalist accounts of the ultimate nature of reality, Kastrup (2017) argues that our only access to the world – whether this is through the instruments of the physical sciences or as a result of our everyday experience – is 'through sense perception which is itself phenomenal' (Kindle ed., loc 23) and therefore a part of consciousness. Employing the term 'cosmopsychism' as interchangeable with panpsychism, he attempts to meet all the challenges to this idealist position including the powerful cosmological history objection. The main thrust of this challenge is that – since there is overwhelming evidence for the existence of the universe before conscious life arose – it is untenable to say that consciousness is fundamental to the universe. Against this, Kastrup argues that consciousness is, within idealism, clearly not generated by biology or material life and that there was a 'universal consciousness corresponding to the inanimate prior to the origin of life' (ibid., loc. 232). Applying Schopenhauer's metaphysics to these issues, we arrive at a picture of the world in which the 'universal will' – which can be equated with cosmic consciousness – is fundamental to all experience and all phenomena (2020).

It is important to note here the glaring inadequacies and weaknesses of materialism as both a metaphysics and a strategy for understanding reality. As Kastrup explains:

Scientific modelling is useful for informing us how one thing or phenomenon relates to another thing or phenomenon...but it cannot tell us what these things or phenomena are in and by themselves. The reason is simple: science can *only explain one thing in terms of another thing*; it can only explicate and characterize a certain phenomenon in terms of its relative differences with respect to another phenomenon (2014, p.11, original emphasis).

Examples would be the explanation of positive electric charge in terms of its negative charge, or describing a subatomic particle in terms of its difference from another particle. Consequently, in addition to the many glaring problems of scientific materialism – such as dark matter/energy, the ontology of the quantum world and the hard problem of consciousness (Sheldrake, 2012; Goff, 2019) – such abstract and partial representations of reality do not satisfy epistemological criteria. Moreover, as suggested earlier, they fail the crucial parsimony test of Occam's Razor by having to postulate theories and concepts which are inscrutably complex and incapable of verification. As Kastrup (2014) concludes:

According to materialism, what we experience in our lives every day is not the world as such, but a kind of brain-constructed 'copy' of the world. Everything we see, hear, or otherwise perceive is supposedly a complex amalgamation of electrochemical signals unfolding in a kind of theatre inside our skulls (p.20).

Such a picture is impossibly confused and unhelpful in our attempts to understand the world which is why Kastrup (2019) proposes the much simpler and more parsimonious strategy which argues for an 'idealist ontology consistent with empirical observations', and which obviates the so-called mind-body problem of explaining consciousness. The position is summarised as follows:

spatially unbound consciousness is posited to be nature's sole ontological primitive. We, as well as all other living organisms, are dissociated alters of this unbound consciousness. The universe we see around us is the extrinsic appearance of phenomenality surrounding – but dissociated from – our alter. The living organisms we share the world with are the extrinsic appearances of other dissociated alters (p.57).

On this account, our subjective experience as dissociated alters – that is, individually segmented parts of an all-encompassing mental cosmos – is founded upon and supported by a robust metaphysical idealism which may be used to circumvent the false picture presented by physical science and the illusions of mind-body dualism.

Kastrup goes on to elaborate his thesis that the cosmos is mental and everything is mind by means of a series of ingenious metaphors and analogies which seek to explain the world revealed to us through experience in ways which are both cogent, precise, and more epistemologically and metaphysically satisfying than the mainstream materialist theories. We are asked to picture the ultimate primitive mind or cosmic consciousness as a 'thin, mirror-like membrane with some rigidity, but also some elasticity' such that the 'qualities of experience now correspond to the specific patterns of vibration of the membrane' (2014, p.138). There is, thus, 'nothing to reality but the medium of mind itself' (bid.) and all our experiences of the world may be explained in terms of the vibrations and oscillations of the membrane of mind. Subjective individualised experiences of the world may be correlated with the ripples and loops of this membrane which brings about segmented islands of consciousness. The metaphor is thus intended to explain both why we seem to have limited control over the unfolding of events in the world and also why we seem to be separated from each other in terms of our individualised states of consciousness.

In other work, however, Kastrup (2015, 2016, 2019) is concerned to emphasise that both of these characteristics of subjective consciousness – lack of control and individual ego states – are actually largely illusory and, as such, present us with a confused

and partial perspective on reality. In order to escape such confuse it is necessary to wield Occam's Razor forcefully and accept that everything is a modification of consciousness. As he explains:

I claim that we do not need more than consciousness to explain reality: *all things and phenomena can be made sense of as excitations of consciousness itself*. According to this more parsimonious view, the ground of all reality is a transpersonal flow of subjective experiences that I metaphorically describe as a stream. Our personal awareness is simply a localization of this flow: a whirlpool in the stream (2015, p.13, original emphasis).

This powerful metaphor of consciousness is intended to 'fully capture the patterns and regularities of nature as currently understood by physics' (2014, p.132). Moreover, it is not just more parsimonious than physicalist perspectives but has far greater explanatory power than the current scientific metaphors positing string theory, quantum fields, and multiple universes.

In his most recent collection of essays, Kastrup (2021) presents an array of arguments to substantiate and reinforce the earlier claims that 'materialism is a dead-end' (p.7). As he argues, from a philosophical perspective, 'materialism is...unparsimonious – that is, uneconomical, unnecessarily extravagant – and arguably incoherent' (p.9). He elaborates this notion:

As we have seen, matter is a theoretical abstraction of mind. So when materialists try to reduce mind to matter, they are effectively trying to reduce mind to one of mind's conceptual creations. This is akin to a dog chasing its own tail. Better yet, *it is like a painter who having painted a self-portrait, points at it and proclaims himself to be the portrait* (p.10, emphasis added).

Kastrup's concludes with the observation that 'materialism is a relic from an older naïver, and less sophisticated age...But it has no place in this day and age' (Kastrup, 2021, p.11).

## 6. Neo-Idealism and Post-Materialistic Artistic Expression

If our vision of the world – following Hoffman and Kastrup – is indeed illusory and post-realist, what images, what forms of painting and general artistic visions might result from and be generated by these perspectives on reality? Is it possible to generate forms of expression which reflect this notion that everything we perceive can be interpreted as excitations of the membrane of cosmic consciousness?

For a start we can begin to answer such questions by pointing to the granular richness of the forms of expression outlined in Section 1 above, particularly in the areas of expressivism, institutional theory and postmodernist images. In more specific terms with particular reference to conscious realism, Justin Riddle (2023) has examined many of these issues in collaboration with Hoffman, and it is possible to offer some tentative suggestions in relation to art and the new visions of consciousness. Riddle's research delves into the emergent properties of consciousness, suggesting that subjective experience is not merely an epiphenomenon of neural activity but a fundamental aspect of the universe. Basic ideas for artistic expression flowing from this conception might include the following:

The creative mind would continually shape reality through interaction with the world and with other conscious agents

Images akin to a kaleidoscope by which subjective experience continually transforms experience

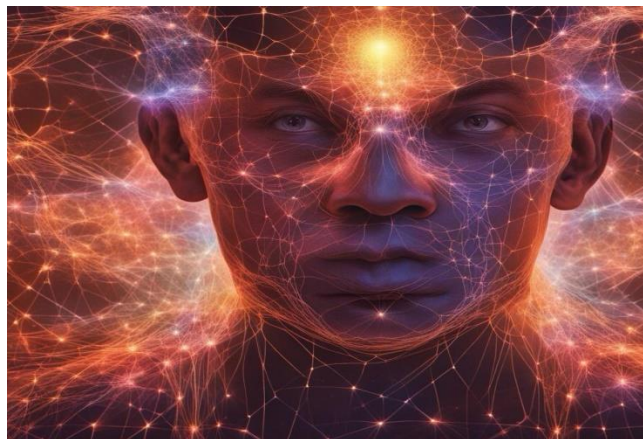
A framework of a dynamic interplay between mind and reality which challenges spectators to envision experience of art, not as a static phenomenon, but as an ongoing, interactive canvas where perception and reality coalesce in a rich visual tapestry.

Emphasizing the art of being present, artists might create works that encourage mindfulness (Hyland, 2011, 2023) and which resonate with idealist conceptions of the mind's role in shaping reality. This might include installations that require contemplation and slow observation, inviting spectators to engage deeply with the connections between the artwork and their own consciousness

More specific tools, forms and ideas might incorporate the following (Heartney, 2001; Young, 2001; Hyland, 2024a)

- a) *Interwoven thoughts, fractal illusions, intensity of colours, dreamlike qualities, shifting geometries, boundless light, surreal landscapes*
- b) *Radiant spirals, glowing nodes, interconnected patterns, infinite loops, abstract dimensions*
- c) *Luminous beings, ethereal planes, multiverse images, representations of quantum entanglement, dynamic and fluid energies*
- d) *Vivid hues, shifting shapes, reflective surfaces, cosmic webs, intricate patterns, dimension crossing, spectra of light*

As in the sphere of modernist/postmodernist musical forms (Hyland, 2024), such perspectives may be realised through artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies. Some examples are illustrated below:



Images created by Art Tools incorporated into Chat GPT-4

## 7. Concluding Remarks: Philosophy, Art 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). 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.

All of this adds valuable insights to the conceptions of art and consciousness discussed above but it is McGilchrist's work on left and right brain operations that has important and equally radical implications for the philosophy of mind in general and the philosophy of art in particular (Hyland, 2023, 2024b).

McGilchrist's 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 mind/body wellbeing. 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'être* 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).

Most of school and college learning is predominantly left-brain in nature, ideally aligned with the dominance of maths, science and the *quantitative* nature of the materialistic/physicalist paradigm (Hyland, 2023). However, if we wish to enhance creative, flexible, open-ended and qualitative operations it is right-brain work which needs to be developed and enhanced.

As mentioned above, the new idealist perspectives on consciousness and the nature of reality call for a serious revision of contemporary standard ideas in a wide range of disciplines and domains. Consequently, the presentation of such alternative perspectives may be justified as a worthwhile educational project in itself since it contributes to critical thinking and the development of expansive knowledge, understanding and values. In a cultural climate characterised by irrational post-truth conspiracy theories and an obsession with shallow populist social media propaganda, there has never been a more urgent time to emphasise the importance of questioning the mainstream conceptions of reality supported by scientific materialism and the values which that view of the world carries with it (Sheldrake, 2017; Hyland, 2017).

Contemporary critical commentators on educational policy and practice routinely offer standard recommendations for the incorporation of greater scope for the fostering of critical thinking, creativity and imagination in school and post-compulsory curricula (Rushe, 2021; Hyland, 2024b). Philosophy of art has much to learn from McGilchrist and other neo-idealist thinkers and, in particular, theories such as Hoffman's 'conscious realism' point the way to a future in which non-representational art may engage with the ontological ultimate reality of cosmic consciousness. Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (1889, below) painting is a good example of the ability of artists to see beyond and below immediate reality to apprehend more fundamental features of existence (Wright, 2019). It is this precious gift of art (Papanoutsos, 1978) which needs to be foregrounded in curricula from school to university.



Van Gogh - *The Starry Night* (1889) - Museum of Modern Art in New York

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