

BOOK REVIEW

Spiritual Science: Why Science Needs Spirituality to Make Sense of the World by Steve Taylor. London: Watkins, 2018. 273 pp. \$11.52 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-78678-158-1.

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Ever since the rise of modern science in 17th-century Europe, science and spirituality have been estranged. This has been worse than unfortunate because science and spirituality are major parts of human experience, and it won't do to have them perennially at odds with each other. So one of the mega thought-memes of modern history has been trying to harmonize these two dimensions of experience that so powerfully influence our lives. The challenge is how to integrate them and do justice to the best they have to offer while being wary of the worst as well.

Much of modern thought has struggled to make the divided soul of Western humanity whole and to reintegrate a broken human identity. The task becomes more urgent today when the fractures and conflicts of human society are growing, alongside looming climate catastrophe, with secular scientists and public intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky and Helen Caldicott talking about doomsday and apocalypse (Caldicott, 2017). Fortunately, there are those anxious to make the case for the marriage of science and spirituality.

Dr. Steve Taylor, a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Beckett University, UK, offers readers an informed guidebook to that possible marriage, *Spiritual Science: Why Science Needs Spirituality to Make Sense of the World*. The title is clear and to the point, as is the writing throughout. Taylor is fully aware of the unorthodox nature of his views, given that the word *spiritual* is a pariah in today's mainstream intellectual world. Worse, to use *spiritual* to modify *science* is clearly heretical. But Taylor is not apologetic: “. . . our culture is in thrall to a particular paradigm or belief system that in its own way is just as dogmatic and irrational as a religious paradigm” (p. 2). We should resist being forced into a “false dichotomy” between dogmatic religion and reductive materialism when in fact both stances need to yield to a new paradigm that transcends their limitations.

Taylor states that the main idea of his “spiritual approach is very

simple: The essence of reality (which is also the essence of our being) is a quality that might be called spirit, or consciousness” (p. 3). This clearly is opposed to materialism, but also to religion. In the religious paradigm, God is the fundamental premise; in Taylor’s paradigm, spirit or consciousness is fundamental. The difference is major: The notion of God is something we generally take on faith; whereas consciousness is self-evident and pervades human experience. The new paradigm in this way gains a more solid foothold in reality; it provides a starting-point impossible to deny, unlike the old paradigm in which it is possible, even easy, to deny the existence of God. But it is not possible to consciously deny that one is conscious. So, willy-nilly, we are all immersed in spirituality, however shallow and limited our awareness of its potential depths and multiplex meanings.

In framing the structure and intent of the book, Taylor speaks of the explanatory power of spiritual consciousness. Mainstream materialists ensure their identity by denying the reality of anything they can’t explain. Taylor’s book takes the reader on a “tour” (p. 7) of experiences typically glossed over by materialists that need to be explained but cannot be by known physical principles.¹ Explanation becomes possible only by invoking mental and spiritual causes.

The most dramatic challenge to physicalism is consciousness itself, which materialist science has failed to explain. The assumption is that the brain produces consciousness, but “there is no evidence for this at all—despite decades of intensive investigation and theorizing, no scientist has even come close to suggesting how the brain might give rise to consciousness” (p. 5). This ought to be decisive, and the only honest conclusion possible today is that materialism is dead.

But some myths die hard. It has to be said here that the irrational denial of certain phenomena is instructive to observe; the inability to confront certain factual truths may be carried to bizarre extremes. Examples abound; for example, Joe Nickell’s review of a book about the most famous case of levitation on record (Grosso, 2016). The review is published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* (Nickell, 2018). A review of Nickell’s ‘review’ may be found online (Grosso, 2018). Nickell nowhere addresses *any* of the evidence marshalled in the book and instead argues that the saint developed such strong legs from praying on his knees for 35 years, that he was able to jump in the air and fool all of Europe into thinking he could levitate. Nickell’s pseudo-review is a bizarre symptom of the irrational resistance to anything that questions totalitarian materialism.

Taylor is clear about a point often played down or not even mentioned in this type of discussion. The falsehood of materialism is not just an academic issue. On the contrary, materialism “has very serious consequences” (p. 8),

especially evident in our age of looming climate catastrophe, epidemic arms sales, and unprecedented inequity between the rich power-holders and everyone else on Earth. Far from a merely abstract concern, Taylor would have us proceed full-speed ahead toward a new age of “post-materialism,” an age in which spiritual values play a key role.

Chapter by chapter, Taylor lays out the many reasons that prove the failure of materialism while in each case also opening vistas of human potential that materialism automatically would reject. So, for example, Chapter 6 covers “The Puzzle of Near-Death Experiences” (NDEs), evidence for life after death that materialists are duty-bound to reject or, more likely, resolutely ignore. It turns out that there are many puzzles about this experience. We have cases where a clinically dead person is revived and correctly reports observations made of the physical environment in an out-of-body state. Taylor is impressed by the profound spiritual transformation that results from many NDEs, and concludes the phenomenon is authentic and evidence of the emergent post-materialism.

One chapter focuses on the puzzle—puzzling to the materialist—of evidence showing how the mind can change the brain and affect the body, which ought not to occur if materialism is true. The determined materialist, like Daniel Dennett, can insist that our ideas of mentality are illusions. But on the other hand illusions are examples of mental not physical phenomena. In my opinion, if materialism were true, how anyway could we know it was true? If materialism is true, my opinions must be strictly determined by physical not rational forces. I’m not sure how reason can be ‘rational’ in a physical universe totally devoid of mind. Another chapter reviews the puzzle of “awakening experiences,” sudden influxes of heightened awareness, mystical forms of consciousness that transcend what we can imagine the brain producing. These phenomena point dramatically toward the need for a post-materialist paradigm. Any paradigm, economic or philosophical, hostile to “awakening experiences,” as Taylor defines them, is no friend to humanity. A more fully evolved human consciousness is needed at this juncture of history where the end of civilized life is not just an abstract possibility but a looming probability.

Chapters 8 and 10 discuss what Taylor calls the “puzzles” of psychic phenomena and altruism. Again, these are only puzzles to folks who are committed to reductive physicalism; they are relatively rare, and strange, and often inspiring to normal people with open minds.

Surely, materialism falls to pieces in light of the reality of extrasensory perception and psychokinesis. We have only to spell out what is implied by these terms to see how so. Whether it be telepathy, clairvoyance, pre- and retro-cognition, or psychokinesis, we confront alleged human activities

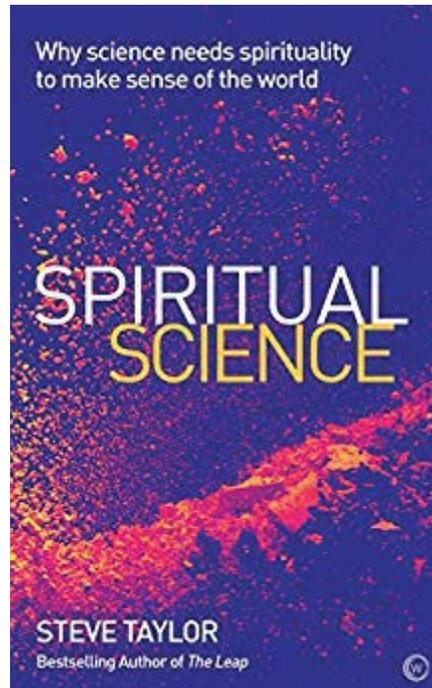
that occur but bypass physical mediation, events wholly at odds with the ‘scientifically’ dominant worldview. The sprawling body of “puzzles” that Taylor reviews under the heading of psychic phenomena is in fact a hammer-blow to materialism, which, when combined with evidence of NDEs (Greyson, 2021 forthcoming) and other forms of survival evidence, spell death for materialism.

We are looking at some of the consequences of lifting the iron curtain of materialism from our view of human performance. Chapter 10 attempts to palliate another blindspot inflicted on our collective vision by materialism. Afflicted by what Raymond Tallis calls *Darwinitus* (Tallis, 2011), science struggles to see the value

and reality of altruism, in other words, the values and rights of *other* centers of sentience. When the Darwinian “struggle for existence” and Hobbes’ “war of all on all” merge, we have the basis of the modern world that is ruled by material power and only faintly and sporadically by the forces of altruism.

Chapters 9 and 11 deal with two puzzling ideas of central importance—evolution and quantum mechanics. In line with the premise and title of his book, which is about spiritual science, Chapter 9 questions the neo-Darwinian account of evolution, which relies on random mutation and natural selection as explanatory, and instead offers a tentative model of spiritual evolution that posits a drive in nature toward increasing complexity and intensity of consciousness. Also, rejecting the all-dominant role of competition in neo-Darwinism, Taylor argues for the efficacy of empathy and co-operation in evolutionary advance. While not offering absolute certainty of anything, Taylor’s expansive (fact-based) worldview is far more optimistic than the brutal prospects of reductionist physicalism or the (often criminal) simplicities of religious fundamentalism.

It seems that some of our sacred intellectual cows are being turned out to pasture. My early impressions about the limits and mortality of neurons



have all been recently upended. Recent research, Taylor reminds us, shows that the brain is more elastic and creative than previously supposed; so that by directed mental effort it is possible to rewire our own brains—another step toward establishing the primacy of mind (see especially Chapter 5). It is true that the materialist can say that the efforts of my will are simply brain states, despite my feeling that a *mental* effort is going on. But this seems no more than a speculative choice, one you would expect a materialist to make. More generally yet, the neo-Darwinian creed is by no means impregnable to doubt, argues Taylor, so we are free to posit a spiritual force driving the evolutionary arc of life, and even perhaps the evolution of the entire universe.²

Taylor devotes Chapter 11 to the question of quantum mechanics. The rise of 17th-century mechanistic science led to the triumph of metaphysical materialism; but the new physics of relativity and especially quantum mechanics have served to restore the primacy of consciousness in nature. For one thing, he quotes Max Planck who flatly declares: “There is no matter as such” (p. 208). In Newtonian physics, consciousness plays no role; in quantum physics, consciousness becomes central. The observer and the observed physical event become inseparable (p. 209), while other quantum effects like entanglement and non-locality also serve to break down the gulf between mind and matter, with mind in the end becoming the key player in the metaphysical play of the universe.

The concluding chapter sums up the arguments for the reality of a spiritual universe and describes how the author sees our endangered species “moving beyond materialism” (p. 219). The first step is to get clear on our vision of reality, so Steve Taylor lays out his “tenets of panspiritism”,³ which are radically at odds with mainline materialism: For example, that life is not an accident of mindless matter but a key part of the evolution of the universe toward ever-greater consciousness and complexity; that our spiritual consciousness can shape our bodies and our brains and transcend both at death, which follows from the fact that consciousness is not a product of the brain but is part of an antecedent universal consciousness; that human beings are not isolated egos but psyches inwardly open to the entire community of being; that human beings possess paranormal and mystical potentials of consciousness that represent the evolutionary direction of the human race; and that the great spiritual purpose of our lives is “self-evolution” (p. 230).

Let me end with what seems the essence of Taylor’s message, which revolves around a revolution of perception. In his own words:

Moving beyond materialism means becoming able to perceive the vividness and sacredness of the world around us, so that we can experience our connectedness with nature and other living beings. (p. 232)

The great challenge then becomes how to institute a revolution in the way we sense, feel, and perceive the world, a transformation of consciousness, and thus a transformation of the world. This might well serve to define one of the great aims of a new spiritual science. There is both an empirical basis and significant human need for the kind of spiritual science Taylor argues for, and the idea of creating a new spiritual science may seem to some a thing whose time has come.

My own sense is that—short of a miracle—the momentum of history is too powerful to stop; the thing must play itself out to the end. The new paradigm will most likely begin to flourish *after* the total physical and cultural dénouement (i.e. self-destruction) of Western materialism. What that picture might look like in any detail is an open question.

Notes

- ¹ The author himself singles out as one of his sources E. Kelly (2007).
- ² See an account both mind-blowing and authoritative by Rees (1998).
- ³ Other terms the author uses or might use are *panpsychism*, *panentheism*, *idealism*. There are nuances here but the central idea is the primacy of mind and consciousness—the opposite of materialism or physicalism.

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