**Note: This is a part of a long discussion: http://www.integralworld.net/readingroom.html#ST**

**Beyond Belief: When Science Becomes A Religion (A response to Lane and Visser)**

I am grateful for David Lane’s extended responses to my essay ‘Beyond Materialism.’ In this piece, I would like to further explore one of my central criticisms of Lane’s perspective, which I don’t believe he has adequately addressed. This is my point that materialism is a metaphysical system, which in some ways is little different from a religious belief system. Some of my points will also be directed towards Frank Visser’s response essay (‘Spiritual Science is a Contradiction in Terms.’)

In this essay, I will focus on three of the typical characteristics of belief systems. The first is that adherents to a religion or belief system accept tenuous assumptions and presuppositions as facts. The second is that adherents may not be consciously aware that they have adopted a belief system, and interpret the world through the prism of their beliefs without being consciously aware of any filtering or distorting. (That is, they believe they are evaluating the world objectively, when in fact they are being selective and prejudiced.) The third aspect I will focus on is the irrationality and prejudice (and sometimes hostility) with which adherents react to evidence which seems to undermine their belief system. I will show how these characteristics apply to the belief system of materialism - and more specifically, to the approach that Lane (and to some extent Visser) has adopted.

**The Tenets of Materialism**

In my book *Spiritual Science*, I list a number of the major tenets of the materialist belief system. To be a materialist, you don’t necessarily have to accept all of them, just as a religious person doesn’t necessarily have to agree with every tenet of their preferred doctrine. But if you accept the general thrust of these tenets, or agree with most of them, then you might consider yourself a materialist. They include the following:

* Life came into being by accident, through the interactions of certain chemicals. Once it had come into existence, it evolved from simple to more complex forms through randomly occurring genetic mutations acted on by natural selection.
* Human beings are purely physical creatures, or machines. There is nothing more to us than the physical stuff - that is, the atoms and molecules and cells - or our bodies and brains. As a result, there is no such thing as a 'soul,' 'spirit' or 'life-force.' These are superstitions that have been dispelled by science.
* Living beings consist of 'selfish genes' whose goal is to replicate themselves. Human beings are merely vehicles for the propagation of our genetic material. The impulse for genetic replication is the primary motivation of human behaviour.

* Consciousness is generated by the brain. The billions of neurons in our brains work together - in some as yet undiscovered way - to produce our subjective experience. This also applies to the workings of the human mind, which can be reduced to (and explained in terms of) brain activity.
* Since consciousness is produced by the brain, and we are nothing more than physical stuff, there can’t be any life after death. When the brain and body cease to function, my consciousness and identity will disappear just as the picture on a television screen disappears when the plug is pulled out.
* As living beings, we are isolated individuals, moving through space in separation to one another. I have my own body and brain, and you have yours, and we can touch each other physically or communicate with one another through language, but we our sense of being - as produced by our brains - is essentially enclosed within the physical stuff of our bodies.
* Paranormal, ‘mystical’ or ‘spiritual’ phenomena cannot be genuine because they contravene the fundamental laws of nature. For example, there is no known energy field which could link one mind to another and make telepathy possible, and no known force which could account for the ability to move objects by mental effort.

On close inspection, all of these tenets are little more than assumptions. It is a fact that atoms and molecules exist. It is a fact that consciousness exists, and that it is associated with neurological activity. It is a fact that there is a close relationship between the mind and the brain. It is factual that life somehow came into being at some point and that evolution has taken place. But it is an assumption that life can be explained wholly in terms of the action and interaction of various chemicals. It is an assumption that consciousness is produced by neurological activity (and therefore that consciousness ends with the death of the brain) and also that mental activity is produced by neural activity. It is an assumption that life came into being by accident, and there is no coherent or convincing theory to explain how this might occurred. It is also an assumption (which is being rejected by more and more contemporary biologists, such as the adherents of the Third Way in Evolution movement) that evolution can be explained wholly in terms of random mutations and natural selection.

There is, in fact, a great deal of evidence that contradicts the above assumptions. Unfortunately I don't have space to describe all of it here. (In *Spiritual Science*, I devote a chapter each to the different areas and examine the evidence for and against them.) In my original post (‘Beyond Materialism’), I focused on three specific problematic areas: consciousness, altruism and evolution. Here I will focus on two other areas: the relationship between the mind and the body, and the problem of the origins of life.

**The Relationship between Mind and Body**

According to materialism, the mind is a shadow of the brain - an epiphenomenon, resulting from the interactions of material particles. As a result, the mind should not be able to influence the functioning or structure of matter, in the same way that a shadow should not be able to affect the object that it’s the shadow of. However, there is a massive amount of evidence for the powerful effect that mental intentions and beliefs can have on the body, and on the brain itself.

Studies of the placebo effect show that simply *believing* that you have undergone medical treatment can bring about the same analgesic or healing effects as actual treatment, and these effects manifest themselves neurologically and physiologically.. One of the most striking examples of the placebo effect is ‘sham surgery’, when procedures are performed ritualistically, without any actual medical interventions. Puzzlingly, this often results in a successful outcome. In 2014, researchers published a comprehensive review of every recorded trial of sham surgery and found 53 cases where it was practiced alongside normal surgical procedures. They found that sham surgery was beneficial in 74 percent of trials, and in half of them, it was beneficial to the same degree as the actual procedure. In some cases, it was found to be more beneficial than the actual procedure. (1) The only way viable way of explaining these effects is in terms of a powerful unconscious influence of the mind over the body, with self-healing properties.

Similar analgesic and healing effects can occur under hypnosis. Recent research with patients who had teeth extracted under hypnosis showed that 'hypnotic-focused analgesia' can increase pain thresholds by up to 220%. This research also found that 93% of patients experienced reduced postoperative pain and haemorrhage.(2) Hypnotic suggestion has been found to alleviate conditions such as epilepsy, neuralgia and rheumatism and - in particular - skin conditions. In highly suggestible people, hypnosis has been used to rapidly heal wounds and burns, to make warts and blisters disappear and to control the bleeding of haemophiliacs. Conversely, highly suggestible people may produce blisters or burn marks, if they are told by a hypnotist that they their skin has been burnt, or if they are blindfolded and the hypnotist pretends to touch them with a red hot poker or another object. (3)

It is also important to consider the phenomenon of neuroplasticity. A vast amount of research has shown how mental activity or training can lead to major changes in brain structure and functioning, including the generation of new neural networks, new cells and the shifting of different functions to different parts of the brain. (4) One could argue that neuroplasticity simply results from parts of the brain exercising themselves more, so that they grow like a muscle. But this is not an appropriate analogy. No one knows how the brain generates new cells and forms new connections between cells, but it certainly isn’t in any way analogous to muscle growth, which occurs through the damage and repair of muscle fibres. Muscle growth certainly doesn’t involve any increasing interconnectivity between cells either. Neurogenesis (the generation of new brain cells) is much more complex and subtle than a simple physiological process.

The point here is that, from the point of view materialism, all of these effects are impossible. For the mind to influence matter, it would be like saying that the images on a computer screen can influence the software or hardware of the computer. All of these effects show that the mind cannot just be an epiphenomenon of the brain. They only make sense if we presume that mind is more fundamental than the matter of the body, and so has the capacity to alter its form and functioning.

**The Origins of Life**

In 1952, a young graduate student called Stanley Miller managed to synthesise amino acids – the basic building blocks of life – from a chemical simulation of the earth’s atmosphere. After this many scientists believed that the problem of the ‘origin of life’ would soon be solved. It seemed inevitable that similar experiments would lead to the formation of a ‘self-replicating’ molecule from those amino acids.

However, more than six decades later, no one has managed to artificially create a self-replicating molecule, and so explain the origin of life. Soon after Miller’s experiment, researchers began to realise that life was actually a lot more complicated than they had presumed. Cells were not simply little packets of chemicals, but highly complex and intricately organised entities. Another problem identified by researchers was the ‘chicken and egg’ problem that DNA needs proteins to function, but protein itself needs DNA to be sequenced properly. So how could one arise without the other?

Some researchers noted the problem that, since life is so complex, and relies on the combination of so many different elements in such an intricate way (all of them building on each other in layers of increasing organisation and interconnectivity), there may not have been enough time for it emerge accidentally on the Earth. Such theorists pointed out that there was only a relatively short ‘window of opportunity’ for life to emerge. The Earth came into being around 4.5 billion years ago, and we know that until 3.9 billion years ago, it was heavily bombarded with meteors, which would have made life impossible. And yet the first signs of life appear in fossil records 3.8 billion years ago. This means that life had no more than 100 million years to come into being. This led to the theory of ‘Panspermia’, suggesting that life may actually begun elsewhere in the universe, and that the Earth may have been ‘fertilised’ from interstellar space. However, as other scientists have pointed out, the odds against this may be even greater than the odds against life starting on this planet.  
 In recent years, scientists have developed a theory that life originated with RNA molecules. (Like DNA, RNA is a nucleic acid that has a role in decoding and expressing genes.) The standard way of thinking about the origin of life was of dozens of molecules coming together simultaneously in a chemical soup. But perhaps life didn't depend on all of these different molecules. RNA molecules have been found to be very versatile, and could perhaps have performed all of the functions of life on their own. However, this theory seems doubtful, because of the simple fact that RNA cannot self-replicate. RNA has also never been created by chemists from scratch. Although it is a lot simpler in structure than DNA, it has proven impossible to make. As a result, many scientists are now sceptical about the importance of RNA in the origins of life.

Other suggestions have been put forward - for example, that life originated with another simpler molecule called PNA. According to this theory, the first cells didn’t emerge gradually and cumulatively, but all at once, in a fully formed state. This sounds a little like creationism, but it may have just depended on the right mix of chemicals. A ‘primordial soup’ could have existed for tens of thousands of years, until suddenly the right elements were in place, and fused together to produce a PNA molecule.

However, this theory is highly speculative too, and there is still no consensus amongst scientists about how life might have begun. Nevertheless, the idea that life on Earth came into being by accident is still taken for granted by many people. This perhaps isn’t surprising, since the alternative to this seems to be creationism. If life didn’t start accidentally, then wouldn’t we have to believe that God created living beings?

But to believe that - in the words of the philosopher Thomas Nagel - it is ‘prima facia impossible that self-reproducing life forms should have come into existence spontaneously’ (5) does not necessarily entail creationism. As Nagel suggests, the world may have a natural tendency to move towards greater value and complexity, so that the origins of life and evolution were not accidental, but inevitable. This tendency to move towards greater complexity expresses itself most obviously in evolution, but it may also have existed in the prebiotic world, generating more and more complex inorganic structures, which eventually led to the formation of cells, and simple life forms.

**Interpreting the World through the Prism of Materialism**

In his response, Lane speaks of the importance of avoiding ‘unnecessary shrubs of magical thinking.’ He would no doubt class Nagel’s explanation of the origins of life as an example of this.

However, the question of what constitutes magical thinking is determined by one’s perspective. Outside the materialist belief system, it is surely magical to presume that consciousness can emerge from physical stuff, that human beings’ mental and psychological functioning is purely generated by neural activity, and that life forms could emerge spontaneously and accidentally from molecules. (Strikingly, the philosopher Colin McGinn has suggested that the idea that the brain could generate consciousness to analogous to water turning miraculously into wine [6]). It is also magical to believe that natural selection working on random mutations could approximate to a creative principle. In his response, Visser suggests that ‘the whole point of Darwin’s theory of natural selection is that it *is* creative!’ But this is not the case. There is nothing creative about occasional beneficial mutations accidentally conferring advantages, so that a life form can manage to survive when pressures eliminate their fellows. As the Third Way theorists suggest, it is very dubious (in fact, magical) to assert that this accidental negative process can give rise to the whole of the novelty and variety of evolution. Even Darwin himself came to regret that he had placed so much emphasis on natural selection in his theory of evolution. Although he still believed that natural selection was the main way in which variety had arisen in evolution, he harboured serious doubts that it was the *only* way. He didn’t believe that natural selection was sufficient to account for the variety of life forms on Earth, and the seeming ease with which they arise.

This brings me on to the second point about belief systems: that they are often surreptitious, in that people often believe that they are evaluating the world objectively, when in fact their perspective is impartial and prejudiced. Both Lane and Visser refer to the Occam’s razor principle that the simplest and least speculative explanation is usually right one. In fact, this has often been used by skeptics of psi and other anomalous phenomena. I have no argument with the principle itself, but - as with the notion of magical thinking - the question of what constitutes simple or speculative is determined by one’s perspective, through the lens of expectations and assumptions. Visser writes that ‘Materialism therefore is the first candidate that comes into view.’ However, materialism’s explanations only seem simple and economical if you have already decided that materialism is true. To my mind, some of materialism’s explanations are not simple or economical at all. Take altruism, for example (as discussed in my original article). Theories that altruism is the result of disguised selfishness, kin selection, ‘costly signalling’ (or the display of resources) or a leftover instinct from when we lived in tribes of extended families seem unnecessarily convoluted. They seem to be attempts to explain away a natural impulse that simply results from our ability to empathise with one another, which itself stems from our fundamental interconnectedness.

There is also nothing simple or economical about materialists’ tortuous attempts to explain near-death experience in neurological terms. The range of different theories is dizzying - cerebral anoxia at the point of death, a rush of hallucinations at return to consciousness, paroxysm of the temporal lobes, the release of endogenous DMT or ketamine, high concentrations of carbon dioxide, altered serotonin activity, REM sleep patterns, psychological dissociation due to trauma, and so on. All of these theories - some of which contradict each other - are speculative and flawed, with many strong arguments (and pieces of evidence) contradicting them. (Again, see my book *Spiritual Science* for an extended discussion of these points.) It seems more simple and economical to accept the idea that consciousness does not have its origin in the human brain. As a result, in some circumstances, it can continue when the brain is inactive.

The same applies to materialist’s attempts to prove that psi phenomena such as telepathy and precognition cannot exist, and to explain away positive findings in psi research in terms of fraud, the ‘file drawer’ effect or flawed methodology. Outside the belief system of materialism, telepathy can be explained simply and economically as another aspect of the fundamental interconnection of human beings (stemming form our shared network of consciousness). The quantum concept of entanglement also suggests a simple means by which telepathy could operate. Entanglement means that, once two particles have interacted, they will always remain connected. No matter how far apart, they will spin together in harmony, and balance each other’s random fluctuations. In other words, particles can’t be treated as separate entities, but only as a part of a whole system. This suggests a fundamental level of interconnection which would allow for the possibility of an exchange of information via telepathy. Precognition can be explained in terms of the fundamental timelessness of fundamental consciousness, which relates to the quantum concept of retro- causation and the ‘transactional’ interpretation of quantum physics (which sees quantum events as an interaction between waves that move both forwards and backwards in time).

Skeptics of psi often claim that it cannot exist because it contravenes the fundamental principles of science. If it really existed, so they say, we would have to completely revise our understanding of physics. But as the above discussion shows, although psi might contravene some of the laws of traditional Newtonian physics, it is completely compatible with many of the findings and interpretations of quantum physics. Again, to believe whether psi contravenes the laws of science depends on your perspective - in particular, whether you have a simplistic Newtonian materialist view of science, or a more nuanced and uncertain scientific perspective implied by quantum physics.

Lane uses another argument that is often made by skeptics of psi and other anomalous phenomena: the argument that (in a phrase usually credited to Carl Sagan) ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.’ But, once again, psi phenomena are only seen as extraordinary through the lens of materialism. From a cultural point of view, psi is not extraordinary. Research has shown that most people believe they have experienced it, and most cultures throughout history have accepted it as a reality. And certainly from the perspective of panspiritism, there is nothing extraordinary about the idea we may sometimes pick up on the intentions or thoughts of people with whom we share the same fundamental consciousness, and the idea that we may sometimes step outside the flow of linear time.

(Incidentally, the ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence’ argument is sometimes used to justify the view that psi experiments should have higher standards of proof and replication than standard scientific procedures. However, this is clearly prejudicial, like saying that certain types of criminals need high levels of evidence to prove their innocence.)

**When Beliefs Systems are Contradicted - Denying the Evidence for Psi**

Like many materialists, Lane suggests that science is an open and objective enterprise and that scientists will gladly update and revise their views when presented with sufficient evidence. As he writes in relation to evidence for psi, ‘The scientific community would welcome such amazing news. Bring it on. Who or what is holding anyone back, particularly now when there are open channels of information available worldwide via the Internet and the World Wide Web?’

However, this is a very naive perspective. It is undoubtedly how science should ideally operate, but in practice, it often doesn’t work like this. Since materialism (or physicalism) is the prevailing worldview that is associated with science (and with modern western secular culture in general), findings and theories which contravene these model are often denied a fair hearing. Some materialists have a blanket refusal to consider the evidence for anomalous phenomena, in a similar way to how many religious fundamentalists refuse to consider evidence against their beliefs.

In fact, there is already abundant evidence for psi. In 2011, the eminent psychologist Daryl Bem - at the present time, professor emeritus at Cornell University - published a paper called ‘Feeling the Future’ in a prestigious academic journal, The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. The paper described the results of 9 experiments involving more than 1000 participants, eight of which showed significant statistical evidence for precognition, or presentiment. Across a variety of different procedures, Bem found that his participants seemed to be able to ‘intuit’ information before it appeared. In a simple example, they were shown a pair of curtains on a computer screen, and asked to click on the curtain where they thought an image would be. At that point an image was randomly generated, and equally likely to appear behind either of the curtains. It was found that a significant number of the participants chose the correct curtain. And since no image was actually there at the time the participants chose, this was seen as evidence of presentiment. (7)

Prominent skeptics were outraged, and dismissed Bem’s findings out of hand. Ray Hyman described the results as ‘pure craziness ... an embarrassment for the entire field’ (8). The physicist Robert Park called it ‘a waste of time ... it leads the public off into strange directions that will be unproductive.’ (9) There was initially no attempt to find flaws with Bem’s methodology, or his interpretation of his results - just a simple blanket refusal to consider that they could possibly be true. The science journalist Jim Schnabel accurately characterized these responses as an attempt to 'suppress the findings of a scientific colleague because his findings threatened his reality' (10).

Bem encouraged other researchers to repeat his experiments, and many did so over the next few years. Perhaps even more significantly than the original experiments, a meta-analysis of 90 attempted replications of the experiments (involving 12,406 participants in 33 different laboratories) showed a highly significant positive result. According to Bem, this provided ‘decisive evidence’ for his experimental hypothesis that human beings could sense future events. (11).

There is a massive array of other evidence which I do not have space to include here. But take just a couple of examples: a meta-analysis of more than three thousand Ganzfeld trials that took place from 1974 to 2004 had a combined ‘hit rate’ of 32 per cent. A seven per cent higher than chance rate may not seem so impressive, but over such a large number of experiments, this equates to odds of 29 quintillion to one - and a figure that is far too significant to explained away in terms of the file drawer effect. (12) Another example is the Ganzfeld experiments that have been undertaken with creative people, with a significantly higher than normal rate of success. In 128 Ganzfeld sessions with artistically gifted students at the University of Edinburgh, a 47% success rate was obtained, with odds of 140 million to one. (13). Similarly, in a session with 20 undergraduates from the Juilliard school of performing arts, the students achieved a hit rate of 50%. (14) Another study primarily with musicians had a 41% success rate (15).

It is not surprising that, as the statistician Jessica Utts has stated, ‘using the standards applied to any other area of science, it is concluded that psychic functioning has been well-established’ (16). Even Ray Hyman admitted at an earlier stage in his career that the research findings on psi ‘do seem to indicate that something bend odd statistical hiccups is taking place. I also have to admit that I do not have ready explanation for these observed effects.’ (17).

So if the evidence is there, why hasn't it been ‘welcomed’ by the scientific community? Why do so many scientists still refuse to take psi seriously?

First of all, it’s important to point out that psi isn’t rejected by all scientists. The evidence for psi - together the theoretical possibility of its existence - has convinced some more open-minded scientists, who weren’t so in thrall to the paradigm of materialism. (Such as Alan Turing, Marie Curie, Wolfgang Pauli, Max Planck, Eugene Wigner and JJ Thompson, Olivier Costa de Beauregard, John Stewart Bell, and many others too numerous to mention.). Sadly though, the evidence for psi is all too often rejected out of hand simply because it contravenes the belief system of materialism.

Even worse, there are cases of skeptics manipulating psi experiments to suppress positive results. In 2005, researchers at Notre Dame University conducted a series of 8 Ganzfeld experiments, which found a highly significant overall ‘hit rate’ of 32%. The researchers admitted that, as skeptics, this result made them feel ‘uncomfortable’, since it came ‘precariously close to demonstrating that humans do have psychic powers’ (18). Seemingly panicked by this, the researchers quickly developed a further experiment, where they matched up individuals who had ‘hits’ during the previous 8 experiments. For some strange reason, these pairs produced the highly significant negative result of a 13% hit rate (significantly lower than the 25% chance rate). Encouraged by this negative result, the researchers claimed that it invalidated the previous 8 experiments, and concluded that they had found evidence that telepathy did not exist.

Similarly, there was a great deal of controversy when the skeptic psi researcher Richard Wiseman attempted to replicate an experiment by Rupert Sheldrake which appeared to show that a dog responded psychically when its owner was on the way home. According to the methodology used by Sheldrake, Wiseman’s four experiments actually yielded a more positive result than Sheldrake’s - the dog sat by the window 78% of the time that its owner was travelling home, compared to 4% during the rest of her absence. (In Sheldrake’s experiments, it was 55%, compared to 4% during the rest of the owner’s absence). (19).

That would seem to be an incontrovertible successful replication of Sheldrake’s experiments. However, Wiseman chose to ignore this data, and used a different criterion of success: Jaytee (the dog) had to go to sit by the window at the exact moment that her owner set off home. If she went to the window before this, this would mean that she had ‘failed.’ And not surprisingly, by this criterion, the experiments were judged to be unsuccessful and bizarrely presented as ‘proof’ that Jaytee (and dogs in general) do not have psychic powers (20).

**Cognitive Dissonance**

All of this shows that it’s always possible to explain away evidence if you don’t like it. If you are strongly attached to a belief system, any evidence that seems to contradict it creates cognitive dissonance, which in turn generates an impulse to ‘bury’ that evidence. Most frequently, this means performing bizarre and highly irrational cognitive contortions, such as when creationists try to explain the existence of fossils by saying that they were put there by God to test our faith (or by Satan to tempt us into unbelief) or when sceptics rejig the methodology of experiments to try to convince themselves that significant results have not occurred.

There is an interesting example of the effect of cognitive dissonance - and the powerful grip of existing beliefs in the face of strong evidence - from the psychologist Susan Blackmore, who spent several years as a psi researcher. One day Blackmore was asked to witness an experiment on telepathy with your children. With admirable candour, she explained her reactions when the results turned out to be positive:

*[T]he children did very well. They really seemed to be getting the right picture more often than chance would predict. I began to get excited; even frightened. Was this really ESP happening right in front of my eyes? Or was there an alternative explanation?.…Somehow I just couldn’t accept that this was psi, and I was to go on arguing about the method used in future years. Was is just perversity? A refusal to accept my own failures? A deep fear of psi? Whatever it was, it led me into constant confusion* (21).

This is a very revealing passage. Blackmore is describing a state of cognitive dissonance - the confusion of facing evidence that conflicts with one’s beliefs; the anxiety that arises when one’s worldview is threatened. This is probably very close to the anxiety that church leaders felt when they were confronted with scientific evidence that the Earth is not the centre of the Solar System. Blackmore is honest enough to analyse her cognitive dissonance and question why she is unable to accept the evidence, but was unfortunately unable to let go of her ideological conviction.

Another excellent description of cognitive dissonance comes from the clinical psychologist Elizabeth Mayer. Originally skeptical about psi, she began to change her attitude after a dowser managed to locate her daughter’s stolen harp. After hearing about the significant findings of the Ganzfeld studies, she volunteered herself as a participant. She acted as a ‘receiver,’ and describes her reaction when found she was able to pick out the images she had been sent:

*I felt the tiniest instant of overwhelming fear. It was gone in a flash but it was stunningly real. It was unlike any fear I've ever felt. My mind split. I realised that I knew something I was simultaneously certain that I didn’t know….The feeling was terrifying. My mind had slipped out from under me and the world felt out of control….I recovered quickly and launched in on logical explanations.* (22)

Realising that the results couldn’t be accounted for by coincidence, Mayer began to revise her views about reality, which led to her developing her own Freudian-based theory of why sceptics are so resistant to evidence for psi. This is a good example of the open-mindedness and flexibility which scientists should ideally possess.

Mayer’s conclusion was that sceptics have a deep unconscious fear that their beliefs may be wrong. And this is undoubtedly true. Belief systems perform an important psychological function. They provide a narrative to make sense of our lives, giving us a sense of orientation and understanding of our predicament. At the same time, to feel that we can explain the world provides a satisfying feeling of control, a sense that the nature is ‘under our thumb’ and in thrall to us. As a result, from a psychological point of view, it is extremely important for materialists to maintain their worldview. They react in a very hostile way to any phenomena which seems to invalidate it, and go to great lengths to explain away (or suppress) evidence that contravenes their beliefs.

Materialists see themselves as a part of a historical ‘enlightenment project’ whose aim is to overcome superstition and irrationality. The Enlightenment movement that first flourished during the eighteenth century was originally a process of liberation from the hegemony of the church and monarchy, replacing dogma and myth with scientific knowledge. And there is no doubt that this project has been massively beneficial to the human race - medicine, technology, freedom from superstitions and taboos, and from social and intellectual oppression, a truer, more evidence-based concept of reality.

However, the enlightenment project has unfortunately led to a blanket opposition to any phenomena that appear to be ‘irrational.’ More specifically, it has led to a ‘category error’ of associating phenomena such as telepathy and pre-cognition (or indeed, spiritual experiences or near-death experiences) with phenomena such as fundamentalist Christianity or Islam, or such as superstitions and taboos.

**The Tenets of Panspiritism**

I would therefore encourage materialists to examine whether their beliefs are really the end result of rational examination of evidence, or whether they have adopted a belief system which is appealing because of the sense of orientation, control and identity it provides (and because it may seem like the only rational alternative to conventional religion, or because it is so closely associated with the scientific enterprise, and so has been unconsciously absorbed). I would encourage materialists to examine whether their skepticism towards psi and other anomalous phenomena is the result of rationality, or is a form of prejudice against findings which would contravene and undermine their belief system. I would encourage them to look at the massive amount of evidence against simplistic reductionist and physicalist explanations of human experience and nature. Materialism may be appealing because of its simplicity - because it provides a seemingly coherent narrative to account for human life and the world - but as a metaphysical system, it is hopelessly flawed.

And myself? Of course, I wouldn’t pretend that I am free from beliefs and assumptions. When I was younger, I adopted a materialist vision of the world for a few years (influenced by existentialist philosophy), until I realised that it contradicted with my own spiritual experiences, and my own philosophical intuitions about the nature of reality. After that, my outlook was broadly ‘post-materialist,’ without being particularly coherent. It was really only when I wrote *Spiritual Science* that I realised I had to attempt to construct a more coherent form of post-materialism, based on my intuitions, my experiences and the evidence I was aware of. This led to what I call ‘panspiritism,’ which is still in an ongoing process of development.

Of course, panspiritism is a metaphysical paradigm in the same way as materialism, with its own tenets. You could call it a belief system too. But I would argue that it is a much more valid paradigm, supported by much more evidence, and with the capacity to include (and explain) a vast range of phenomena which don’t fit into the materialist model. This inclusivity is one of the most important aspects of panspritism. The materialist model can only function by excluding psychic phenomena, near-death experiences, spiritual experiences, the self-healing through mental influence, ’pure’ altruism and many other phenomena. This is the only way that such a narrow and rigid worldview can preserve itself - to ignore everything which it can’t explain. It’s similar to how a small totalitarian state might try to preserve itself, by barring any travel or media contact with other countries, and pretending that the rest of the world doesn’t really exist. But the panspiritist worldview has no need to exclude anything - which is a sign of its validity.

So let me finish by listing some of the tenets of panspiritism, just as I began by listing some fo the tenets of materialism:

* Life did not come into being through the accidental interactions of certain chemicals, but as the result of the innate tendency of the universe - propelled by consciousness itself - to move towards greater complexity. At a certain point, when material entities reached a certain degree of complexity, they became able to receive and transmit universal consciousness. This was when life began.
* Evolution is not an accidental process. Once life forms had come into existence, evolution was impelled by the innate tendency of consciousness to generate greater complexity. More complex life forms enabled universal consciousness to express itself more intensely, manifesting itself as individual consciousness.
* Rather than being just biological machines, human beings are, both mentally and physically, expressions of spirit, or fundamental consciousness.
* As the previous point suggests, our individual consciousness - our subjective or inner life - is not generated by the brain. It is a fundamental universal quality, which our brains ‘receive’ and canalise into our individual being.
* Mental phenomena cannot be reduced to neurological activity. There may be correlations between mental and neurological activity, but there is certainly not a one way causal link. Neurological changes can affect mental experience, but mental experience can also bring about neurological changes.
* In a similar way, the mind exerts a powerful influence on the body. It can bring about healing and illness, and even change the structure of the body. This is because, while both mind and body are expressions of consciousness, the mind is a more subtle and intense manifestation of consciousness.
* Since consciousness is not produced by the brain, and since we are more than just physical stuff, we should be open to the possibility of some form of life after death. Consciousness will not come to an end when our brains and bodies die.
* Human beings are not isolated entities, moving through the world in separation to one another. We share the same essence, and are therefore deeply interconnected. We express (and become aware of) this connection through empathy, compassion and altruism.
* Our normal state of awareness is limited and delusory, and does not provide us with an accurate perception of the world ‘as it is.’ In higher states of consciousness - or awakening experiences - we gain a more expansive and intense awareness, and attain a fuller and truer perception of reality.
* Paranormal phenomena such as telepathy and precognition do not contravene the laws of science. From the perspective of post-materialism, they are not only possible, but natural. For example, since we share the same essential consciousness with other human beings, it is not surprising that we sometimes sense each other’s thoughts and intentions (as in telepathy).

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