

GUEST EDITORIAL

PHYSICALISM

BY ROBERT S. GEBELEIN¹

Scientism, reductionism, materialism, physicalism—the assertion that there is no reality beyond the physical or what can be explained by known physical laws—has been accepted at our major educational institutions as some kind of absolute inviolable truth, such that persons suggesting the possibility of such things as precognition, telepathy, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, the existence of a spiritual reality, the power of prayer, reincarnation, levitation, or intelligent design are automatically dismissed as mentally incompetent, and denied publication, funding, and employment. And yet, despite these obstacles, qualified and responsible people are studying these dismissed subjects and building up a body of knowledge (e.g., Radin, 2013; Schmicker, 2002; Tart, 2009). The result is that our major educational institutions, having become paralyzed by their adherence to physicalism, are falling farther and farther behind actual cultural knowledge. I am sending this to the presidents of our top-ranked educational institutions, to see what they can do to end the paralysis and revive the flow of information and ideas.

There seems to be a fear on the part of some people that acknowledging the existence of “spiritual” phenomena will take us right back to religion again. So the first thing we need to do is to separate the spiritual from religion. Religion is primarily fiction created to explain and deal with the unknown, primarily the spiritual. Religion presents itself as a rigid authoritarian belief system, pretending to be absolute ultimate truth, to give people the security they want. Religion will always be incompatible with science, not because it deals with the spiritual, but because it is a rigid belief system. The spiritual can be explored scientifically, as some people are now doing, simply by observing the evidence and drawing valid logical inferences from it. No religious assumptions (like the existence of a “God”) have to be made.

But science has overextended itself by trying to replace religion. With Darwin’s theory of the origin of species, it was no longer necessary to have a Creator to explain our existence. Matter simply assembled itself, according to known physical laws. Everything was known or could be known through physical science.

Biologists themselves have accumulated the evidence to refute Darwin’s theory. New species have appeared too quickly, in geological time, to have evolved through the process of adaptation, and they have appeared fully formed, and not in gradual stages of adaptation (e.g., *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1983; *Illustra Media*, 2009). Biologists can’t admit that Darwin’s theory has been refuted, because their whole belief system rests upon it (e.g., Dawkins, 1987). We are thrown back to the realization that we don’t really know. Physicalism has become the new fiction to explain the unknown.

¹ *Editor’s Note:* Robert Gebelein is the Business Manager of the *Journal of Parapsychology*. The editorial is a revised version of a letter he sent to the presidents of over 137 top-ranked American colleges and universities in 2013. As with all our Guest Editorials, the views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the *Journal of Parapsychology* or its Editor. The present editorial does, however, conform to my desire that our editorials be provocative.

What is the scientific basis for physicalism?

In order for physicalism, scientifically, to be the absolute and inviolable truth it is treated as, it would have to be demonstrated scientifically, absolutely and inviolably. And I don't see that proof anywhere. In order to establish scientifically that there is no reality beyond the physical, one would need a complete knowledge of everything. With the discovery of dark matter, it should be clear that we are nowhere near a complete knowledge of even the physical, let alone those dimensions which may yet be undetected.

Conversely, the other side of the logical proposition "There are no such things" is that if we can find only one such thing, the proposition is falsified. In 1958, I dreamed of my grandmother's death an hour before I received the telegram. That's all the evidence I ever needed to know there was a reality beyond what had been explained in my physics courses at Harvard.

The Catholic Church has recorded thousands of miracles. The Christian Science Church has recorded thousands of miraculous cures. All this evidence, along with my own experience, is dismissed as "anecdotal evidence" because it wasn't acquired by members of the scientific establishment. This is supported by the further assertion that all persons outside their social group are unintelligent, uninformed, and superstitious (of course, without the necessary psychological testing).

This is not scientific thinking. This is in-group thinking, where members of the in-group believe they are superior to people in the out-group, who have faults that in-group people don't have (Berelson & Steiner, 1964). It is related to psychological projection and class prejudice.

If you belong to a social group, any group, you must conform to its norms and at least pay lip service to its opinions, attitudes, and beliefs. I have seen this demonstrated with small groups of boys, like the gang on the street corner (Berelson & Steiner, 1964). I believe it also applies to larger groups, like the Catholic Church, the Hippies, and the scientific community.

"Science" is a method of acquiring knowledge. "Science" is also a social group of people who practice the scientific method. Not all of the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of people in this social group are arrived at by the scientific method. Ideally, scientists would conform to the scientific method, with the highest status in the social group being rewarded to those who practice the scientific method most faithfully. This seems to be generally true when they are working inside their fields of expertise or within the boundaries of physicalism. But many of their views on fields outside the domain of physicalism were not determined by the scientific method, and conformity to these views is enforced by pre-scientific methods of social domination and manipulation like ridicule and ostracism. While the scientific in-group is not allowed to take people's lives for extreme deviation from its norms, it can take away their livelihood, by denying them publication, funding, and employment.

It should be obvious that if scientists limit their study to physical reality, then they are not qualified to give a scientific opinion on what may lie beyond. But science has (rightfully) earned such a huge status in the present culture such that all opinions of scientists are accepted as "scientific," whether arrived at by the scientific method or not. To say that the viewpoint of scientists is "limited," or that they are "not qualified," is a violation of the rules of status. Only persons of status, in this case scientists themselves, are authorized to say who is "qualified" and who is not.

But I am surprised that persons of status have not come forward and recognized that scientists are not qualified to operate outside of their areas of expertise. And I am surprised that persons of status have not come forward and recognized that illegitimate arguments like ridicule and ostracism are keeping physicalism in power. Doesn't every undergraduate learn the difference between legitimate and illegitimate arguments? Yet here is a consensus, among the highest-ranked colleges and universities in the United States, supporting physicalism. The power of in-group thinking is enormous.

In-group thinking is the only way that I know to explain the assertion that Carl Jung was a "mystic." If you know what a mystic is, you know that Carl Jung was not a mystic. A mystic is a person who tries to bypass the evidence of the senses and reasoning in search of deeper truths—just the opposite of a scientist. Carl Jung, actually, was more of a scientist than those who rejected him, because when he saw

evidence of a spiritual reality in his patients' dreams, he accepted it. But because he violated the primary taboo of the in-group, they had to reject him. The way they chose to reject him was to identify him with the out-group. This is a common ingredient in in-group jokes and insults. For example, the editor who recently published a peer-reviewed paper on intelligent design in a major journal was called a "Bible-thumper."

So there is this widespread acceptance in the academic community of this labeling of Carl Jung as a "mystic," without a peep of protest, because everybody in the in-group understands the joke. And, even better, Carl Jung's greatest scientific discovery has become a dictionary definition of the word "mysticism" (Merriam-Webster, 1996), because that word has been used so often by academic people to mean "Whatever Jung was." This is a mess that needs to be unsnarled.

Another assertion in the academic community is that Edgar Cayce (it is whispered) was a fraud. It has to be whispered, because if it were said out loud, it would be grounds for a very expensive lawsuit. I have not seen any legal or scholarly evidence to indicate that he was fraudulent in any way, and I am challenging the academic community to produce such evidence.

Not only has physicalism worked to block our view of the spiritual, but it has inhibited our view of the mental as well. The only way we know that we have such a thing as the "mind" is because we are able to sense certain mental processes—our thoughts, our emotions, our memories, and our dreams. The early psychologists called these internal perceptions "introspection." I prefer to call them "mental senses," to make it clear that I am referring only to internal mechanisms of perception, as differentiated from other mental activity like brooding and fantasizing (Gebelein, 1985).

The evidence of the mental senses has been called "subjective," suggesting that it is biased and therefore inaccurate, whereas the evidence of the physical senses has been called "objective," suggesting that it is independent of the human mind and therefore unbiased and completely accurate. The rationale for this thinking is that more than one person can observe the same physical event, whereas one can observe only one's own mental processes. But actually ALL perceptions are subjective. Having multiple observers only creates a kind of collective subjective, where the average of the observations smooths out the discrepancies of individual observations. "Objectivity" is just another one of the assertions supporting physicalism (Gebelein, 1985; Sheldrake, 2012).

Actually, in practice, there usually aren't multiple scientists observing the same physical event. For example, scientists studying gorillas don't all study the same gorilla. They each study their own gorilla, and then they compare results. In the same way, mental events observed with the mental senses can be replicated.

The early psychologists were having trouble studying mental processes using the mental senses, because there were discrepancies and inaccuracies in their subjects' reports. In addition to this problem, I believe that the continuing ridicule from the physical scientists, saying that the psychologists weren't really doing "science," pressured them into abandoning the study of mental processes and switching over to behaviorism, studying physical processes observable with the physical senses.

In order to study the mind scientifically, one must observe the mind, and the only way to do that is with the mental senses. So in switching to the physical senses, the psychologists abandoned the study of the mind. Studying the physical brain is not the same thing.

There is the assertion that "The mind is nothing but the physical brain." This has been falsified in recent cases where people have had conscious "near-death" experiences when medical instrumentation has shown no brain activity at all. The most publicized of these experiences is described in the book, *Proof of Heaven*, by Eben Alexander, MD (2012). He has not proved that there is a "heaven," or life after death, but he experienced very active mental processes while the medical instruments were showing no brain activity.

Some scientists say, "I don't read that kind of stuff." But ignoring the evidence is not science; it is prejudice.

While the early psychologists were having trouble studying mental processes, the early psychoanalysts like Freud and Jung accumulated a huge body of knowledge about mental processes via the mental

senses, including considerable knowledge of why people's reports of their mental processes are inaccurate (defense mechanisms, rationalizations). When my friends at Harvard in the mid-1950s described Western philosophy as "a complex rationalization of the universe," they were reflecting this new knowledge.

Freud and Jung have now been much maligned, but people who have successfully completed psychotherapy have replicated many of their findings (and falsified others). If the evidence of the mental senses was respected, we would be able to build on that knowledge. But because of the domination of physicalism, the evidence of the mental senses has been dismissed (Alloy, Jacobson, & Acocella, 1999, pp. 107–108), and that whole body of knowledge is lost.

Even within the limitations of physical science, J. B. Rhine was able to show evidence of psychic abilities in people. His experiments (as of 1980) had been replicated in no fewer than six independent laboratories, in five different countries (Beloff, 1980).

And yet in 1988, the National Academy of Sciences issued a report with the assertion, "The committee finds no scientific justification from research conducted over a period of 130 years for the existence of parapsychological phenomena" (Druckman & Swets, 1988, p. 22).

Actually the committee *did not look at* the research of 130 years. The report contained only five references to the peer-reviewed *Journal of Parapsychology*, and no references to the peer-reviewed *British Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, or the peer-reviewed *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, or the peer-reviewed *European Journal of Parapsychology*. It does not even mention the name "J. B. Rhine," let alone refute his findings and the people who replicated them throughout the world.

In 2011, I mentioned this in a letter to the President of the National Academy of Sciences, Ralph Cicerone, saying that the scope of this study was insufficient to support its sweeping conclusion, and he replied, saying that he was asking a "disinterested, knowledgeable party" to review the 1988 report. At least I can say that the reference to the 1988 NAS study has been removed from the definition of "parapsychology" in Wikipedia. Some progress has been made.

As if ridicule and ostracism and withholding of funding weren't enough, when Cornell Professor Daryl Bem recently demonstrated precognition (Bem, 2011), the scientific in-group actually changed the math in order to dismiss his results (Wagenmakers, Wetzels, Borsboom, & van der Haas, 2011).

Daryl Bem agrees with the establishment view that "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." I agree with Palmer (1987) that this exerts a bias. The same criteria for evidence should apply to all claims, because, as I explained to him, the word "extraordinary" implies some presupposition of knowledge about the claim that hasn't itself been demonstrated.

Daryl Bem says that his experiments have been replicated in 30 countries by 80 independent observers. In the face of this and other massive evidence, one can ask the question: Who is making the extraordinary claims—those showing evidence of phenomena beyond physicalism, or those trying to dismiss this knowledge?

The combination of the massive amount of evidence refuting physicalism, and the illegitimate arguments supporting physicalism, and the widespread (universal?) acceptance of physicalism as a dominant belief system in our most prestigious colleges and universities, without a peep of protest, is really unbelievable. There must be enormous forces of coercion keeping people in line.

I am hoping that the presidents of our top-ranked colleges and universities have a high enough status in the in-group, collectively if not individually, to be able to question the domination of physicalism and expose it to the scrutiny of critical thinking, perhaps first to identify the social forces that make this belief system so dominant. And then, of course, with their legitimate authority, I am hoping that they will initiate the necessary reforms, in the interests of freedom of inquiry and the accuracy of our cultural knowledge, knowing that reform will come eventually and that those who initiate it will receive the credit for it. Towards that end, I have some suggestions:

1. All subjects should be debatable. No subject should be career-ending.
2. Lawyers who use illegal methods are disbarred. Similarly, scientists who use unscientific methods should lose their credentials. Science needs to police itself, to protect those of lower status in the in-group. To start with, the scientists themselves should understand that they lose credibility when they use unscientific methods.
3. Scientists in any particular field should be considered the best qualified to operate in that particular field, and should be considered the best qualified to determine what the rules of evidence should be for that particular field. For example, physical scientists should not impose their rules of evidence on people studying mental processes.

A majority of academic people accepted the reality of psychic phenomena a long time ago (Bem & Honorton, 1994). Change is long overdue.

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*18 Hawthorne Drive
Durham, NC 27712
bobgeb@frontier.com*