

Is Materialism Resistible?
And What does this mean for ME (Myself)?
(and should we perhaps listen
to Weber?, or to Dawkins?, or to Boethius?)

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Abstract

(Slide 1) This talk centres around the theme of how we might relate to the extraordinary fact that for each of us, I exist, and ME, or Myself, or my Self is (or seems to be) at the "absolute centre" of it all.

In the first half I describe a "package" of Materialism, Nominalism, Monism and Moral Subjectivism as a base case against which to examine this mind-blowing fact, and suggest that adding "Enchantment" and "Humanism" provide powerful ways to make the package appealing. In the second half I look briefly at Metaphysical (Panpsychism, Idealism, Dualism) and Religious (Non-theist and Theist) alternatives for those who find the base case package unappealing. In the talk I address, first, the "Materialists" (e.g. the Atheists), then the "Disenchanted" (e.g. the Metaphysicians), then the "Committed" (e.g. the Spiritual and Religious).

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October 2025

Update – version 1. 09/10/2025. (See page 15)

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(except for Appendix 2, where copyright belongs to Matt Whiteley – see the last page.)

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Prologue

(Slide 2) “There is a certain feeling or state that for me [often late at night] motivates all of my philosophical or intellectual thought...

The feeling is of the sheer absurdity of my existence.

In fact, of all existence, the sheer, bonkers, unfathomable, preposterous fact that

I exist,

and I don’t know why ...

Here I am, just existing ...

As they say: w.t....”

(3) Can I ask you to pause and consider whether this is a feeling you can identify with?

Have you ever experienced that extraordinary feeling of “vertigo” or dizziness when you really allow yourself to think about what it means to actually exist?

Have you ever thought?

- You arrived here, in your body and your life – not someone else’s;
- Life itself seems to an extraordinary miracle.
- What is around you is unbelievable, extraordinary, beyond comprehension.
- And yet we try – we try and try to make some tiny limited sense of just some of it.
- And, somehow, “we feel the ‘I’ or ‘me’ is always present [absolutely] in the centre of our existence”. [Shen. 2025.]

(4) The words I am quoting come from the article written by Matt Whiteley¹ that was circulated before this talk. **[See Appendix 2. Whiteley 2025]**. This article really captivated me when I read it. So much so that I decided to build my talk around it today.

Introduction

(5) This talk is borne of three things that happened to me in the past year. The most recent was discovering Matt Whiteley’s article, some of which I have just quoted.

(6) And before that, I had encountered a talk given elsewhere by Ted Hodgson, previously a member of the Pinner Philosophy Group. In part he based that talk on the ideas of Max Weber, a late 19th century philosopher, who lamented that the world is disenchanted by Materialism. Ted instead pointed to the possibility of “Enchantment, ... another account of materialism which is ... delicately placed on the boundaries of physics and metaphysics”. I found this a wonderful phrase. I feel that this is what many people who have a scientific (and perhaps overly logical bent) – might be yearning for.

(7) But the journey of this talk really began last year when Adrian and I shared a train home after a Pinner Philosophy Group talk. He turned to me and said, in the way that only Adrian can:

(8) *“You know, I am sometimes starting to wonder whether everyone else is right ..., and I am wrong!”*

¹ Whiteley writes about a range of philosophical questions on Substack and Medium. He told me that:

“I generally keep myself to myself in terms of biography... I'm not an academic by work, just writing about what I'm thinking about and what interests me. Glad you find some of it helpful!”

A wry joke, perhaps, but to Adrian's bemusement I took him seriously. I thought about this; and realized that up until then I had consciously chosen NOT to have "point of view".

(9) So I decided to move slightly away from my approach of "listen and learn"; to start to "think for myself". I decided I would select an "-ism"- one philosophical position that I would try to understand in more depth, that I could connect to, and that I could use as a comparator when I encounter new issues in philosophy.

(10) To help me I went back to an article I found some years ago by Jeff Carreira entitled "Eight Confusing Philosophical Terms Explained" [Carreira 2010]. He starts by describing everything in terms of dualisms. And the first, core dualism concerns REALITY. The duality is between Mind and Matter – which is more real?

(11) Well, given my scientific background, my first instinctive answer was – Matter is more real than Mind, obviously.

(12) Carreira then gave me four more choices. Here they are. I'll come back to each of these; but after a bit of reading about each; falling heavily on my previous prejudices; and in line with my previous answer, I chose **Materialism** as my candidate "-ism"!

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| • Idealism vs Materialism | What is real? (Philosophers call this Ontology) |
| • Rationalism vs Empiricism | How do we know what is real? |
| • | (Philosophers call this Epistemology) |
| • Realism vs Nominalism | Are there real entities behind universal ideas? (“Universals”) |
| • Dualism vs Monism | Are Mind and Body the same thing? |

(13) So that sets the scene for my talk.

Knowing you now just a little, as I do, I am feeling that there are at least three types of people in the audience today, and perhaps more.

- There are the Materialists – who are looking for a description of reality that seems logically sensible;
- There are the Disenchanted – who feel that even though Materialism may be a logical destination when a cold harsh light is shone upon it, they hope that somehow there may be something more;
- And there are the Convinced – who, like many people I know and love, will draw real strength from their core religious or spiritual beliefs which transcend Materialism.

This is how Matthew Whiteley's article runs – he deals with Materialism, then Disenchantment and then Conviction. So, I have structured this talk in the same way - to cover each in order; and you can see here the topics I will cover in each section.

(14) My plan is to divide up our two hours together into one hour of presentation and 55 minutes of discussion – in 6 discussion sessions. And if we are to do justice to the last two sessions - which I really do not want to compress - we must take our break at 11:25, so please bear with me when I insist on this. Thanks.

So, let's start.

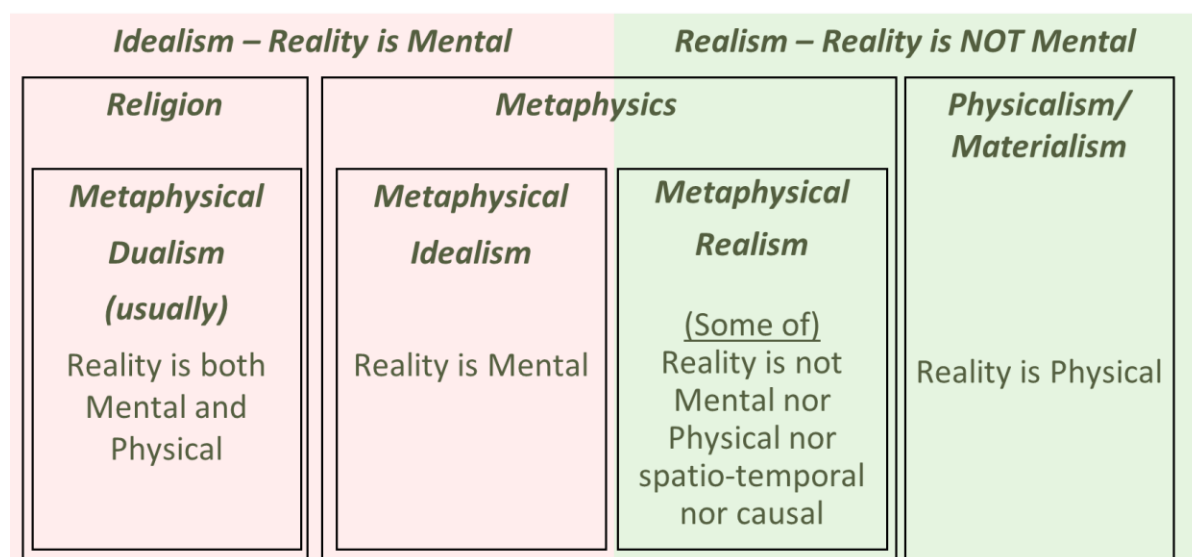
Part 1: For the MATERIALISTS

(15) This first part is for the MATERIALISTS. Whiteley asserts that “Life is what we [do with] the assumptions we can make about REALITY...” [Whiteley. 2025]. Let’s look at some of those assumptions.

(16) Firstly, Materialism is the view that everything that exists is either made of matter or is dependent on matter for its existence. Everything - including even our innermost thought - either is, or comes from, matter. And that is all - there is nothing else. Which also implies that there is no afterlife.

Actually, nowadays it may well be better to talk about Physicalism [Fu & Warje 2025]. Physicalism takes into account the modern scientific understanding that the observable universe, what is in it and how it behaves includes not only matter, but also energy, and the forces and fields of physics, and space, time and information; and, also, the laws of physics (and perhaps even the laws of mathematics) [Stanford 2021].

In most contexts Materialism and Physicalism are taken to be synonyms, and I will use these terms interchangeably from now on.²



(17) So, in the right box of this diagram, Physicalism or Materialism says that Reality is Physical. But what are the alternatives? Here is a simplified map of some of the other main possibilities.

Idealism (the red area on the left) says that, ultimately, all of reality is mental [Pradahh 2024]. In opposition to that, Realism (the green area on the right) simply says NO, reality is NOT mental [Khlemtzos 2025].

On the far left, many Religions say that reality is both physical and mental. And finally Metaphysical Realism³, the third box – says that some of reality is neither physical nor mental, and does not exist in space and time, and has no “causal” effects. In which case,

² In many respects Naturalism is a synonym too.

³ The word Metaphysics is used here in the sense that metaphysics and science are distinct non-overlapping fields; rather than Metaphysics being an umbrella term which covers all of reality, including materialism and, of course, religion. [Routledge 2025].

what is it? This is the box where Plato's Universals, would sit – if they exist; as would the Abstract Concepts of Mathematics [Balaguer 2025]. [See Endnote 1].

I will return to all these concepts in more depth later.

A Possible “Package” driven by Materialism/ Physicalism

(18) As soon as I had chosen Materialism as my candidate “ism”, I realised that Materialism on its own does not cover enough of the sweep of the philosophical landscape to allow me to compare it to the wide range of philosophical issues I was encountering.

(19) That is why Carreira talked about eight ideas - and four dualities. I realised that I needed to make a choice across all the options [Carreira. 2010].

However, within this list I chose not to address Rationalism versus Empiricism here, because it is not relevant for this package; though I do address it in my end notes to this talk. [See Endnote 2].

(20) Next, consider Realism versus Nominalism. This is a new distinction to me, and a really crucial one. The question Carreira poses is whether there are real “things”, or entities, “out there” behind the so-called “universals” that we use in language all the time. These would be in addition to the physical world that we see around us.

Realism says there are, Nominalism says there not.

Essentially Metaphysical Realism adopts Plato's idea that there are real things which sit behind “universal ideas”. As an example, is JUSTICE an actual thing? That is, is there more than simply a concept that we call justice? Or are there just individual instances of justice which are real; which we then choose to group together under a category, or a “universal”, called Justice, for convenience in our communication with each other?

To me, for this package, if reality consists only of physical materials, energy, forces and fields - and nothing else - then it seems odd to assume that there are real entities behind universal ideas.

(21) So I chose Nominalism - meaning that we create names for the “universals” for convenience of communication, not because they are real entities.

Which then means, for example, that “redness” and “consciousness” are not real entities – they are just conceptual collective or descriptive nouns for individual instances of being red and being conscious. In his later work Wittgenstein pointed out that we do this a lot – turning adjectives into nouns; and this can trap us into thinking that the nouns we create are real entities, instead of just being collective nouns. [Wittgenstein. 1953]. So, it may be better to use the adjective – “being conscious” – rather than the collective noun – “consciousness”.

(22) And finally, Dualism or Monism? Materialism or Physicalism is very much a Monist view. There is only the physical - and nothing else. [Wikipedia – Materialism]. So, having chosen Materialism, it seems unavoidable that I should choose Monism.

(23) Which means that for this package of ideas, the Mind and the Brain are the same thing [McLeod 2025].

BUT...this package contains one HUGE hole. What about Morality? The eight “isms” in Carreira's article do not address morality. This seems a large gap, as ethics and morality

represent one of the most important highest-level key themes of philosophy. So, I decided to add this in as well.

(24) So, what are our sources of morality? The vast majority of people feel moral feelings deeply. BUT... does that mean that morals exist objectively, rather than coming from biological evolution? And what about the idea that Morality is TOO IMPORTANT to just say that moral truths simply exist and are “handed down” from somewhere else or someone else; and that we therefore need to accept them and blindly follow them?

(25) The key philosophical distinction around Morality seems to be between:

- On the one hand, Moral Objectivism (or Moral Universalism), which holds that moral truths exist objectively, independently of human opinions, beliefs, or cultural practices; [Gowans, Chris. 2021]
- On the other hand, Moral Relativism, where moral statements are not objective truths, rather they reflect the subjective feelings and attitudes of individuals or groups. [Gowans, Chris. 2021]

Materialism as a view would seem to be consistent with Moral Relativism, uncomfortable though that may seem. So, I added Moral Relativism to my package. [Endnote 3].

(26) So, here is my candidate “package” of “isms” which – if I understand them a bit, might be usefully compared against whatever philosophy is being discussed – to give a reference point which makes thinking about new concepts more manageable.

To recap, the package consists of Materialism, Nominalism, Monism and Moral Relativism. This may or may not be a package that one likes – but does that make it any less credible as a view? I would suggest that the criterion for judging the package is not whether one finds it attractive, but whether one finds it coherent.

- **Materialism**, or **Physicalism** as it is now called - everything, including the thoughts in our brains, consists of, or arises from, physical reality. There is nothing else.
- **Nominalism** - there are no real entities behind the names we give to “universals” as concepts; (and abstract concepts like numbers etc are part of Physicalism).
- **Monism** - for this package, mind and body are the same thing.
- **Moral Relativism** - there are no objective moral principles; instead, morals arise in people.

I want to emphasize that I was not choosing, and have not chosen, something that I “believe in”. I was simply looking for a comparator, an “illuminator”, through which I could better understand the philosophical topics I was encountering. So, these are not “my position”. But I have found that they provide a powerful template against which to compare other philosophical ideas.

Arguments for the “Materialism package”

(27) Finally, why might this package - and Materialism in particular - make sense?

I did not feel that I could adequately summarise the very diverse arguments that I had encountered that address this question. So - as an experiment - I asked ChatGPT to summarise the arguments for me. I then amended the arguments, based on my research. Here is the resulting list of seven arguments in favour of materialism.

(28) The first two arguments address the science:

- Firstly, Materialism is the best fit with the most successful and predictive system we have: science, combined with logic, [Stoljar 2024] and;
- Secondly, Materialism provides a common explanatory foundation across all domains of knowledge.⁴

(29) The next three arguments address the mind - which we will discuss much more later when we cover Consciousness.

- Firstly, the mind is very closely tied to the brain - it therefore seems reasonable to infer that the mind is a physical phenomenon.
- Second, a physicalist explanation of the world, and especially of the mind, fits seamlessly with Darwinian evolution.
- And third, we have strong evidence to suggest that "... physical events have only physical causes". [Vincente. 2006]. The implication is therefore that mental phenomena are physical. [Yalowitz 2025].

So far, these five reasons may create a rather "academic" list - without too much humanity to it. But it is a stronger list than it looks at first glance, and it has underpinned the adoption by many, many people of Materialism as their underlying worldview or mindset - even if they are not really aware of it.

(30) And while to some the first five arguments may perhaps look like less than convincing proof, the last two arguments highlight that the alternatives are even more problematic. Such (it would seem) is the nature of metaphysics and philosophy.

These arguments say:

- Firstly, compared with the alternatives, Materialism wins by offering a leaner, more unified view of reality. This is the Occam's Razor argument.⁵
- And finally, Materialism is more clearly articulated and better supported than its rivals. We'll examine those rivals shortly.

That summarises the case FOR Materialism. What are the arguments AGAINST Materialism? Well – there are at least five.

(31) First, for most people, the search by human beings for objective moral values, given from somewhere else and beyond argument, seems deeply embedded in most people (though not all).

Also, Materialism seems brutal, reductionist, at odds with human empathy. To quote Weber, it is "disenchanting"!

⁴ "Physics explains chemistry; chemistry explains biology; biology explains neurophysiology; neurophysiology explains psychology." [Chat GPT dialogue – see Appendix 1]

⁵ Why should a simpler argument always be more logical? It will not. BUT Occam's razor performs a more human, sociological function. When human beings are struggling to construct convincing arguments, they often resort to making those arguments more intricate and complicated. This may provide an interesting "tell" that the proponents of an argument are having to work rather too hard to be convincing.

And for three quarters of people in the world, an afterlife, a soul, and perhaps God, represent core beliefs. Should we not be taking that empirical evidence into account in some way? [Hackett 2025].

But, despite these huge issues, for philosophers the main argument against Materialism is the view that it does not, cannot and will not explain consciousness.

I will discuss all these objections to Materialism next, starting with consciousness,

Discussion 1 (10 minutes)

(32) but first, let us discuss the package of “isms” I have presented so far.

(Being) Conscious(ness)

(33) Let us turn now to consciousness.

To be conscious is to experience being ME. “Being Conscious” and “Being Myself” and “Being ME” all seem to be the same thing. No one else can experience “being me”, and one cannot experience “being anyone else”. [see Endnote 4]

(34) Consider the adjective “conscious”, as in “to be conscious”: In 2012 the Merriam Webster Dictionary provided this definition:

“To be Conscious, at its simplest, is to be aware of a state - or an object - either internal to oneself or in one's external environment.”

(35) When we are awake we are continuously aware of an enormously wide range of sensations, from the simplest to the most evolved and “cerebral”. And at the most cerebral end of the scale is Introspection: for example, being aware that we are thinking, and even being aware that we are aware that we are thinking.

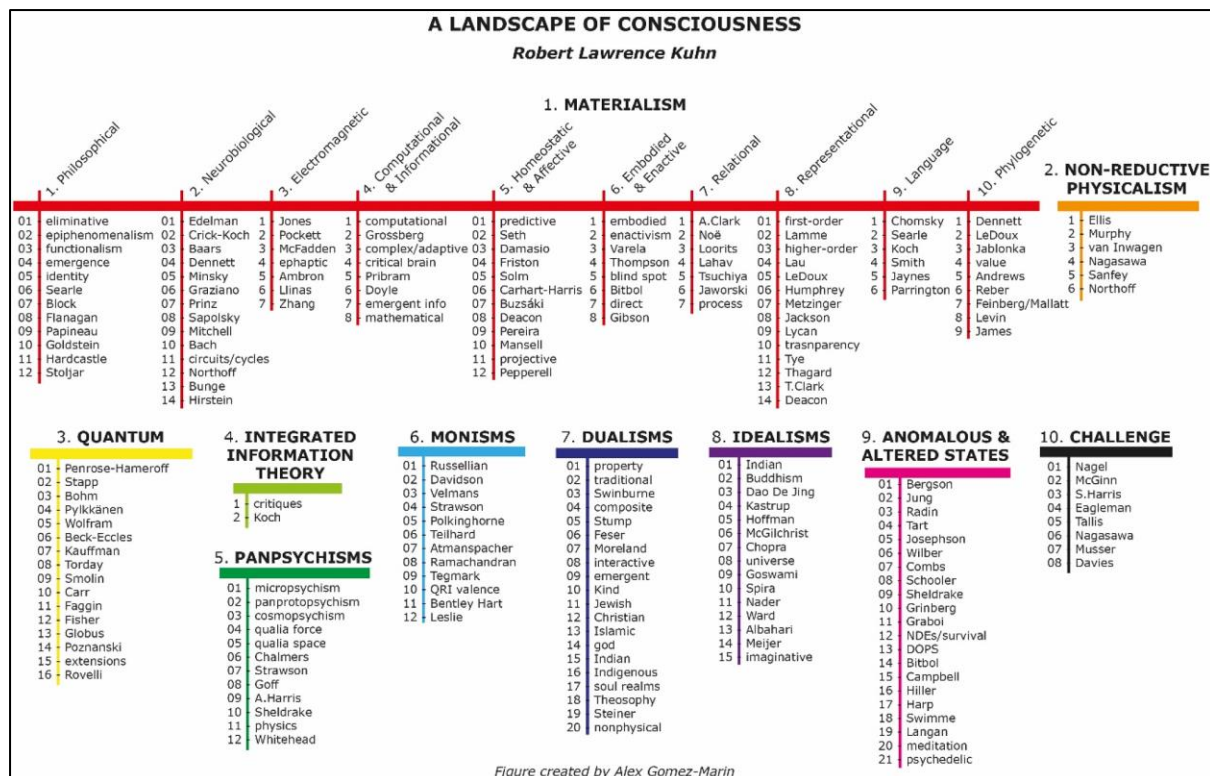
(36) The general opinion of many neuroscientists who actively study this subject is that science probably will be able - one day - to explain how most of these levels of being aware work, the so-called “easy” problems of consciousness - “easy” not because they are simple to solve, but because the routes to solving them are conceptually clear. [Chalmers. 1995]

But perhaps not Introspection. This seems much more difficult. In 1995 David Chalmers named this “The Hard Problem of Consciousness”. [Chalmers. 1995]

(37) Despite Chalmers’ work, there are many scientists and philosophers who think that the “Hard Problem” too can, in principle, be, and one day probably will be, explained in scientific terms. For example, Daniel Dennett was a prominent proponent of materialism in the philosophy of mind. He argued that “mental states, including consciousness, are entirely the result of physical processes in the brain” [Wikipedia Daniel Dennett]. And Anil Seth, a prominent UK neuroscientist, has said “The hard problem might not be solved – it would instead be dissolved.” [Sobrado 2024].

(38) Research into consciousness has grown enormously. Many scientific theories are emerging.

In 2024, Robert Lawrence Kuhn catalogued the current theories in a landmark paper called “A Landscape of Consciousness” and published this map. [Kuhn 2024]. It is an extraordinary paper – which I recommend highly. And I recommend his “Closer to Truth” television and video series even more highly. They are outstanding.



The theories attached to the red bar at the top of this slide are those that are ostensibly compatible with Materialism; and are therefore potentially able to explain away the Hard Problem. And the lower lists are those theories that assume Materialism is not correct.

These theories are still very high level, and are at present largely unprovable. All are contentious, and there is much disagreement about what is known. But it does seem quite credible that some of these “red bar” theories, or other future theories, might (not will, but might) resolve the problem one day.

However - there are many people who disagree. Matt Whiteley amongst them.

(39) He says: “this thing consciousness is here..... no objective third-person description of the brain can logically arrive at a subjective first-person state of being.” “Most popular science [assumes].... that while we can’t explain consciousness right now, we may well be able to in the future.” “Yet anyone who knows that truly existential feeling knows otherwise”. “...we won’t find an explanation for consciousness with [neuroscience]” [Whiteley 2025].

(40) The “New Mysterians” agree. Named after a Michigan “garage” rock band from the sixties(!), this loose grouping might include a wide range of prominent 20th century scientists and thinkers.^{6 7} [Wikipedia. New Mysterianism.] [Kuhn 2024 p144].

(41) This group, and others, believe that Consciousness cannot and will not ever be understood, for one or more of three reasons:

- Firstly, they believe humans do not have, and will never have, the mental capacity to understand consciousness. It is just too intellectually difficult [McGinn 1999].

⁶ They might include Colin McGinn, Thomas Nagel, Jerry Fodor, Noam Chomsky, Martin Gardner, John Horgan, Steven Pinker, Roger Penrose, Edward Witten, Sam Harris and others. [Wikipedia. New Mysterianism.]

⁷ In 2014 McGinn wrote: “The idea is to flag the mysteries as ‘mysteries of nature’, not ‘mysteries of the supernatural’”. [McGinn 2014]

- Secondly, as Whiteley says, it is impossible to study first person experiences - any person's private perspective is completely inaccessible to others, making the Hard Problem impossible to solve [Whiteley 2025].

However, neither of these first two reasons mean that Materialism is wrong; they simply mean that we cannot yet prove that Materialism is correct.

(42) Nevertheless:

- Thirdly, and in the same vein, there is an “explanatory gap” - between the physical brain processes and the subjective experience they produce. Materialists do not see this as a problem – David Papineau for example says that *“consciousness... refers to brain processes that feel like something. What’s so hard about that?”* [Papineau 2020a].⁸ But their opponents feel that the existence of this gap is sufficient reason to reject Materialism without further evidence, though their reasons are not well explained. For example, Sam Harris asserts: *“... it is difficult to imagine what experimental findings could render the emergence of consciousness comprehensible”* [Harris 2011 Part 2].

Again, this does not seem sufficient reason to invalidate Materialism. [Endnote 5]

Overall, when one looks at them like this, this seems a much less convincing package of objections to Materialism than its opponents might feel that it is. For all the conviction and force of argument of its proponents, the view that a current inability to explain consciousness must mean that Materialism is incorrect seems a lot less well-founded than first appears.

(43) Nevertheless, for some these are strong views, firmly held.

For them, another route out of the Hard Problem beckons - to step across the boundary from physics into the metaphysical, or into the religious; where the Hard Problem of Consciousness does not arise, and in which Morality, Enchantment and the Afterlife might find their place.

Discussion 2 (10 minutes)

(44) That is where we go next, but first let's discuss consciousness – including being aware, being conscious, consciousness itself, and the Hard Problem.

Where next?

(45) So – where next?

The remainder of this talk will discuss seven ideas which might complement and enhance Materialism or, alternatively, replace it. First, we will see whether either Enchantment or Humanism might overcome the difficulties of Materialism. Then we will consider three alternative views from the Metaphysical realm - Panpsychism, Idealism, Dualism – that may appeal to those who are still Disenchanted. And finally, we'll turn to two types of religious views - Non-theist religions and Theist religions - which may appeal to the Committed.

Part 2: For the DISENCHANTED

(46) It is now time to turn to a second group in the audience today – those who find Materialism “Disenchanted”.

⁸ Papineau also says: “The supposed ‘explanatory gap’ between brain and mind is nothing but a corollary of dualist intuitions.” [Papineau. 2020b].

Enchantment

(47) "Philosophy un-weaves the rainbow,and clips an angel's wings". So wrote Keats in his famous poem "Lamia", published in 1820, lamenting that Newton's Optics "had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colours." The concern with Disenchantment clearly goes back a long way.

(48) But Disenchantment was perhaps codified in 1917 when Max Weber, echoing Keats' sentiment, wrote: "...the world is *disenchanted [by Materialism]*" [Weber. 1917]. [See Endnote 6 for the full quote]. Ted Hodgson summarised Weber's views thus: "...the advance of science has ushered in a disenchanted world; the material world has been flattened, pronounced subject to universal physical laws. And so emptied of magic and mystery". [Hodgson. 2025].

(49) In German the word for Disenchantment is "Entzauberung". This translates as "Magic", which can be interpreted both as "delight", or as "delusion" [Saler. 2013.] Philosophically, Disenchantment can also be, and is, interpreted in both ways. In one sense Disenchantment is seen as a negative - a loss - a loss of delight wrought by science, a loss of the mystery and magic in a less mysterious world. But in another sense, it describes an enlightenment - shedding the delusion of the metaphysical world.

Weber embraced both meanings. Pursuing scientific advance means shedding the illusions of the metaphysical world; but he also regretted losing the apparent magic of the mystical world.

(50) Weber's ideas have since triggered a philosophical discussion of Enchantment, or Re-Enchantment. [Beaman. 2021]. Here, Enchantment might be seen as delight in our extraordinary world and universe, even while accepting a Materialist worldview.

As I mentioned earlier, in this vein, Ted Hodgson has pointed to the possibility of "Enchantment as a form of philosophical engagement", representing "... another account of materialism which is ... delicately placed on the boundaries of physics and metaphysics." [Hodgson 2025]. Ted Hodgson's suggestion is that the first place to look for enchantment is in the world around us - the world of nature, the world created by humanity in the arts and science and socially between people throughout the world. It is extraordinary - there is so much to take from it and be enchanted about; and indeed, to give to the world - natural, artistic, scientific and human.

(51) In this view, Materialism need not be seen as reductive – "reductive" implying that Materialism limits our experiences because it excludes the metaphysical.

Richard Dawkins, for example, disagreed strongly with Keats. In "Unweaving the Rainbow" he wrote "The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable, [ranking with] the finest that music and poetry can deliver." [Dawkins. 1998.] [See also Endnote 7]

Seen in this way Enchantment - overlaid on top of Materialism, offers perhaps a way of overcoming the cold, brutal, negative appearance of Materialism; allowing us to embrace and delight in the extraordinary opportunity that is, to adapt the saying of the Quaker missionary Etienne de Grellet, granted to us as we "pass through this world but once".

(52) Enchantment does face a significant challenge however. It lifts those fortunate enough to be able to see the positive. But does it help those for whom life is difficult? One would like to think yes - if we have the strength just to lift our heads even slightly, hopefully this is true.

But everyone has known moments when they just wish for someone or something to rescue them from their despair.

(53) And for them, if it is not their God, then perhaps that someone is us - we all surely have a role to help others in their hour of need.

Which brings us on to the second way that Materialism can perhaps be enhanced to feel satisfying.

Humanism

(54) The second concern with Materialism is that it contains no moral aspect. The package I chose embraces Moral Relativism, meaning that moral values are not objective or fixed - moral values are not “handed down as a given”, nor do they exist in some objective way external to our humanity.

Humanism addresses this directly.

(55) According to Humanists UK, roughly speaking the word humanist has come to mean someone who embraces these core ideas.

- trusts the scientific method and rejects the supernatural, and is therefore either an atheist or agnostic;
- believes that there is no afterlife nor any discernible purpose to the universe;
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals;
- believes human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

This list is compatible with the “package” of “isms” I have chosen.

(56) Humanism asks: does the Moral Subjectivism that fits alongside Materialism, that is the lack of ‘moral mandates, handed, down’, mean that one can and will behave immorally? No. (Of course not!)

Conversely, one could of course also ask: do the objective moral codes of other systems mean that, within those systems, people cannot and will not behave immorally? Again – No. (And again, of course not!)

(57) There are many versions of Humanism, and many other philosophical strands that share very similar ideas – in particular, that (to repeat) all members of humanity should:

- make their ethical decisions based on **reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals**, without requiring a framework for morality that is provided from elsewhere.

Humanists and others believe – yes, it is a faith-based position – that our moral impulses have been developed through evolutionary processes, (or put another way, are biological). And they also believe that whilst morality really is subjective rather than objective, it is still possible, sensible and indeed ethical to live our own lives, and to expect others to live their lives, according to a moral code which is based on reason, empathy and concern for other human beings and natural life.

Humanism asserts that the apparent absence of an objective moral framework is NOT a license to nihilism – it is not a reason to behave immorally. We do not need an objective moral code to force us to behave morally, And nor is there any objective code available that would guarantee that we will behave morally.

For Humanists at least, this is sufficient to allow them to accept Materialism as valid.

Discussion 3 (10 minutes)

(58) To sum up, Materialism does not provide enchantment, nor does it provide a moral code. But , critically, neither does it exclude either of these things. We can choose to live enchanted lives; and we can choose to live according to a moral code we adopt for ourselves. Let's now discuss whether Enchantment and Humanism complement Materialism sufficiently to overcome any resistance you may have to a package of Materialism, Enchantment and Humanism.

(59) We'll take a break now, and after the break we will look at alternatives to Materialism.

BREAK (15 minutes)

The Metaphysical Realm - Crossing the Border

(60) As we discussed before the break, Enchantment and Humanism can enhance and complement Materialism. Those embracing them deal with disenchantment, and with the absence of morality, the afterlife, the soul and God, by accepting the Materialistic claim; and then adding to it – actively choosing an outlook and a mindset that gives meaning to life.

But some of those – whether from the Classical, Enlightenment or Modern Scientific ages – who still reject Materialism in general, and who are restless about the absence of an explanation of consciousness in particular, look across the border away from physics and into metaphysics. And if they also reject religion, their search is often into the three lands of Panpsychism (where everything has Consciousness), Metaphysical Idealism (where there is one “Mega-Meta-Mind”) and Dualism (which combines Materialism and Idealism).

Let's visit each - one at a time.

Panpsychism

(61) “Panpsychism is the philosophical view that consciousness is a fundamental aspect of reality, present not only in humans and animals, but in everything in the universe, including inanimate objects and even subatomic particles.” [Goff 2019].

(62) In its most common, modern form panpsychism suggests that all subatomic particles, although they do not possess a “mind”, do contain the key ingredient of consciousness, “similar to the fundamental fields and particles in physics” [Kuhn. 2024. p100.]; and that when these particles are aggregated into a sentient being this ingredient builds up to create consciousness as we know it in humans and sentient animals [Cook 2020].

(63) Panpsychism is one of the oldest philosophical theories, and in the 19th century, panpsychism was the default “philosophy of mind” in Western thought. It saw a decline in the mid-20th century with the rise of logical positivism, but interest in panpsychism has reappeared in the 21st century - because it addresses directly the “Hard Problem of Consciousness”. [Panpsychism – Wikipedia] [Seager 2020]

(64) Panpsychists reject Physicalism because it has, so far, failed to explain consciousness. One feels that they do so with regret. If, for example, the theory that consciousness is in fact embedded in all sub-atomic particles is proved correct through neuro-science, they would see that as a victory for both sides.⁹

But currently Panpsychism remains purely conjectural - there is no empirical evidence to support its existence [Goff 2018], and the theories underpinning it have no predictive power [Goff 2019]. John Searle says it is unfalsifiable because "It does not [even] get up to the level of being false". [Searle 2013]. At present, it feels to be a niche, speculative idea with little to draw one in.

Idealism

(65) Let us move on to Idealism – an even more difficult concept. [See also Endnote 8]. Unlike Panpsychism, Idealism rejects Materialism immediately and completely. But, again, it has no evidential base to support it.

That said, Robert Lawrence Kuhn, and many of the “New Mysterian” big thinkers listed earlier have been attracted to Idealism. But, unless, like the English philosopher and theologian Keith Ward one takes a religious view [Ward 2020, 2022], Idealism is difficult to understand, difficult to make sense of, and difficult for most people to take seriously.

(66) There are many different Idealisms, it has proved difficult for thinkers to define the term uniformly.

For example, the various authors at Wikipedia have toiled hard, only to come up with this:

Idealism asserts, variously, that

- “most fundamentally, reality is equivalent to mind, spirit, or consciousness, or that;
- reality is entirely a mental construct; or that
- ideas are the highest type of reality or have the greatest claim to being considered ‘real’”.

But what can any of this possibly mean? And whose mind? Mine, or all of ours, or who else? And how might that work?

(67) Fortunately, Robert Kuhn, the presenter of “Closer to Truth”, after repeating these thoughts, then tells us what he thinks Idealism really means. He tries to help make sense of the idea by identifying how the mental turns into the physical. It does so through the work of an all-pervading and all-encompassing “cosmic consciousness” [Kuhn 2024].¹⁰ This would seem to be the central concept of Idealism – that there is what I am thinking of, in my words, as a “Mega-Meta-Mind”.

Could this idea of a ‘cosmic consciousness’ mean that something metaphysical but not religious; or perhaps a spiritual presence; or even a God, creates the reality that people then perceive?

(68) Bishop George Berkeley, named by Schopenhauer as the “father of Idealism”, was a powerful enlightenment proponent of what is now called “subjective idealism”. He argued

⁹ Podgorski describes Panpsychism as a “...model of consciousness which I see as having significant overlap with physicalism.” [Podgorski. 2019.]

¹⁰ In full, Kuhn says: “Idealism is consciousness as ultimate reality ... [that is] the age-old claim ... that the only reality that’s ‘really real’ is consciousness - everything else, from physical laws to physical brains, is the generative product of an all-pervading and all-encompassing ‘cosmic consciousness.’” [Kuhn 2024].

that what we perceive as material objects are actually collections of ideas or sensations in our minds. And it is God that maintains the ideas of things, even when humans are not directly perceiving them, for example when a tree falls unobserved in a forest. [See Endnote 9].

Berkeley's very literal views fell out of favour even in his lifetime, but various subsequent traditions of German, and then British and American idealist schools continued strongly until the early 20th century. A number of proponents of idealism remain, mainly as part of a religious philosophy [Ward 2022], and especially within eastern religions.

And various new, non-religious versions of Idealism have emerged recently in response to recent advances in neuroscience. One example is that of Bernard Kastrup, a current prominent proponent and populariser of non-religious Idealism, whose Analytic Idealism posits the existence of a Universal Consciousness. And within that Universal Consciousness, there is a "Mind-At-Large" which brings material objects into existence. [Giles 2025]

Overall, however, Idealism now remains a minority view (or even less), and like Panpsychism, non-religious Idealism also feels to be a niche, speculative idea with little to draw one in.

So, given my lack of real understanding of the subject (even after very considerable effort) I will leave it there.

Dualism

(69) The final core metaphysical idea in this trio describing the nature of reality is Dualism.

(70) Dualism stands in contrast to both materialism and idealism. Where materialism says everything is physical, and idealism says everything is mental, dualism says that reality consists of both.

Dualists assert that the mind is not the same thing as the brain. The brain is physical. But mental states (like pain, belief, desire) are not reducible to physical states; and consciousness and subjective experience are fundamentally different from material objects [Robinson 2023].

Descartes was the most famous enlightenment proponent of the concept, claiming that the mind and the brain are entirely separate substances – a position known as "substance dualism". On the other hand, "property dualism" holds that only physical substances exist, but they have both physical and non-physical properties. [Calef, in IEP.]¹¹ [12]

Dualism is a core concept underpinning most religions. The soul and the body are separate things. Many current dualists subscribe to a religious philosophy. We will discuss this later. But a small number of current modern metaphysicians who do not hold religious views also still appeal to the existence of a non-physical realm alongside the physical world that we can see. [Kuhn. 2024]

(71) The arguments for Dualism are very similar to those of Idealism – that science cannot explain consciousness!

Dualism, however, faces many significant criticisms, especially from materialist philosophers and scientists.

¹¹ In general usage, "dualism" means Substance Dualism as opposed to Property Dualism [Kuhn 2024].

As a small selection, the Materialists ask how a non-physical mind can interact with a physical brain? [Calef, in IEP.] And how can one ignore the evidence of the strong correlations between mental events and neural events. [Calef, in IEP.] The Idealists perhaps ask why a separate mind and brain are needed when Idealism does not require it.

In conclusion, unlike Panpsychism and Idealism, Dualism does present a simple, compelling philosophical idea. But, like Panpsychism and Idealism, it lacks an evidential base. It requires a step away from evidence into intuition for it to be appealing.

(72) One final question is worth asking and discussing, of all three of these metaphysical ideas. They are metaphysical in the sense that there is no evidence for them (though many panpsychists hope this might change). They work through faith and assumption, but not evidence.

So, it does feel somewhat incongruous that, on the one hand, those advocating for these ideas dismiss materialism on a narrow and highly objective basis of logic, which is that we cannot explain consciousness now through science, so we must assume that materialism is wrong, rather than not proven right. Then on the other hand they go on to invoke metaphysical alternatives on grounds of faith or assertion only, without needing to invoke logic or evidence at all?

Discussion 4 (5 minutes)

(73) So, having crossed the boundary from physics into metaphysics, can I ask for some very **brief reaction - in 5 minutes** – to this trio of metaphysical ideas - Panpsychism, Idealism and Dualism..

Part 3: For the CONVINCED

(74) And so we move to a third group in the audience today - the Convinced - those who are convinced by the articles of their faith, and who will draw real strength from their core spiritual or religious beliefs which for them transcend Materialism.

(75) For them Whiteley asks again – what does it mean to be ME?

If Materialism itself is not convincing; and if the metaphysical ideas we have just discussed are too esoteric to resonate; then how can we address the “absurd, inexplicable fact of our existence”? Are we still to be “without an answer to the questions of being, to feel that some key fact is absent.”?

To Whiteley, “Life becomes for many a quest to either satiate or assuage that existential appetite.”

(76) So where, instead of Metaphysics, or instead of Enchantment and Humanism combined with Materialism, does Whiteley want to take us?

To the place inhabited by billions of people for tens of thousands of years. Whiteley points us to the seemingly obvious; to the human response since before remembered time, to something that we amongst many in the modern world may choose to forget. He points to us “to a quest for remembering” what we have “forgotten”.

(77) This year at Easter, as a lapsed Anglican, I attended church with my family, as I do two or three times a year. Unusually this year, the Easter sermon focussed on the “mysteries” of Easter, and the struggles of Christian believers in that mystery, rather than on the traditional message addressing the “good news” of the story of Easter.

(78) And the priest used the phrase “a religion without mystery is just a philosophy”. I don’t know whether I have heard this before, but it seems to fit both Non-theist and Theist religions. Embracing the mysteries of faith are core to religion – and is perhaps what elevates it above the “Material”. It is perhaps the religious equivalent of Enchantment. Unlike the New Mysterians who flag the “mysteries of nature”, religions flag the “mysteries of the supernatural”.

And so – to answer the question - Whiteley points us to spirituality, to religion – and back to Weber’s love of mystery: Weber, remember, who shuns mystery for progress, and yet laments the loss he then feels.

Non-theistic religions

(79) Consider first the Non-theist religions. These religious or spiritual systems usually do not centre on a personal deity - some of them reject the idea of God entirely.

(80) Instead, they emphasise the spiritual, the mystical. In general they interpret “divine” as symbolic, impersonal, or experiential. They emphasize ethics, mindfulness, cosmology, or transcendence rather than divine intervention; and they answer existential questions (like "Why are we here?" and "What matters?") without appealing to a creator God.

(81) Here are some examples of the most prominent Non-theist religious traditions. I will leave you to read this list and the attributes of these religions later.

Examples of Non-theist Religious Traditions

1. **Buddhism** (most schools): No creator God; the universe is eternal and cyclical. Focuses on personal experience, meditation, ethical living, impermanence.
2. **Jainism**: No God; the universe is eternal, self-regulating. Belief in individual souls, but not a creator or intervening deity.
3. Certain Schools of **Hinduism** e.g. Samkhya and early Mimamsa schools: The universe functions through eternal laws (Dharma and Karma), not divine will.
4. **Daoism** (especially classical / philosophical): The Dao is not a god, but the impersonal, natural order of reality. Harmony comes from living according to nature and the Dao. Spiritual depth through balance, not worship.
5. Certain **Humanist Spiritualities** or **Naturalistic Religions**: e.g., Embrace ritual, community, and meaning without supernatural claims. The sacred is found in nature, the cosmos, or human dignity.

(82) But here is a simple list of some of the core features of some Non-theist religions. This is an oversimplified list, and there are many other ways in which Non-theist religions work.

| Feature | Description |
|----------------------------------|---|
| No personal deity | Do not rely on a creator or sustaining God |
| Transcendence through practice | Achieve peace, insight, or liberation via personal effort |
| Cyclic or impersonal cosmos | Reality often self-originating/ governed by natural laws |
| Emphasis on ethics and awareness | Moral action and self-knowledge are central |
| Symbolic use of myth | Myths are often read metaphorically, not literally |

They all find Materialism wanting, and push against and generally across its boundaries. They all emphasise the spiritual, and many also embrace the “natural” as an holistic “force”. They all provide some form of religious or spiritual answer to the seeming problems of Materialism; especially regarding both the afterlife, and also morality. And in general, they rest on some of the ideas which have since been embedded into modern Idealism and Dualism.

Theistic Religions

(83) And finally, in contrast, we approach the Theist religions – especially those of the Abrahamic tradition.

From an almost incomprehensibly broad sweep, Whiteley chooses Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy as a single signpost for all three of the Abrahamic religions, the major Theistic religions of our time.

Whiteley says: “Written in 523–24 AD, the Consolation bridges the classical world of late antiquity to the medieval world that would follow, its influence being considerable for the next millennium. The Consolation would be translated by Alfred the Great in the courts of Anglo-Saxon Wessex, by Chaucer into Middle English prose and would influence literary works that are still widely read today, not the least Dante’s Divine Comedy.”

(84) Whiteley continues: This “short book contains a dialogue between Boethius, who is in prison awaiting torture and execution, and a woman who appears to him as a representation of philosophy. Boethius is tearfully bemoaning his state when Lady Philosophy appears, and offers not comfort but admonition. Boethius’ state of fortune has caused him to forget what he has learned:

*“...when storms of life
Inflate the weight of earthly care,
The mind forgets its inward light
And turns in trust to the dark without.”*

(85) Lady Philosophy argues that “...**life’s purpose is** not in the acquisition of contingent fortune but **the use of moral reason** to realise that all desire is **desire for the good**, possessed only by **the soul’s ascent towards God**.”

(86) And in a call perhaps to the Virtue Ethics of the classical world, she concludes:

***“Cultivate virtue...
A great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, ... to be good;
... since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things.”***

And there it is – a full refutation of the Materialist view, an embrace of the dualism of the mortal material world on the one hand, the immortal Soul on the other. And a God – who sees all, and judges all – against the objective moral standard of “good”.

Nothing of my “Materialism Package” remains – Materialism, Nominalism, Monism and Moral Relativism are all rejected.

As in the millennia before Boethius, and the centuries since, much of humanity has either chosen or been persuaded, in one way or another, to shun Materialism and embrace this Dualism; and, also, to embrace Objective Morality. And much of humanity continues to do so to this day.

Discussion 5 (10 minutes)

(87) What are your thoughts about this section on Non-theist and Theist religions, and their relationship with Materialism.

Conclusion

(88) So, where have we got to?

(89) Well...,

For the Materialists, Richard Dawkins says:

- Materialism remains irresistible.
- And we absolutely can live fulfilling lives, even in that knowledge, and the knowledge of its consequences

(90) For the Disenchanted:

Ted Hodgson says Enchantment can be ours if we seek it

- “We need to keep a mystical sense of wonder, of enchantment, in our lives even as scientism and scepticism sometimes seem to threaten its obliteration.”
- Simultaneously, the Humanists point to the moral code we can choose to live by.

(91) For the Metaphysicians, the “New Mysterians” point either

- to the ingredients of sub-atomic consciousness, or
- to the “Mega-Meta-Mind”.

(92) And for the Convinced: Matt Whiteley says:

- “...in the age of modernity it is up to us as individuals to remind ourselves of everything we have forgotten.”

Discussion 6 (10 minutes)

(93) So, before we end, what are your thoughts about this whole talk in general and Materialism in particular?

Epilogue

(94) What an extraordinary journey, since I shared that train with Adrian! To travel is to learn, and I have travelled far, through seventeen “isms”¹², barely stopping, but, where I could, drinking deep. My thirst remains, and I feel I have much further to travel still.

And I have learned this - certainties do not exist.

Whiteley’s most profound phrase comes at the end, when he says: **“faith is faith – either way”**. And faith runs through every one of the “isms” that we have discussed today.

Above all **I need to learn to understand where others have, or are seeking to, put their faith; and how to live well with their choices, as well as my own.**

Thank you for listening, and also for taking part.

¹² List of “isms” I have learned about: Materialism (including Physicalism, Nominalism), Idealism, Realism, Nominalism, Monism, Dualism, Panpsychism, Empiricism, Rationalism, Humanism, (Dis) Enchantment, Non-Theism, Theism, Moral Objectivism, Moral Relativism, Nihilism, Scientific Mysterianism (McGinn)

ENDNOTES

Endnote 1 (from slide 17): Does Mathematics “fit” into Physicalism?

Where Mathematics lies on the “Map of Reality” in slide 17 is a fundamental and non-trivial question. Mathematics comprises the “Abstract Entities” that Mathematical Platonists see fitting into the Metaphysical Realism box. [Cowling et al 2025]. These entities are not found in space and time, are not mental, and are not physical. Physicalists are charged with explaining how, if they exist, these fit with their description of Physicalism.

Britannica says: “Philosophers have come up with numerous arguments for and against Mathematical Platonism.... The pro-Platonist argument was first clearly formulated by Frege (1884, transl 1953),... and the locus classicus of the anti-Platonist argument is a 1973 paper by the American philosopher Paul Benacerraf [Benacerraf 1973]” [Britannica 2007]; subsequently improved by Field. [Linnebo 2023].

And Balaguer gives a detailed description of the Epistemological Argument against Platonism [Balaguer 2025].

However, all this misses a key point. Are the laws of mathematics “part of Physicalism”? The best reference to this found so far is by Szabo Laszlo, in which he says: “The only situation in which [logic and mathematics] can become meaning-carriers is when they are involved in a physical theory. But, in this role they represent a physical concept.” [Szabó 2023]. This presents a possible argument that logic and mathematics do indeed form a logical “part of” Physicalism. And in his section on “Numbers and Abstracta” Soltjar cites a number of other attempts to deal with this issue [Soltjar 2021].

Endnote 2 (from slide 19): Rationalism versus Empiricism

Rationalism versus Empiricism is not considered here, because in this analysis it does not make a difference. Some time ago Kant aimed to resolve the Enlightenment period debate between these two schools of thought by synthesising them together. The IEP’s full quote reads:

“A large part of Kant’s work [The Critique of Pure Reason] addresses the question ‘What can we know?’ The answer, if it can be stated simply, is that our knowledge is constrained to mathematics and the science of the natural, empirical world. It is impossible, Kant argues, to extend knowledge to the super-sensible realm of speculative metaphysics. The reason that knowledge has these constraints, Kant argues, is that the mind plays an active role in constituting the features of experience and limiting the mind’s access only to the empirical realm of space and time.

Kant responded to his predecessors by arguing against the Empiricists that the mind is not a blank slate that is written upon by the empirical world, and by rejecting the Rationalists’ notion that pure, a priori knowledge of a mind-independent world was possible. Reason itself is structured with forms of experience and categories that give a phenomenal and logical structure to any possible object of empirical experience. These categories cannot be circumvented to get at a mind-independent world, but they are necessary for experience of spatio-temporal objects with their causal behaviour and logical properties. These two theses constitute Kant’s famous transcendental idealism and empirical realism.” [McCormick. In IEP]

Endnote 3 (from slide 25): Materialism and Nihilism; Morality and Evolution

Materialism is also consistent with the more extreme view of Moral Nihilism - the view that there is nothing that has intrinsic morality, [i.e. "there does not exist anything that is morally wrong"]. [Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter. 2004]. And it is consistent with the idea that feelings of morality are biological human traits developed through evolution, [i.e. a "part of evolved human nature to employ moral judgment in governing human behaviour"]. [FitzPatrick, William. 2025].

Endnote 4 (from slide 33): The Self

Stephanie Shen has written an interesting article speculating on "...Why 'I Think, Therefore I Am' Might Be Backwards". She writes:

"The concept of the self has been broadly recognized as essential to consciousness. But what exactly is the relationship between them? Is the self simply the content of consciousness or, more essentially, the seat that grounds consciousness?

I think it is both.

..... When Descartes declared, 'I think, therefore I am', he clearly acknowledged the self's existence. But he would have been correct if the order were reversed: I am, therefore I think." [Shen 2025].

Endnote 5 (from slide 42): Explanatory gap – epistemic, not ontological

Kuhn says: "Owen Flanagan addressed "the gap between the first-person way in which conscious mental life reveals itself and the way it is, or can be described, from an objective point of view" by asserting bluntly, "mind and brain are one and the same thing seen from two different perspectives. The gap between the subjective and the objective is an epistemic gap, not an ontological gap." Indeed, he claims, "it is precisely the fact that individuals possess organismic integrity that explains why subjectivity accrues first-personally" (Flanagan, 1992). " [Kuhn 2024 p44.]

Endnote 6 (from slide 48): Weber's full quote on Disenchantment

The full quote from Weber is:

"Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service. This above all is what intellectualization means." [Weber 2017].

Endnote 7 (from slide 51): Weinberg – "we can least make a point for ourselves"

In a similar vein, the Nobel Laureate and physicist Steven Weinberg said:

" 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless' (Weinberg 1997)." But he subsequently said: " '... [even] if we don't find a point in nature, we can at least make a point for ourselves. We can love each other and find beauty in things. And one of the things that gives point to some of our lives is the process of discovering nature, discovering the laws of nature. But whatever point there is, it is one that we have to give to ourselves.' (Weinberg 2006)".

Endnote 8 (from slide 65): Ontological versus Epistemic Idealism

When the term Idealism is used unqualified it usually refers to that which philosophers call Ontological Idealism. Ontology addresses the question of “what is real?” – of reality itself. Here, reference to Idealism means to Ontological Idealism; and not Epistemological Idealism, as discussed for example by Kant. Epistemological Idealism on the other hand, including Kant’s Transcendental Idealism and also some others, addresses the question of how we might get to learn about and understand reality, and in particular the view that we cannot understand reality itself – we can only see it through the lens of our own perception and experience. That is not the focus here.

Kuhn puts it this way:

“The focus here is ontological idealism, where ultimate reality is mind or awareness or thought, while everything else, including all physical worlds and universes and all that they contain, are derivative or illusory. (I do not consider epistemological idealism, where all we can know is constrained by the structure of human thought.)” [Kuhn 2024 p121].

An article on Reddit (not usually to be taken as a definitive source) by “TheRealAmeil (@r/consciousness)” paints an excellent and vivid picture of some of the myriad complexity and “instances” of idealism. [TheRealAmeil (@r/consciousness)]

Endnote 9 (from slide 68): Chalmers - reality unobserved.

[Kuhn 2024] (section 16 p121) notes that Chalmers says that:

“Idealists are not necessarily committed to anti-realist views about the physical world, though some are, especially among Eastern traditions. It is perfectly coherent for an idealist to regard the physical world as “real” in the sense that it exists when no one is looking; “[The physical world really exists out there, independently of our observations;] it just has a surprising nature”, having been formed from mental fundamentals [Chalmers 2020].”

Appendix 1. Reasons that Materialism makes sense - Dialogue with Chat GPT

ChatGPT: Materialism in Philosophy – P Dixon dialogue in June 2025:

PD Question:

I would like to understand the reasons that people have for accepting materialism as the correct interpretation of the world.

ChatGPT provided the following:

Great question. The reasons people accept materialism as the correct interpretation of the world span science, metaphysics, epistemology, and even practical considerations. Below is a detailed breakdown of the main arguments in favor of materialism:

1. Empirical Success of Science

Argument:

Modern science operates on materialist assumptions and has been extraordinarily successful in explaining and predicting phenomena.

Details:

Physics, chemistry, biology, and neuroscience all describe the world in terms of physical entities, laws, and interactions.

Scientific explanations of phenomena (e.g., disease, heredity, perception, consciousness) have progressively replaced spiritual or non-material accounts.

No verified scientific theory requires non-material entities to explain the world.

Conclusion:

Materialism is the best fit with the most successful and predictive system we have: science.

2. Explanatory Power and Simplicity (Occam's Razor)

Argument:

Materialism offers a simpler, more parsimonious ontology than dualism or idealism.

Details:

Occam's Razor favors theories that do not multiply entities beyond necessity.

Materialism posits just one kind of substance: the physical.

Dualism requires explaining not only how two substances exist, but how they interact—something materialism avoids.

Conclusion:

Materialism wins by offering a leaner, more unified view of reality.

3. Dependence of Mental States on Physical States

Argument:

There is overwhelming evidence that mental processes are dependent on brain states.

Details:

Brain damage affects memory, personality, decision-making, and consciousness.

Drugs and electrical stimulation alter mood, perception, and cognition.

Neuroimaging shows correlations between mental events and neural activity.

Conclusion:

If the mind is so closely tied to the brain, it's reasonable to infer that the mind is a physical phenomenon.

4. Continuity with Evolution

Argument:

Evolutionary theory supports materialism by showing that consciousness and cognition developed gradually from simpler physical organisms.

Details:

Humans evolved from non-conscious ancestors via physical processes.

If we are continuous with non-conscious animals, there's no need to posit a non-material "mind stuff" that appeared suddenly.

Consciousness can be seen as a high-level function of biological systems.

Conclusion:

A physicalist explanation of mind fits seamlessly with Darwinian evolution.

5. Causal Closure of the Physical

Argument:

If physical events are always caused by other physical events, there's no room for non-physical causes.

Details:

Physicalism holds that the physical world is causally closed—every physical event has a sufficient physical cause.

If mental events (assumed to be non-physical under dualism) caused physical events, it would violate this closure.

Hence, either mental events are physical, or they are epiphenomenal (causally inert).

Conclusion:

To preserve causal coherence, mental phenomena must be physical.

6. Predictive and Explanatory Integration

Argument:

Materialism allows integration across disciplines—from physics to psychology.

Details:

Physics explains chemistry; chemistry explains biology; biology explains neurophysiology; neurophysiology explains psychology.

This unity supports a physicalist ontology.

Materialism encourages interdisciplinary cooperation and theoretical integration.

Conclusion:

Materialism provides a common explanatory foundation across all domains of knowledge.

7. Incoherence or Vagueness of Alternatives

Argument:

Competing theories like dualism and idealism are either poorly defined or fail to explain observable data.

Details:

Dualism struggles to explain how the immaterial mind interacts with the body.

Idealism struggles to explain why the world behaves consistently and independently of individual minds.

Panpsychism and neutral monism remain speculative and lack empirical support.

Conclusion:

Materialism is more clearly articulated and better supported than its rivals.

8. Naturalism and the Rejection of the Supernatural

Argument:

Materialism fits naturally with a secular, scientific worldview that rejects supernatural explanations.

Details:

As belief in gods, spirits, and souls has declined, materialism has grown more attractive.

Naturalism (the view that everything arises from natural properties and causes) presupposes a physicalist ontology.

Conclusion:

For naturalists and secular thinkers, materialism is the only plausible metaphysical foundation.

Would you like to explore the counterarguments to any of these points, such as critiques from dualists or proponents of qualia-based objections?

=====

Appendix 2. Existential Vertigo is Revelation - Matt Whiteley (April 2025)

PREPARED BY PATRICK DIXON FOR THE PINNER PHILOSOPHY GROUP (Sep 2025)

NOT FOR FURTHER DISTRIBUTION

[This Isle is Full of Noises](#)

[Existential Vertigo is Revelation](#)¹³

The hard problem, forgetting, and Boethius' consolation.



[Matt Whiteley](#)

Apr 05, 2025

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[INTRODUCTION]

Para 1. There is a certain feeling or state that for me motivates all of my philosophical or intellectual thought. It's not easy to induce, because the normality of life is a hard thing to see through, but like many people (although I've learned, not everybody) it is often late at night. The feeling is of the sheer absurdity of my existence. In fact, of *all* existence, the sheer, bonkers, unfathomable, preposterous fact that I exist, and I don't know why and no explanation, no elaborate theory, no unnumbered set of scientific propositions, however elegant, could do anything to dent it.

¹³ Whiteley, Matthew. [Existential Vertigo is Revelation](#). *Substack*. 05 April 2025.
[<https://substack.com/@thisisleisfullofnoises/p-160621658>]

Consciousness, in Heidegger's term, is "thrown" into existence. Here I am, just *existing*. As they say: *w.t..!*

Para 2. In the middle of the day, things just are what they are. Thoughts are about things to be done or what's for dinner, and even thinking about existential things doesn't quite induce the same vertigo. But it is in those late at night moments, or those moments when it catches you off guard, that you realise it is running in the background even then. Life is what we make of the assumptions we can make about reality, not what we *know* about what we are doing here.

[PART 1 – FOR THE MATERIALISTS]

Para 3. This feeling alone is why I remain so suspicious of reductionist explanations of reality or the truculent claims of popular scientists that our models of the universe put us on the verge of explaining it. We are not. In fact, in spite of great advances in material science we remain further from truly understanding our absurd place in reality than we have ever been. We are reaching the point of declaring that the late at night "holy s***, I actually exist" state is not even really there, the thought is a bubble of brain process plopping [sic] on the surface of what we call consciousness, which is just an epiphenomenal overlay on top of the biological operations of your brain, imagined by a self that doesn't really exist in any sense except an illusion.

Para 4. We call this the "hard problem of consciousness," as coined by David Chalmers, a term that had to be invented because the problem is unique to our insane time. Now that we have reached the assumption that we can in theory map all underlying brain process as objective, causal and biological and have first dismissed the soul and then the self, we are left over with this film on top of the brain's activity, the odd and rather difficult fact that this thing consciousness is here. The hard problem indicates this obstinate fact that no objective third person description of the brain can logically arrive at a subjective first person state of being. In short, we have put a pin in the butterfly and are mystified to find nothing there that is alive.

Para 5 (i). Most popular science deals with consciousness by simply bypassing philosophy and leaning on the assumption that while we can't explain consciousness right now, we may well be able to in the future. It is I suppose the materialist's equivalent of "trust me bro."

Para 5 (ii). This in a way is the only option, it's either that or illusionism, or else resign to a kind of dualism that sees consciousness as an inexplicable overlay on a reality that it does not interfere with. It needs no physical explanation other than the brain's process, parts of which it is synonymous with, and exactly why it is there is simply the wrong question, it just *is* there.

Para 6. Other modes of explanation, such as various kinds of idealism, require a blending of science with metaphysics that we do not like even whispers of in the halls of modern thought. The idea that the ancient cosmologies, or the thought of Plato, Aristotle, or even religious conceptions of reality might contain more wisdom than the billiard balls banging together kind of reality that has crept upon us since the scientific revolution is hardly compatible with the belief that modernity is the crest of the wave of progress rising out of history.

Para 7 (i). To be fair, many modern scientists are suspicious of such ideas out of a fear of woo woo that is not exactly illegitimate. Part of the hardening of the battlements towards anything that is not materialism is a reflection of the discipline of science defending itself against the genuinely unscientific, and it has at times had legitimate reason to do so.

Para 7 (ii). Nor is the belief that we could explain consciousness scientifically exactly out of line for a scientist, since the fact that we don't know what we don't know and it's interesting to try and find

out is part of the motivation of science. No one should be calling a halt to neuroscience just because logic seems to imply we won't find an explanation for consciousness with it. It's probably a good thing for the advancing of neuroscience that neuroscientists believe they will find it.

[PART 2 – FOR THE DISENCHANTED]

Para 8. Yet anyone who knows that truly existential feeling knows otherwise. There is, to use David Bentley Hart's term, a vanishing point of consciousness, the existential point of self-reflective realisation that persists even if tomorrow all of your memories were to be erased. Consciousness always is *thrown* into existence, the circumstances and reality into which we find ourselves are always given out of a kind of absurd contingency, and it is consciousness that makes it actual. It is *you* that exists first.

Para 9. It is this self-reflective thought that ultimately flaws the materialist's claim. If the brain can be mapped objectively, then objective thoughts should not be able to witness a subjective state. If consciousness is epiphenomenal, if it is just a film over the top of brain process, how can brain process know it is there? What is it in the brain that knows that it is experiencing experience? Where is the vanishing point that jolts you up in bed with the realisation that the stuff of distant stars has conspired to tumble together into this shuddering realisation that you *are*?

Para 10. The idea that tomorrow you could wake up with all your memories erased and still be aware that you exist is important. In some sense it seems to us that this is exactly what *has* happened. To realise the absurd, inexplicable fact of existence, to experience "thrownness," is precisely to be without an answer to the question of being, to feel that some key fact is absent. Life becomes for many a quest to either satiate or assuage that existential appetite. Science itself is arguably a response to this attempt to understand what it is we are doing here, even if it simply piles contingent facts on top of the question without actually answering it.

[PART 3 – FOR THE CONVINCED]

Para 11(i). So for all of our scientific brilliance, we remain as existential amnesiacs on the island of existence upon which we find ourselves, even more so in the modern world. Strangely our quest for understanding is something like a quest for remembering, for the acquisition of something we have "forgotten."

Para 11(ii). And the idea that our fundamental condition is one of forgetting is a theme of one of the most influential philosophical works of the last two millennia: Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Para 12. Boethius' work is significant for a lot of reasons. Written in 523–24 AD, the *Consolation* bridges the classical world of late antiquity to the medieval world that would follow, its influence being considerable for the next millennium. The *Consolation* would be translated by Alfred the Great in the courts of Anglo-Saxon Wessex, by Chaucer into Middle English prose and would influence literary works that are still widely read today, not the least Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Para 13. Boethius was an extremely successful philosopher and politician in the remains of the Western Roman empire, and had risen to the height of Magister Officiorum to the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. Yet in 523 Boethius was accused of treason by enemies within the court, and he was imprisoned in Pavia and sentenced to death. The *Consolation* is written during Boethius' final days in prison before his brutal execution.

Para 14. The short book contains a dialogue between Boethius and a woman who appears to him as a representation of philosophy. Boethius is tearfully bemoaning his state when Lady Philosophy

appears, and rather like Beatrice's first appearance to Dante in the climax of Purgatorio she offers not comfort but an admonition.

Boethius' state of fortune has caused him to forget what he has learned:

*...when storms of life
Inflate the weight of earthly care,
The mind forgets its inward light
And turns in trust to the dark without.*

Boethius' state is one of forgetting, lady philosophy claims: "It is nothing serious, only a touch of amnesia that he is suffering...He has forgotten for a while who he is, but he will soon remember."

Para 15. In one of the great dialogues of philosophical history, Lady Philosophy constructs the argument that life's purpose is not in the acquisition of contingent fortune but the use of moral reason to realise that all desire is desire for the good, possessed only by the soul's ascent towards God. They argue about the nature of evil, free will and injustice, leading to Lady Philosophy's resounding conclusion:

Avoid vice, therefore, and cultivate virtue; lift up your mind to the right kind of hope, and put forth humble prayers on high. A great necessity is laid upon you, if you will be honest with yourself, a great necessity to be good, since you live in the sight of a judge who sees all things.

Para 16. Of course, in a materialistic age, this is all redundant. Boethius' torture and death is another indifferent fact of history, and knowledge about the objective is found through science, and any 'consolation' is sought in your own subjective consciousness, great for you if you find it, but ultimately arbitrary and meaningless. The idea that we might "live in the sight of a judge who sees all things" is something we would rather not tolerate as long as a moral judge imposes upon our own individualistic authenticity, as ultimately arbitrary and ironically unauthentic we might admit in weaker moments that authenticity is.

Para 17. Yet behind the arguments of the consolation is a metaphysic that encompasses reality much more holistically than does modern materialism and its insistence that science answers all questions of truth. Boethius still inherited a philosophical view of reality that saw values, forms and meanings as possessing as much currency as the physical things that composed them, and in which all of Aristotle's causes were still given the value they are not in our current metaphysic.

Para 18. Yet it is us who have lost our way. Our worldview is akin to the belief that a sentence of speech can be explained by predictive sequences out of a material substrate rather than the necessity of its coherent meaning as a whole, a mistake that AI models make us even more inclined to make. Science and its worldview denies formal and final causes, leaving us with an aspectual view of reality that we insist to be total. The 'hard problem of consciousness' is the ridiculous tip of an iceberg, we have no comprehension of form, meaning or purpose outside of reductionist causes that offer predictable sequences that we call causation but that explain nothing about *what things actually are*.

Para 19. So what can it mean in 2025 to imagine that the moment of consciousness at 2am is the soul remembering it has forgotten itself, like Boethius in his cell? Scientifically, nothing; materialistically, nothing, and you should abate the feeling with whatever suits you. But this feeling is

the wicket gate¹⁴ through which the religious pilgrim first enters, it is the ‘shipwreck’ of the lower self that William James describes in his seminal lectures on religion. His observation was that in truly religious experience this lower self comes to realise it is coterminous with a *something more*, the fruits of which are what James calls ‘saintliness.’ It is that second experience, that feeling or state that motivates something more than just intellectual thought.

Para 20. Although I suppose if you have enough faith then even that will be explained by neuroscience which will be explained as the cumulative result of coding errors in the genome. Faith is faith either way, and we must ask the question of what provides us with a philosophy that explains the entire composition of reality as much as delineated fragments of causation that offer no explanation whatsoever of the whole. The writing of Boethius echoed the meeting of Athens with the Christian religion throughout the subsequent millennia, and now in the age of modernity it is up to us as individuals to remind ourselves of everything we have forgotten.

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The Author - [Matt Whiteley](#).

Whiteley writes about a range of philosophical questions, many of which are published principally on [Substack](#) and [Medium](#).

(<https://medium.com/@doyouthinkihaveforgotten>; <https://substack.com/@thisisleisfullofnoises>)

He told me (Patrick Dixon) that:

“I generally keep myself to myself in terms of biography... I'm not an academic by work, just writing about what I'm thinking about and what interests me. Glad you find some of it helpful!”

I (Patrick Dixon) have subscribed to Matt Whiteley’s Substack channel for a year as a Founding Member until 24 August 2026. This costs a premium of £134 above the normal rate of £44/year; which is intended as payment for circulating this document to the roughly 25 members of the Pinner Philosophy Group (who are not Substack subscribers) ahead of my presentation to them on 8th October 2025.

¹⁴ Mis-spelled “wicker gate” in the original article. (John Bunyan refers to the wicket gate in his “The Pilgrims Progress”, as a metaphor for the pilgrim’s entrance to the Christian life.)

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“... some physical events, such as one’s arm rising, are caused by certain mental events, such as deciding to scratch one’s head.”]

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Update History

Update 1: 9th October 2025.

- Expanded quoted words in Footnote 10, page 15. Added the words: [Idealism is consciousness as ultimate reality ... [that is] the age-old claim, rooted in some wisdom traditions, that]
- Improving the quotes attached to the references to [Kuhn 2024 p121].