Self, Consciousness and Neo-Idealism: exploring critical alternatives to the materialist paradigm in the promotion of mental health in higher education

Terry Hyland

Professor Free University of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

Abstract
Concerns about the deteriorating mental health of university students have been researched and documented over the last few decades, and there is some evidence of an intensification of the problems as a result of the recent Covid pandemic and resulting lockdowns. The central thesis of this paper is that all such mental health problems are exacerbated by a dominant hegemonic culture of materialism which – supported and reinforced by the culture of neoliberalism – celebrates a reified conception of a solitary self divorced from the social networks which provide the conditions for psychological nourishment and mind/body wellbeing. In order to challenge such a potentially harmful culture, a process of 'unselfing' through a critique of the metaphysical materialism which underpins the current orthodoxy is proposed alongside a set of strategies drawn from Buddhist principles which seek to uncover the delusions which serve to bolster the neoliberal self. In conclusion, a number of changes are recommended in the form of a critical dimension which may be incorporated into learning programmes at all levels in higher education institutions with a view to enhancing mind/body wellbeing.

Key words: self, neoliberalism, materialism, neo-idealism, mental health, higher education policy and practice

1. Introduction: Wellbeing in Higher Education Institutions

1.1 Contextual Background

There is a general consensus that the rapid and far-reaching changes in higher education in recent decades – massification, increased competition between and within universities, the dominance of work-related knowledge, and spiralling course fees – have led to immense changes in the experience of students within higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world (Raaper, 2021). Naidoo & Williams (2015) have argued that:

The restructuring of higher education (HE) according to neoliberal market principles has constructed the student consumer as a social category, thereby altering the nature, purpose and values of HE (p.1).

Jarvis (2000) saw these developments as the birth of the 'corporate university' which symbolized 'quite clearly that we have entered a new era in which the information technology empowered by those who control capital determines the shape of the society's superstructure' (p.52). In terms of the student experience, the research indicates increasingly negative impacts on the student experience including demotivation in terms of learning, feelings of social isolation and increases in mental illness and disorders amongst the HEI population. Macaskill (2012) has noted that concerns about the mental health of HE students have become a global problem in an era of widening participation and declining resources to support educational expansion. Her research reported 'significant increases'(p. 13) in mental health issues amongst students alongside a general lack of acknowledgement of such problems within both staff and student bodies. As she comments:

The mental health issue is one largely unacknowledged aspect of widening participation. Changes in financial support to universities have resulted in students having to fund their studies, and this is an additional stressor. All this occurs at what is arguably a difficult time for young people, with the transition to adulthood and independent living. They are also at the age where the risk of developing mental health problems is greatest (ibid.,p.14).

Early intervention by counselling and support services were recommended as potential solutions to such problems, and these matters – along with recommendations in terms of additional programmes linked to unselfing processes, an enhanced curriculum, and spiritual practices – are taken up below in the concluding section.

1.2 The Nature of Wellbeing
Like goodness and happiness the concept of wellbeing is a complex and all-embracing one which needs to be unpacked before it can be usefully employed in argument. It is worth observing at the outset that there is a current concept of 'wellness' which is linked to the neoliberal 'selfing' which is criticised in the next section, and which needs to be distinguished from the more positive interpretations of wellbeing recommended here. This new wellness notion is – as Ward (2022) explains at length – linked to contemporary therapy culture, positive psychology, and the 'happiness industry'. She comments:

Wellness involves, fundamentally, an injunction to take control of our mental and physical health. We do this through privileging something called 'self care;, through fitness and positive thinking programmes, diets and exercise...Moreover, the rhetoric of wellness is highly moralised: being happy and healthy pass for a moral life. Morality is no longer about the public sphere or an issue of public deliberation, but our lifestyle choices. And as with the happiness phenomenon, the more we try to achieve wellness, the more narcissistic, anxious and isolated we become as we are confronted with the emptiness of our own desires (pp. 38-9)

As against this negative notion, a more positive conception of wellbeing needs to be located within wider networks of interdependent social relationships and values. The recent survey of the mental health of HE students by the United Kingdom Department for Education (DfE, 2021) noted that most providers tended to use the broader conceptions of mental health and wellbeing developed by other organisations. As the report observed:

HE institutions sometimes referred to definitions provided by other organisations, bodies or academics. Most commonly this was the WHO definition "Mental health is not just the absence of mental disorder. It is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to *make a contribution to her or his community*." Others cited included the definition of mental impairment outlined in the Equality Act 2010, and a definition provided by the US Office of the Surgeon General (2001): "a state of successful performance of mental function, resulting in productive activities, *fulfilling relationships with people*, and the ability to change and cope with adversity" (p.23, italics added).

It is worth noting the overarching framework of *social* values incorporated into these working definitions of wellbeing, and the contrast they make with the isolated neoliberal self outlined earlier. Contemporary evolutionary theory supports the notion that social co-operation – not selfish individualism – has been the driving force behind human progress in all spheres (Dawkins, 2017; Dennett, 2018). Goswami (2008) has argued forcefully that 'all genuine learning is social'; she goes on to explain that:

We gave social brains. The wealth of studies of infant and animal cognition are showing more and more clearly that the complex mammalian brain evolved to flourish in complex social environments (p.391).

Thus, when it comes to providing the optimal conditions for human flourishing and wellbeing, the evidence favours the social/collective rather than the individualistic models represented by neoliberalism.

1.3. Decline in HE Student Wellbeing

On any of the definitions of wellbeing outlined above, the research points to an increasing decline in the mental health of HE students in recent decades. In a survey of the sector in 2017 conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2017) it was reported that 'over the past 10 years there has been a fivefold increase in the proportion of students who disclose a mental health condition to their institution (p.1). This picture is confirmed in other reports by, for instance, the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021) and the National Unnuin of Students (NUS, 2020) in Britain, and summed up in the large scale DfE (2021) report which concluded that:

The proportion of students declaring mental health conditions has dramatically increased in recent years, set against changes in support funding in HE (and wider healthcare funding), changing attitudes towards disability and mental health, and rising expectations for HE and its institutions (p.4).

Moerover, this deterioration in health was greatly exacerbated by the recent Covid-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown (NUS, 2020; ONS, 2021). As the research by Chen & Lucock (2022) reported:

We found high levels of anxiety and depression, with more than 50% experiencing levels above the clinical cut offs, and females scoring significantly higher than males. The survey also suggested relatively low levels of resilience which we attribute to restrictions and isolation which reduced the opportunities to engage in helpful coping strategies and activities rather than enduring personality characteristics. Higher levels of distress were associated with lower levels of exercising, higher levels of tobacco use, and a number of life events associated with the pandemic and lockdown, such as cancelled events, worsening in personal relationships and financial concerns (p.1).

All this research highlighted the importance of social interaction in learning, something that was obviously lost during lockdown and not adequately compensated for by online learning. Indeed, there is some evidence that the enhanced use of social media during this period actually exacerbated mental health problems (DfE, 2021; Shankleman.,Hammond & Jones, 2021).

2. Sources of the Malaise: Materialism

2.1 Forms of Materialism

In order to define clearly the principal aims of this critique, it needs to be stressed that the materialist worldview identified below is inextricably connected by critical commentators with the ordinary language or everyday meaning of materialism (as distinct, for example, from its technical use in Marxist and postmodern analyses, see Olssen, 2006). Mal Leicester (1999) describes such materialism in terms of:

inordinate, or excessive, valuing of material objects and activities. This includes valuing material objects and activities as an end in themselves; it also implies a hierarchical valuing of material objects and activities over the emotional, intellectual, psychological or spiritual needs of others and/or the self. Crass materialism may be seen in such behaviours and attitudes as possessiveness, covetousness, envy, non-generosity, hedonism, acquisitiveness, and greed (p.263).

The links between such materialistic values and scientific materialism are located in the mainstream scientific picture of a world of shadowy material objects – at bottom just quantum fields – whose true or real nature is forever closed off to individual centres of consciousness isolated from each other and from a world which is indifferent to human purposes. As the philosophers, Thomas Nagel (2012) and William Jaworksi (2016) have claimed, not everything can be reduced to physics and chemistry, and attempts to do so have conjured up visions of bleak and soulless worlds.

2.2. Materialism and the Neoliberal Self

Applied to contemporary HE systems the predominance of such materialistic attitudes has resulted in the mental health problems outlined earlier. Ward's (2022) critique of the neoliberal self is located squarely within this materialistic worldview and connected with all aspect of social and public life, including the current state of higher education. She identified the defining characteristics of neoliberalism in terms of:

First, a deregulation of economies; second, a forcing open of national markets to international trade and capital; and, third, a shrinking of the state's realm through privatisation, austerity or both (p,7).

However, in recent decades neoliberalism has been extended beyond the boundaries of this macro-economic framework to include all aspects of private and public life. As Rose (1990) has described this process, it is as if individual persons have become privatised, and the 'self' becomes a project to be worked on in the interests of competitive market forces. The result is *homo economicus*, a fragmented and stripped down being who becomes a commodity in the market and is expected to behave in a disciplined, competitive manner to enhance the goals of the all-embracing neoliberal agenda. As Stiglitz (2019) has argued, this unfettered mutation of political and social life may eventually destroy contemporary civic norms and values unless it is tamed and mediated by alternative values.

The neoliberal self is readily identifiable in contemporary HE systems and captures the lives and work of both staff and students. It leads to what has been called the 'McDonaldisation' of academic life (Hartley, 1995; Hyland, 2019) in which students become consumers in a market in which each individual competes for products (qualifications) to be utilised in the competition for jobs. The curriculum becomes increasingly dominated by economistic, employability objectives and lecturers are asked to package these for consumption by students. Research and teaching are themselves transformed by performance indicators and targets which come to define the lives of tutors and administrators. Little wonder this state of affairs has led – not just to the student health problems noted earlier – but to the deteriorating mental health of academics. In the wake of increasing staff sickness, and even suicides in recent times, Tremblath (2018) argues that such 'tragic statistics tell us that the collective mental health of our academics is in crisis [and] should be a wake-up call to *all* of us who work or study in universities, in any capacity' (p.2).

Many of these contemporary notions surrounding materialist and neoliberal transmutations of the lives of individuals are rooted in current modes of scientific materialism, and it is necessary to offer a critical account of this worldview before turning to alternative conceptions.

3. Critiques of Scientific Materialism
3.1 Materialism and Consciousness
Susan Blackmore (2011) has defined the so-called 'hard problem of consciousness' in terms of the question: 'how can objective, physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience?'(p.25). Within philosophy of mind, this 'mind-body problem' goes back at least as far as Descartes and his infamous dualist analysis of the mental and physical worlds which leaves unexplained exactly how they may be connected (Searle, 2004). More generally it results in the long-standing problem of how to explain subjective mental phenomena such as hopes, wishes, intentions, etc. – or simply what it is like to be something (Nagel, 1974) – in a world which, according to science, consists only of material objects, forces and processes. A number of solutions in the form of reconciliation strategies have been proposed in relation to the hard problem including the idea that there is no serious problem since the mind and mental events are simply what the brain does (hence a form of extended materialism; see Dennett, 1991) or, alternatively, that all material objects are imbued with forms of consciousness which evolve more fully within complex systems. This latter view is what contemporary panpsychism has largely come to mean and – in its materialist or physicalist form – has been championed most prominently by Galen Strawson (2006, 2016).

Shan Gao (2014) offers a succinct identification of the contemporary background to accounts of panpsychism in noting that:

Consciousness is the most familiar phenomenon. Yet it is the hardest one to explain. There are two distinct processes relating to the phenomenon: one is objective physical processes such as neural processing in the brain, and the other is the concomitant subjective conscious experience (loc. 47, Kindle edn.).

Forms of panpsychism are thus introduced to make the connection between the objective and subjective aspects of reality. Philip Goff (2018) expresses the basic problem by noting that:

Nothing is more certain than consciousness, and yet nothing is harder to incorporate into our scientific picture of the world. We know a great deal about the brain, much of it discovered in the last eighty years...But none of this has shed any light on how the brain produces consciousness (p.5).

Galen Strawson (2006) – one of the leading exponents of a physicalist form of panpsychism – prefers to characterise the contemporary debate by declaring that:

Consciousness... [by which] I mean what most people mean in this debate: experience of any kind whatever...is the most familiar thing there is, whether it's experience of emotion, pain, understanding what someone is saying, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or feeling. It is in fact the only thing in the universe whose ultimate intrinsic nature we can claim to know. It is utterly unmysterious (p.1)

Strawson then goes on to assert that the so-called objective and unmysterious nature of the physical world is, in fact, far from the truth. As he comments:

The nature of physical stuff, by contrast, is deeply mysterious, and physics grows stranger by the hour. (Richard Feynman's remark about quantum theory — "I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics" — seems as true as ever.) Or rather, more carefully: The nature of physical stuff is mysterious *except insofar as consciousness is itself a form of physical stuff* (ibid.)

Attacking the problem from an alternative conception which foregrounds the fundamental place of mind and consciousness in human evolution, Donald Hoffman (2019) argues that 'space , time and physical objects are not objective reality. They are simply the virtual world delivered by our senses to help us play the game of life' (p.xv). The ultimate claim of Hoffman – justified in terms of mathematical arguments rooted in evolutionary facts – is that, contra the physicalist case, it could be that 'consciousness does not arrive from matter...instead matter and spacetime arise from consciousness' (p.xviii).

3.2 . Materialist and Idealist Solutions to the Hard Problem
Panpsychism has emerged as a key component in attempts to solve the hard problem of consciousness which consists in explaining the existence of non-materialist subjective experiences in a world which mainstream science insists is made up of purely materialist elements. Although contemporary interpretations of panpsychism are, in the main, utilised in trying to solve problems of consciousness, the concept has a long history with diverse and widespread uses and applications.

David Chalmers (1996) outlines the 'easy' problems of consciousness, that is, how to map brain functions onto human thinking and behaviour. Such 'easy' problems include the integration of information by a cognitive system, the focus of attention, and the reportability of mental states, but such essentially functional processes leave us with the question of 'why the performance of these functions is accompanied by experience' (p.5). This is is labelled by Chalmers the 'central mystery' (ibid) of consciousness and gives rise to the 'hard problem' of how to understand and explain the undisputed existence of subjective mental states in a world which science tells us consists only of physical objects.

3.3. *Physicalist Panpsychism*

In later work, Chalmers (2013) has advanced a number of speculative solutions such as that the fundamental building blocks of the universe utilised by science – space, time and mass, for example – may have to be extended to include consciousness as a primary entity or universal property of everything in the cosmos. This is described as a 'nonreductive psychophysical' notion which supplements physical theories by explaining how 'physical processes are connected with and dependent upon the 'properties of experience' (p.17).

To make headway on this, as Strawson [5] argues, it is necessary to introduce some notion of subjective experience into existing physical theories. Real physicalists according to Strawson, 'must accept that experiential phenomena are physical phenomena' (2006, p.1), and supports the assertion concerning the emergence of experiential or consciousness properties from physical, non-experiential characteristics through, *inter alia*, the analogy of the emergence of the liquidity of water from non-liquid H2O molecules. A core aspect of this speculative thesis is that we do not know enough about the nature of the physical to argue – as dualists since Descartes and most post-Cartesian philosophers have held – that the physical and the mental are irrevocably distinct and irreconcilable. Making use of arguments by Eddington and Russell, Strawson asks 'on what conceivable grounds do so many physicalists simply assume that the physical, in itself, is an essentially and wholly non-experiential phenomenon?'(ibid.,p.3).

3.4 *Idealist Panpsychism*

Although physicalist materialism has been the foundation of science since the Enlightenment it has not gone unchallenged within philosophy where idealist theories of knowledge, truth and reality have been around since the Ancient Greeks. Shan Gao [7] has produced a fascinating philosophical history of panpsychism which demonstrates how thinkers from the pre-Socratics, through Plato and Aristotle, and down through the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods to current philosophy of science have advanced theories which propose that the natural world is imbued with, and indeed dependent upon, some form of conscious or mental element. However, in order to avoid the mind/body dualist black hole some form of monism needs to be considered, and Occam's Razor has led many thinkers – notably Leibniz, Berkeley and, in more recent times, Russell and Whitehead – to consider seriously the notion that, as Philip Goff [8] puts it, 'consciousness is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of physical reality' (p.112).

A principal materialist move is to assert that – since it is generally assumed that consciousness is generated by the brain – it is simply a matter of time before cognitive neuroscientists provide data which will solve the hard problem. However, as Steve Taylor (2018) has argued at length, there are no satisfactory models of how the mind/brain link can be supported, and he outlines the range of implausible claims – from epiphenomenalism to illusionism (pp.58-64) – which have failed to solve the principal problems. In addition, there is now a good range of neuroscientific data which indicates that – contra the physicalist assumptions – certain anomalous states of awareness (such as those produced by brain impairment, hallucinogenic episodes, or near-death experiences) result in *reduced* brain activity (ibid.,pp.67ff.).

Along with the glaringly obvious implausibility of the notion that there might be neural correlates of the taste of coffee, the smell of a flower or the sound of falling rain, the reduction of brain activity in transcendent states of awareness is the exact opposite of what is entailed by the materialist assumption that all experience is generated by the brain. The realisation that metaphysical materialism has to be abandoned as an explanation of consciousness represents a courageous step but such a move has been made by Francis Crick's former colleague, Christof Koch (2014) who argues that the 'emergence of subjective feelings from physical stuff appears inconceivable' and that, rather than being produced by the circuitry of the brain, consciousness is 'inherent in the design of the universe' (p.28).

Moreover, as Bernardo Kastrup (2014) points out, there is a crucial difference 'between materialism as a *metaphysics* and scientific theories as *models'* (p.10). Scientific materialism observes patterns and

regularities in nature and constructs models which explain objects and forces – such as subatomic particles and negative electric charge – in terms of their relationship to other cognate constructions and issues only in *quantities* not the *qualities* of phenomenal experience. Explaining and predicting how aspects of the material world operate relative to other aspects reveals nothing about the fundamental aspects of nature. The analytical idealism proposed by Kastrup as a more cogent alternative is claimed to solve, or rather, dissolve the hard problem by positing a form of idealist panpsychism by which consciousness is the ultimate primitive.

The explanation of why we seem to be separate from the world and other beings is couched in terms of the idea of dissociated mind states drawn from well established psychological studies. The brain, rather than generating experience, receives and canalizes information from the transpersonal world of mind. Like whirlpools in the stream of consciousness, individual minds are a 'partial localization of the flow of experiences in the stream' (2014, p.82). This idea of subjective experience as individualised representations of transpersonal consciousness is further elaborated by Hoffman (2019) in his theory of conscious realism.

Following Occam's simplest is best doctrine, the next logical step is to posit the idea that, as Donald Hoffman (2019) prefers to say, it is consciousness itself – not spacetime, forces or material objects – that forms the fundamental basis of the cosmos. Hoffman argues that 'space, time and physical objects are not objective reality. They are simply the virtual world delivered by our senses to help us play the game of life' (p.xv). His ultimate claim – justified in terms of mathematical arguments rooted in evolutionary facts – is that, contra the physicalist case, it could be that 'consciousness does not arrive from matter...instead matter and spacetime arise from consciousness' (p.xviii). Labelled 'conscious realism', this theory 'claims no central role for human consciousness' but 'posits countless kinds of conscious agents with a boundless variety of conscious experiences' (p.201).

Hoffman is acutely aware of the monumental cognitive dissonance which may result from considering such ideas but insists that it is simply an extension of the ideas of Galileo and Darwin. Moreover, the notion that reality is constructed through the interaction of conscious agents is supported by a robust mathematical model (pp.203-5) which underpins a process whose objective is to show how everything that we claim to know can be derived ultimately from the theory. He concludes his thesis with the following challenge:

Spacetime is your virtual reality, a headset of your own making. The objects you see are your own invention. You create them with a glance and destroy them with a blink. You have worn this headset all your life. What happens if you take it off? (ibid.,p.202)

Alternative visions of reality and human experience are readily available in the neo-idealist perspectives which posit consciousness as the ultimate primitive which generates and grounds all experiences of the world.

4. Unselfing through spiritual practice
It is the materialist/physicalist perspective that neo-idealism sets out to undermine which gives rise to the notion of humans as isolated individuals struggling for survival in an impersonal world. This provides an apt description of the contemporary HE student especially when we add to this bleak picture the neoliberal, corporate capture of university life resulting in rise of instrumental learning, predominantly economistic objectives, and the decline of the intrinsic value of educational activity (Barnett & Standish, 2003). As Kromydas (2017) argues, higher education is 'now an industry operating in a global market' (p.1) He goes on to observe that:

The mainstream view in the western world, as informed by the human capital theory sees education, as an ordinary investment and the main reason why someone consumes time and money to undertake higher levels of education, is the high returns expected from the corresponding wage premium, when enters the labour market (ibid., p.3).

The role of the student 'self' in all this is crucial and I want to suggest a critique of the materialistic perspectives which may be described in terms of a process of 'unselfing'. Recent work in philosophy of education (Olsson 2018; Bakhurst 2018) has foregrounded Iris Murdoch's work to illustrate how a process of 'unselfing' may assist in the process of moral transformation and the development of other-regarding values and dispositions. Murdoch (2003) was insistent that learning and, indeed, much purposeful intellectually activity was essentially moral in character in the sense that 'learning is moral progress because it is an asceticism, it diminishes our egotism and enlarges our conception of truth' (p.179). Olsson argues that the notion of 'unselfing' is central to Murdoch's particular conception of education and moral transformation. There is an overriding requirement for a 'decreased egocentricity and for a greater sensitivity towards other beings and objects in the world' with the aim of cultivating a 'morally oriented manner of relating to others in the world' (2018, p.165).

Unselfing is viewed as both a goal and as a process 'wherein one learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself' (Murdoch, 2003, p.17). Olsson suggests that central to this process is the concept of attention which is described by Murdoch as a 'just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality' (ibid., p.327). It is here that the links between education, morality and unselfing are brought into prominence. As Murdoch writes in her well-known thesis which emphasises the sovereignty of good over other concepts:

If I am learning, for instance, Russian, I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. Love of Russian leads me away from myself towards something alien to me...The honesty and humility required of the student – not to pretend what one does not know – is the preparation for the honesty and humility of the scholar who does not even feel tempted to suppress the fact which damns his theory (ibid.,p. 373).

But it is not just the qualities developed through such an attitude to learning but the very process of attending to something beyond and independent of our own egos and concerns which makes learning of such significance. As Olsson (2018) argues, the attention that Murdoch recommends invites us to move beyond our obsessions as 'narrating creatures' by becoming 'wrapped up in something' which involves the 'experience of spontaneity, immediacy, being touched and moved'. Such a process may be 'induced by a careful attention, freed of requirements, and by the concrete experience of the world' (p.173). Murdoch (2003) agrees with both Kant and Schopenhauer that the pursuit of aesthetic knowledge and experience is a moral enterprise which may help to overcome the egotistic impulse by 'inducing, at least a temporary, state of selflessness' (p.179). As she goes on to observe:

Any artist, or thinker, or craftsman knows of crucial moments when an aggregate of reflection and skill must now be pressed a little harder so as to achieve some significantly better result...Ideas break the narrow, self-obsessed limits of the mind. The enjoyment and study of good art is enlarging and enlightening in this way. We may add to this that as mathematics 'stands for' any high intellectual discipline, we may, without breaking faith with Plato, suggest that the carpenter 'stands for' any careful attentive self-forgetting work or craft, including housework, and all kinds of nameless 'unskilled' fixings or cleanings or arrangings which may be done well or badly (ibid.,pp.179-180).

The idea of particular forms of learning and training of the mind as means of escape from the self and suffering was, as mentioned earlier, a principal feature of Schopenhauer's philosophy and is, of course, also central to Buddhist teachings, especially in the increasingly popular mindfulness strategies informed by Buddhist philosophy (Hyland, 2011; Ergas, 2019). It is possible that, like Schopenhauer, Murdoch gained insights about the importance of particular forms of training attention from such Buddhist sources since there are remarkable parallels between – as Olsson and others have noted (Mole, 2006) – the centrality of the role accorded to selfless attention in her general philosophy and the idea of Buddhist mindfulness as the 'self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience...an orientation that is characterised by curiosity, openness and acceptance' (Bishop, 2004,p. 232).

5. Conclusion: Recommendations for Practice

It almost goes without saying that many of the problems stemming from the construction of the neoliberal self and its harmful impact on higher education can only be solved by wider political and social changes which are not entirely in the hands of students and lecturers. However, the sort of criticisms of materialism and selfing outlined above may go some way in providing the alternative perspectives necessary to generate change. In addition, there are many practical ways in which the lives of students may be enhanced without the need for a wholesale revolution of university policy and practice.

5.1. Unselfing and the HE Community

In terms of translating the theoretical recommendations outlined above into practical projects, a useful start would be to challenge those aspects of learning and teaching which are supportive of the neoliberal 'selfing' culture and seek to replace them with more collaborative arrangements. All the reports cited above recommend active monitoring of student health and early intervention by integrated counselling and support services (DfE, 2021; Raaper, 2021). What needs to be added to such practices are inter-departmental staff development sessions which seek to encourage collaborative and group learning/teaching so as to break down the solitary, isolationist approaches of many HEIs (Rossin & Hyland, 2003; Brame & Biel, 2015). Such an enhancement not only satisfies emerging research on the efficacy of social as against individualistic strategies but also contributes to the important ethical project of fostering the feeling of 'belonging' recommended by the research reports on student wellbeing in the sector (IPPR, 2017; DfE, 2021).

This move from individualistic conceptions of learning/teaching to social/collaborative ones represents a vital moral transformation of current HE theory and practice. Instead of treating students as consumers in some sort of impersonal academic marketplace, they become moral persons entitled to and demanding of the respect we would accord to all members of the ethical community. The justifications for such arrangements are to found in the standard moral arguments offered by both utilitarian and deontological philosophers, grounded in both evolutionary theory (Boehm, 2012) and the golden rule of 'respect for persons' (Peters, 1966). This ethical framework is crucial for the achievement of that sense of student 'belonging' which is recommended in all the recent reports on the sector concerned with the wellbeing of students (Kromydas, 2017; DfE, 2021).

5.2. Enhancing the Curriculum

There is a common consensus that the HE curriculum has has become utilitarian and instrumental in nature in response to the dominance of corporate and employability objectives. Moreover the vocational/academic divide has led to a state of affairs in which neither students nor employers are entirely satisfied with university provision (Barnett & Standish, 2003; Hyland, 2022). Kastrup (2015) captures the chief features of the debate in his distinction between a 'utilitarian education' which aims to equip one for the performance of practical tasks' and broader 'philosophical education'. Although, universities and colleges are charged with preparing students for working and civic life, Kastrup (2015) insists that education must not be circumscribed by a crude and narrow materialist agenda. As an alternative to this bleak conception, he recommends:

An education that equips us to look critically and thoughtfully at the world around and inside us; an education that that helps us understand nature, history and the dynamics of the human mind; an education that helps us take the lead in driving our lives to meaningful goals, as opposed to falling by reflex into the role of mindless consumers who only on their deathbeds come around to asking "What has all this been about anyway?" (p.128).

Moreover, many educators are now pointing to failure of HE at all levels to foster that creative and innovative capacity that is increasingly required in all spheres of work and life roles. The UK Government report on creativity (DfE, 1999) stressed the importance of creative and cultural studies to all aspects of

education, the economy and social life and – one of its main contributors and foremost advocate of creative education – Sir Ken Robinson has continued the pioneering work in this field. He argues that:

instead of growing into creativity in school, we grow out of it. Students all over the world have had more years of schooling than they care to count. During this process, students are taught that making a mistake is a sin. We have planted in our students' minds a picture of a perfectly, carefully drawn life...Education isn't about facts being stored in our minds so that we can get tested on them. Education is the beauty to nurture creativity, to fuel curiosity and to create a well-rounded person (in Delile, 2012, pp.1-2).

Similar arguments have been levelled against the trends in vocational education which have resulted in an obsession with prescriptive competence outcomes at the expense of affective (feeling and personal engagement) and psychomotor (physical embodiment) educational objectives (Hyland, 2017).

Many of these failings can be explained by the dominance of left-brain objectives – also, like the neoliberal economic worldview supported by scientific materialism – in contemporary education systems. Iain McGilchrist's lifelong work on the divided brain – founded on premises in full alignment with the idealist anti-materialism discussed in earlier sections – sets out the problems in graphic detail. McGilchrist's work goes further than the standard accounts of brain science and human development by identifying the differential roles of the left and right hemispheres in all forms of life. As he puts it, 'we can only know the world as we have shaped it by the nature of our attention' (2012, p.9), and the different hemispheres – though collaborating in the process of responding to the world – display quite different forms of attention, focus and objectives. This observation is elaborated as follows:

The left hemisphere, as in birds and animals, pays the narrow-beam, precisely focussed attention which enables us to get and grasp: it is the left hemisphere that controls the right hand with which we grasp something...The right hemisphere underwrites sustained attention...not in the service of manipulation, but in the service of connection, exploration and relation...One way of looking at the difference would be to say that while the left hemisphere's *raison d'etre* is to narrow things down to a certainty, the right hemisphere's is to open them up to possibility (ibid.,pp.11-13).

In his most recent work, McGilchrist (2021) summarises the chief differences between the left hemisphere (LH) and right hemisphere (RH) in terms of their scope and functions:

The LH is principally concerned with manipulation of the world; the RH with understanding the world as a whole and how to relate to it...the LH deals with detail, the local, what is central and in the foreground, and easily grasped; the RH with the whole picture, including the periphery or background, and all that is not immediately graspable...the LH aims to narrow things down to a certainty, while the RH opens them up into possibility....the LH tends to see things as isolated, discrete, fragmentary, where the RH tends to see the whole...the RH is essential for 'theory of mind'...and essential for empathy...the LH is unreasonably optimistic, and it lacks insight into its limitations. The RH is more realistic, but tends towards the pessimistic (pp.46-51).

McGlichrist is adamant that this left-brain dominance is responsible for many of our mental health problems and – in addition to the importance of the right brain in enhancing creative and holistic knowledge and understanding – this supports an increasing role for right hemisphere objectives in an enhanced HE curriculum.

5.3 Spiritual Practice
It is interesting, and surely not coincidental, that all the neo-idealist theorists and practitioners discussed above ground their arguments in some form of spiritual, holistic perspective to explain the nature of reality and human experience. Even Hoffman – arguably the most positivist and mainstream scientist among this

group of thinkers with his mathematical model of consciousness and experimental programme – suggests that his theory of conscious realism leads to forms of secular, naturalistic spirituality. As he contends:

I also think that conscious realism can breach the wall between science and spirituality. This ideological barrier is a needless illusion, enforced by hoary misconceptions: that science requires a physicalist ontology that is anathema to spirituality, and that spirituality is impervious to the methods of science. (2019, p.199),

Similarly, Daoist and Buddhist concepts are connected to the notion of 'mind at large' or cosmic consciousness in Kastrup's writings (2015, 2019), and McGilchrist appeals to similar spiritual traditions. As he comments:

To be human, in my view, is to feel a deep gravitational pull towards something ineffable...something outside our conceptual grasp, but nonetheless present to us through intimations that come from a whole range of unfathomable experiences we call 'spiritual' (2021, pp. 1847-8).

As indicated in earlier sections, both idealism and unselfing are founded on a non-dualist concept of reality and experience and this perspective has its origins in Eastern spiritual traditions, especially in Buddhist philosophy and practice. In recent times, mindfulness strategies drawn from these traditions have become something of a boom industry over the last few decades thanks largely to the work of Kabat-Zinn (1990) who developed a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme in his work at the Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. There is some evidence of the efficacy of mindfulness practices in treating mental health problems in both medical and educational settings (Hyland, 2011, 2022), but the increasing commercialisation and commodification of such strategies as they have been captured by the neoliberal market – described by Purser (2019) as 'McMindfulness' – needs to be taken into account if such approaches are to be utilised in university settings.

Ward's critique of higher education practice based on neoliberal perspectives is adamant that these new commodified forms of mindfulness – divorced from Buddhist ethical principles – need to challenged. Such commercialised forms of mindfulness:

can be understood as playing the same role in the production of the neoliberal self as therapy culture. In failing to address collective suffering and acknowledge that systematic change is necessary, what we are left with is an endless focus on ourselves, a triumph of narcissism (2022, p.136).

However, mindfulness practices which are rooted in Buddhist ethics and connected with social engagement and interdependence can provide a powerful antidote to mindless narcissistic selfing, and should have a place in counselling and support services concerned with the mental health of students in HEIs (Ergas, 2019; Hyland, 2022).

Materialistic neoliberalism posits a cosmos of isolated individuals alienated from an outside world of objects, and this perspective has helped to produce a culture of selfish individualism, manic consumerism and the near destruction of the planet. As Taylor (2018) concludes, 'moving beyond materialism means becoming able to perceive the vividness and sacredness of the world around us...transcending our sense of separateness so that we can experience our connectedness with nature and other living beings' (p.231). Such a vision – grounded in the neo-idealistic perspectives outlined above – can help to construct a powerful mission statement for higher education staff and students struggling to cope with the problems of working in the 21st century corporate university.

References

1. Bakhurst, D. (2018).Practice, Sensibility and Moral Education; *Journal of Philosophy of Education,* 52(4): 677-694
2. Barnett,R. & Standish, P. (2003). Higher Education and the University. In Blake, N., Smeyers, P. Smith, R. & Standish, P. (eds)(2003). *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*. (London: Blackwell)
3. Brame, C.J. & Biel, R. (2015). Setting up and facilitating group work: Using cooperative learning groups effectively. *Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.* http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/setting-up-and-facilitating-group-work-using-cooperative-learning-groups-effectively/.
4. Bishop, R. (2004). Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition; *Clinical Psychology, Science and Practice,* 11(3): 230-241
5. Blackmore, S. (2011). *Zen and the Art of Consciousness.* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubs)
6. Boehm, C. (2012). *Moral Origins: The Evolution of Virtue, Altruism and Shame* (New York; Basic Books)
7. Chalmers, D. (1995). Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness; *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3):200-219 (http://consc.net/papers/facing.pdf);
8. Chalmers, D. (1996). *The Conscious Mind.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
9. Chen T. & Lucock M (2022). The mental health of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic: An online survey in the UK. *PLoS ONE* 17(1): e0262562. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0262562
10. Dawkins, R. (2017). *Science in the Soul*. (London: Bantam Press)
11. Delile, L.(2012). Are Schools Are Killing Creativity? *HuffPost*, 4/10/12. See also Sir Ken Robinson's talk on https://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity
12. Dennett, D.(1991). *Consciousness Explained*. (Boston: Little Brown)
13. Dennett, D. (2018*). From Bach to Bacteria*: The Evolution of Minds.. (London: Penguin)
14. DfE (1999). *All Our Futures*. (London: National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education: Dept of Education).
15. DfE (2021). *Student Mental Health and Wellbeing: insights from higher education providers and sector experts*. (London: Department for Education).
16. Ergas, O. (2019). Mindfulness In, As and Of Education: three roles of mindfulness in education; *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 53(2): 340-358
17. Gao, S.(2014). *Consciousness Encounters Quantum Physics. (*Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing)
18. Goff, P.(2019). *Galileo's Error: Foundations for a New Science of Consciousness.* (London: Rider)
19. Goswami, U. (2008). Principles of Learning, Implications for Teaching: A Cognitive Neuroscience Approach. *Journal of Philosophy of Educatio*n, 42(3/4): 381-399
20. Hartley, D.(1995). The McDonaldisation of Higher Education; food for thought? *Oxford Review of Educatio*n, 21(4): 409-423
21. Hoffman, D. (2019). *The Case Against Reality: How Evolution Hid the Truth from*
22. *Our Eyes* (London: Penguin)
23. Hyland, T. (2011). *Mindfulness and Learning: Celebrating the Affective Dimension of Education (*Dordrecht: Springer Science)
24. Hyland, T. (2017). Craftworking and the "Hard Problem" of Vocational Education and Training; *Open Journal of Social Sciences,* 5(3): 304-325
25. Hyland, T. (2019). *Vocational Studies, Lifelong Learning and Social Values*. (London: Routledge Revivals)
26. Hyland, T. (2020). Unselfing, Suffering and Morality: Cultivating Non-Narrative Approaches to Ethical Development; *International Journal of Social Policy and Education,* 2(1), 108-122
27. Hyland, T. (2022). Consciousness, Analytic Idealism and Buddhist Foundations: Exploring Non-Materialist Ways of Connecting Eastern and Western Spiritual Perspectives; *Advances in Social Science and Culture,* 4 (2), 56-71

28. IPPR. (2017). *Not By Degrees: Improving Student Mental Health in the UK's Universities* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research) https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/not-by-degrees

29. Jarvis, P.(2000). The Corporate University. In Field, J. & Leicester, M.(eds)(2000). *Lifelong Learning: Education Across the Lifespan* (London: Routledge Falmer)

30. Kabat-Zinn, J.(1990). *Full Catastrophe Living. (*London: Piatkus)

31. Kastrup, B. (2014). *Why Materialism is Baloney* (Hampshire: iff Books)

32. Kastrup, B. (2015). *Brief Peeks From Beyond: Critical Essays on Metaphysics, Neuroscience, Free Will, Skepticism and Culture* (Hampshire:i ff Books)

33. Kastrup, B. (2016). *More Than Allegory* (Hampshire: iff Books)

34. Kastrup, B. (2019). *The Idea of the World* (Hampshire: iff Books)

35. Kastrup, B. (2021). *Science Ideated.* (Hampshire: John Hunt Publishing)

36. Kromydas, T. (2017). Rethinking higher education and its relationship with social inequalities: past knowledge, present state and future potential. *Nature: Humanities and Social Sciences Communications.* 3(1): https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8

37. Leicester, M.(1999). Crass Materialism: A Crucial Value Education Issue. In Leicester, M. & Modgil, S.(eds). *Institutional Issues: Pupils, Schools and Teacher Education.* (London: Routledge) pp..263-278

38. Macaskill, A.(2012). The mental health of university students in the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 41 (4), 426-441

39. McGilchrist, I. (2012). *The Divided Brain and the Search for Meaning.* Yale University Press

40. McGilchrist, I. (2021). *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World. (*London: Perspective Press)

41. Mole, C. (2006). Attention, Self and the Sovereignty of Good; in Rowe, A.(ed); *Iris Murdoch: A Reassessment (*Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) pp.72-84

42. Murdoch, I. (1998*). Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin)

43. Murdoch, I. (2003). *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals. (* London: Vintage)

44. Naidoo, R. & Williams, J. (2015). The neoliberal regime in English higher education: Charters, consumers and the erosion of the public good. *Critical Studies in Education,* 56(2): 208-223,

45. Nagel, T. (2012). *Mind and Cosmos*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

46. NUS (2020). *Students and Coronavirus. Phase 3 study mental health.* (London: National Union of Students). https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-and-students-phase-3-study-mental-health-with-demographics-nov-2020

47. Olssen, M.(2006). *Michel Foucault: Materialism and Education*. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers).

48. Olsson, A.L. (2018). A Moment of Letting Go: Iris Murdoch and the Morally Transformative Process of Unselfing. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52(1): 163-177

49. ONS (2021). *Coronavirus and higher education students: England* (London: Office for National Statistics). https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/england20novemberto25november2020

50. Peters, R.S. (1966). *Ethics and Education*. (London: Allen & Unwin)

51. Purser, R.(2019). *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality. (*London: Repeater Books)

52. Raaper, R.(2021). Contemporary Dynamics of Student Experience and Belonging in Higher Education. *Critical Studies in Education,* 62(5): 537-542 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17508487.2021.1983852

53. Rose, N.(1990). *Governing the Soul: the shaping of the private self.* (London: Taylor & Francis)

54. Rossin, D. & Hyland, T. (2003). Group Work-Based Learning within Higher Education; *Mentoring & Tutoring.* 11 (2):.153-162

55. Shankleman, M., Hammond, L. & Jones, F.W. (2021). Adolescent Social Media Use and Well-Being: A Systematic Review and Thematic Meta-synthesis. *Adolescent Res Rev* **6,** 471–492 https://doi.org/10.1007/s40894-021-00154-5

56. Stiglitz, J. (2019). Unfettered neoliberalism will literally destroy our civilisation. *Irish Independent*, November 17th

57. Strawson, G. (2006). Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 13 (10/11) :3-31

58. Strawson, G. (2016). Consciousness isn't a mystery. It's Matter. *New York Times*, 16/5/16

59. Taylor, S. (2018). *Spiritual Science: Why Science Needs Spirituality to Make Sense of the World.* (London: Watkins Media)

60. Tremblath, J.E. (2018). The Neoliberal University is Making Us Sick. Who's to Blame? *The Familiar Strange,* June 14 https://thefamiliarstrange.com/2018/06/14/neoliberal-universities-whos-to-blame/

61. Ward, E. (2022). *Self.* (Cork, Ireland: University College Cork).