



# A Call for a Renaissance of the Spirit in the Humanities

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*'But we....who are we?'*

Plotinus, *Enneads VI, 4*

## Summary and aim

This document follows on from the 2014 *Manifesto for a Post-Materialist Science* (<https://opensciences.org/about/manifesto-for-a-post-materialist-science>) and the 2018 Galileo Commission Report, *Beyond a Materialist Worldview: Towards an Expanded Science* (<https://galileocommission.org/report/>) as a corresponding call for the Humanities to be liberated from and expanded beyond existing ontological and epistemological constraints.

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the 'grand narrative' of Western culture has been increasingly dominated by a mechanistic, materialistic and instrumental world view originating in the natural sciences. This has entailed a naturalist ontology based on the primacy of matter and a bottom-up reductionist epistemology whereby the whole is seen as the sum of its parts and the physical universe as a causally closed system. According to the philosophical presuppositions embedded in this view, consciousness is generated by/ in the brain, hence physical death means the end and extinction of the person as a conscious entity.

On this basis, our inner world of ideas, emotions, concepts – our conscious life in all its forms and facets - is widely presumed to be a mere epiphenomenon, a secondary by-product or side-effect derived from and reducible to the primacy and ultimate reality of matter. As Francis Crick memorably put it, 'you are nothing but a pack of neurons.' Like C.S. Lewis in his book *The Abolition of Man*, we contend that this view destroys the very ground of rational thought, free will, meaning, purpose, value and moral responsibility.

The aim of the present document is threefold: (i) identify the intimate interdisciplinary connections between the Sciences and the Humanities; (ii) explore the ways in which materialist assumptions about the nature of reality have 'spilled over' from scientific disciplines and permeated the Humanities; and (iii) critically consider the implications of post-materialist scientific findings for the way the Humanities can redefine and expand their scope, goals and practices towards ever greater levels of diversity, self-awareness, academic freedom and open-mindedness.

## Background and diagnosis

Philosopher of religion Jeffrey Kripal<sup>1</sup> points out that most scholars in the humanities, like most scientists, "assume the same metaphysics [conception of reality]...of physicalism or materialism. They sincerely believe that they have a clear and convincing answer to the mind-matter problem: matter is really real, and mind is really not." Crucially, he argues that "this same materialism has been very destructive of the humanities, mostly by rendering the human literally non-existent and certainly irrelevant in a technological world of objects and things", concluding that "this leaping conflation of science, materialism, and philosophical truth is *devastating* to the humanities." This represents a foundational cultural crisis of the first magnitude that is essentially spiritual and metaphysical: who indeed are we?

We share his diagnosis that "if we want to reinvigorate and renew the humanities (and our humanities), we have to address, firmly and without apology, the dominant ontology of materialism that is presently destroying them from within and from without." This means questioning the view that the human being is nothing more than a complex biological machine and the brain a

'meat computer' (Marvin Minsky), which we believe leads to an overall self-undermining of the Humanities with numerous ethical, cultural and political repercussions. Such renewal of the foundations of the Humanities requires a radical metaphysical reconstruction and an inversion of the presumed primacy of matter.

Studying its origins and development from Classical times to the Renaissance, we observe that the Humanities began as a way of curating spiritual or intangible dimensions of human life and self so as to engage our human spirit in all its aspects and address its deeper aspirations.

By losing connection with their original force and foundational purpose, the Humanities have forfeited their once cherished status and popular appeal. The lost cultural understanding regarding the role and significance of the Humanities is reflected in their declining appeal and funding in favour of more 'practical' and 'real' STEM subjects, and can be directly related to the loss of spirit and diminishment of the human within the Humanities and society more generally.

Nearly 60 years ago, Thomas Kuhn popularised the use of the word "paradigm" in his ground-breaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Conceptually, paradigms are closely related to worldviews serving as sets of axiomatic presuppositions which function as 'lenses' and metaphors through which we understand and explain the world. The term "worldview" is a translation of the German *Weltanschauung*, which literally means the way we look at the world. Crucially, as Richard Dewitt argues, "a worldview is not merely a collection of separate, independent, unrelated beliefs, but is instead an intertwined, interrelated, interconnected system of beliefs" with an internal logical coherence characterised by E.O. Wilson as *consilience*.

For religious scholar Ninian Smart, worldviews tell people who they are in relation to society and the universe, and define the true constitution of the self. Self-image and world-image are therefore intimately connected such that the dominant view of the human as a complex biological machine is mirrored in and by a mechanistic understanding of the universe and life. The way we view the nature of the world – a process largely based on socially established assumptions, beliefs and interpretations – largely determines the way we perceive the nature of our selves, and vice versa.

Cultural historian Richard Tarnas goes even further when he contends that *worldviews actually create worlds* in terms of our beliefs and theories, our metaphors, our myths, our interpretive assumptions: 'Our world view is not simply the way we look at the world. It reaches inward to constitute our innermost being, and outward to constitute the world. It deeply configures our psychic world.'<sup>72</sup> A threat to our worldview, therefore, also constitutes psychologically a threat to the self. This explains the widespread resistance and even refusal to examine evidence that conflicts with our worldview, even though such evidence may be derived through methods and processes which we accept as legitimate.

Currently, the dominant worldview in our western societies is scientific materialism which can harden into 'scientism' in its more ideological form: this metaphysic postulates the primacy of matter over consciousness and the reduction of consciousness to matter – i.e. the assumption that mind or consciousness, including all emotional and psychological experiences, are secondary products of physical activity in the brain and hence reducible material processes. Such a view regards the universe as devoid of spirit, purpose or teleology.

This evidently has profound repercussions on the way we interpret the nature of human beings: As we have already noted, the idea of the 'human being' at the heart of the Humanities currently remains embedded in the underlying mechanistic-materialist world view carried over by the positive sciences. This assumption is reflected in recent convergent developments in biotechnology, nanotechnology, AI, robotics and computation, where the aim now appears to be the merging of humans with machines within a centralised technocratic control system. Such developments are founded on and justified by the mechanistic metaphysic of the human being as a complex biological machine or operating system, which also underpins Silicon Valley Transhumanism and the Fourth Industrial Revolution/Great Reset advocated by the World Economic Forum.

The ideological dominance of scientism is due both to the phenomenal success and prestige of science with its claim to be the ultimate and only valid source of true knowledge, but also because scientific

paradigms, due to their perceived legitimacy, transform into *cultural* paradigms which shape and define the collective world view of entire generations, and, *crucially, what is regarded as real and unreal.*

Despite efforts by a minority of theorists to challenge such assumptions, almost all disciplines and the majority of analytical and post-modern branches within the Humanities are founded on the postulate that the human being is a complex biological machine capable of logic and emotions, reason and love, but ultimately reducible to its chemical – biological functions, its genetic predispositions and relative cultural situatedness, and, eventually, its physical body. Human beings are seen as individuals separate from one another and from nature, reducible to genetic – neuro-biological factors and sociocultural context.

Naturally, such a historically conditioned view of the human being is by no means the only possible way of conceptualising our human experience. Non-materialist and indigenous world views provide alternative readings of the nature and essence of *human-ness, humanity*, and hence *the Humanities* as an academic discipline – for instance, the Hellenic notion of 'psyche' and 'nous', the medieval notions of 'anima', the Indian philosophical notion of the 'Atman or Self', or even the Hegelian 'spirit'. These have been marginalised as potentially legitimate narratives for providing valid answers to Plotinus' question of 'who we are'. Alternative world views have gradually lost their prestige, while the materialist interpretation has gained a hegemonic status as 'power knowledge', 'consensus opinion' and 'settled truth' vis-à-vis its predecessors, even disparaging them as 'naïve', 'ignorant', 'tribalist' and 'spiritualist' nonsensical superstitions.

As a result, the perceived goal of academic practice, along with our methods, has been largely conditioned by those predominant ontological presuppositions. The end of knowledge is no longer the awakening of our psyche from the 'cave of illusion' as Socrates contended, nor our union in *gnosis* with the Oneness of Being, as both Hellenic and Indian scholarship presumes; nor even the more modest purpose of achieving Aristotelian virtue, which stands at the core of classical education. Within academic training in the Humanities, we are scarcely educated to 'know ourselves', as the Delphic oracle once suggested as the crux of knowledge, nor do we learn how to connect with and cultivate our 'psyche' with its discrete faculties such as logical and transcendental reason, intuition, imagination, the 'eye of the heart' and volition.

A central thrust of the post-modern project in recent years has been devoted to questioning and delegitimizing Enlightenment rationalism, the epistemological hegemony of modern science and the left hemisphere understanding of 'reason'. Deconstructivism,

social constructivism, intersectionality and other currents of post-modern thought have initiated a critical engagement with the *problematique* of scientism and materialism.

Although post-modern strands do question the scientific hegemony of materialism and positivist methodologies, they fall short of attempting the leap of articulating a coherent, systematic post-materialist ontology and epistemology as an act of deep metaphysical reconstruction.

## Consequences

### Loss of Cultural Diversity

The supremacy and purported incontestability of an ontological materialist paradigm in the Humanities at leading universities dictate the very context of acceptable epistemologies within which academic discussions take place. This has resulted in covert and overt forms of discrimination against other worldviews, serving to delegitimize and undermine differing traditions of non-materialist indigenous knowledge and wisdom and leading to a systemically embedded monoculture in western academia.

In response to this situation, many theorists from various theoretical strands, such as post-modernism, constructivism, critical theory, etc., have extensively addressed these issues of diversity, colonization and the need for multi-culturalism within academia. As a result, more institutions and theorists are becoming aware of the importance of greater cultural polyphony and cultural decolonization of our academic practices.

We believe that becoming aware of embedded ontological biases can lead to an even greater level of diversity, self-awareness, academic freedom, open-mindedness and room for exploring novel post-materialist epistemologies within the Humanities.

### Academic Freedom & Epistemological Discrimination

Accompanying the predominance of the materialist worldview as the cultural backbone of western academia is the correlated prejudice underpinning mainstream Humanities strands favouring *a priori* 'left-hemisphere'-based research over 'right-hemisphere' approaches. This includes the prioritization of rational calculation, discursive reason, linear logic and empiricism over other forms of knowing, which has resulted in the marginalization of key human faculties such as intuition, imagination and emotional intelligence, as discussed in depth by Iain McGilchrist in *The Matter with Things*.

This downgrading of these ways of knowing as 'less' academic or 'legitimate' is written into the normative structure of modern academia and is reflected in the very *modus* of academic teaching, writing, assessment and performance requirements at Universities.

This 'epistemological discrimination' has in turn limited our academic freedom and reinforced the exclusion of non-materialist knowledge traditions which offer us tools both to situate ourselves and critique our own presuppositions, as well as potentially yielding insights that could lead to the transformation and evolution of knowledge.

Such epistemological discrimination can be correlated with the perpetuation of systemic patriarchal residues and the development of more feminine or feminist epistemologies which would advance gender equality.

#### *The Divided Life: Addressing Epistemological Discrimination within the Humanities*

As a result of the tacit prejudice against alternative non-materialist *ontologies* and *epistemologies* as valid starting points of academic research, a significant number of our colleagues within the Humanities - as a plethora of testimonies demonstrates - ultimately have to resort to a kind of 'divided life' whereby personal beliefs and/or experiences deviating from the prevailing narrative have to be privately hived off from academic positions and arguments for fear of rejection by and even ejection from the academic community.

This has resulted in tacit forms of discrimination against Humanities practitioners who approach their work from a different ontological worldview. We argue that both overt and covert discrimination is unjustified and that bringing this into the open can enhance academic freedom, equality and diversity within universities.

#### *Social and Political Consequences*

Seeing matter as the ultimate (and only) reality, and human beings as inherently separate has promoted a culture of unhealthy individualism, self-centredness, separatism and extreme consumerism. Modern capitalism and neoliberalism, founded on the prioritization of material wealth and self-interest, have contributed to increasing social inequalities and a general loss of meaning in younger generations. Although this is largely due to the political appropriation of scientific materialism and competitive neo-Darwinism on the part of political institutions of power, it has nevertheless been reinforced by the Humanities.

#### *The Green – Environmental Parameter*

Our world view shapes the ways in which we treat nature. The current model according to which matter, including nature, is seen as 'dead' and human beings as extrinsic to nature is a significant factor in the unprecedentedly destructive ways in which human beings have treated the natural world, leading to environmental *hubris* and corresponding ecological degradation.

The prioritization of left-hemisphere approaches of instrumental manipulation and control in economic and political theorizing have also led to an economics of exploitation and an ideology of economic growth disconnected from ethics, compassion, unity, and respect for all forms of life and the planet itself.

#### **A call for a renaissance of the Spirit in the Humanities**

*Accumulating evidence from cutting-edge post-materialist scientific research indicates that we are standing at the verge of a expansive paradigm shift and a novel emerging world view that will transcend the outdated materialist paradigm. Many studies are now supporting the position that consciousness now needs to be regarded as primary, nonlocal and unified rather than secondary and reducible to matter. This understanding entails crucial and radical repercussions for the way we understand the nature of our world, the nature of our selves, and thus our relationship to nature. This expands and deepens the view of the human, hence this Call for a Renaissance of the Spirit in the Humanities.*

We contend that raising awareness and engaging in critical and self-reflective investigations regarding the existing presuppositions and limitations underpinning the Humanities can assist in **clearing away its restricting dogmatic and patriarchal residues**. This can foster genuine interdisciplinarity and inter-cultural dialogue, unleashing novel creative possibilities that will renew and reinvigorate the Humanities.

**We argue that this critical and creative re-examination of the Humanities' central assumptions will also allow them to embody more authentically the principles of academic freedom, diversity, non-discrimination, equality, open-mindedness and innovative spirit that, since its beginnings, form its core foundational values.**

We call for the **dismantling of cultural bias of the materialist paradigm by allowing alternative ontologies and correlated epistemologies regarding the nature of the world, consciousness and the human being** as alternative views equally worthy of consideration and academic investigation.

We urge theorists to open to **greater levels of dialogue and consideration of non-materialist worldviews, by also expanding the scope of permissible epistemological approaches to include non-discursive methodologies, self-reflexive, participatory and action research methods** that evolve and transform not only knowledge, but the practitioners as well.

We believe that approaching the Humanities informed by the findings of post-materialist sciences can shine a **new light on epistemological possibilities** that have the potential to

- (i) **Embody praxis to bridge the gap between 'scholarship vs practice';**
- (ii) **Re-emphasize the more contemplative and experiential ways of knowing by demonstrating how 'the experiential can be academic';**
- (iii) **Shift our collective worldview and self-view in ways that foster greater environmental awareness and more inclusive and compassionate forms of political participation.**

Finally, we invite members of the Humanities to investigate the implications of the **unity and primacy of consciousness for our understanding of the status and nature of 'the human being' around which the Humanities develop** – the nature of the human self.

In the light of this growing post-materialist understanding of the nature of consciousness, we invite the Humanities to revisit cultural roots in Hellenic and other wisdom traditions.

It is time to reconsider Heraclitus' words, that "*Logos is one and shared*" and realize its implications for the way we approach not only knowledge, but also life, relationships and ethics.

It is time to reintegrate the Love (*philotis*) for wisdom (*Sophia*) back into our academic practices, and reconsider the ancient Platonic notion that *gnosis* (knowledge) is the experiential turning of consciousness onto itself with the purpose of directly realizing the unity of logos – the non-dual nature of consciousness.

Expanding our academic practices to encourage exploration of the nature of being and the underlying oneness of consciousness can redefine our understanding of the nature and depth of the human being in the Humanities in a way consistent with the findings of post-materialist sciences. This includes the ethical implications of deep states of oneness where there is no ultimate sense of separation – where we realise we are one with each other - which leads us to care more for each other, for life and for the earth.

**We invite you to support this Call for a Renaissance in the Humanities by signing on <https://galileocommission.org/call> and posting the link on your own website and links on social media.**

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#### Notes

1 Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Future of the Humanities*, pp. 375 ff in *Consciousness Unbound*, (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021)

2 Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New Worldview* (New York, New York: Viking: The Penguin Group, 2006), p. 16.

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