

## COMMENTARY

### ***Transcendent Mind: Rethinking the Science of Consciousness* by Imants Barušs and Julia Mossbridge**

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Half a lifetime ago, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson dismantled one of the mental tools we use to understand our reality, usually bamboozling ourselves in the process. Their classic study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) showed how powerfully certain very basic physical parameters bracket our emotional response to the world and other people. One routine metaphor draws on height as a privileged characteristic: her Highness, ascending a hierarchy, sheer physiological tallness as a marker of worth and attractiveness.

So what metaphors and metonymies are invoked by the term “transcendent mind”? Doesn’t it immediately exert a claim on us of *superior worth, purified of dross, even unearthly magnificence*? Certainly that is suggested by the Oxford Dictionary, which finds “transcendent” to convey “surpassing the ordinary; exceptional, existing apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material universe,” and even, drawing on Kant, “not realizable in experience.” On the whole, then, a transcendent mind would be far more wonderful than the coarse, grubby, workaday thinking and feeling unit tucked away under our skulls. Look at the roots of the word, it’s that height thing again: from the Latin verb *transcendere*, “climbing up and over.”

Then again, haven’t I just glibly tossed in another standard metaphor for mind, that it’s a kind of mechanism, a “workaday thinking and feeling unit,” a sort of neural abacus? I admit it. Contemporary science finds no use for the traditional hypothesis of an immaterial soul extended downward to the world of *stuff* from an empyreal beyond, infusing the flesh and working the mindless physical abacus.

Could it be, though, that this canonical Enlightenment doctrine is under terminal stress, a dying paradigm unable in principle to reach beyond reductionism into the brilliant spatially nonlocal entangled timeless quantum reality, beyond equations that have nothing to set them blazing? That is the key claim made in this book’s quite important synoptic intervention: that “materialism” is kaput, getting by on borrowed time.

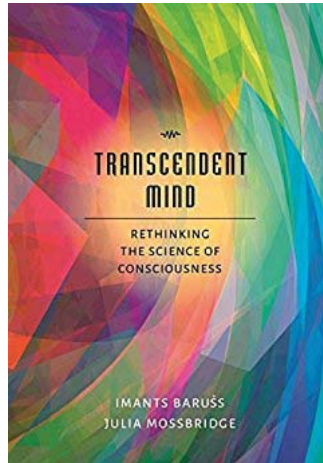
But what is this materialism we need to climb up over to reach the heights of better understanding? Psychology professor Imants Barušs and neuroscientist Dr. Julia Mossbridge define it in a curiously antique way, as if the billiard-ball rules of Newton still ruled the roost, and relativity and quantum theory, force fields and energy exchanges, had not actually been increasingly in charge of our *Zeitgeist*, our *Weltanschauung*, for a century.

The billiard-ball or “materialist” universe, they note, is marked by six features: it is *scalable*, with the same laws governing everything; *deterministic*, with all activity utterly predictable; *objective*, since subjective observation can have no direct effect on matter; *reductive*, with even consciousness explainable by the formal dance of atoms; and dependent on *absolute space* and *invariant time*. “Each of these six prongs of historical materialism,” the authors point out, “have been pretty much dismantled by now” (p. 8). Since this is indeed largely the case, and has been for many decades, they would seem to have removed the need for a book that argues the death of materialism. But they are poised for a bolder move than that: a call for its replacement by a reality not just *subject to* direct interventions by consciousness, but actually *made out of* consciousness (whatever that could mean). Indeed, this is how they end the book:

What if . . . consciousness of some sort is the fundamental substance of the universe and everything else is made out of consciousness? (p. 179) . . . that consciousness is the ultimate reality, that physical manifestation is the by-product of the mental, that anomalous phenomena occur, that the other anomalous means of acquiring knowledge . . . such a position ends up being largely supported by the evidence that we have discussed in this book . . . We think consciousness has an aspect that is a deep reality that we might only be able to partially know conceptually. . . . we think it is likely to exist ontologically prior to space and time. . . . We speculate that consciousness creates physical manifestation through which it then expresses itself in stepped-down, accessible form. (p. 195)

Is this position identical to the philosophical approach known as panpsychism, which claims that consciousness is fundamental, an elementary property of living matter, not to be derived from any other source, as neuroscientist Christof Koch (2012) puts it? Yet some of its adherents see even panpsychism as a materialist viewpoint, in which consciousness is dispersed throughout all the matter of the cosmos, somehow congealing in certain suitably complex arrangements that are aware of the world around them and of their own internal workings, just like we are. Here we are told, by contrast, that “materialism is on its way out . . . it appears that panpsychism is on its way in” (p. 20).

In the recent astonishing book *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and The Deep Origins of Consciousness* (2016), philosophy professor Peter Godfrey-Smith mentions the opinion that “all living things have a modicum of subjective experience,” a view, he says wryly, that “I don’t regard as insane, but surely one that would need a lot of defense” (p. 79). When this theoretical possibility is taken to the extremes of panpsychism (*everything* is aware, at least a little bit, including quarks and leptons), I’m less forgiving; I do regard it as insane, or at least pragmatically useless and theoretically preposterous.



But Barušs and Mossbridge do not reach their immaterialist conclusion from a desire to be interesting nor to *épater la bourgeoisie*. They provide a host of anomalies that remain verboten among most academics, notably the phenomena known in aggregate as psi: telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, systemized remote viewing of events distant in time and space, presentiment instrument-registered by changes in physiological states not under the control of ordinary awareness and action.

I find this catalog of mysterious but statistically corroborated effects compelling (declaration of interest: Some of their references in this regard are drawn from the chapters written by expert experimenters for *Evidence for Psi*, edited by me and AI researcher Ben Goertzel). All of it seems to breach the boundaries of the known and accepted physical sciences, but none seems to me to require the ontological contortions needed to make consciousness (rather than, say, digestion or the ability to whistle Annie Laurie through a keyhole) the fundamental reality prior to time, space, information, and energy.

On the other hand, I am extremely skeptical of the anecdote offered by the authors (with suitable demurrals) in which one Thomaz Coutino purportedly had the ability to speed up biological processes, as if a local vortex of spacetime had wrapped itself around them. In one 1982 instance, witnessed by a psychiatrist, a physician, a judge, and the American journalist Gary Richman, and recorded by seven black-and-white photographs, Thomaz entered an altered state of consciousness and, one after another, held 15 newly purchased eggs to his forehead, cracked them open, spilled the contents into a flat bowl.

He then hyperventilated with “puffed” chest and “taut and crimson” face, and stretched his arms with “palms down over the eggs.” Within 5 minutes, the yolks solidified and darkened until the “fetal forms of baby chicks could be identified” . . . At 7 minutes, “the internal organs of the embryos could be seen through thin membranes.” And at 9 minutes, the cheeping of baby chicks could be heard. Nine of the 15 eggs hatched, four survived longer than 3 days, and a couple of them, from the series of experiments, lived in the backyard until they were eaten for dinner.” (pp. 141–142).

What’s that you say? Legerdemain? The wily conjurer had the baby birds up his sleeve? Perhaps not. Barušs and Mossbridge are stern: “It is precisely because of the degree to which this example challenges our ways of thinking about reality that could prove to be instructive” (p. 142). That is often a useful decree, but perhaps one might be forgiven for asking whether there is any limit to its application.

Perhaps the most wonderful aspect of this book is the identity of its publisher: the American Psychological Association, an austere defender of generally conventional viewpoints. In 2003, the APA had released an earlier Barušs book, *Alterations of Consciousness: An Empirical Analysis for Social Scientists*. That was something of a brave choice, at a time when the word “consciousness” could still cause alarm. Maybe we really are, as the authors suggest at the outset, “in the midst of a sea change” (p. 3). And maybe that implies “that there are healthy numbers of academics who reject materialism and think that consciousness is primary” (p. 28). Sea changes, of course, especially the unexpected kind, have been known to tip sailors into the briny, in which deep and uncomfortable element they tend to drown. But for bold readers willing to take the risk, *Transcendent Mind* is worth a careful inspection. Just keep one weather eye open for those dangerous metaphors.

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