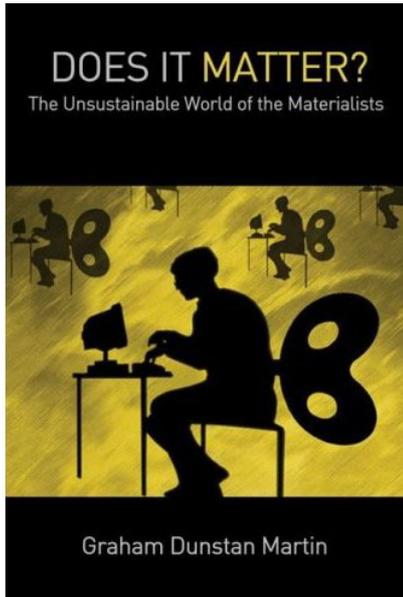


BOOK REVIEW



Graham Dunstan Martin

Does it Matter?

The Unsustainable World of the Materialists ↗

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Reviewed by U. Mohrhoff

The more lucid and unforgiving the criticism that a theory has survived, the better the theory. One cannot argue with this. According to Graham Dunstan Martin, what has survived unscathed the most searching and ingenious assaults, is the theory that consciousness is irreducible to material events, constituents, or processes.

In this rationalist, materialist age, we are not *less* justified in being soulists than our prescientific forebears — but *more* justified. Today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, *it is more sensible for me to believe in the reality of the soul than it was for my grandfather.* He believed in it as a matter of faith. I believe in it because, despite the arguments, it stands up.

As Martin demonstrates in *Does it Matter?*, it does indeed stand up. His demonstration appeals to argument, evidence, and probability. “I shall ask how much we may *know* or *guess*, and what the *probabilities* are of the reality of the soul and of a Universal Creator.” Quoting the eminently quotable Tom Paine, he dismisses all claims founded on “revelation”:

No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to [communicate a revelation] if he pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person. . . it is revelation to that person only. When he tells it to a second person, a second to a third, a third to a fourth, and so on, it ceases to be a revelation to all those persons. It is revelation to the first person only, and *hearsay* to every other; and consequently they are not obliged to believe it. (TP)

In the first of the book's twelve chapters, the author calls up Polanyi's distinction between *explicit* and *tacit* knowing. All experience is basically tacit. If we compare it with a landscape, our explicit statements about it are like a map — "symbols and pointers which enable us to make our way over the terrain of life." The map is not the terrain. When we talk or write about our experience, reducing it to words, we are indeed *reducing* it. Tacit knowing is ineffable because experience is ineffable. In an important sense, the phrase 'linguistic description' is a contradiction in terms. Words do not *describe* objects; they merely *point* to them. But if tacit knowledge cannot be put into words, *a fortiori* it cannot be put into mathematical formulas. *A fortiori* consciousness, with its ineffable contents, cannot be simulated by computers: "the things computers cannot do are perfectly banal — such as smelling an apple, feeling the skin of a baby, seeing a sunset, or appreciating and enjoying these things."

A principal source of confusion about these matters is Turing's thesis that the question whether a computer can think can be settled by an operational test: it can think if it can imitate the performance of a human being so well that no-one can tell the difference.

This must be one of the most bandied-about fallacies ever to be proffered. It is immediately evident that an appearance of thinking is not the same as thinking; that one may appear to think without thinking; and that one may think without appearing to do so. It is a fallacy to suppose that if an imitation is good enough to deceive then it is no longer a deception. On the contrary, it is only if an imitation is good enough to deceive that it *becomes* a deception.

One of the most famous thought experiments in modern philosophy is Searle's "Chinese Room" argument. Martin considers it an absolute knock-down argument, and I tend to agree.

This is why opponents can't accept it. In fact, anyone who honestly rejects Searle's Chinese Room argument thereby shows that he has failed to understand it. One can see how worrying reductionists find it, from the fact that there have been over a hundred published attacks on it since its original publication.

The structure of Searle's argument could hardly be simpler: (i) Programs are entirely syntactical. (ii) Minds have a semantics. (iii) Syntax is not the same as, nor by itself sufficient for, semantics. Therefore programs are not minds, nor can they simulate minds. Q.E.D. Searle now believes — Martin thinks rightly so, and so do I — that this argument concedes too much. Even if minds could be reduced to programs, programs are not reducible to the material reality of computers, the essence of which is electrical pulses. Electric pulses become computational symbols only when they are so interpreted by a mind. There is an ironic consequence to Turing's view.

If it were indeed possible to simulate all the external appearances of being conscious, to such a degree that no difference could ever be detected between a conscious person and an unconscious machine, then what would follow. . . is this: it would then become inexplicable what the purpose or function of consciousness is, that is *why consciousness is present in the world at all*. (original emphasis)

This takes us to the second chapter, titled "Robots and Zombies." (Philosophers' zombies are hypothetical creatures that lack consciousness yet to an external observer be-

have exactly like people, to whom we attribute consciousness. If Touring were right, there could be no such thing as a philosophers' zombie: according to his thesis, if something behaves like us, it *is* conscious like us.) The chapter begins by asking, pertinently, *what is matter?* Given that matter is held by scientific orthodoxy to be the one and only reality, "one would think that scientists might have a lucid answer to this question. For how can one assert that one knows that the Universe is made of X, when one does not know what X is?" As a matter of fact, *nobody* knows. As was stressed not least by Eddington, our scientific data are pointer readings, and pointer readings tell us little about whatever lies hidden behind them. Indeed, the mathematical formalism of the fundamental theoretical framework of contemporary physics — quantum theory — allows us to calculate the probabilities of the outcomes of measurements the could be made (or could have been made) on the basis of the outcomes of measurements that have been made. The moment one tries to go beyond statistical correlations between pointer readings, inconsistencies and absurdities result.

The rest of the chapter is chiefly a defense of Berkeley's metaphysics. According to Berkeley, to *be* is either of two things: to *perceive* or to *be perceived*. If this is granted, it stands to reason that the subject of the active verb ("mind") is ontological prior to the subject of the passive verb ("matter"). But only if. Some of the conclusions Martin draws here are therefore not quite as inescapable as he makes it seem. How, for instance, would he know or conclude with finality that "[w]ithout consciousness, nothing can exist"?

He nevertheless has a point. If something existed in the absence of consciousness, it couldn't be known to exist, and so there would seem to be no point in asserting its existence. There wouldn't even be a way of making sense of the word "existence." Existence as we know it is existence *for us*. As the history of philosophy has amply demonstrated, it is much easier to understand matter as a derivative of consciousness than to understand consciousness as a derivative of matter.

Chapter 3 tackles qualia. Here the authors concedes more than he should, especially when he writes

That qualia are caused by neurological events cannot be doubted. How qualia might be caused by neurological events is however impossible to understand. . . Moreover the nature of these qualia is so unlike the neurological events that it cannot be seen how any explanation could be given, or what sort of explanation it might be.

As a matter of fact, that qualia are *caused* by neurological events *can* be doubted, for Martin himself shows in a later chapter that the concept of causality can be undermined.

Chapter 4 makes a case for dualism. Wilder Penfield — a pioneer in modern brain surgery and in mapping the functions of the different regions of the brain — used to precede surgical treatment by exploration of parts of the brain while his patients were conscious. By applying electrodes in various places, he would produce reactions in them, getting them to move their hand for example, or utter a sound. The patients however always knew that this was not an action willed by them. Their will and their critical judgment was not influenced by, and thus clearly separate from, the surgeon's activating of their cortex. Penfield drew from this the conclusion that "although the content of consciousness depends in large measure on neuronal activity, awareness itself does

not. . . what the mind does. . . is not to be accounted for by any neuronal mechanism that I can discover.” Reflecting on his work after his retirement, Penfield wrote that “[t]hroughout my own scientific career I, like other scientists, have struggled to prove that the brain accounts for the mind. But now, perhaps, the time has come when we may profitably consider the evidence as it stands.” The evidence as it stood (and still does) led him “to take seriously, even to believe, that the consciousness of man, the mind, is something not to be reduced to the brain-mechanism.” To his own surprise, Penfield ended up a dualist, as did John Eccles and other eminent neuroscientists.

More recently, Antonio Damasio observed that core consciousness — the possession of one’s own self-aware perspective — is not affected by brain damage. According to Martin it “is therefore a tenable view that core consciousness is non-physical, or outside the brain.” The data in fact suggests to him “that consciousness (along with its experiential modalities, that is the qualia) is *outside the brain altogether*, either in some extra-dimensional space and/or in some separate mental space.” Thus he holds that

My sense of identity and continuity. . . has nothing to do with my contingent *existence* in the outside world, nor with my personality or character, but with my *experience* in my own inner world. . . [W]e must not be deceived by the accidental appearances of continuity and discontinuity outside us in ‘the real world’. . . It is not from these appearances that our sense of identity and reality derives, but from the continuity of our inner experience. Real continuity is only to be found within the deep self.

David Hume, who famously claimed that there is no ‘I,’ misunderstood or misrepresented the issue. The ‘I’ that Hume couldn’t find was what was doing the searching. If indeed “the description that neuroscientists are building up of the way the brain works leaves no room for a central self,” as Blackmore asserts, then what follows is that the central self is not to be found in the brain. That there is no central self — full stop — only followed if one postulates that the physical world is all there is.

Penfield also found that by touching parts of a patient’s brain with an electrode memories of extraordinary detail and intensity could be evoked. Such memories were not ordinary memories; they proceeded in a normal time frame, with full somatic participation in the original experience. These findings suggest to Martin that

our memories are (a) endless in number, (b) packed with as much tacit detail as the original experiences, and that (c) all memories, however banal or trivial, remain in the memory store. One might reasonably conclude that the mind preserves a complete record of the whole of our past experience.

The Russian psychologist Alexander Luria devoted a whole book to the remarkable case of a person who never forgot “anything he had learned, even following a single exposure, and even after more than a decade.” Unsurprisingly, this person was severely handicapped in the ordinary business of life by the permanent presence of so many memories. A recent *National Geographic* article,¹ published after *Does it Matter?*, discusses the case of a 41-year-old woman, an administrative assistant from California, who re-

¹ “Remember This” by Joshua Foer, *National Geographic*, November 2007, retrieved from <http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/2007-11/memory/foer-text.html> on April 15, 2008.

members almost every day of her life since age 11. She remembers world events and trips to the grocery store, the weather and her emotions. Virtually every day is there. She's not easily stumped. "My memory flows like a movie — nonstop and uncontrollable," she says. Her inexhaustible memory for autobiographical details is so unprecedented and so poorly understood that James McGaugh, Elizabeth Parker, and Larry Cahill, the neuroscientists at the University of California, Irvine, who have been studying her for the past seven years, had to coin a new medical term to describe her condition: hyperthymestic syndrome.

In the face of similar, if not quite as striking, evidence Martin thinks that "it is still perfectly possible to argue not only that consciousness and its qualia could be 'outside the brain' but also that certain areas of the memory, specifically long-term and tacit memory, could well be 'outside the brain' as well." By contrast, here is how the *National Geographic* article responds to the challenge posed by that newfangled syndrome:

The best that neuroscientists can do for the moment is this: A memory is a stored pattern of connections between neurons in the brain. There are about a hundred billion of those neurons, each of which can make perhaps 5,000 to 10,000 synaptic connections with other neurons, which makes a total of about five hundred trillion to a thousand trillion synapses in the average adult brain. . . Every sensation we remember, every thought we think, alters the connections within that vast network.

While I am convinced that this isn't all there is to memory, the sheer number of "configurable" synapses involved suggests to me that shifting memory wholesale out of the brain would leave many of those synapses seriously underemployed.

From the fact that such extraordinary feats of memory are possible Martin concludes that there must be something that normally prevents us from having or accessing it — some mechanism that suppresses irrelevant memories and, indeed, makes most of them hard to retrieve. This immediately suggests a "filter" theory of mind/brain relations such as that advanced over a century ago by F. W. H. Myers and developed further by his friend and colleague William James. In their outstanding tome *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), Kelly *et al.* make the case that

by thinking of the brain as an organ which somehow constrains, regulates, restricts, limits, and enables or permits expression of the mind in its full generality, we can obtain an account of mind-brain relations which potentially reconciles Myers's theory of the Subliminal Self with the observed correlations between mind and brain.

James himself spoke variously of the brain as straining, sifting, canalizing, limiting, and individualizing the larger mental reality behind the scenes: "Matter is not that which produces Consciousness, but that which limits it, and confines its intensity within certain limits." Although *Does it Matter?* was published prior to *Irreducible Mind*, I am surprised that Martin makes no mention of Myers and only once refers to the James in a different context. He does however refer to the cognate ideas of Bergson, who suggested that the function of the nervous system (including the brain and the sense organs) is in the main eliminative. In the words of Ornstein, their "function is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at

any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.”

Bergson proposed that remembering is really an aspect of perceiving — one of its modes. The Universe is a single vast experiencing process. . . The problem, for him, is not how perception (and memory) arises, but how it becomes limited, in the case of individuals, to their own experience, and furthermore limited to their own experience in the here and now. The senses are a limitation on infinite perception, and therefore on infinite memory, confining us to a particular moving time and space, the present moment. The Brain is a mechanism concerned with our survival, and it rejects and shuts out anything which is at the moment irrelevant to that survival. *The Brain is a filter.*

In Chapter 5 Martin tackles the thorny question of determinism versus free will. From the outset he makes it clear that the unpredictability of quantum events does not help the apologists of free will. Genuine free will — the “libertarian” version as against the “compatibilist” one — is neither the puppet of deterministic causality nor the plaything of chance. If (genuine) free will exists, then there exists, besides deterministic causality and chance, a causality that is neither deterministic nor reducible to chance. This is the causality of agents exercising their free will. Martin argues that the very notion of causality derives from our intimate acquaintance with free will. Our application of it to the world is an extrapolation from our own experience. But if our notion of causality is derived from our experience of free will, then causality (deterministic or otherwise) cannot be used as an argument against free will.

Determinism is also self-defeating. If you defend determinism, then you implicitly admit that your defense of determinism lacks a rational basis, inasmuch as you claim that it results from a haphazard chain of blind causes.

Then there is the moral angle. According to Susan Blackmore, to be released from free will makes us really free — free of all moral responsibility, I suppose with Martin.

We must fear for a society whose members reject responsibility for their own acts, prefer to consider themselves the helpless puppets of their childhood or their chemistry, and who by the constant invention of imaginary ‘syndromes’ appeal to the prestige of science to support their irresponsibility.

In the remainder of the chapter Martin invokes the mess that Goswami and other woolly masters have made of quantum physics, in order to argue that “the intervention of a conscious mind may be necessary for the misty probabilities of reality to emerge into actuality”.² He also repeats the blooper that if “the whole of the time dimension is already in being,” as special relativity seems to suggest, then “the future is already determined.” What special relativity does suggest is that the parts of the spatio-temporal whole exist in advance of its frame-dependent differentiation into space and time, and thus as a whole that is neither spatial nor temporal. To say that the whole of the time dimension is *already* in being, which implies that the past and the future form part of

² As said, the mathematical formalism of quantum physics is a probability calculus. It allows us to calculate the probabilities of possible measurement outcomes on the basis of actual ones. As soon as one tries to interpret the formalism as anything other than a probability calculus, inconsistencies and absurdities abound.

the present, is self-contradictory. No valid conclusion can be drawn from such a statement (e.g., the conclusion that “the future is already determined”), or rather *any* conclusion can be drawn from it, for *ex falso quodlibet*. In the second chapter, as you will remember, Martin has claimed that “[w]ithout consciousness, nothing can exist.” What exists, exists *for* a conscious self. And so there can be a consciousness not situated in the present moment nor viewing the world from a particular location — a consciousness the encompasses what we decompose into space and time. This is not only what special relativity suggests but also what deep spiritual experience confirms.

The sixth chapter counters some really bad arguments against dualism with a mixed bag of arguments for dualism. Chapter 7 illustrates the creative power of the mind with, *inter alia*, Charles Bonnet syndrome and dreaming (both ordinary and lucid). These examples suggest

the *all-powerfulness of mind* as creator of experience, and perhaps therefore of reality, and of what is called matter. This is what we have to be protected against, because otherwise our world’s narrow possibilities would collapse, and we would find ourselves in a shifting unpredictable universe. . . One is tempted once again to take Blake’s and Bergson’s view of the matter and say that our fundamentally illimitable minds have artificial valves or filters placed upon them, which limit us to the world of normality.

What is missing here is a reference to a large body of data from both neuroscience and psychology, which strongly suggests that the experienced world is a wholesale *creation* guided by sparse cues from “outside”.³ The chapter concludes with a review of the deep monism of James and of Sartre’s views on consciousness.

Chapter 8, unsurprisingly given its title “Consciousness and Quantum Theory,” takes us on a stroll down the garden path. Chapter 9 is devoted to Charon’s “complex relativity,” Smythies’ “theory of extension,” and the “quantum vacuum.” I think that both these chapters are best left unread, but I hasten to add that this by no means detracts from the value of the book as a whole.

Chapter 10 summarizes the indeed impressive evidence for a designer universe. I find it interesting that the blurb quotes Raymond Tallis as saying that

Although I could not accept Martin’s case for intelligent design, I found his beautifully written and lucidly argued book to be a brilliant critique of materialist accounts of the universe and of the place of consciousness in it.

While Tallis is right in saying that *Does it Matter?* is a brilliant critique of materialist accounts of the universe and of the place of consciousness in it, it seems to me rather disingenuous of him to remonstrate against the rather compelling arguments presented in this chapter while acquiescing into the half-baked ideas presented in the last two chapters. Ah well, the politics of scientific correctness.

The final two chapters are again rather weak, lacking some of the important arguments and evidence that could be brought forward in support of their conclusions: the existence of a cosmic, creative intelligence and the existence of a soul, suitably defined. The strength of

³ See, for example, Donald D. Hoffman, *Visual Intelligence: How We Create What We See* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

this book clearly lies in the many cogent reasons — some well known, some quite novel and ingenious — to dismiss materialistic accounts of life, the universe, and everything.