

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The strange fate of the morphed ‘rump materialism’: a comment on the vagaries of social science as seen through Alexander Wendt’s *Quantum Mind and Social Science*

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Abstract

In putting Wendt’s recent *Quantum Mind* in a larger context both of his own disciplinary engagement and some larger philosophical issues, I try to avoid a hasty dismissal, since the book seems at first blush to offer a ‘theory of everything’, or an uncritical acceptance, since the desire to know what makes the world hang together has always been part of the knowledge game. As to the first problem, I find it rather odd that Wendt spends little time in justifying his particular take on quantum theory, which is far from uncontroversial. Second, I attempt to understand why he has given up on the profession trying now to solve puzzles in the field by claiming that ‘quantum consciousness theory’ provides us with an ‘ace up the sleeve’. But the fact that wave collapse plays havoc with our traditional notions of cause, location, and mass, does not without further ado entitle us to claim that all or most problems in social science dealing with issues of validity and meaning of our concepts (rather than ‘truth/falsity’, as decided by making existential assertions) have been solved by quantum mechanics.

Keywords: Concept formation; epistemology; problem of meaning; social ontology

The eternal quest

In the Introduction to his *First Critique* Immanuel Kant remarked that the ‘odd destiny of human reason consists of the fact that it is in its nature to be confronted with questions which it cannot reject but which it also cannot answer as they transcend the limits of human reason’.¹ He identifies thereby the paradox that although we cannot resolve certain metaphysical questions, such as why there is anything instead of nothing, or what makes the universe hang together, we cannot simply give up on them.

¹Kant [1781] Vorrede, A VII.

I want to use these initial observations as a framework for interrogating some of the implicit or explicit assumptions on which Wendt's book rests. It is certainly a challenging book, and it is not one for the fainthearted, either, given that it uses various literatures of different fields. This is why we frequently do not know what to make of 'the evidence' Wendt presents, forcing us to either suspend disbelief, or giving in perhaps to a more visceral reaction of rejecting it out of hand.

Either reaction would, however, be problematic: the first one is likely to mutate soon into a church of acolytes, where one is fully preoccupied with interpreting the canonical text, with scant attention to the criticisms one has received. The other alternative is not much better, since – *pace* Popper – we can learn a lot even from theories or speculations that are false. This, of course, poses then some serious questions of how to think about progress and the accumulation of knowledge, which is again the subtext of Wendt's book, only that this time not International Relations (IR) theories but metaphysical controversies serve as the drivers of this project.

Three readings of the 'quantum mind'

If we approach Wendt's book with these points in mind, I have rather ambivalent reactions. Wendt's text, I think, lends itself to be read in three different modes. In the strongest, or first version, we can interpret it as an attempt at delivering a 'theory of everything', completing, in a way, the dream of materialists and of idealists, only that not ideas – as in his earlier work – but *physis* provides now the *explanans*. However, it is no longer brute matter (material) – as in the earlier 'rump materialism' – but matter now matters because it possesses forces that we usually ascribed only to the mind (panpsychism).

This shift from the discipline to meta-theoretical issues, however, significantly limits the audience which is supposed to serve as the critical court in assessing the claims made. Although it might be worthwhile to look for validations beyond the traditional IR audience of positivists (plus some dissenters), the *ex-cathedra* argumentation that the problem of understanding has been solved by the 'wave collapse' of quantum theory is – at best – a still rather unsubstantiated wager. In other words, the assertion that a 'theory of everything' is in the offing would require, as Chernoff points out, a different type of ontology – comparable perhaps with giving up on absolute time and space – that can hardly be squared with just another version of 'scientific realism', which Wendt professes.² Or as Prozorov questions: 'What is the status of potentialities in (Wendt's) quantum theory?'³

To plausibly justify such a wager, Wendt would – at a minimum – have to show that alternative objections to the wave collapse – as, for example, argued by Feynman, who provided with his paths integrals a reformulation of quantum mechanics – have more or less been refuted. But, in the absence of such a proof or plausible ground, a wave-collapse cannot be his main explanatory tool for a variety of phenomena in different fields, and Wendt cannot sustain the claim that consciousness is quantum mechanical in a substantive sense. As he put it: 'Quantum consciousness theory suggests that two of the deepest mysteries confronting modern science – how to

²Chernoff 2022.

³Prozorov 2022.

interpret quantum theory and how to explain consciousness – are two sides of the same coin'.⁴ But can such a wager be justified by just ignoring the alternatives even within the field of philosophy of science, such as the debate about 'realism'⁵ and the recent discussion of the 'placement problem'?⁶ Or is this not a (perhaps innocent) attempt at cherry picking, or the (much more serious) one of jury tampering?

Wendt's move is also all the more surprising as in one of his best pieces he once criticized, for example, a supposedly comprehensive discussion of the rational design school by showing that there even the 'critical' authors shared most of the substantive assumptions, and thus could hardly establish the superiority of the rational design argument. As he argued correctly, showing the actual superiority of the rationalist paradigm would instead require a mapping of the 'contrast space', that is, examining different paradigms of action instead of just fiddling only with the some differences resulting in the derivations from essentially the same assumptions.⁷

Noting this failure is not just a gratuitous criticism on my part that can easily be dismissed by Wendt by saying that he just did not mention the philosophers 'I like'. Here, for example, Wendt would require some response with regard to the naturalism of Sellars and how to deal with the differences between the 'manifest image' and the 'scientific image', where the first cannot just be mapped onto the latter – although the scientific image has to be taken seriously in opposition to a philosophy of the mind (à la Ryle and others).⁸

But be that as it may, were it not for the similar problem that Wendt's commitment to the Copenhagen version of quantum theory is hardly unproblematic, as the physicist/philosopher of science Tim Maudlin showed.⁹ Maudlin starts from the apparent paradox of the importance of quantum mechanics in providing a 'recipe for calculating' in the field and its technological usefulness *despite its weak and highly controversial status as a 'theory'* (what Einstein once called the 'low grade wood' of modern physics, as compared to the shining 'marble' of the space-time structure of Relativity theory).

What is presented in the average physics textbook turns out to be not a precise physical theory at all. It is a very effective and accurate recipe for making certain sorts of predictions. What physics students learn is how to use the recipe. For all practical purposes when designing micro-chips and predicting outcomes of experiments this ability suffices. But if a physics student is unsatisfied with just learning those mathematical techniques and asks instead of what the theory claims about the physical world, s/he is likely to be met with a canonical response: shut up and calculate.¹⁰

⁴Wendt 2015, 31.

⁵See e.g. Putnam 1989.

⁶This means that problem of interpretation can be reduced to problems of accurate 'measurement' and needs not address conceptual issues concerning the framework from which the 'questions' emerge which guide our search for data. See e.g. van Fraassen 1989, 156.

⁷Wendt 2001.

⁸See Sharp and Brandom 2007.

⁹Maudlin 2019. Although the book appeared only 4 years after the publication of Wendt's *Quantum Theory*, the issues concern no new discoveries that could not be known before.

¹⁰Maudlin 2019, 2.

The real problem seems to be that the particular jumps, that is, the collapses of wave functions, are associated with observations that can be given a precise meaning within the laboratory environment. But, if this is supposed to be a theory, it needs a full characterization of an actual observation in real life. In other words:

Was the wave function of the world waiting to jump for a thousand of millions of years until a single cell living creature appeared? Or did it have to wait a little longer for a better qualified system with a Ph.D.?¹¹

In short, several things still would be needed to buttress the various choices Wendt made in arriving at his particular wager. Wendt's own discussion of the 'under-determination of metaphysics by physics'¹² and the disarray over the various interpretations of quantum theory mentioned above provide good reasons for insisting on such a further examination. I, therefore, found Wendt's assertion rather strange that because the interpretation problem cannot be solved at the level of physics, we have an 'ace up the sleeve' called 'quantum consciousness theory' which, in turn, draws on the application of quantum mechanics in the area of brain research, biology, and psychology. Do these problems really hang 'together'?

A second way of reading the text is to just get on this bus and enjoy the trip into the place where the philosopher's stone can be found. In this sense, the research Wendt presents is fascinating and makes for a good read, particularly since one finds some interesting new spins on old problems of the unity of the actors, the free will *problematique*, and the mind/body problem. Nevertheless, even if one enjoys the trip, one soon gets the feeling of being carted off to various metaphysical mines. But Wendt's answers to the philosophical puzzles are, on second thought, somewhat anticlimactic. Although the discussion certainly clarified some issues, the real question remains whether his approach has actually *resolved* them, or whether they were displaced by pushing them into the metaphysical part. If mind and matter are after all the 'same' (although in different manifestations), then issues of the mind-dependence of many of the concepts of the social world and their 'downward' causal powers (mind to matter, not matter to mind) easily become 'red herrings', since all we have is the assertion of a 'wave collapse'. But, due to the lack of a clear answer to this question, one does not know whether Wendt's move is then not question-begging, which definitely spoils the excitement. It could avoid such a fate only if the conditions could be specified and we also could be assured that we move in a kind of hermeneutic circle between metaphysics and theories in different fields, instead of just assuming that it is – or must be – the case.

Furthermore, given the revolutionary implications of quantum theory for conventional ways of conceiving the 'world' – leading in one of its interpretations even to the notion of a pluriverse – it would be downright miraculous if Wendt's move could not only resolve the interpretation question of metaphysics and science but provide us with a 'theory of everything', including 'language, light, and other minds' (Part IV of *Wendt's Quantum Mind*). Such a postulated metaphysics of 'life' (i.e. nature plus mind and 'history') is, however, a tall order to fill, and so we are probably just bested by a misapplied metaphor. Of course,

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Wendt 2015, 41f.

the above criticism does not rule out that the application of elements of quantum ‘theory’ – whether it satisfies the criteria of theory or of having actually dispensed with certain metaphysical puzzles we can leave in abeyance – could lead to some heuristically fruitful results.

This leads me to a third reading of the treatise, which I prefer. But caution is in order, since issues of meaning cannot be simply reduced to measuring by physical apparatuses, which are implicated in what we see, or to some strange co-constitution of particles suggested by the working of a force at a distance, since these analogies could be misleading. Furthermore, the fact that also time in the quantum world shows some similarities to thinking about time in more phenomenological terms is probably a ‘false friend’,¹³ as in social analysis the realization of novel types of actions – exemplified, for example, by a revolution – is not just an actualization of some pre-existing potentiality.

Of course, we could forget those petty doubts and think big. In comparison with the universe, concerns with who wins the next battle in IR (or social science) is small change indeed, and there is also no issue that someone who wants to take this existential leap should be free to do so. This was after all why we have churches and monasteries in which we can concentrate on those eternal questions, circumventing sceptical questions and the arduous task of engaging with non-believers. But, for me, coming from Florence, where once Niccolò Machiavelli lived down the street, excoriating the church for putting everything into the bag of ultimate questions, while neglecting those responsibilities that accrue to us as finite historical beings, such advice does not sit well. It then does not make much difference whether such a religious impulse – which all contributors have noted – is merely contemplative (as was the Platonic ontology and its medieval instantiations) or activist, as in the case of Wendt. There is, however, a certain logic to the trajectory of Wendt’s quest that provides us with some clues but requires us to place Wendt’s book in the wider context of his intellectual career.

Disciplines and disciplining power

That Wendt might no longer be interested in following up on the potential of constructivism for IR analysis is understandable, given that his offering in *Social Theory* to mainstream political science was never really accepted, and that the constructivist project was also promptly hijacked by people who wanted to seize the middle ground for professional rather than epistemic reasons. On reflection, the rather different takes on what ‘matters’ in these two books can, however, be understood in terms of the same driver. It is here that I find Hutchings’s comments particularly insightful.¹⁴ Formerly, Wendt’s audience was the profession, which had to be persuaded that constructivists were not woolly-headed post-modernists even if they insisted that meta-theoretical choices matter, but that they were carrying out serious research that was not as incompatible with ‘science’, as first impressions suggested.

¹³‘False friends’ is a term in linguistics for the same word having different meanings in two languages of the same root such as Italian and Spanish, such as *burro* (in Italian, butter, and in Spanish, ass).

¹⁴Hutchings 2022.

The crucial question is then – as already mentioned – what is the audience for this book? It would be more than startling if it were still the fraternity of IR specialist or political scientists, given the Bozon-diffusion in those fields.¹⁵ Instead it has to be the philosophers, who since Kant have been the stand-ins for ‘reason’ and ‘man’ in general¹⁶ (even if the generic ‘man’ is now a woman and ‘reason’ has gone post-colonial). Wendt seems to believe that if he can convince those who are the entrusted with the highest-order problem, that is, ontology, then he no longer needs to bother with convincing his recalcitrant peers, since a verdict from ‘ontologists’ will be obvious to all ‘reasonable’ beings.

However, I wonder whether Wendt is not making the same mistake as he did in his earlier *Social Theory* book by misunderstanding that the problem of orthodoxies is one of social pathology, not one of ‘epistemology’.¹⁷ It does not primarily arise out of cognitive issues, as Bourdieu’s analysis illuminated.¹⁸ To that extent, thinking that the ‘right answer’ lies in the area of ‘ontology’ and having an ontological ace up the sleeve might be nothing more than a pious hope. There are two reasons for such a suspicion. One is that philosophers are notorious for their disagreements – and so are theoretical physicist turned philosophers – as Wendt’s own discussion shows, so that banking on ontology seems risky. The second is the implicit assumption that those questions can be settled by ‘going to the top’, since a verdict issued there has *disciplining power* over other fields.

True, Wendt is aware that the turf wars within disciplines are not decided by gladiator debates, or even by ‘crucial experiments’ – precisely because the latter turn out to be crucial only *ex post*, ratifying in good right-Hegelian fashion the ascendance of a new paradigm. They are mostly ended by biology (as he himself put it somewhere in this book). But then again, things seem to be still more complicated. The displacement by biology is a commonly accepted wisdom – for which the rise of constructivism to one of the canonized three approaches, taking over the slot vacated by Marxism – supposedly provides the evidence. But we just wished that it were so! The fact is that there is in the United States no established constructivist on the faculty of the top 10 departments! Similarly, all departments in this category hire virtually exclusively each other’s graduate students. This seems to indicate that there are real limits to pluralism in the knowledge industry. Finally, the biological metaphor also suggests something else: that new ideas do not necessarily win out, but that they can be sequestered (like old ones) to niches. Even extinction can occur, not only on the level of certain schools of thought, but on the level of disciplines themselves, because the necessary ‘requisite variety’ for innovation no longer obtains.

Given this state of affairs in the republic of letters, appealing to philosophers, whom Kant charged with the duty to speak in the name of publicity, has a certain ring to it, but it might be little more than an empty gesture, particularly in a world

¹⁵Here, I do not mean ‘bosons’ in the sense of the generic name for certain particles (such as photons and gluons), in order to distinguish them from ‘fermions’ (such as quarks or leptons). Thus, the Higgs particle, which was confirmed in 2013, was such a ‘boson’ (with an ‘s’). Here, I mean the rather miasmatic phenomenon when ‘bozons’, taking their origin from Bozo (the clown), spread at incredible speed and then become strangely stationary, hovering right under the ozone layer, when they encounter political science department meetings and conferences.

¹⁶Kant 1991, 176–90.

¹⁷Wendt 1999.

¹⁸Bourdieu 1988.

in which knowledge creation is increasingly subject to 'corporate governance'. As disenchanting as it might be, what ultimately makes the world hang together is not the 'is' – even the 'is' of a naturalist philosophy – but how knowledge 'cashes out' – to use the metaphor that is increasingly used for its assessment. Ironically, cash is of course not something as ultimate and as final as the 'is' of ontology, but just a convention.

Metaphors, analogies, and heuristics

Let us return from this brief excursion into issues of knowledge dissemination to the epistemic status of Wendt's argument. Even if I am off with my take on the audience and Wendt's motivating *animus*, I think his stance involves him in a performative contradiction. On the one hand, the argument about quantum mechanics suggests that what knowledge *is* cannot be decided *ex ante* by specified criteria derived from 'reason'. This would mean that instead of field-independent criteria – such as logic and the excluded middle – more substantive field-dependent considerations will have to do most of the explaining. On the other hand, the step from physics to metaphysics seems like an attempt to regain a secure foothold by making a transcendental move hoping that it resolves our quandary.

This move, however, cannot be quite right for several reasons. One is that the problem of producing warranted knowledge about the world is not analogous to the elaboration of logical implications, as Hume's problem of induction demonstrates. Second, the phenomena of the social world are not mind-independent and this seems to raise different problems than those of measurement and of the role of the observer, as exemplified in Schroedinger's cat problem. In the social world, disagreements about what is the case are rife and no obvious compelling solution exists, but, nevertheless, choices binding on all have to be made. Thus, what serves as a solution in logic or mathematics might be useless for the social realm since the term 'solution' means different things in both realms: solutions in logic concern their determinacy; solutions in the social world imply *convergence on one alternative*, requiring 'uniqueness'. But uniqueness and determinacy are different criteria as the multiple equilibrium problem of game theory demonstrates. Since we accept that our problems are not mathematical, why do we think that by making an analogous move to metaphysics we can circumvent those difficulties? Are we not looking in the wrong place?

After all, what are we measuring in the social sciences? It is certainly not particles and their location in space, even if wave collapse plays havoc with our notions of causality, force, location, and mass. The fact that some of the fundamental notions seem to lose their classical meaning even in physics does not entitle us to conclude that *all, or even most problems of meaning* are reducible or analogous to the conceptual upheavals of quantum mechanics.

This analogy needs further scrutiny. For example, causality reduced to efficient causality was already suspect to Hume and he considered it – contrary to all traditional textbook interpretations – a function of the *mind*, rather than a property of nature. For that reason, he thought that finalistic or teleological explanations – which he called 'moral explanations' – are therefore more 'satisfying'. *He did not* suggest that causality can be reduced to either efficient or to final causality.

He argued instead that for understanding the social world, issues of meaning can neither be induced nor deduced from the ‘things’ themselves, nor from a particular ‘form’ supplied by the mind. The domain of social science is, after all, that of *praxis*, and actions are not explained by sub-sumptions or generalizations but are *explications* that require for their persuasiveness detailed knowledge of the actual practices, their underlying conventions, and their genealogy. This type of knowledge cannot be gathered from looking harder at the facts of a world out there, or by interpreting them like events in a world of a time/space continuum. The analogy to measurement problems and wave collapse seems, therefore, misleading.

In this context, I shall raise three further questions, two of which deal with the issue of concept formation and the role of concepts in communication, while the last one raises the issue with which we began, that is, whether we need a complete picture of the whole, for which the ‘world’ has been the stand-in. If not, the cure for asking those question would not lie in finding a solution but in coming to terms with the suspicion that it is an incoherent notion, which should plague us as little as the realization that we have no answer to what the largest number is, or why there is something and not nothing.

Three further questions: concepts, communication, and ‘the world’

Consider in this context three queries all addressing the issue of meaning. The first concerns the issue of categorization and its rootedness in semantic fields, and issues of extensions of meaning by analogy. The second query involves the question of inter-action and intra-action and their relevance for the study of meaning construction and communication. The third grapples with the notion of ‘the world’.

Semantic fields: the issue of republican lions?

The first issue is exemplified by an actual story of the construct of the animal kingdom and of the lion being its ‘king’. Apparently, this status was attributed to the *felis leonina* by George-Louis Leclercq, Comte de Buffon, as recorded in his monumental *Histoire Naturelle* of 1788. This work and the evidentiary support for its explanatory scheme was considered a crowning achievement, but only a few years later, during the French Revolution, its status as a basis for knowledge was shattered. The reasons were the heated debates of the National Assembly concerning the incorporation of the royal menageries into the public Jardin des Plantes. The lions, whose status was severely contested in those debates, were finally voted a ‘pension’ (sic!) by the *Assemblée Nationale*, but with the rider *that among animals there were no kings!* Nevertheless, the name seems to have stuck, all republican intentions notwithstanding.¹⁹

When Gaston Bachelard shook in the 1930s the naïve belief in the accumulation of knowledge, making instead ‘ruptures’ the actual *explanans* for new knowledge – one generation before Kuhn and three generations before the quantum wave collapse! – he used the example of the lion to show that our concepts are not innocent

¹⁹Ellenberger 1960; Derrida 2011.

descriptions. Instead, the lion was ‘king’ only because of the assumption that nature also needed an order, since there was, after all, an animal *kingdom*. The neutral ‘observer’ was not neutral at all but imported the meanings into what s/he saw. Bachelard suggested, therefore, that observers should be psychoanalysed to become aware of the entanglements of our ‘normal’ designations.²⁰

Jacques Lacan, one of his students, took up this challenge and observed in the late 1950s in the London Zoo the peaceful living together of a pride of lions, one male and three females. This peaceful non-rank type of interaction he found odd and suggested – for us rather strangely but perhaps again in analogy to the debate on numbers in philosophy and mathematics – that lions probably lacked the concept of numbers!²¹ Furthermore, a new ‘egalitarianism’ was ‘discovered’, but it remained an oddity since the traditional wisdom was that there existed a disposition among humans to form strict hierarchies. According to the ruling orthodoxy it had emerged among primates. Here, the hierarchies among wolves, horses, chimps, and so on served as the paradigm. In all those cases, the alpha male and female defend their place against any rival, although among wolves other females do seem to babysit for others. The egalitarianism among lions was then an exception, while reinforcing the wider point of the ‘naturalness of hierarchies’. But, putting the problem this way, that is, treating it as an exception, hides the fact that this egalitarianism is not one of general peace among lions, but obtains only to certain aspects of the cycle of reproduction. It tells us little about what an egalitarian political order should look like and how behavioural research of other species can tell us something about our problem.

So much for the danger of analogical extensions. I doubt it, because what we would need is some evidence that we are dealing here not only with similarities but have identified a generative force or a driver of theoretical import. Absent such an argument we have indeed very little when we just recast problems in a different vocabulary.

Concepts in communication

My second query concerns the role of concepts in communication, and whether the attribution of meaning is similar to a wave collapse. I think such an analogy might lead us astray. Let us remember that we frequently use analogies as building blocks for describing the social world, despite being aware that our concepts in the social world are not mind-independent. Realizing this rules out any attempt at explaining this world in terms of simple deictic procedures or ‘reference’, or treating its objects as natural facts. Meaning is rather constituted *by use*, by the place of concepts in a semantic field, and by pragmatic considerations. In short, the same term can be used for entirely different concepts and the metaphorical ‘root’ quickly loses its pull, as the term ‘Zug’ in German shows. It can mean: a train, a facial feature, a character trait, a draft (of air), a swarm (as among birds), a ‘pull’ (as in using a

²⁰Bachelard 2002 [1938], 1968 [1940].

²¹I could no longer find the original Lacanian quote dealing with the ‘other’ – given Lacan’s voluminous and complex work in psychoanalysis but the story is corroborated by another psychiatrist. See von Hummel 2019, 32–34.

pulley), a parade, designating the marchers on St. Patrick's day, a move (as in chess), and a 'turn' (as in: it is your turn now). This puts the last nail into the coffin of a theory of correspondence and of essential vs. accidental descriptions and it strengthens the notion of 'language games' and forms of life.

Meaning is thus *not* a property of the concepts matching the things of the world, and it is also not contained in the combinatory structure, as semiotic approaches suggest. I think Wendt's opting for some form of 'holism' by emphasizing context and the role of semantic fields is right, but I have my doubts whether this establishes thereby also the alleged need for a quantum solution to this problem, while passing over pragmatic considerations. In short, I aver that meaning cannot be reduced to truth and that, therefore, searching for truth-conditions is a poor paradigm for pursuing this question. Several corollaries follow from this.

One is that although I can see a certain family resemblance between the quantum theory and semantics, it seems that if we want to understand how meaning is created, the paradigm of a demonstration or proof is inapt. Here the role of conversation stoppers or of those 'connectors' that enable us to go on, draws our attention to *implicature*, that is, to *what is not being said*, as elaborated in Grice's 'inferential pragmatics'.²²

Although I do not want to imply thereby that Wendt misunderstands the process of communication as being analogous to a parcel being sent by a sender and received by a recipient, I do not see – and this is my second point – *what the exact analogue* to the quantum approach is supposed to be. After all, the communication about natural phenomena still goes from sender to recipient via the reference to something happening in the experiment, even if the 'tests' are not neutral observations. Here, Wendt's summary in his chapter on 'Quantum Semantics and Meaning Holism' is somewhat mystifying, as something more than just 'temporal symmetry' seems to be required. To recall: consciousness is produced in a wave function collapse conceived as a process of temporary symmetry breaking initiated by free will; will works through the advanced action, enforcing correlations between the future and the present; and experience complements that backward movement with retarded action moving forward in time and in doing so restores temporal symmetry.²³

My third point is – and here I probably fundamentally disagree with Wendt – that the notion of one 'world' is incoherent and thus I have serious difficulties with his ontological solution by means of a panpsychic revolution. In short, my contention is that we seem able to do well without such conceptual crutches.

Do we need 'the world'?

My first objection is that the 'world out there' is in terms of the classical ontology complete and fixed. None of these assumptions makes much sense after Darwin and modern cosmology. But, can the conceptual dilemmas be fixed by postulating a pan-psychic 'whole'? Probably not. The world and its parts can only be considered to consist of fixed entities, if we take a creationist perspective, whereby the

²²Grice 1989.

²³Wendt 2015, 221.

philosopher/epistemologist takes the place of God who, staying outside his creation, sees that everything is finished and that he can rest.

Although creationism has run its course, we do seem to have considerable difficulty accepting the wider implications of the 'world', which is not analogous to a furniture store, where things are ready for inspection. After all, any assertion about the world is always made from *within* the world and cannot be predicated from a place or position outside or above the world (meta-physics = next to, or 'above' physics). To that extent the notion of a world as a container in which everything can be placed and understood – ranging from quarks to numbers, to Shakespearian sonnets, to the civil service, to contracts or stock options, melodies, or the international system – seems simply obscurantist. Equally problematic is then the notion that what exists must be material or physical (even if the *physis* is now supposed to be psychic). In the physical world there is no 'crime' but also no 'trust', and although there is still 'death', there are at least no 'taxes'. Nevertheless, endowing matter with some psychic capacity misses the point that these creations (taxes, crimes, senators, and so on) are of purely conventional nature and not a function of molecules, particles or, by implication, of waves.

In short, each of these phenomena 'is' only insofar as it can be located within a particular field, and thus 'the world' is not a single ordered *kosmos* (if the concept still makes any sense) but, at best, a manifold of different fields with their respective ontologies, semantics, methods, and practices. This realization casts doubt on the strategy of naturalizing moves, that is, treating social facts as if they were akin to rocks or chemical elements. However, this recognition does *not* imply that since the human world is in a way 'made' and not simply 'there', everything is now possible. The efforts of constituting and reconstituting this world through practice can neither be understood by the analogy to 'making' something, be it an engine or a dam – here *techne* and technology provide a misleading template – nor can such a world simply be wished or brought into existence, by a clarification of universal principles or an appeal to ultimate values. In short, dilemmas among goals and values are real, collective action problems abound, knowledge and information are always limited, and realizability is not a theoretical or even reflective problem, but a practical one, in which power and wherewithal play a role and which cannot be reduced to questions of 'truth'. Finally, since certain phenomena, such as contracts or options, do not even 'exist' in the natural or in the artistic world, trying to fit them into 'one whole' seems futile.

Such reflections lead us then to the perhaps uncomfortable conclusion that our attempts at reducing everything to 'one world' and its elements are essentially misguided because there are various worlds which interact, but which have their separate ontologies and ways of making sense. Since the notion of science as a mirror of the 'world' is shot through with metaphysical understandings that do not withstand closer scrutiny, the 'solution' for understanding the social world does not lie in a theory of the whole, but in finding an appropriate vocabulary for analysing meanings and actions taking place in historical time.

Unfortunately, Wendt has in his response chosen to exercise his privilege of not providing us with some hints (or answers) to those questions.²⁴ Instead, given the

²⁴Wendt 2022.

many issues and the format of collecting questions, which allows for a cherry picking approach in the response, Wendt's concluding remarks restate his postulates and reiterate his promissory notes on the potential of his new approach. Although the latter can obviously remain an open question, subject to future developments, there is something fishy about the strategy of asking for commitments without answering the criticisms by fully engaging them. As Mark Zuckerberg so nicely demonstrated in putting both the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament in 'their place', selective attention is the best way of avoiding the discomfort of controversial questions and of having to face hard choices.

It is then well within that logic of spreading the good news and upholding the hope of progress in science that someone who insists on getting the questions right before assessing the tendered 'answers' becomes the 'heavy' and the party pooper. He can then be charged with a certain 'lack of engagement' with the argument of the author – as one of the reviewers hinted in his discussion of my contribution – which apparently justifies the benign neglect. If, in 'the end', there are no comparable or even 'better' alternatives offered by the critic – as a superficial reading of my argument might suggest – one could argue that decisions have to be made, and that means that one has to choose sides and 'get on with it' instead of vetting once more some old issues.

This, of course, reverses the burden of proof since the author no longer has to provide persuasive reasons for his assumption but instead *the commentators* are supposed to corroborate the thesis that this work represents the 'best possible response to the paradigmatic crisis of consciousness and cognition' (*sic!*), as one reviewer suggested. If discussants refuse to be cheerleaders, does this prove that 'they remain in their world and look at Wendt's proposal with curtains at least pulled... mostly shut', as suggested by another reviewer? That would be strange indeed! But how could one even begin with such an assessment, if all the criteria are declared invalid, overtaken by recent developments, but which escaped the commentators who are unable to read the tell-tale signs, so clear to the *cognoscenti*?

Obviously, here we come dangerously close to the point where apologetics substitute for critical inquiry, and belief displaces doubt – not in the Cartesian megalomaniacal sense of leading to absolute certainty, but in the Socratic sense of knowing that one does not know, as any increase in knowledge goes hand in hand with the realization of mounting ignorance. Instead, the wish becomes now the father of all thought. But could we not respond: so what, when no clarifications are tendered and the critical vetting is depreciated? After all, we are dealing with revolutionary science – which still would make careful translation and comparisons necessary. But should such niceties not be dispensed with when something much bigger is at stake: the meaning of everything, of the mind, of matter, and of being human? To that extent it is not surprising that in such situations prophets and modern influencers arise who are not followed because they tell us what the case is but because of the vision they espouse and because of the commitments their followers exhibit.

As understandable as this reaction seems, it is *not* the only way to respond to our predicament, since what serve as answers are neither simply evident nor free-standing but crucially depend on what the question was. 'Answering' thus entails an appraisal that usually requires judgements – Kant's *Urteilkraft* – which is different from either the logic of inference or the hopes that fuel our commitments. In

short, this problem cannot be short-circuited by making it simply a function of the inquirer's commitment or of the acquisition of new methodological tools. Wendt's epistemological move betrays a rather 'disciplinary' bent (in the Foucauldian sense), since it entails not only that techniques and 'ways of doing things' are now applied to different domains, but that 'futile thinking' is to be rooted out. The previous latitudinarian treatment of 'truth' that one found in Wendt's earlier work on the practical world, where not truth conditions of assertions but value-interests and counterfactual validity presumptions were at issue, is now abandoned and truth with a capital 'T' re-enters the scene.

At this point, I emphatically disagree, because I think that the search for such a new whole is as futile and undesirable as the proverbial hole in the head. If we do not take physics as a paradigm – and mind you, a notion of physics that is rather different from that of most practicing physicists – and do not open our eyes just when they are blinded by the glare of the 'idea of ideas' (Plato's sun, showing us what 'holds it all together'), but turn instead to biology, then we 'see' different things. Then we realize that evolution can occur only in an environment in which a *requisite variety* rather than uniformity prevails. By implication from the analogy of natural processes to those of knowledge-production, this means that one reviewer's notion of finding the 'best possible response to the paradigmatic crisis of consciousness and cognition' is probably a self-defeating quest, not only because even Plato knew that you cannot stare into the sun – or to put it in today's vernacular, the 'overdose' of science fiction can blind, and seldom illuminates.

I might be a person of little faith, but for good reasons I am convinced that engaging with an argument *is – and has to be* – something different from embracing it even before a discussion gets off the ground. If it had been the expectation of the editors to have this distinction discarded, I would have declined the invitation, as I stated in my original message to them. For me, discussions that do not respect the distinction of engaging vs. embracing quickly become pointless and are therefore counterproductive for helping us to find our way in a world that is not readily perspicuous to us. Here, Hume has always been a better mentor when he compared the perhaps less than edifying activity of criticism to the allure of thinking 'big' thoughts: '...generally speaking errors of religion are dangerous, those in philosophy only ridiculous'.²⁵

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²⁵Hume 2007, Bk. I, 4.7, 177.

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