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978-1-107-08254-0 - Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology

Alexander Wendt

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Quantum Mind and Social Science

There is an underlying assumption in the social sciences that consciousness and social life are ultimately classical physical/material phenomena. In this ground-breaking book, Alexander Wendt challenges this assumption by proposing that consciousness is, in fact, a macroscopic quantum mechanical phenomenon. In the first half of the book, Wendt justifies the insertion of quantum theory into social scientific debates, introduces social scientists to quantum theory and the philosophical controversy about its interpretation, and then defends the quantum consciousness hypothesis against the orthodox, classical approach to the mind–body problem. In the second half, he develops the implications of this metaphysical perspective for the nature of language and the agent–structure problem in social ontology. Wendt’s argument is a revolutionary development which raises fundamental questions about the nature of social life and the work of those who study it.

ALEXANDER WENDT is Ralph D. Mershon Professor of International Security and Professor of Political Science at The Ohio State University. He is the author of *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), which won the International Studies Association’s Best Book of the Decade Award in 2006.

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“Wendt’s second monograph has been eagerly anticipated. Was it worth the wait? Of course. Beautifully written and painstakingly argued, *Quantum Mind and Social Science* explores the potential impact that advances in quantum mechanics may have on the social sciences. Notwithstanding the fact that this is probably one of the best introductions to quantum mechanics I have read, the book also raises a series of pressing questions about how a careful engagement with quantum mechanics might alter how we think about social science and social practice. Do I agree with it? No. But that’s not the point. This is a book of speculative grand theorizing that is sadly lacking in the social sciences today.”

Colin Wight

Professor in the Department of Government and
International Relations, The University of Sydney

“Alexander Wendt, one of the leading and most original voices in International Relations, has now produced what may be his most daring effort yet. In *Quantum Mind and Social Science* Wendt argues for a new kind of physicalism that encompasses elements of mind all the way down to the quantum processes governing elementary particles. For most social scientists, all that Wendt takes us through will be a revelation. Wendt’s discussion of this material is just fabulous, the best lay discussions of the issues I have seen. Whatever one thinks of the final thesis, the journey here is definitely worth the ride.”

Douglas V. Porpora

Professor of Sociology in the Department of
Culture and Communication, Drexel University

“This book is very well written and engaging and introduces some very controversial new ideas. The author takes a courageous stance on a number of deep and difficult issues in philosophy of mind. Some of these ideas may ultimately not be supported, and some others may engage never-ending debates. But if even one of them turns out to be right, then the book will have made a great contribution.”

Jerome R. Busemeyer

Provost Professor in the Department of Psychological
and Brain Sciences, Indiana University

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For Emma and Otto

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“... the worst of all possible misunderstandings would occur if psychology should be influenced to model itself after a physics which is not there any more...”¹

Physicist Robert Oppenheimer in 1956

¹ The quote is from Young (1976: 26).

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Acknowledgments

Writing this book has been very much a “quantum” experience. On the one hand, locked in my own personal bubble of subjectivity, I have found it quite isolating to venture into and try to get a grip on literatures with which I often had no initial familiarity, and where an iconoclastic interloper could expect little systematic help from local guides. On the other hand, my experience has also been quite holistic in the sense that innumerable individuals have joined me along the way, whether in the form of written comments on parts of the text, meetings over lunch to discuss problems I was having, countless questions at seminars, references sent that I had not seen, and a striking number of random emails from people around the world who had heard of my work and either had something substantive to say or just wanted to offer encouragement. By no means has everyone agreed with me, but their comments were overwhelmingly constructive. I was not able to incorporate all of the input I received, but a great deal of it is now enfolded in one form or another within the final product, which is participatory epistemology at its best.

The journey to this book has been a long one, over ten years depending on how you count, and over the course of this period the logistics train carrying my records of all this feedback simply broke down. Thus, much to my regret I am unable to recall every individual who helped me to clarify and formulate my ideas – or even every institution where I have presented them. All the more reason, therefore, for me to begin by expressing my heartfelt thanks to everyone I have encountered along the way, and my apologies to those whose names are now lost in the sands of time.

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I am very grateful to Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander, who in a 2006 volume gave me the opportunity to crystallize my argument in the form of

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an “auto-critique” in response to critics of my first book, *Social Theory of International Politics*. This led to the first published version of these ideas, and generated a number of subsequent comments that encouraged me to keep going with the project.

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Turning finally to family, Chris Wendt, my brother and a physicist by training, patiently answered my many naïve questions over the years about quantum mechanics, which was an invaluable resource that saved me from numerous elementary mistakes (though he bears no responsibility for those that undoubtedly remain).

My father, Hans Wendt, taught me that the way forward in science is to look for anomalies, not just patterns, which as you will see found its way into the structure of many parts of the book.

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Quantum Mind and Social Science is dedicated to Emma and Otto, who have never known a day of their lives when I was not working on it, and who may live long enough to find out whether Daddy's conjecture is right.