



Science and Spirituality: Observations from the Battlefield

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“The most common misunderstanding about science is that scientists seek and find truth. They don’t – they make and test models.”

Neil Gershenfeld, MIT (‘Edge’ Magazine, Jan. 2011)

“We know this rich and complex world in many ways, among which physical science is important, but our immediate experience is much more so.”

Mary Midgley (‘The Guardian’, 5.2.11)

“It suits the purposes of our economists, technologists and politicians to pretend that living organisms are machines, since the benefits provided by the state and the formal economy cater above all for humanity’s mechanistic needs.”

Edward Goldsmith (‘The Ecologist’, March/April 1990)

Abstract

As society today finds itself confronted by a tabula rasa, a void created by science’s increasing lack of authority to interpret reality and its over-identification with a specific world-view, it is time to consider another alternative, and a legitimate, modern path to truth. Instead of merely accepting science as another à la carte belief system, purpose or meaning to our existence can be provided by spirituality.

However, coexistence between spirituality and science is currently recognised only on the terms of the latter and sparks concern with regard to the dangers of scientific fundamentalism. Rather than managing to disprove spiritual truths, modern science has led to a research methodology which excludes even the possibility of immaterial realities.

To this end, the need to pursue open-minded spiritual research cannot be under-emphasized in order to cease the ongoing subservience of science to the creed of scientific materialism. On the path to harmonious cooperation between science and spirituality lies a rebuilding of the concept of community in order to provide a new beginning based on humility and circumspection. Such reconciliation would facilitate modern society to develop a lifestyle of modest sufficiency, one which may only be achieved by understanding spirituality as a science in its own right.

Discussions on this topic usually start from the premises that science provides the only legitimate modern path to truth, and that we live in a mechanistic universe, where the material level is the ultimate reality and life, a ‘blind’ trial-and-error selection of the ‘fittest’ with no

purpose or meaning. This dismal “Western creed”, based on a “firm foundation of unyielding despair” (Bertrand Russell), is presented by celebrated scientists and philosophers as proven beyond doubt. While it is recognised that many people, including scientists, need spiritual crutches to cope with their ultimately meaningless existence, any suggestion that there are other realities and paths to truth are dismissed as a dangerous retreat to the past, opening the floodgates to irrationality.

Co-existence between science and spirituality is thus seen as acceptable only on terms set by science, i.e. recognising it as the only modern path to truth. But, while “the opposition of faith to reason has behind it an old tradition, ... the opposition of faith to truth is a desperate novelty and dangerously favours any self-imposed deception.” (Czeslaw Milosz)

Darwinism is then no longer a powerful scientific theory but “the most important bastion of the humanistic-liberal worldview. If it falls, ... it will not be long before the ostracism of all leftists, homosexuals and pro-abortionists begins”, according to the liberal German weekly DER SPIEGEL (52/05).

In a recent report the same magazine described the teaching of homeopathy at German Universities under the heading “Fall-back to the Middle Ages”. Homeopathy was dismissed as “scurrilous... humbug”, comparable to “voodoo medicine” and “long disproven”. An open-minded attitude on this issue was only proof of “moving ever further away from international medical standards”.

My issue here is not whether homeopathy works – although I saw it curing my son from nightly epileptic fits after one treatment. My concern is with our ways of ascertaining reality. The scientific method of doing so has been ideologically and dogmatically reduced to a narrow mechanistic path, impoverishing science and modern life in many ways. The ‘dissident’ scientist Prof. Rupert Sheldrake – who faced a call from the editor of a top scientific publication, ‘NATURE’, to burn his books – recently spoke of the dangers of scientific fundamentalism. Thus, homeopathy must be only a subjective placebo effect – despite its many successes with children and animals – because anything else would threaten the materialistic world-view imposed on us in the name of science.

Spiritual seekers are bad consumers and care little about economic growth. Therefore research into non-material realities and non-mechanistic paths to (spiritual or inner) truth is very difficult to fund. If, on the other hand, you can present your research as scientific, then money is no problem, however weird your project is. The “Biosphere 2” project in Arizona was based on the belief that we understand enough about interactive natural eco-systems to be able to replicate them. “Biosphere 2” was to show how humans can survive nuclear war or environmental collapse by escaping underground or, preferably, into space. It attracted huge publicity and hundreds of millions in funding. Support from top universities, NASA, etc. gave it credibility. It proved completely unworkable – the “bionauts” inside had to smash the walls to escape suffocation.

It was the pet project of a charming, eccentric professor and his group of young female assistants. Had their quest been spiritual, the media would have had a field day, denouncing the waste of private and public funding for this “sect”. But, because it was “scientific”, it escaped such scrutiny.

There are other problems. Physics still cannot explain why the universe now consists almost entirely of matter, although matter and anti-matter are supposed to have been created in equal quantities in the Big Bang. Even less can our experts explain the Big Bang itself: why would nothing suddenly bang?

Those acquainted with research into so-called paranormal phenomena will spot another fundamental problem with the scientific quest. One such well-documented phenomenon is telekinetics, i.e. the ability of certain individuals to influence and move objects with the power of their minds. While research into such phenomena is not regarded as respectable or fundable in the West today, it was seen as potentially military use and thus well-documented in the Soviet Union. In one famous experiment, witnessed by US researchers, a Leningrad house-wife lifted heavy objects from a table and moved them purely with her mental telekinetic powers.

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Modern science has not disproven spiritual truths. It has developed a research methodology which excludes the very possibility of immaterial realities. When confronted with such phenomena, it capitulates: “I don’t want to discuss evidence... It’s too complicated.” (Richard Dawkins on telepathy. Network Review, Winter 2007 www.scimednet.org.) Those who have debated with so-called scientific sceptics know that ‘what cannot be must not be’. George Vithoulkas has revived classical homeopathy and teaches packed courses to medical doctors from many countries on the Greek island where he lives. A few years ago he told me excitedly about looking for evidence for the medical efficacy of homeopathy. It looked promising, but soon after the participating doctors resigned. I suggested to one of them that he was afraid of what would happen to his reputation if the study confirmed the effectiveness of homeopathy. He readily admitted that this was the case.

Of course, homeopathy is not spirituality. Nor is it telepathy. But both are evidence of non-material realities. The subservience of science to the creed of scientific materialism explains the difficulties of finding common ground between it and the vast experiences of human spirituality. The failure to pursue open-minded spiritual research has made us less knowledgeable about key issues of our existence than many of our ancestors. We have exchanged their often harmless superstitions for a dangerous belief in the paramount powers of markets, “growth” and technological fixes, which now threaten our common future. It is symptomatic that the only new Nobel Prize introduced by the Nobel Foundation is for economics! Religious fundamentalism made the crusades, pogroms and 9/11 possible. But modern science made Hiroshima and Nagasaki possible. And the scientists responsible did

not even know if the nuclear chain reaction would get out of control and set the Earth's atmosphere on fire...

The findings of Quantum Physics limit the validity of the scientific materialism still dominating our social sciences. While this materialism and its 'science' of economics destroy the concept of community, leaving us both alone and meaningless, quantum physics re-asserts the primacy of consciousness and re-creates community by re-connecting us (religare!) with the world around us. It also warns us that, as integral parts of this whole, it is very unlikely that we will ever be able to understand it fully. It certainly makes it doubtful if we can do it from the outside. If we want to understand more, we have to develop our inner self-knowledge and creative intelligence. Serious spiritual students have documented many experiences which are intra- and inter-personally replicable.

I had long wondered if the proponents of the dismal creed of modern science really believe what they say, or are just following fashion. For, if they really thought their life and existence meaningless, why would their discoveries have any objective validity? And would someone as brilliant as Bertrand Russell really not have spotted this contradiction? Well, it appears that he did, but did not want to admit this, preferring to keep up his image as the 'courageous' atheist, facing down despair.

Some years ago I came across Kyros Markides' biography of Daskalos, *The Magnus of Strovolos*, the remarkable Cypriot spiritual teacher, healer and mystic. Markides quotes from the respectful, inquiring letters to Daskalos from a "famous philosopher". Recognising their style, I asked the author if they were from Russell, which he confirmed.

Nor is this an isolated example. David Loye's "Darwin's Hidden Theory of Love" reveals a Darwin seeing human evolution as a struggle for moral growth, opposed to the mechanistic evolutionism of his followers but unwilling to distance himself from them publicly. And 'The Origin of Species' closes with his conviction that life "having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one..."

But who breathed? And how can inter-active and dynamic structures and functions of living organisms come into existence by chance? The tadpole and the frog belong to different species – so do the caterpillar and the butterfly. Yet they are different stages of the same animal. How is this possible without a plan? As my grandfather biologist (and 'father' of bio-semiotics) remarked, Darwinists have "turned nature into an idiot who feels around blindly and starts all sorts of experiments of which most are failures..."

No wonder spirituality is back in fashion. The pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela (Spain) has regained so much popularity that the facilities along the path – almost empty a decade or two ago – are struggling to cope. The recently deserted monasteries on Mount Athos are rapidly filling up with new monks from many countries.

The issue is no longer the role of spirituality in a scientific world. We face a tabula rasa where no method or authority is trusted to interpret reality. Science has lost that authority by identifying and allying itself with a specific world-view, which is losing credibility because of the problems it has caused or failed to solve. Can we really do no better? Its protestations of non-responsibility are no longer believed, as too many scientists have become propagandists "in the name of science" for many of the mega-projects which are now seen as dangerous monuments of a false "progress".

When she learnt that her boss Enrico Fermi had become sick worrying about testing the new bomb they had developed, Manhattan Project nuclear scientist Leonora Libby describes in her autobiography how she burst into his bedroom and asked how he as a scientist could justify not finding out if the H-Bomb would work? German Chancellor Angela Merkel has stated that she is in favour of nuclear energy because she is a physicist...

Science risks becoming another á la carte belief system, quoted when convenient but regarded as capable of massive fraud. A few years ago my brother-in-law gave the Kindergarten teachers he was training a book by Rupert Sheldrake to encourage their critical thinking vis-à-vis ruling dogmas, but the results were not what he expected.

The young women told him that Sheldrake's heretical thinking was interesting "and of course the moon landings did not really happen either"...

Even the mainstream media now accept the reality of events which "defy medical science", as the 'Financial Times' recently reported from the Malaysian Thaipusam festival, where pilgrims pierce their cheeks and tongues with spears, and backs with hooks, without any bleeding. My friend Prince Alfred von Liechtenstein recently described bringing a Philippine 'spiritual surgeon' – whose methods also defy medical and scientific explanation – to operate in a Vienna hospital. After their initial shock and amazement, the assembled doctors decided not to investigate what they could not understand – but concluded that they must have been hypnotised, and that their colleague who had extended the invitation must be fined for allowing an operation by an un-licensed individual...

At this time of accelerating global crises, threatening simultaneous "peak-everything", we can afford neither superstition, nor a science corrupted by money, power and arrogance. We need a new beginning based on humility and circumspection – grounded but open-minded – where science and spirituality cooperate to help us develop the life-styles of modest sufficiency which our planet now demands.

The US bio-semiotics pioneer Prof. Thomas Sebeok was asked by the US Government to develop danger signs for nuclear waste installations which could still be understood in 10,000 years. He replied that he regarded this as impossible and instead recommended the establishment of a self-perpetuating "nuclear priesthood" to guard these wastes. Thus, when science does not know how to deal with the consequences of its creations, it calls for priests...

The physicist and World Future Councillor Hans-Peter Dürr believes that "science and religion are not just called to reconciliation, but also to always remain aware of their mutually dependent complementary roles." And his countryman, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas asks "if modernity committed to market radicalism can regenerate itself by its own resources, i.e. without religious content."

But a serious reconciliation requires the understanding that spirituality is not just a belief system but a science in its own right, another path to profound truths. Even my Baltic-Ger-

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man biologist grandfather expected the major discoveries of the next generations to be “diesseits”, i.e. inside ourselves. Only thus can the calls of Dürr and Habermas become more than exhortations in a moral void. As Plato noted, we understand at the level at which we are and perceive. Scientific materialism has deepened our knowledge but narrowed our consciousness. As Aldous Huxley wrote in ‘Heaven and Hell’ (1953), “Like the earth of a hundred years ago, our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins.”

The spiritual explorer is also on a quest for knowledge. To quote William James, “mystical states... are states of insight into depths of knowledge... illuminations, revelations, full of significance...” (‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’, N.Y. 1902, p.371).

The remarkable Swedish scientist and spiritualist Emanuel Swedenborg saw his investigations of spiritual realities as a logical continuation of his other scientific experiments. Indeed, to quote his biographer Lars Bergqvist, “his knowledge of nature had been a prerequisite for his insights into spiritual things,” (‘Swedenborg’s Secret’, p.382) His findings were open to empirical confirmation, by using his methods of investigation, which were open to anyone and did not require a lifetime of asceticism, which he rejected.

I entitled this paper “Observations From the Battlefield” as I do not believe it is helpful to re-define modern science and spirituality until they can be nicely reconciled. As they currently stand, they represent contradictory realities, paths and worldviews. Only by accepting that the scientific methodology must be re-thought and expanded to include a broader range of human experiences can we move to the new synthesis we now urgently need.

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