

1. A WORLD AT THE CROSSROADS

Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure, as Freud believed, or a quest for power, as Alfred Adler taught, but a quest for meaning. (Viktor E. Frankl)

The materialist conception has placed human life in serious danger. Nature—formerly a mother—is conceived of as something to be exploited; man is thought of as a mere machine; our attention is given almost exclusively to the outer world... All of this augurs an ever-more inhuman and mechanized future, and an increasingly downtrodden environment. The destruction of our environment is but a projection of our inward chaos and the loss of a sense of the sacred. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for whom the origin of the ecological crisis lies in the materialist concept of the Universe, points out that modern man looks upon nature as a prostitute “to be used without any sense of obligation or responsibility”.

Science is a rigorous mode of knowledge that specializes in diverse areas of the physical world, and is true within its legitimate standpoint; but in its “ideological” version, on the basis of its achievements in the physical domain, it claims to monopolize the whole arena of knowledge. Very often, the “scientific ideology”—known as “scientism”—continues to adhere to the positivist propositions of Auguste Comte: science is the only valid source of knowledge to understand the role of mankind, and only science can provide an accurate vision of the world.

B. Allan Wallace:

Can science provide an adequate view of the entire natural world that includes only objective phenomena, while excluding the subjective phenomenon of consciousness altogether?

Depriving (with no more argument than their incapacity to perceive them) the Universe of consciousness and intelligence, scientific spokesmen—heavily backed by both education and the media—present, implicitly or explicitly, a dire panorama of the real:

The physical world is the only reality. It originates wholly from impersonal natural forces; it is devoid of any intrinsic moral order or values; and it functions without the intervention of spiritual forces of any kind, benevolent or otherwise. Life and consciousness originally arose in this universe purely by accident, from complex configurations of matter and energy. Life in general, and human life in particular, has no meaning, value, or significance other than what it attributes to itself. During the course of an individual’s life, all one’s desires, hopes, intentions, feelings, and so forth—in short, all one’s experiences and actions—are determined solely by one’s body and the impersonal forces acting upon it from the physical environment. [...] The termination of an individual’s life results in the disappearance of consciousness and the utter annihilation of the individual; and eventually this is the destiny of all life in the universe—it will simply disappear without a trace.

We human beings are nothing but extremely complicated biological machines. Everything we are and do is in principle causally explainable from the bottom up in terms of our biology, chemistry, and physics—ultimately, that is, in terms of local contact interactions among bits of matter moving in strict accordance with mechanical laws under the influence of fields of force. [...] Mind and consciousness are entirely generated by—or perhaps in some mysterious way identical with—neurophysiological events and processes in the brain. Mental causation, volition, and the “self” do not really exist; they are mere illusions, by-products of the grinding of our neural machinery.

To come face to face with other perceptions of things is enormously useful as a means to discover fissures and gaps in our thinking, and above all, to make us conscious of our axioms and assumptions. Roger-Pol Droit notes how non-western authorities are systematically ignored in textbooks:

It is generally in a side remark of an introduction, at the end of a preface, or perhaps in some addendum of unessential items where four-fifths of humanity is brushed aside [...] before beginning to speak of serious things. [...] What is astonishing is that no one finds this situation unusual. It has become so normal in its abnormality that no one finds anything to say. Worse still: no one is even aware of it anymore.

In my opinion, Indian thought—which dates back to earliest times while still being vital today—has a great deal to offer in today’s world by providing a very different point of view, yet one that is still possible for the westerner to comprehend. Thanks to its tremendous flexibility, it does not allow itself to be confined by concepts. However, its basic assumptions are different than those of the Semitic religions, which are still largely valid in the secularized western world.

Rajiv Malhotra explains one of the basic differences between western and eastern axioms:

All dharmic schools begin by assuming that ultimately the cosmos is a unified whole in which absolute reality and the relative manifestations are profoundly connected. [...] The sense of an underlying unity is strong and allows for a great deal of inventiveness and play in understanding its manifestations. As a result, there tends to be a great diversity of paths and philosophical understandings without fear of chaos. Western worldviews, whether religious or secular, begin with the opposite premise: the cosmos is inherently an agglomeration of parts or separate essences. The debates on this subject are not about how and why multiplicity emerges but about how unity can emerge out of the multiplicity. Such a unity is not innate; it must be sought and justified again and again, and the resulting synthesis is always unstable.

According to Frithjof Schuon:

One of the effects of modern science has been to give religion a mortal wound, by posing in concrete terms problems which only esoterism can resolve; but these problems remain unresolved, because esoterism is not listened to, and is listened to less now than ever. Faced by these new problems, religion is disarmed, and it borrows clumsily and gropingly the arguments of the enemy; it is thus compelled to falsify by imperceptible degrees its own perspective, and more and more to disavow itself.

According to Huston Smith, humanity has always contemplated

a tiered reality as man's central surmise when the full range of his experience is legitimated and pondered profoundly. Constituting until recently, through both rumored and recorded history, what we have ventured to call the human unanimity—the phrase overstates the case slightly, but not much—it presents itself as the natural human outlook: the view that is normal to man's station because consonant with the complete complement of human sensibilities. It is the vision philosophers have dreamed, mystics have seen, and prophets have transmitted. [...] The only notable exception is ourselves; our modern Western outlook has differed in its very soul from what might otherwise be called “the human unanimity”. But there is an explanation for this, namely, modern science and its misreading.

“The all is one”, the Pythagoreans used to say, and before and after them, innumerable sages and philosophers. In the end, only the One is; its diverse parts have no reality or existence except as parts of this “all”. If this is so, what value could there be in a vision that envisages the world as the result of the complex mutual interaction of basic quasi-independent components? The Tamil book *Ellam Onru* (“All is one”) asserts:

In the same tree we see leaves, flowers, berries and branches different from one another, yet they are all one because all are included in the word tree. Their root is the same, their sap is the same. Similarly, all things, all bodies, all organisms, are from the same source and activated by a single life-principle.

Richard Dawkins, who attempts to prove the inexistence of God (conceived of in an elementary mode), mocks the religious experience (identified with “visions”) of people as something subjective and without basis:

Many people believe in God because they believe they have seen a vision of him—or of an angel or a virgin in blue—with their own eyes. Or he speaks to them inside their heads. This argument from personal experience is the one that is most convincing to those who claim to have had one. But it is the least convincing to anyone else, and anyone knowledgeable about psychology. You say you have experienced God directly? Well, some people have experienced a pink elephant, but that probably doesn't impress you.

But the religious experience of the common man is like the mathematical equation of a seven or ten year-old child. The equation may be correct or incorrect—and if it is correct, it should not be disparaged, but given support so that the child keeps learning—yet it will always be elementary mathematics, nothing compared with the advanced equations of a professional mathematician or physicist, not to speak of a scientific genius. The equations of a child, even though correct, are not enough to prove a mathematical theory: this is done by the great mathematicians. In like manner, if we wish to probe into the spiritual world, convince ourselves of its existence, we should study and discuss the experience of spiritual geniuses.

For Peter Russell:

Science has looked out into deep space, back in “deep time” to the beginning of creation, and down into the “deep structure” of the cosmos, the very essence of matter, and is proud to tell us that it finds no need nor place for God—the Universe

seems to work perfectly well without his assistance. But whoever said God is to be found “out there”, in the realm of space, time and matter? This is a very naive and old-fashioned interpretation of God. When spiritual teachings refer to God they are, more often than not, pointing towards the realm of inner experience, not some thing in the physical realm. If we want to find God, we have to look within, into the realm of “deep mind”—a realm that science has yet to explore.

The way of life aggressively promoted by the modern world—and which is difficult to avoid—actively favours dispersion rather than recollection and concentration, haste instead of calm, agitation instead of peace, the transitory instead of the lasting, the stream of “current” events instead of the permanent, superficial human relations instead of committed ones, a vain and luxurious life instead of a simple one, frivolity instead of profundity... in a word, it tries in every way possible to do away with any inclination towards the spiritual. Already in 1947, Georges Bernanos had accurately observed: “Absolutely nothing can be understood about modern civilization if we fail to first admit that it is a universal conspiracy against any form of interior life.”

Traversing the ocean of time, the voice of wisdom is heard unanimously proclaiming: “Man, know thyself, and thou shalt know the Universe and the gods.”