

# BOOK REVIEWS



**THE SCIENTIST AND THE SAINT** *The Limits of Science and the Testimony of Sages* by Avinash Chandra. (HB) Pub. Archetype, Cambridge, UK, 2018. pp.660, approx. ₹4,000/-, £12.81, \$46. ISBN-13: 978-1901383546. [www.archetype.uk.com](http://www.archetype.uk.com)

Once in a while one comes across a book for which the word ‘staggering’ is an apt description. The book staggers because of its size, 660 pages, and it weighs in at about a kilo. This is a book meant for a long, slow read. The range of discussion is wide and deep. The books cited and quoted are extensive and the author’s grasp of his subject matter is impressive. There is an extended table of contents at the very end of the book which may help readers orientate themselves to the sheer scale of the material. The opening chapter ‘A World At The Crossroads’, will give the reader an overview that will ease them into the detailed but fluent arguments the author skilfully makes. There is a modesty about the book which is inviting and I thoroughly enjoyed the adventure, though this is not a fast read.

The author quotes, early in the book, a statement by Richard Tarnas, a historian of culture, which succinctly presents the challenge, “In the combined wake of eighteenth-century philosophy and twentieth-century science, the modern mind was left free of absolutes, but also disconcertingly free of any solid ground. [...] A stupendous quantity of information had become available about all aspects of life—the contemporary world, the historical past, other cultures, other forms of life, the subatomic world, the macrocosm, the human mind and psyche—yet there was also less ordering vision, less coherence and comprehension, less certainty. [...] The great revolutionary political projects of the modern era, heralding personal and social liberation, had gradually led to conditions in which the modern individual’s fate was ever more dominated by bureaucratic, commercial and political structures. Just as man had become a meaningless speck in the modern universe, so had individual persons become insignificant ciphers in modern states, to be manipulated or coerced by the millions.”

Avinash Chandra presents us with two contrary arguments, the ‘traditionalist’ view and the modern worldview encapsulated by the philosophy of science that postulates that, to put it bluntly, if something is not quantifiable then it does not exist. The traditionalist worldview states that the physical world we inhabit is not the only world, in fact it is quite dense and limited. It states that there are higher more subtle worlds beyond the limited dimensions of time and space we presently experience. It embraces a transcendental attitude with the implicit assumption that our purpose in life is to transcend this world through a series of disciplines, which deepens and strengthens our consciousness, so that we may transcend our ignorance.

It is interesting to note that Rene Guenon, the French traditionalist (1886-1951), who was at the forefront of the intellectual challenge to make us aware of the dangers we face from the deadly impact of modern materialism, had a profound impact on our founding editor, Arthur Osborne, as also on the author of this book under review.

The book is divided into four main parts: i. The Scientific View of the World; ii. Consciousness; iii. The Spiritual Vision; and iv. The Labyrinth, that includes topics such as Death, Evil and Finding the way out of the labyrinth. Those who have read the book excerpt earlier in this issue of the magazine, will have some idea of the tenor and scope of the author’s intentions.

A distinguished modern proponent of traditionalism, who combats the presumptions of materialist science, is Alan B. Wallace, who is quoted here in connection with a scientific conference in London under the auspices of The Royal Society, about consciousness: “This meeting revealed a remarkable consensus among the speakers that science understands none of the central aspects of consciousness — what it is, how it evolved, how it is generated by the brain, or even what it is for. The paradox confronting the participants was that from the first-person perspective, consciousness is a prime irreducible datum, but from the third-person scientific perspective there is no way of investigating it directly. That is, brain research tells us nothing about why neural processes should give rise to mental experiences of any kind. However, when one participant suggested that research into consciousness must include the first-person perspective, a number of his colleagues expressed consternation. In their eyes avoiding

the taboo of subjectivity and remaining ignorant of consciousness was apparently preferable to breaking that taboo and opening the possibility of fresh avenues of understanding.”

What we are attempting to do, as adherents of a transcendental view of reality and as devotees of Sri Ramana Maharshi, is to be absorbed in that Pure Consciousness, or, shall we say, unalloyed subjectivity, so that we profoundly see that thoughts are a result of consciousness. They are the shadows on the cave wall made possible by the fire of consciousness in the parable related by Plato. Thoughts may describe but they are not the thing in itself. What Avinash Chandra has done is lay down before us in a magnificent manner the intellectual foundation of why we do what we do. I, for one, will be reading my copy for some considerable time to come.

— Christopher Quilkey