

REVIEWS

The Scientist and the Saint: The Limits of Science and the Testimony of Sages by Avinash Chandra. Cambridge: Archetype, 2018. 666 pp. £35.

This is a book about two competing worldviews: one governed by the materialistic ideology of science, and the other by traditional metaphysics—referred to respectively by the Traditionalist school as ‘modernism’ and ‘Tradition’. They are represented in the book’s title by the terms ‘Scientist’ and ‘Saint’, and the interlocutors are the many individuals whose ideas this book critically explores. Avinash Chandra, its author, portrays his role as that of ‘organizer and presenter of ideas that others, much wiser than myself, have clearly expressed’. However, he does much more than that, wielding an argument, encapsulated in the book’s subtitle, which he summarizes as follows:

. . . to show (not prove, for no worldview can be proved) that the world is much more than what can be discovered scientifically, that the universe is much more than its visible and measurable parts, that man is much more than a ‘naked ape’, that consciousness—the fundamental characteristic of man—is much more than cerebral activity. And that this ‘much more’ [. . .] can be known . . .

The book examines the limits of scientific knowledge and contrasts it with the experiential knowledge of gnosis and mysticism.

Chandra begins by surveying the foundation of the materialistic philosophy that underlies modern sciences. He describes the rise of scientific epistemology, its Cartesian roots, the secularization of knowledge during the Age of Enlightenment, and the rise in the industrial and technological era of what Wendell Berry has termed the ‘science-technology-and-industry’ which provides modern science with much of its current prestige while (often intentionally) disguising its limitations and false premises. These derive from its reductivist assumptions and methods which operate only within the measurable world of Quantity, while dismissing the archetypal, ontological and qualitative domain of Forms, thereby dividing man from nature, the observer from the observed, and leading to a desacralization of the world and the disintegration of knowledge.

In his survey of physics, Chandra considers how a materialist cosmology fails adequately to account for the origins of the universe or to explain the mystery of the 'anthropic principle', the fine-tuning (for example, through the precision of the cosmological constants) that creates the miraculous conditions for the existence of human life on earth. Modern scientists, operating from materialistic premises that have moved beyond Newtonian mechanisms, have thus far failed to reconcile the Einsteinian theory of relativity with quantum physics. Physicists like Wolfgang Smith are urging scientists to integrate their findings with metaphysics, with the principle of verticality. Without a transcendent cause or purpose for the universe, or without an intelligence behind the designing and sustaining of life, science is left with perplexing paradoxes about the origins of existence, life and consciousness. Physics is confronted by enigmas such as non-locality (Bell's theorem), and the collapse of the wave's function, which contradict our ordinary perception of time and space and appear to implicate the observer in the observed in a way that defies materialistic knowledge. While the new physics increasingly points to a non-material foundation for reality, a holistic one which transcends the Newtonian and Einsteinian worldview, ironically neo-Darwinist biology is tugging in a different direction. In a quasi-religious manner, it tenaciously clings to a materialistic ideology which views life simply as randomly self-organizing matter—this, in the face of compelling evidence from the fields of palaeontology, molecular microbiology, and genetic engineering, that renders the Darwinian 'science' of transformist evolution untenable.

The missing link for reductive science—what fails to integrate the merely material world with our broader experience of reality—is, as the book argues, consciousness. It is by integrating the subject with the object that reality can be known. Modern science, lacking a planimetric view of reality which allows for the presence of Logos, is unable to explain consciousness without either dismissing or reifying it, thereby reducing it to its limited epistemology. The result is that consciousness, initially reduced to the mind, is in turn seen as no more than the workings of the brain. But the experiencing subject, as we all know through our personal subjectivity, possesses a reality that transcends the merely physical. Chandra explores this subjectivity through a series of brief sections which distinguish the mind from the workings of a computer, explore the dangers of neurophysiological explanations, and suggest the reality to which the new physics points—of non-materialistic intelligence as its core.

In pursuing his argument, Chandra privileges 'Indian thought'—by which he means primarily Hinduism—over Western and Semitic traditions. He claims that Indian thought 'does not allow itself to be defined by concepts' and 'its basic

assumptions are different from those of the Semitic religions'. This reviewer would take issue with that statement. While it may be true to some extent that, as Frithjof Schuon states, '[t]he East is sleeping over truths [while] the West is living in errors', the perennial truths about the transcendent wholeness of reality, and how it can be experienced through one's higher consciousness and expressed in virtue, are in fact a feature of all faith traditions and of the Sanātana Dharma, understood as the core of all faiths.

Chandra explores consciousness in Indian thought, describes how it differs from the mind, and how it is related to the metaphysical Self or Ātman. He identifies the theory of the four 'states' (waking, dream, deep sleep, and Ātmanic consciousness), and the five kośas or sheaths of the microcosm, culminating in the realm of Pure Consciousness. This planimetric view is founded in the primacy of what Hindus term Ātmanic consciousness, from which the lower realities of the egoic self and material world are derived. To scale the heights of consciousness requires sādhanā, the discipline of self-awareness through techniques such as yoga and meditation.

The main section of the book deals with the unanimous testimony of sages from all faith traditions about the possibility of the attainment of spiritual vision, and with the ways of its attainment. Higher awareness is understood by the sages to be intellectual, that is, experiential; its core is being and not merely concept, nor is it sensory and derived from matter. Such awareness is veiled by the conditions of existence, and therefore, as Blake noted, the doors of perception must be cleansed before one can experience it as Infinite. Chandra describes the Hindu path to mystic knowledge. It is a process of self-purification, leading in some cases to experiences of ecstasy (samādhi), and is accompanied by special powers or states of spiritual elation that can be mistaken for madness. He relates this path and its states to the ascending levels of knowledge, of which the highest is jñāna, or gnosis. Here, mystic knowledge coincides with perfect submission to Reality, the state in which, as Augustine says, the heart of the seeker rests in God.

In his survey of the testimony of the sages, Chandra covers a great many subjects and issues: the necessity for guidance, how to distinguish the true from the false teacher, the master-disciple relationship, the role of grace in attaining knowledge, the relationship of diversity and unity, the different understandings of God (corresponding to the distinctions between the Absolute and the Relative-Absolute), and the ineffability of gnosis. He also includes a brief survey of Religion as such—i.e. 'Tradition'—as distinct from such-and-such a religion. He elaborates on the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric, the role of forms and rituals in religion, and the aspects of exclusivity, fundamentalism and pluralism within religious traditions. He contrasts these

with that of the transcendent unity of religions and distinguishes this from the idea of religious synthesis or syncretism. He quotes Abbot Mingzing,

The Ultimate Truth is one, but it has an infinite number of aspects and what is more beautiful than that each faith should reflect only one facet of the Divine, all of them together creating a shining gem of beauty.

While traditional religions affirm transcendence and therefore the necessity of both revelation and intellection—the archetypal knowledge of spiritual literacy—materialistic philosophies reduce religion to a neurosis (Freud) or ‘a mental virus’ (Dawkins). In response to this deracination of knowledge, with its assault upon the sacred, new forms of pseudo-spirituality inevitably emerge but these are inadequate to fill the spiritual need of authentic knowledge—or ‘mysticism’—which, Chandra argues, must be rooted in the soil of Tradition.

The final part of the book, titled ‘The Labyrinth’, addresses two of the fundamental stumbling blocks for materialists: death and evil. Chandra argues that death is a cosmological principle betokening a process of regeneration, and not, as for materialists, simply annihilation. He points to the evidence of near-death and out-of-body experiences and also catalogues traditions about post-mortem states and transmigration. He relates this to the doctrines of karma and of the good death, suggesting that materialistic limitations in fact deny not only the possibility of metaphysical post-mortem states but also the foundations of the meaning and purpose of life itself. With regard to evil, he shows that traditional teachings do not view it as a justification for nihilism. Evil has both metaphysical and human origins: it is either privative—a perspective useful to bear in mind especially during this time of the coronavirus pandemic, enabling one to view suffering as a divine allopathy—or it is sourced in sin. How, then, asks Chandra, are we to find our way out of the labyrinth of our epistemic closure? What is needed is a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge. We must abandon the physicalist worldview which lacks a vertical dimension. In the words of Max Planck, ‘We must assume behind this force [of material causation] the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.’ More, one should seek to rediscover the wisdom of Tradition contained within Religion as such, and expressed in the individual religions. This means confronting the New Atheism and its false ideology that limits knowledge, so that we can reintegrate man with nature and resacralize the world. In this sense, the book is an invitation to the reader to embark on or renew the personal spiritual quest in a manner that is transcendently open to God. This is not the way of materialistic science for, as Swami Ramdas states,

'God is a living Reality. [. . .] Scientists cannot find out what He is. They want to put Him in a test-tube [but] that is not the way. God is Truth.' Instead, as the unanimous Tradition asserts, God is to be found within the laboratory of the self. 'Seek, and ye shall find', says the scripture. The eternal way is found within, not in anatomizing the material world: 'For what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?'

The Scientist and the Saint is a fine survey of traditional wisdom, which it contrasts with the materialistic scientific worldview. It catalogues a vast range of ideas and thinkers, and despite its Hinducentric focus it fairly covers all the faith traditions. While the book might have benefited from a topical index, it contains useful indices of proper names and religious texts. Based on its content, its size (it comes in at over 550 pages of main text) should not deter the reader. Because of its dual focus, it can at times seem like two different books: the sections on science will engage those with a curiosity about scientific explanations regarding the cosmological and biological origins and mechanisms of life, providing an understanding of why these are inevitably wanting; and the later sections on metaphysics and mysticism will engage those who, having encountered the dead-end of those explanations, are more open to the inward exploration for truth and meaning.

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Where Shall We Run To? A Memoir by Alan Garner. Bromley, Kent: 4th Estate, 2018. 209 pp. £8.99.

For readers who, like me, grew up in the 1960s, once we had devoured everything obtainable by J. R. R. Tolkien, the next destination was the novels of Alan Garner. I say 'destination' advisedly, for like Tolkien's works, Alan Garner's were profoundly bound up with place. But whereas Tolkien's Middle-earth was a meticulously imagined and numinous realm of fantasy, the settings of Garner's books were, or seemed to be, the actual landscapes of our own world; his characters—the human ones at least—children unexceptional except, perhaps, in their determination and courage; and his magic fascinatingly authentic. I can still remember the *frisson* I felt when I came to the 'Note' at the end of his second book, *The Moon of Gomerath*, and read:

The spells, and many others, are in magical manuscripts at:

British Museum: Sloane 213 [*et cetera*]

Bodleian: Bod. MS. Rawl. D.252 [*and so on*]