Theosophy and Science

Science and Mysticism

The motto of the Theosophical Society is "There is no religion higher than Truth." That is a statement to which a scientist can subscribe equally well. Theosophists and scientists are indeed both engaged in a search for Truth. However, scientists seek for truth at the outward physical level, whereas Theosophists are concerned with Truth at an inner and more spiritual level, as taught by the great mystics and seers throughout the ages. That deeper Truth is sometimes called the "ancient wisdom" or the "perennial philosophy."

The scientific and mystical methods of search also differ, being complementary rather than contradictory. Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science, but we human beings need both. Yet many scientists, perhaps even the majority, do not see a need for any deeper Truth than those which objective scientific procedures discover. Others would like to have some involvement with religion but are discouraged by fundamentalist religious teachings that are inconsistent with well-established scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, many great scientists—Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Erwin Schrödinger, and David Bohm—have seen the need for the deeper spiritual understanding taught by the great religious teachers and mystics of all ages.

Scientists seek to understand the world by proposing explanations (or theories) that account for what we can observe in the physical environment around us. A theory must be adequate to account for what we observe repeatedly in experiments testing it. It should also be internally consistent and as simple as possible. A scientific theory is never "proved." It is only tested by experiments, and if it accounts for what the experiments show, it is upheld. If it is contradicted by the experiments, it still isn't given up until there is a better explanation to put in its place. Thus all scientific knowledge is tentative. But if a particular theory has been widely tested without being seriously contradicted, it is accepted as a fact of nature until a better theory comes along.

The mystical method of search is quite different, although it shares some features with scientific investigation. The mystic has an experience profoundly different from our ordinary day-to-day perception of things. Because that experience is out of the ordinary, the mystic cannot describe it for others in everyday language. Scientists also may have difficulty stating their explanations in ordinary language, which is often ambiguous, so they turn to the precise language of mathematics to express their ideas. Mystics turn instead to the language of metaphor, symbol, and

allegory to express the Truth they have perceived.

Among the features shared by science and mysticism is that both experimental results and mystical experiences must not be unique, but available to everyone under the right conditions. Just as a good scientific theory has to be tested and confirmed by several scientists working independently, so a convincing mystical experience has to be shared by a number of mystics from different cultural traditions and expressed in symbolic language that points to the same underlying truth, although the type of poetic imagery used may differ. And like science, mysticism is progressive, being supplemented and revised by succeeding generations of investigators into the inner world of experience.

Science was extremely successful during the twentieth-century in explaining the physical world, in understanding the nature of the atom, and in exploring the universe at large. We have explored the planets of our solar system and disproved the older concept that at least some of those planets are sufficiently similar to Earth to support human life forms like our own. We now consider the possibility of finding intelligent life on planets around other distant stars. From not knowing of the existence of galaxies, we have progressed to discovering a vast evolving universe of galaxies like our own Milky Way, each with its billions of stars, evolving over billions of years, and even super clusters of galaxies.

On a micro scale, we have discovered DNA and developed the science of genetics far beyond what we could have dreamed a century ago. By 2003, the Human Genome Project, which involved the research of 28,000 scientists over thirteen years, had identified some 20,000 to 25,000 genes in the human genetic structure. By studying ancient rocks and the fossils embedded in them, geologists have built up a detailed picture of the evolution of our planet and indeed of life's presence on it.

Science is also having considerable success in discovering how the brain works but is nevertheless quite unable to explain the nature of consciousness. Scientists call that explanation "the hard problem." On the other hand, there is much valuable material on consciousness in the mystical tradition. Similarly, biologists are expert at studying living forms, but not at understanding the nature of life itself. Mysticism views the life ensouling forms as greater than the physical forms that express it.

Is there some deeper cause behind the laws that science discovers? For many scientists, that question is irrelevant, but for others it is important to probe such questions. Physicist Paul Davies, on pondering these questions, says that he can believe in a form of Deity that he describes as "an impersonal creative principle or ground of being." Mystics seek to experience that creative principle as both the ultimate cause and the purpose of existence.

Theosophy's Approach

Where does Theosophy fit into the contrast between science and mysticism? The word *Theosophy* means "divine wisdom," and has been used since the ancient days of the Alexandrian Neoplatonists for a particular worldview. It was chosen by the founders of the Theosophical Society in 1875 as expressing the ideas they wished to promote, derived from the Ancient Wisdom tradition, passed on by sages throughout the ages. Helena Blavatsky, a principal co-founder of the Theosophical Society, entitled her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* to indicate it was a teaching not generally known, but she also gave it the subtitle *The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy,* thus recognizing the importance of all three disciplines as contributions to a grand unified view of the cosmos.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky set forth three Fundamental Propositions. The first of these envisions "an Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless and Immutable Principle—One Absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned Being." This statement is a noble attempt to describe the indescribable: an unlimited impersonal Deity transcending but also immanent throughout the universe. This concept of Deity can appeal to a scientific mind that does not believe in a personal God but is dissatisfied with scientific materialism, which denies the existence of anything subtler than the dense matter that can be manipulated in scientific experiments.

Blavatsky's second Proposition affirms "the absolute universality of that law of periodicity . . . of ebb and flow which physical science has recorded in all departments of nature." She sees such periodicity exemplified in the alternation of "night and day, sleeping and waking, life and death." Another example is the weather, which appears chaotic but which scientists have found to be an extremely complex combination of cycles. Periodicity is the regular repetition of patterns, characterizing the orderliness of the universe. All science assumes that the universe is orderly, that is, predictable, as otherwise science would not be possible; and order is basically patterned repetition, of which cycles are a prime example.

The third Proposition affirms "the fundamental identity of all Souls with the Universal Oversoul." This is the basis of the Society's first Object, which speaks of the fundamental unity of all peoples through its concept of universal brotherhood. The essential genetic unity of all humanity is affirmed by the biological sciences, and the identity of all souls with a universal oversoul, although it goes beyond orthodox science, echoes the subtle interconnectedness of everything in the universe proposed by the quantum physicist David Bohm, who derived the idea from his theoretical studies in quantum mechanics. Thus we can contemplate the essential unity, not only of all human beings, but of all life and indeed of the Earth itself, as in the Gaia concept of our planet as a single living being, and even beyond

that, the unity of the whole vast universe.

The third Proposition also speaks of a continuous process of change undergone by each soul, an evolution of spirit and intelligence, as well as of form, throughout the ages. Each soul is altered by its evolutionary experiences in the direction of greater Self-awareness. This concept is not amenable to scientific experimental verification as it involves the purpose of existence, and speculations on intent or purpose fall outside the domain of science. Nevertheless, the third Proposition is consistent with established scientific explanations of causes and laws.

The Theosophical Society promotes freedom of thought and encourages its members to use their own judgment and discrimination on all matters—whether scientific, philosophical, or religious. Many scientists have found inspiration and insight in Theosophical ideas, and members of the Society have always included scientists, some quite prominent in their fields. Since the Society's founding in 1875, many Theosophists have expressed their views about scientific matters. Some of those views have stood the test of time and even proved to be prescient of current scientific knowledge. Other views uncorroborated by subsequent discoveries have been superseded by present-day knowledge.

Prominent Theosophists, from H. P. Blavatsky onwards, notably Annie Besant, have stressed the need for continuing research, while keeping alive the ideals of the Fundamental Propositions, which are the axiomatic foundation of a Theosophical view of the world. Facts about the world around us and the world within ourselves must be discovered by appropriate methods of search and constantly reformulated in understandable ways. Thus Theosophists and scientists alike share the motto "There is no religion higher than Truth."

For Further Information

Ancient Wisdom—Modern Insight, Shirley Nicholson. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House (TPH).

Intelligence Came First, E. Lester Smith. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

Interrelations Between Planetary and Human Evolution (DVD), Victor Gostin. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

The Mind of God: Scientific Basis of a Rational World, Paul Davies. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Modern Science and the Ancient Wisdom (3-part audio CD), Ravi Ravindra and Renee Weber. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

The New Science of Life (3-part audio CD), Rupert Sheldrake. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

Science and the Sacred, Ravi Ravindra. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

Science and Occultism, I. K. Taimni. Adyar, India: TPH.

The Sense of Being Stared At: And Other Unexplained Powers of the Human Mind, Rupert Sheldrake. New York: Crown Publishing.

Taking the Quantum Leap: Connecting Science and Spirituality (5-part DVD set), Theosophical Society in America. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

The Tao of Physics (3-part audio CD), Fritjof Capra. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

The Visionary Window: A Quantum Physicists Guide to Enlightenment, Amit Goswami. Wheaton, IL: TPH.

Books or recordings from the Theosophical Publishing House are available at www.questbooks.net.