

11. FINDING THE WAY OUT OF THE LABYRINTH

There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition. (Blaise Pascal)

How we perceive the world and the universe, how we conceive of ourselves, what we think our role is in life: everything that constitutes our “worldview” is of the utmost importance. In accordance with what we think we are, in that way will we act, in that way will we transform ourselves. Modern society allocates a central place to the economy, social life, and politics, and maintains that the question of finding a meaning to life is a private matter for each person, in regard to which society has nothing to say. Yet this is a fallacy: society repeats over and over again through the media, schools, universities, and through what is said by its most prominent personalities that the world consists of what we can see and scientifically study, and that our only mission in life is to accomplish useful, practical activities (with the economy as a basis), and enjoy things without having to look beyond appearances.

A person, by action or omission, will always have a worldview, a way in which he conceives of life. Huston Smith explains:

To have or not to have a worldview is not an option, for peripheral vision always conditions what we are attending to focally, and in conceptual “seeing” the periphery has no cutoff. The only choice we have is to be consciously aware of our worldviews and criticize them where they need criticizing, or let them work on us unnoticed and acquiesce to living unexamined.

Lay people are often denied the right to give an opinion on scientific discoveries. However, although ignorant of the technical processes and competencies, any educated person can comment regarding the philosophical framework into which those discoveries are inserted, and based upon which they are interpreted. In fact, given science’s extreme specialization, all scientists are ignorant of even slightly different branches of science than their own. According to Lewis Mumford:

The scientist himself has often shown an incapacity for both self-criticism and self-control. [...] Outside his narrow realm, he may be a barbarian, and to the extent that he is concerned only with that narrow realm he is in fact a barbarian.

According to Amit Goswami,

it has become a bad habit of science to claim that science is about finding a “natural” explanation for phenomena while defining “nature” as the space-time-matter world.

Seraphim Rose, after trying to understand the apparent oppositions between “science” and “religion”, observed:

I began to see that very often what calls itself ‘science’ is not *fact* at all, but *philosophy*, and I began very carefully to distinguish between *scientific facts* and *scientific philosophy*. [...] Most people *assume* “science” knows what it is talking about. *But there is no such thing as* “science”—there are different “sciences,” each one with a very different level of accuracy and preciseness.

Due to its own intrinsic limitations, and albeit at times emboldened by its “seal”, the so-called “scientific” discourse makes an attempt, science cannot provide true answers regarding the origin—and much less the meaning—of the universe, life, or man, nor has it anything to say about consciousness, which is the indispensable basis for any kind of knowledge. As Jonah Goldberg said, “science is marvelous at explaining what science is marvelous at explaining, but beyond that, it tends to look for the car keys where the light is good”.

For Rupert Sheldrake: “It seems impossible to be a consistent materialist. Materialism depends on a lingering dualism, more or less thinly disguised”:

The materialist agenda was once liberating but is now depressing. Those who believe in it are alienated from their own experience; they are cut off from all religious traditions; and they are prone to suffer from a sense of disconnection and isolation. Meanwhile, the power unleashed by scientific knowledge is causing the mass extinction of other species, and endangering our own. [...] I am all in favour of science and reason if they are scientific and reasonable. But I am against granting scientists and the materialist worldview an exemption from critical thinking and skeptical investigation. We need an enlightenment of the Enlightenment.

The Dalai Lama has always been interested in contemporary science. In his words:

Although I am not aware of a school of thought that explicitly propounds this notion [scientific materialism], it seems to be a common unexamined presupposition. This view upholds a belief in an objective world, independent of the contingency of its observers. [...] The problem is not with the empirical data of science but with the contention that these data alone constitute the legitimate ground for developing a comprehensive worldview or an adequate means for responding to the world’s problems. There is more to human existence and to reality itself than current science can ever give us access to. [...] When I speak with open-minded scientists and philosophers of science, it is clear that they have a deeply nuanced understanding of science and a recognition of the limits of scientific knowledge. At the same time, there are many people, both scientists and nonscientists, who appear to believe that all aspects of reality must and will fall within the scope of science.

Arthur Osborne observes:

The mind is a skilful builder but an amazingly poor judge of the foundations it builds upon, and logical theories are only too often built on beliefs and prejudices that may be taken for granted and therefore almost unconscious. [...] We intellectuals, whether historians or philosophers, like to think of ourselves as objective critics standing aloof and viewing mankind’s adventures in life and thought with an impartial eye; but if we consider how past intellectuals in one generation after another have voiced the opinions of their age and how we ourselves are in agreement with at least one trend of current outlook, it may almost lead us to humility.

Gandhi said:

Rationalists are admirable beings, rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself omnipotence. [...] I plead not for the suppression of reason, but for a due recognition of that in us which sanctifies reason.

And Abraham Joshua Heschel:

The worship of reason is arrogance and betrays a lack of intelligence. The rejection of reason is cowardice and betrays a lack of faith.

There is no real opposition between religion and science, but there is between science and literalist, fundamentalist religion, just as between spirituality and scientism. For this reason, nowadays a certain amount of scientific mentality is highly necessary to restrain the fanaticism and irrationality of certain religious forms that are re-emerging in the contemporary world. Few things are as threatening to genuine spirituality as religions that are narrow-minded and removed from all rationality. But also many champions of the scientific worldview, under the pretext of “rationality”—a very limited and unilateral rationality—exhibit equally fanatic and “fundamentalist” positions.

In explaining the ancient Egyptian conception of life, John Anthony West expounds the fundamental difference between ancient worldviews and the modern one:

The one big, irreconcilable difference between the ancient conception and the modern is the question of consciousness. In all ancient conceptions, consciousness is the primordial property, that which precedes all else: the All or Absolute is conscious. It is consciousness that ultimately calls the universe into existence, and it is consciousness that, ultimately, sustains it. Rational science cannot take this view. Science is, by definition, concerned only with what it can measure. Consciousness cannot be measured, nor can it be theoretically accounted for in any physical theory accepted by science. Its existence is therefore denied, ignored, or written off as a chance result of accidentally evolved collections of cells. In this view, a doctrine that accords consciousness a preeminent position is seen as primitive and unscientific. The fact remains that consciousness is the fundamental experience of every sentient creature. Yet the possibility that a science that excludes consciousness from consideration is itself inadequate to the task of answering fundamental questions is seldom considered.

However, all authentic inward knowledge that might resolve this situation and restore a minimum of equilibrium to the human being is discarded. The teachings transmitted by all the wise men over the course of history, the great religious and spiritual traditions of humanity, all this is practically ignored in educational programs. At the same time, the teaching that is offered is far from neutral, being accompanied by a very particular worldview. B. Alan Wallace urges education to include

the world’s religious doctrines and practices as something to be taken seriously and treated with respect. Students might even be encouraged to learn *from* the world’s religious traditions and not only *about* them. In today’s classrooms, however, the world’s religions are often so overlooked that graduating high school students commonly have only the vaguest notion of any of the world’s religions unless they happen to have been brought up in a religious household and taught their parents’ religion. But the same students will have become well indoctrinated into the metaphysical principles of scientific materialism, without ever being shown the distinction between this doctrine and genuine scientific knowledge. Thus, the so-called separation of church and state has resulted in students being educated in one religion only, while leading them to think of this creed as being fully validated by the authority of science.

Meanwhile, world crises multiply and everybody deplors the shortage, or even total lack, of “wise” men or women, unselfish leaders, trustworthy counselors, etc. It is hardly rational to expect such high qualities from people who have never done any *inner work* and would not even understand what was meant by the words.

How has the modern world come to separate itself from that universal view? Materialism, the idea that only the sensory material world exists, has had precursors among the Indians (Charvaka School) and the Greeks (Democritus, Epicurus). The following Charvaka verses are well-known:

While life remains let a man live happily, let him feed on *ghee* even though he runs in debt. When once the body reduces in ashes, how can it ever return again?

Christopher Hitchens says:

Religion was the race’s first (and worst) attempt to make sense of reality. It was the best the species could do at a time when we had no concept of physics, chemistry, biology or medicine. [...] It has taken us a long time to shrug off this heavy coat of ignorance and fear, and every time we do there are self-interested forces who want to compel us to put it back on again.

For Hume, “The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events.” And Bakunin:

All religions, with their demi-gods, and their prophets, their messiahs and their saints, were created by the prejudiced fancy of men who had not attained the full development and full possession of their faculties.

According to C. S. Lewis:

If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. [...] When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race have always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most...

Arthur Osborne explains that religions, far from progressing, start out from the highest point and thereafter begin to decline.

Not only have all religions [...] not progressed but they have not even remained static; they have declined. Both Buddha and Mohammed are reported to have declared that the best epoch of their religion would be that immediately following themselves and that thereafter it would decline [...]. Christianity also honours the Early Church as its apex. [...] This, then, is the course taken by civilizations: a vigorous but austere youthful period, a luxuriant flowering of potentialities, and then a long decline, possibly arrested temporarily by new injections of life. [...] One might say that religion has two modalities, the vertical and horizontal. Vertically it is man’s path to Beatitude or Liberation; horizontally it is the harmonization of individual and social life and is the soul of a civilization. The vertical is the essence and the horizontal the substance. Once the vertical perishes the horizontal becomes hollow within and is bound to decay.

According to John Gray:

Religion is a human impulse as natural and universal as sex. In intellectual terms atheism is a Victorian fossil. In Freudian terms it is a form of repression. In seeking

to eradicate religion from human life, humanists are trying to suppress a basic human need. As with sex, repression does not work. The religious impulse returns, often in perverse and grotesque forms, such as humanism itself.

Religion can be dangerous in that it is centred on the idea of the “Absolute”; the latter may be mixed with elements of the religion which are not absolute such as ideas, dogmas, institutions, morals, etc. which are not, in the best of cases, anything more than means or tools. When the absolute is not assigned its proper place, it can be directed towards many other non-religious things: nation, future, science, the benefit of humanity or any political concept or idea in vogue. But we should not, because of this potential danger, renounce the entire concept and fall into a perspective of “absolute” relativism. We cannot avoid the concept of the absolute, but it must be directed to its correct place.

Religion is the best of pursuits and the worst of idols; when a King commissions a craftsman to produce a beautifully ornamented cup, the craftsman does not present the King with his tool-chest, but with the cup itself...

Sogyal Rinpoche observes:

Sometimes I think that the greatest achievement of modern culture is its brilliant selling of *samsara* and its barren distractions. Modern society seems to me a celebration of all the things that lead away from the truth, make truth hard to live for, and discourage people from even believing that it exists. [...] The key to finding a happy balance in modern lives is simplicity. [...] So discipline is to do what is appropriate or just; that is, in an excessively complicated age, to simplify our lives.

Perhaps the most urgent task today is to re-sacralize the world and life. Living in a world where all things are looked upon in a crudely profane manner, it is difficult for us to be aware of the spirit that underlies them. If we regard the stars as nothing but combustion chambers where huge physical-chemical reactions occur, how can we marvel at the star-filled sky, an image that has always impelled men to seek the sacred world? If we think that the inner world of man is nothing but the result of biological reactions, what interest could we have in delving into it? How will we discover the treasure hidden within the soul if we do not even believe in the existence of the treasures?

In India the *Atharva Veda* clearly sets forth the view human beings have always held: “The Earth is my mother and I am Her child.” And the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*: “Ether, air, fire, water, earth, planets, all creatures, directions, trees and plants, rivers and seas, they are all organs of God’s body. Remembering this a devotee respects all species.”

Why is nature sacred? Why is the human soul sacred? What does “sacred” mean, a concept or feeling that has always existed yet is so difficult to define? According to Frithjof Schuon:

What then is the sacred in relation to the world? It is the interference of the uncreate in the created, of the eternal in time, of the infinite in space, of the supraformal in forms; it is the mysterious introduction into one realm of existence of a presence which in reality contains and transcends that realm and could cause it to burst asunder in a sort of divine explosion. The sacred is the incommensurable, the

transcendent, hidden within a fragile form belonging to this world.

That is why Seyyed Hossein Nasr insists on the urgency of reinstating the sense of the sacred as the basis of all spirituality:

I feel that at the present moment in the history of the West, in order to resuscitate a sense of awareness of the spiritual world and of Ultimate Reality, the word *sacred* is seminal. The word *spiritual* has become too diffused.

It is not within the range of the most of us to attain sanctity, but we can orient our gaze upward and aspire to elevate ourselves, albeit very slowly. We must make a start, conscious of our destination, with resolve and without haste. The most important thing is our *aspiration*, but that must also be cultivated. The Fathers of the Desert said: “It is not at all what you are or what you have been that God sees, but rather what you desire to be.”

Prayer, in silence or voiced, is a simple act, yet it has a great transformative power. Gandhi said: “Prayer is not an old woman’s idle amusement. Properly understood and applied, it is the most potent instrument of action,” and also:

But why pray at all? Does not God, if there is one, know what has happened? Does He stand in need of prayer to enable Him to do His duty? No, God needs no reminder. He is within everyone. Nothing happens without His permission. Our prayer is a heart search. It is a reminder to ourselves that we are helpless without His support. [...] Prayer is a call to humility. It is a call to self-purification, to inward search.

Joan Mascaró writes:

How can we differentiate faith from fanaticism, or a true vision from a visionary illusion? “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Vision and faith are above reason, yet accept reason; illusion and fanaticism are below reason and reject reason. Superior reason accepts vision and faith, but rejects illusion and fanaticism.

The map is very different from the territory represented, and to find the way it is essential that the map be at least minimally accurate. That some maps are false does not mean that another one which contradicts it will be true. For it to be correct, it should be based on what the “geographers” have explored and researched: the saints rooted in their respective traditions.

In spite of everything offered in the spiritual supermarket, there are no shortcuts on the path. Resolution in the face of diverse obstacles and patience in times of discouragement are always necessary. The spiritual path is the work of an entire life. According to Krishna Prem:

The finest timber comes from the slowest-growing trees. He who expects to blossom into a yogi in a few months or even in a few years of practice is bound to be disappointed and had better leave the whole subject alone. He, however, who has the sincerity and courage to face whatever is in him, and the persistence to go on with his struggle in the face of obstacles within and without, and the humility to recognize that all that he has done is to take the first few steps on a tremendous journey, is

certain to achieve something which he would not give away in exchange even for the whole world...

Sogyal Rinpoche:

Yet there is one significant source of hope in this tragic situation, and that is that the spiritual teachings of all the great mystical traditions are still available. Unfortunately, however, there are very few masters to embody them, and an almost total lack of discrimination in those searching for the truth. The West has become a heaven for spiritual charlatans. In the case of scientists, you can verify who is genuine and who is not, because other scientists can check their background and test their findings. Yet in the West, without the guidelines and criteria of a thriving and full-fledged wisdom culture, the authenticity of so-called “masters” is almost impossible to establish. [...] The most important thing is not to get trapped in what I see everywhere in the West, a “shopping mentality”: shopping around from master to master, teaching to teaching, without any continuity or real, sustained dedication to any one discipline. Nearly all the great spiritual masters of all traditions agree that the essential thing is to master one way, one path to the truth, by following one tradition with all your heart and mind to the end of the spiritual journey, while remaining open and respectful toward the insights of all others.

Does God exist? Can his existence be proven? For the past few centuries in the West fierce criticisms have been launched at any notion of a supernatural power which cannot be rationally demonstrated. Nothing beyond the domain of the measurable can be unequivocally demonstrated, yet there are certain arguments and symbols that will resound among some people. Wayne Dyer offers the following parable:

In a mother’s womb were two babies. One asked the other: “Do you believe in life after delivery?” The other replied, “Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later.” “Nonsense,” said the first. “There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?” The second said, “I don’t know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can’t understand now.”

The first replied, “That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded. [...] And moreover if there is life, then why has no one ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life [...].”

“Well, I don’t know,” said the second, “but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us.” The first replied, “Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That’s laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?” The second said, “She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her this world would not and could not exist.”

The contemporary saint Swami Ramdas assures us in the clearest terms:

God is a living Reality. He is not a hallucination or mere conception of the mind as some take Him to be. Those who say so are entirely mistaken. Scientists cannot find out what He is. They want to put Him in the test-tube and find out what he is and is not. No, that is not the way. God is Truth. Thirty-three years now, Ramdas got the joy of union with Him and the contact and realisation continues to this date. It will continue for all time. This is not phantasy. This is not imagination. Ramdas can

definitely say that God is and he is eternal love and bliss. This is the experience of the sages and saints all over the world. People may say as they like, because they do not know. They do not seek Him and therefore do not find Him. You must have faith in the words of the saints who have experienced the Truth.

William Law explains the need for an interior life in order to obtain any valid religious knowledge:

To find or know God in reality by any outward proofs, or by anything but by God Himself made manifest and self-evident in you, will never be your case either here or hereafter. For neither God, nor heaven, nor hell, nor the devil, nor the flesh, can be any otherwise knowable in you or by you but by their own existence and manifestation in you. And all pretended knowledge of any of these things, beyond and without this self-evident sensibility of their birth within you, is only such knowledge of them as the blind man hath of the light that hath never entered into him.

And, against the current of “the information civilization”, he assures us:

What need of so much news from abroad, when all that concerns either life or death is all transacting and at work within us?

For Mahatma Gandhi:

Sense perceptions can be, often are, false and deceptive, however real they may appear to us. Where there is realization outside the senses, it is infallible. It is proved not by extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within. Such testimony is to be found in the experiences of an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes. To reject this evidence is to deny oneself.

The supreme objective of our existence on Earth is, in consequence, to seek our lost homeland, our true nature, our Centre and Origin. This has been the loftiest preoccupation of the human being throughout his existence. From time immemorial we have been handed down this ancient Vedic supplication which echoes the most profound aspiration of man:

Lead me from the unreal to the Real.
Lead me from darkness to Light.
From death, lead me to Immortality.