

Vision Statement

Science and Spirituality: An Emerging Vision

Esalen's Center for Theory and Research *

Abstract

The vision sketched here provides an antidote to the prevailing postmodern disenchantment of the world and demeaning of human possibilities. It not only more accurately and fully reflects our human condition but engenders hope and encourages ego-surpassing forms of human flourishing. It offers reasons for us to believe that freedom is real, that our human choices matter, and that we have barely scratched the surface of our human potentials. It also addresses the urgent need for a greater sense of worldwide community and interdependence - a sustainable ethos - by demonstrating that under the surface we and the world are much more extensively interconnected than previously recognized.

Keywords: Science, spirituality, vision, postmodern, human condition, freedom, human potential.

The rise of modern science has brought with it a host of extraordinary intellectual and practical achievements, but a host of serious and worsening problems as well. Many if not all of these problems seem connected somehow with a deep split that has developed in modern times between science and spirituality. This split itself resulted mainly from the recent ascendance of scientific secular humanism, a worldview that is anchored in the classical physical science of the late 19th century and profoundly hostile to all things religious, in which it sees only vestiges of our intellectual childhood. This “physicalist” worldview basically holds that reality consists at bottom of tiny bits of solid self-existent stuff moving in accordance with mathematical laws under the influence of fields of force, and that everything else, including our human minds and consciousness, must emerge somehow from that basic stuff. Our everyday understanding of ourselves as effective conscious agents equipped with free will is delusive, because we are in fact nothing more than extremely complicated biological machines. Consciousness and its contents are generated by (or in some mysterious way identical to) neurophysiological processes in the brain, and beliefs about postmortem survival, common to the world’s religious traditions, are therefore also delusive: Biological death is necessarily the end, because without a functioning brain there can be no mind and consciousness, period. On a more cosmic scale, there are no final causes and no transcendent order: The overall scheme of nature is utterly devoid of meaning or purpose.

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Views of this sort have permeated the opinion elites of all advanced societies and undoubtedly contribute to the pervasive “disenchantment” of the modern world with all of its accompanying ills. They have also accumulated enormous cultural momentum and become in effect self-perpetuating by gaining near-total control of key elements of modern society such as our educational institutions and the media. In recent decades our secondary schools, colleges, and universities have all in effect become advocates for the prevailing physicalist worldview, which by now not only dominates mainstream scientific disciplines such as biology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology and the social sciences, but also has destructively colonized neighboring academic areas including the humanities generally (perhaps most surprisingly, religious studies), and even theology. It has also encouraged the recent spate of scientific attacks on traditional religions, especially the Abrahamic religions, which in turn has engendered pushback in the various forms of fundamentalist fanaticism we witness with depressing regularity on the evening news.

Classical physicalism, however, is not merely incomplete, but incorrect at its very foundation. The deterministic clockwork universe postulated by Newton and Laplace was overthrown with the rise of quantum theory a century ago, and “matter” as classically conceived shown not to exist. Contemporary physicalist brain/mind theory is headed in the same direction. At present we have no understanding whatsoever of how consciousness could be generated by physical events in brains, and recent theoretical work in philosophy of mind has convinced many that we can never achieve one. Meanwhile, large amounts of credible empirical evidence have accumulated for a variety of human mental and psychophysical capacities that resist or defy explanation in conventional physicalist terms. These “rogue” phenomena include, for example, paranormal or “psi” abilities of various kinds, extreme forms of psychophysical influence such as stigmata and hypnotic blisters, the most basic experiential properties of our human memory system, multiple and overlapping centers of consciousness associated with single physical organisms, powerful near-death experiences occurring under extreme physiological conditions such as deep general anesthesia and/or cardiac arrest, genius-level creativity, and mystical experiences whether spontaneous, the result of intensive meditative practice, or induced by psychedelics. There is even direct evidence of several substantial kinds for postmortem survival, coupled with increasing recognition that the only credible explanations for this evidence involve either survival itself or psi processes in and among living persons – a dilemma both horns of which are fatal to the physicalist worldview.

Classical physicalism is too impoverished to carry this heavy empirical burden, but what should take its place? Serious attempts to imagine how reality must be constituted, in order that rogue phenomena of the indicated sorts can happen, appear to lead inescapably into metaphysical territory partially shared with the world’s religious traditions – specifically, toward some yet-to-be-fully-characterized form of evolutionary panentheism. A worldview of this type rests upon just three core principles: First, that the manifest world arises from and is constituted by a

tremendous world-transcending ultimate reality of some conscious sort; second, that we humans are intimately linked with that ultimate reality in the depths of our individual psyches, and can experience it directly in a variety of ways; and third, that the antecedently existing universal consciousness or universal self that is the source of the manifest universe is in some sense slowly waking up to itself as evolution of more complex biological forms enables fuller expression of its inherent capacities.

What is currently emerging, in short, is a middle way between the warring fundamentalisms – religious and scientific – that have dominated recent public discourse; specifically, an expanded science-based understanding of nature that can accommodate empirical realities of spiritual sorts while also rejecting rationally untenable “overbeliefs” of the sorts targeted by critics of institutional religions. This emerging vision is both scientifically justifiable and spiritually satisfying, combining the best aspects of our scientific and religious heritage in an intellectually responsible effort to reconcile these two greatest forces in human history. It can provide sustenance in particular to persons who view themselves as “spiritual but not religious”, and to those who remain in a traditional faith but are troubled by inescapable conflicts between elements of religious doctrine and the teachings of science. At the same time, like traditional faiths, it makes room for the possibility of postmortem survival and can therefore provide comfort to persons who are facing the reality of death, whether for themselves or for loved ones such as aging parents, or who have themselves encountered powerful mystical-type experiences through meditation, psychedelics, or a close brush with death.

The vision sketched here provides an antidote to the prevailing postmodern disenchantment of the world and demeaning of human possibilities. It not only more accurately and fully reflects our human condition but engenders hope and encourages ego-surpassing forms of human flourishing. It offers reasons for us to believe that freedom is real, that our human choices matter, and that we have barely scratched the surface of our human potentials. It also addresses the urgent need for a greater sense of worldwide community and interdependence - a sustainable ethos - by demonstrating that under the surface we and the world are much more extensively interconnected than previously recognized.

Our individual and collective human fates in these dangerous and difficult times – indeed, the fate of our precious planet and all of its passengers - may ultimately hinge upon wider recognition and more effective utilization of the higher states of being that are potentially available to us but largely ignored or even actively suppressed by our postmodern civilization with its strange combination of self-aggrandizing individualism and fundamentalist tribalisms. Availability of this improved worldview does not guarantee its acceptance, of course, and even widespread acceptance would not guarantee that its potential benefits will be fully realized, or its potential abuses adequately controlled. But a viable pathway to a better world does appear in principle to be opening up.