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Science and spirituality: A unique relation

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Abstract

It is commonly accepted that science and spirituality are not compatible. Science is considered our reliable way forward, while spirituality often regarded as a sentimental relic of our past we can't quite let go of. So to say it is necessary for the two to work together may seem unrealistic. Science uses rational thinking in analyzing and interpreting what experience and experiment discloses, while combines experience with the nearness of an intuition that speaks to a reality that underlies the world conveyed by the senses. Science and spirituality are on a converging course which shares the realization that the cosmos is not a domain of unconscious matter moving about in passive space, but rather, that it is a dynamic, self-evolving, whole, integral in all domains. The scale of our planet's problems is too great to be solved without an integrated approach of science and spirituality. The power of consciousness needs the systemization of the scientific method, and the tools of science depend on the wisdom and creativity of individual consciousness to guide it in a meaningful direction.

Keywords: science, spirituality, cosmos etc.

Introduction

It has been depicted for so long that Science and Spirituality are antagonistic to each other. Swami Vivekanand, the epochmaking spiritual leader of India who made Hinduism dynamic and practical, and urged modern humanity to combine Western science and materialism with India's spiritual culture for a sustainable civilization. He defined civilization as "a manifestation of the divinity in man." He declared that science and religion go together only on the foundation of Advaita (monistic) Vedanta with its fundamental ideas of an impersonal God, the presence of the infinite within the finite, and a basic inter-connectedness of everything in the universe. The unified field theory is now desperately trying to establish that riddle related to the creation of the universe. Apparently, the concepts of science and religion seem contradictory but the philosophy of science and the philosophy of religion offer a pleasant similarity. Albert Einstein (1879-1955), "Newton of Our Time", Nobel Laureate in Physics, 1921, also summed up the relationship between religion and science in the same vein as that of Vivekananda: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind. A good religious man with deep convictions can also become a true scientist".

The planet as a whole is a living, self-regulating system. The view of the human body as a machine and of the mind as a separate entity is being replaced by one that sees not only the brain, but also the immune system, the bodily organs, and even each cell as a living, cognitive system. And with the new emphasis on complexity, nonlinearity, and patterns of organization, a new science of qualities is slowly emerging^[1]. It is called as new science 'the systems view of life' because it involves a new kind of thinking – thinking in terms of relationships, patterns, and context^[1].

The Systems View of Evolution

'The systems view of life' involves a new kind of thinking – thinking in terms of relationships, patterns, and context. In science, this way of thinking is known as 'systems thinking', or 'systemic thinking'. It includes a new systemic understanding of evolution. Rather than seeing evolution as the result of only random mutations and natural selection, we are beginning to recognize the creative unfolding of life in forms of ever-increasing diversity and complexity as an inherent characteristic of all living systems. Although mutation and natural selection are still acknowledged as important aspects of biological evolution, the central focus is on creativity,

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on life's constant reaching out into novelty.

The systems view recognizes that evolution did not begin with the first living cell but millions of years earlier with a process known as molecular or 'prebiotic' evolution ^[1]. Our detailed ideas about this prebiotic evolution are still very speculative, but most biologists and biochemists do not doubt that the origin of life on Earth was the result of a sequence of chemical events, subject to the laws of physics and chemistry and to the nonlinear dynamics of complex systems.

Spirit and Spirituality

In this majestic unfolding of life, all living organisms continually responded to environmental influences with structural changes, and they did so autonomously, according to their own natures ^[2]. From the beginning of life, their interactions with one another and with the nonliving environment were cognitive interactions ^[2]. When we look at this scenario – from the formation of oily droplets to the emergence of consciousness – the question naturally arises: what about the spiritual dimension of life? Is there any room for the human spirit in this new vision of prebiotic and biotic evolution? To answer this question, it is useful to review the original meaning of the word 'spirit'. The Latin *spiritus* means 'breath', which is also true for the related Latin word 'anima', the Greek 'psyche', and the Sanskrit 'atman'. The common meaning of these key terms indicates that the original meaning of spirit in many ancient philosophical and religious traditions, in the West as well as in the East, is that of the breath of life.

Since respiration is indeed a central aspect of the metabolism of all but the simplest forms of life, the breath of life seems to be a perfect metaphor for the network of metabolic processes that is the defining characteristic of all living systems. Spirit – the breath of life – is what we have in common with all living beings. It nourishes us and keeps us alive.

Spirituality is usually understood as a way of being that flows from a certain profound experience of reality, which is known as 'mystical', 'religious', or 'spiritual' experience. There are numerous descriptions of this experience in the literature of the world's religions, which tend to agree that it is a direct, non-intellectual experience of reality with some fundamental characteristics that are independent of cultural and historical contexts. One of the most beautiful contemporary descriptions can be found in a short essay titled *Spirituality as Common Sense*, by the Benedictine monk, psychologist, and author Steindl-Rast (1990) ^[8]. He characterizes spiritual experience as a non-ordinary experience of reality during moments of heightened aliveness. Our spiritual moments are moments when we feel intensely alive. The aliveness felt during such a 'peak experience', as psychologist Maslow (1964) ^[7] called it, involves not only the body but also the mind. Buddhists refer to this heightened mental alertness as 'mindfulness', and they emphasize, interestingly, that mindfulness is deeply rooted in the body. Spirituality, then, is always embodied. We experience our spirit, in the words of David, as "the fullness of mind and body."

It is evident that this notion of spirituality is very consistent with the notion of the embodied mind that is now being developed in cognitive science ^[9]. Spiritual experience is an experience of aliveness of mind and body as a unity. Moreover, this experience of unity transcends not only the separation of mind and body, but also the separation of self and world. The central awareness in these spiritual moments is a profound sense of oneness with all, a sense of belonging to the universe as a whole.

This sense of oneness with the natural world is fully borne out by the new systemic conception of life. As we understand how the roots of life reach deep into basic physics and chemistry, how the unfolding of complexity began long before the formation of the first living cells, and how life has evolved for billions of years by using again and again the same basic patterns and processes, we realize how tightly we are connected with the entire fabric of life.

A Sense of Wonder

Spiritual experience – the direct, non-intellectual experience of reality in moments of awakened state, is known as a supernatural experience because it is an encounter with mystery. Spiritual teachers throughout the ages have insisted that the experience of a profound sense of connectedness, of belonging to the cosmos as a whole, which is the central characteristic of mystical experience, is incapable of being adequately expressed in words or concepts. Thus we read in the *Kena Upanishad* ^[6]: This encounter with mystery, so the mystics tell us, is often accompanied by a deep sense of awe and wonder together with a feeling of great humility. Scientists, in their systematic observations of natural phenomena, do not consider their experience of reality as indescribable. However, the fundamental interconnectedness of all phenomena is a dominant theme also in modern science, and many of our great scientists have expressed their sense of awe and wonder when faced with the mystery that lies beyond the limits of their theories.

Albert Einstein, for one, repeatedly expressed these feelings, as in the following celebrated passage (Einstein, 1949) ^[5]: The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science i.e. the mystery of the eternity of life, and the hint of the marvellous structure of reality, together with the single-hearted endeavour to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature.

Spirituality and Religion

When we discuss the relationship between science and spirituality, it is important to distinguish between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is a way of being grounded in a certain experience of reality that is independent of cultural and historical contexts. Religion is the organized attempt to understand spiritual experience, to interpret it with words and concepts, and to use this interpretation as the source of moral guidelines for the religious community.

There are three basic aspects to religion: theology, morals, and ritual ^[2]. In theistic religions, theology is the intellectual interpretation of the spiritual experience, of the sense of belonging, with God as the ultimate reference point. Morals, or ethics, are the rules of conduct derived from that sense of belonging; and ritual is the celebration of belonging by the religious community. All three of these aspects – theology, morals, and ritual – depend on the religious community's historical and cultural contexts.

The awareness of these subtle relationships between religion and spirituality is important when we compare both of them with science. While scientists try to explain natural phenomena, the purpose of a spiritual discipline is not to provide a description of the world. Its purpose, rather, is to facilitate experiences that will change a person's self and way of life. However, in the interpretations of their experiences mystics and spiritual teachers are often led to also make statements about the nature of reality, causal relationships, the nature of human consciousness, and the like. This allows us to

compare their descriptions of reality with corresponding descriptions by scientists.

In these spiritual traditions—for example, in the various schools of Buddhism—the mystical or supernatural experience is always primary; its descriptions and interpretations are considered secondary and tentative, insufficient to fully describe the spiritual experience. In a way, these descriptions are not unlike the limited and approximate models in science, which are always subject to further modifications and improvements.

Religion involves not only the intellectual interpretation of spiritual experience, but is also closely associated with morals and rituals. Morals, or ethics, are the rules of conduct derived from the sense of belonging that lies at the core of the spiritual experience, and ritual is the celebration of that belonging. Both ethics and ritual develop within the context of a spiritual, or religious, community. According to Steindl-Rast, ethical behaviour is always related to the particular community to which we belong. When we belong to a community, we behave accordingly.

In today's world, we belong to many different communities, but we share two communities to which we all belong. We are all members of humanity, and we all belong to the global biosphere.

Ecological sustainability and Spirituality

We are members of oikos, the Earth Household, which is the Greek root of the word 'ecology', and as such we should behave as the other members of the household behave – the plants, animals, and microorganisms that form the vast network of relationships that we call the web of life.

The outstanding characteristic of the Earth Household is its inherent ability to sustain life. As members of the global community of living beings, it tells us to behave in such a way that we do not interfere with this inherent ability. This is the essential meaning of ecological sustainability. As members of the human community, our behaviour should reflect a respect of human dignity and basic human rights. Since human life encompasses biological, cognitive, social, and ecological dimensions, human rights should be respected in all four of these dimensions.

To spell this out in detail is quite a challenge, but fortunately we have a magnificent document, the Earth Charter, which covers the broad range of human dignity and human rights. The Earth Charter was written over many years, beginning with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, in a unique collaborative effort involving NGOs, indigenous peoples, and many other groups around the world. It is a declaration of 16 values and principles for building a sustainable, just, and peaceful world – a perfect summary of the ethics we need for our time.

The original purpose of religious communities was to provide opportunities for their members to relive the mystical experiences of the religion's founders. For this purpose, religious leaders designed special rituals within their historical and cultural contexts. These rituals may involve special places, robes, music, psychedelic drugs, and various ritualistic objects. In many religions, these special means to facilitate mystical experience become closely associated with the religion itself and are considered sacred.

Deep Ecology and Spirituality

The extensive explorations of the relationships between science and spirituality over the past four decades have made

it evident that the sense of oneness, which is the key characteristic of spiritual experience, is fully confirmed by the understanding of reality in contemporary science. Hence, there are numerous similarities between the worldviews of mystics and spiritual teachers – both Eastern and Western – and the systemic conception of nature that is now being developed in several scientific disciplines.

The awareness of being connected with all of nature is particularly strong in ecology. Connectedness, relationship, and interdependence are fundamental concepts of ecology; and connectedness, relationship, and belonging are also the essence of spiritual experience. Hence, ecology – and in particular the school of deep ecology, founded by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in the ^[4] – can be an ideal bridge between science and spirituality. The defining characteristic of deep ecology is a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric values. It is a worldview that acknowledges the inherent value of non-human life, recognizing that all living beings are members of ecological communities, bound together in networks of interdependencies.

When we look at the world around us, we find that we are not thrown into chaos and randomness but are part of a great order, a grand symphony of life. Every molecule in our body was once a part of previous bodies – living or nonliving – and will be a part of future bodies. In this sense, our body will not die but will live on, again and again, because life lives on. Moreover, we share not only life's molecules, but also its basic principles of organization with the rest of the living world. And since our mind, too, is embodied, our concepts and metaphors are embedded in the web of life together with our bodies and brains. Indeed, we belong to the universe, and this experience of belonging can make our lives profoundly meaningful.

Conclusion

The paradigm of the new sciences indicates that the great streams of human endeavor, the stream of science and the stream of spirituality, are on a converging course. They share the realization that the cosmos is not a domain of unconscious matter moving about in passive space; that it is a dynamic, self-evolving whole, integral in all domains. This realization informs the mind of a growing number of people in society: more specifically the segment called "alternative cultures" including the "cultural creatives." The search for the wholeness of life, of mind, and of nature is spreading and deepening from year to year. The convergence of science and spirituality is important in itself, and it is also important in regard to its consequences. On the one hand it tells us that our intuitive insights about the nature of life and reality are not illusory: they are confirmed in their essence by cutting-edge science. And on the other it offers motivation for entering on a positive path to our common future. For wholeness is a defining characteristic of the kind of planetary civilization that could overcome the problems created by the mechanistic manipulative rationality of the civilization that is still dominant today.

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