Science, Scientism and Self-Destruction: Some Reflections

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No one will deny that modern science and its technical applications have brought the contemporary world many benefits, even if these sometimes turn out, in the longer term, to be somewhat ambiguous. Nonetheless, many people feel a profound unease about many of the applications, interventions and changes which come in the wake of scientific discoveries. One need only mention such phenomena as genetic engineering, cloning, cryogenics, industrial diseases, "behavior modification", the proliferation of drug-resistant viruses, nuclear and biological warfare, and environmental catastrophes of various kinds, to trigger well-founded apprehensions about where science and technology might be taking us. Not without reason have some of the most disturbing and resonant literary works of the past two centuries been concerned with the unforeseen effects of a runaway science — think, for instance, of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* or Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or Aldous Huxley's dystopian vision in *Brave New World.* Increasingly, many thoughtful people are questioning the modern shibboleth of an inexorable "progress", fueled by "science" and implemented by technology. In this brief article I wish to offer a few general reflections about the way in which science is understood in the contemporary world and to sketch out a perspective which runs against the grain of the modern mentality.

A decisive shift took place in the European worldview in the 17th century, through what we now think of as the Scientific Revolution: Descartes, Bacon, Copernicus, Galileo and Newton were amongst the seminal figures. The triumph of the scientific outlook was more or less complete by the 20th century and provided the basis of the prevailing

intellectual orthodoxies amongst the European intelligentsia. Modern science is not simply a disinterested and, as it were, a detached and "objective" mode of inquiry into the material world; it is an aggregate of disciplines anchored in a bed of very specific and culture-bound assumptions about the nature of reality and about the proper means whereby it might be explored, explained and controlled. It is, in fact, impossible to separate the methodologies of modern science from their theoretical base which we can signal by the term "scientism". Perhaps the central plank in the scientistic platform is the assumption that modern science contains within itself the necessary and sufficient means for any inquiry into the material world, and that it can and should be an autonomous and self-validating pursuit, answerable to nothing outside itself. This was a new idea in the history of human thought, radically at odds with the traditional view that any inquiry into the natural world could only properly proceed within a larger framework provided by philosophy and religion.

Modern science, as it has developed since the Renaissance, is flanked on one side by philosophical empiricism which provides its intellectual rationale, and by technology and industry on the other, a field for its applications. It is rational, analytical and empirical in its procedures, materialistic and quantitative in its object, and utilitarian in application. By its very nature modern science is thus unable to apprehend or accommodate any realities of a supra-sensorial order. Science (a method of inquiry) becomes scientism (an ideology) when it refuses to acknowledge the limits of its own competence, denies the authority of any sources which lie outside its ambit, and lays claim, at least in principle, to a comprehensive validity as if it could explain no matter what, and as if it were not contradictory to lay claim to totality on an empirical basis. (Witness Stephen Hawking's bizarre and quite absurd pretensions to a "Theory of Everything"!)

Critiques of scientism are much in vogue these days both from within the scientific community and from without. The insecure philosophical foundations of modern science, its epistemological ambiguities, its inability to accommodate its own findings within the Cartesian-Newtonian frame, the consequences of a Faustian pursuit of knowledge and power, the diabolical applications of science in the military industry, the dehumanizing reductionisms of the behavioral sciences — all of these have

come under trenchant attack in recent times. New "discoveries" by physicists and the paradoxes of Quantum Theory throw conventional assumptions about time, space and matter into disarray; Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, Chaos Theory and the "New Physics" cut the ground from under the "objectivity" on which science has so much prided itself; the mechanistic conceptions of a materialistic science, the very language of science, are found to be useless in the face of bewildering phenomena to which European science has hitherto been blind. Everywhere cracks are appearing in the edifice of modern science. Titus Burckhardt, writing from a traditional viewpoint, exposes some of the issues involved here in writing

> ...modern science displays a certain number of fissures that are not only due to the fact that the world of phenomena is indefinite and that therefore no science could come to the end of it; those fissures derive especially from a systematic ignorance of all the noncorporeal dimensions of reality. They manifest themselves right down to the foundations of modern science, and in domains as seemingly "exact" as that of physics; they become gaping cracks when one turns to the disciplines connected with the study of the forms of life, not to mention psychology, where an empiricism that is relatively valid in the physical order encroaches strangely upon a foreign field. These fissures, which do not affect only the theoretical realm, are far from harmless; they represent, on the contrary, in their technical consequences, so many seeds of catastrophe.[1]

Social commentators have become more alert to the dangers of a totalitarian materialism, an instrumentalist rationality and its attendant technology. We see that rationality has been allowed to become man's definition instead of his tool, a tyrannical master rather than a humble servant. We sense that the disfigurement of the environment mirrors our internal state, that the ecological crisis is, at root, a spiritual crisis which no amount of science and technology can, of itself, remedy. We know the truth of Victor Frankl's claim that

> The true nihilism of today is reductionism...Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as nothing-but-ness. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena.[2]

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[1] Titus Burckhardt: "Cosmology and Modern Science" in Jacob Needleman (ed.) *The Sword of Gnosis,* Penguin USA, 1972, p.131.

[2] Quoted in E.F. Schumacher *A Guide for the Perplexed,* Jonathan Cape, London, 1977; p.15.

Commentators like René Guénon, Theodore Roszak, E.F. Schumacher, and Wendell Berry awaken us to the provincialism of modern science and to the dangers of what William Blake, the great visionary poet, called "Single Vision".

Though modern science has doubtless revealed much material information that was previously unknown it has also supplanted a knowledge which infinitely outreaches it. As Gai Eaton has observed of the much vaunted "discoveries" of modern science, "Our ignorance of the few things that matter is as prodigious as our knowledge of trivialities."[3] We see this in the complacencies and condescensions of those scientists who like to suppose that we have "outgrown" the "superstitions" of our ancestors. Here is a random example from a prestigious contemporary scientist:

> I myself, like many scientists, believe that the soul is imaginary and that what we call our mind is simply a way of talking about the function of our brains...Once one has become adjusted to the ideas that we are here because we have evolved from simple chemical compounds by a process of natural selection, it is remarkable how many of the problems of the modern world take on a completely new light.[4]

Here indeed is the fruit of a rampant materialism, an "intelligence without wisdom". One recalls Frithjof Schuon's remark that it is the rationalism of frogs living at the bottom of wells to deny the existence of mountains: this is logic of a kind, but it has nothing to do with reality.[5]

It is nowadays a commonplace that many of the ills of our time stem from the rift between "faith" and "science" but few people have suggested any convincing means of reconciling the two. Certainly the effusions and compromises of the liberal theologians and "demytholgizers" are of no help, marking little more than a thinly-disguised capitulation of religion to science. (One might adduce the works of the English theologian, Don Cuppitt, as a case in point.) Nor should we be seduced by those apparently conciliatory scientists who seem willing to allow some sort of place for religious understandings, all the while making it clear that science will concede nothing of substance (here we can find no

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[3] In *Tomorrow* 13:3, 1964, p.191.

[4] F. Crick *Molecules and Men,* quoted in T. Roszak: *Where the Wasteland Ends,* Doubleday, New York, 1972; p.188.

[5] Frithjof Schuon *Logic and Transcendence,* Harper & Row, New York, 1975, p.42.

better exemplar of the mentality in question than E.O.Wilson's immensely popular but muddle-headed work, *Consilience*.[6]) However, in the light of traditional metaphysical understandings many of the apparent contradictions between "science" and "religion" simply evaporate. It is not necessary, to say the least, to throw religious beliefs on the scrapheap because they are "disproven" by modern science; nor is it necessary to gainsay such facts as modern science does uncover — provided always that what science presents as facts are so indeed and not merely precarious hypotheses.

The key to traditional understandings lies in the nature of their symbolism — a mode of knowledge quite inaccessible to the scientific mentality. No one will deny that, from one point of view, the earth is not the centre of the solar system; this is no reason for jettisoning the more important truth which was carried by the symbolism of the geocentric picture of the universe. Another example: it is preferable to believe that God created the world in six days and that heaven lies in the empyrean above the flat surface of the earth than it is to know precisely the distance from one nebula to another whilst forgetting the truth embodied in this symbolism, namely that all phenomena depend on a higher Reality which determines us and gives our human existence meaning and purpose. A materially inaccurate but symbolically rich view is always preferable to the reign of brute fact. In falling under the tyranny of a fragmentary, materialistic and quantitative outlook modern science is irremediably limited by its epistemological base. Of spiritual realities, modern science knows and can know absolutely nothing. As Frithjof Schuon observes

> There is scarcely a more desperately vain or naive illusion - far more naive than Aristotelian astronomy! - than to believe that modern science, in its vertiginous course towards the "infinitely small" and the "infinitely great", will end up by rejoining religious and metaphysical truths and doctrines.[7]

The ways in which the triumph of scientism has contributed to man's dehumanization have been written about a good deal in recent years. It matters not a jot how quick contemporary scientists now are to disown

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[6] E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge,* New York, Vintage, 1999. This work has been subjected to the most searching criticism by Wendell Berry in *Life is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition*, Counterpoint, Washington DC, 2000.

[7] Frithjof Schuon *Dimensions of Islam,* Allen & Unwin, London, 1969, p.156.

discredited "facts" which stood between man and any true self-awareness — the mechanistic theories of the seventeenth century, for instance — on the grounds that these were, after all, only provisional hypotheses which a more "humane" scientific vision can now abandon. The simple fact is that modern science cannot be "humanized" or "reformed" from within itself because it is built on premises which are both inadequate and inhuman.

Suggested Reading

B. Appleyard	*Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man,* Picador, London, 1992.
W. Berry	*Life is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition*, Counterpoint, Washington DC, 2000.
T. Burckhardt	*Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art,* Quinta Essentia, Cambridge, 1987, ed. William Stoddart.
F. Capra	*The Tao of Physics,* Fontana, London, 1976.
R. Guénon	*The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times,* Sophia Perennis, Ghent, NY, 1995 (first published 1945).
B. McDonald (ed.)	*Seeing God Everywhere: Essays on Nature and the Sacred*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2003.
M. Midgley	*Science as Salvation*, London, Routledge, 1992.
S.H. Nasr	*Religion and the Order of Nature*, OUP, New York, 1996.
H. Oldmeadow	*Traditionalism, Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, 2000.
T. Roszak	*Where the Wasteland Ends,* Doubleday, New York, 1972.
E.F. Schumacher	*A Guide for the Perplexed,* Jonathan Cape, London, 1977.
Frithjof Schuon	*Light on the Ancient Worlds,* Perennial Books, London, 1965.
P. Sherrard	*The Rape of Man and Nature,* Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, Colombo, 1987.
W. Smith	*Cosmos and Transcendence,* Sherwood Sugden, La Salle, 1984.
M. Zarandi (ed.)	*Science and the Myth of Progress*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2003.