

The Melancholy Dilemma

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Chapter 3 of *Nature and Self: Reframing the Human Predicament* (A work in progress)
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Most writers today see science and religion as *strongly contrasting enterprises* which have essentially nothing to do with each other. We will find that the reasons for this sharp separation of spheres lie partly in the history of recent centuries. For example, when church leaders attacked Galileo's theory of the solar system or Darwin's theory of evolution, they made pronouncements on scientific issues which they were incompetent to judge. Conversely, Newton and other scientists used God to fill gaps in their scientific accounts — until better data or new theories made divine intervention unnecessary. The "God of the gaps," invoked as a hypothesis to account for scientifically unexplained facts, or introduced as a cause producing effects on the same level as natural causes, retreated further as each of the gaps in human knowledge was closed. But in addition such a picture of God had little relevance to the religious life of man; it was as dubious from the standpoint of religion as from that of science.

Ian Barbour: *Issues in Science and Religion*

Our thinking about religion is confused by the intellectual wreckage left by its confrontation with science during the past century and a half. In what is conventionally conceived as a struggle between opposing sets of belief about reality, science has steadily advanced while religion has retreated. The case of Galileo is the classic example of an early battle. Perhaps the greatest public battle of all has been over Darwinian evolutionary theory, considered by secular people a great victory for science, though even today fundamentalist religion maintains strong creationist guerilla movements in control of much of the population.

Creationism certainly doesn't represent religion in all its aspects, nor does Darwinism represent every aspect of science. Nevertheless, they are beliefs which are commonly called "religious" and "scientific", respectively, and their collision tells us a lot about how the supposed conflict between science and religion has led to the present spiritual impasse.

At least three issues are tangled in this controversy. First, it is a collision of belief systems. Each camp believes a different story. The creationists believe that the story given in Genesis is literally true; the Darwinists think it false, and believe instead an entirely different story about natural selection spanning millions of years.

As the Darwinists, and scientists generally, see it, this first issue is not the most fundamental one. Scientists thrive on disagreements over stories and models: they are part of the game. Among the rules of the game are methods for testing models and stories. So it is the second issue which is fundamental for scientists: what are the rules of the game? How do you decide whether a story is true, or what do you base your belief on?

In this dispute the game has no rules. There is no agreement on procedures for verification. The conflict is not merely between stories, but pits dogma against reason and evidence. Without agreement on how to decide, reconciliation of beliefs is unlikely. It is frustrating for scientists to find that creationists can present no grounds for their belief better than that they have inherited it. How can you argue fruitfully with somebody like that?

Attachment to dogma is strong enough to have motivated hideous wars and atrocities. In order to keep the peace, religious people in at least some parts of the world have learned a fragile tolerance, but it is based mostly on avoiding offense by avoiding the topic. This reticence is itself a measure of people's attachment to beliefs. If direct experience and insight were the rule, we would have nothing to be offended about. The strength of attachment to dogmatic beliefs is in turn a measure of anxiety at the absence of actual insight.

On these first two issues it seems safe to say the Darwinists have long since triumphed intellectually, if not always politically, though present evolutionary theory is of course incomplete. But the third issue in the controversy is that the two stories have entirely different implications about the meaning of life, and here it must be said that both sides are wobbly. Creationism appears to have the facts wrong, so its interpretation of meaning must be suspect. Therefore modern secular society turns to science to authorize its beliefs. But science provides no way to conceptualize insight about the meaning of life, since science is not about this meaning. The meaning of life is a subjective, rather than objective, matter. Indeed, the influence of science has encouraged modern bewilderment over the reality of such meaning. It's on this third issue — the meaning or meaninglessness of life — that we might find some sympathy with the creationist objection to Darwinism, if not with creationist dogma. For this is the Darwinists' weak point.

One of the most eloquent champions of Darwinian theory, Stephen Jay Gould, has written in *Ever Since Darwin*:

I believe that the stumbling block to its acceptance does not lie in any scientific difficulty, but rather in the radical philosophical content of Darwin's message — in its challenge to a set of entrenched Western attitudes that we are not yet ready to abandon. First, Darwin argues that evolution has no purpose. Individuals struggle to increase the representations of their genes in future generations, and that is all. If the world displays any harmony and order, it arises only as an incidental result of individuals seeking their own advantage — the economy of Adam Smith transferred to nature. Second, Darwin maintained that evolution has no direction; it does not lead inevitably to higher things. Organisms become better adapted to their local environments, and that is all. The 'degeneracy' of a parasite is as perfect as the gait of a gazelle. Third, Darwin applied a

consistent philosophy of materialism to his interpretation of nature. Matter is the ground of all existence; mind, spirit, and God as well, are just words that express the wondrous results of neuronal complexity.

I hope we can agree that entrenched attitudes can be a barrier to insight, that the history of the development of life and its forms is recounted more plausibly by Darwinism than by Biblical creationism, and that scientific method is more appropriate to the discovery of the details of that history than reliance on any dogma. But it must be noted too that the Darwinian articles of faith — that evolution has no purpose and no direction, and that materialism provides an adequate account of reality — are actually not propositions within the realm of biology or any other science. They are prior metaphysical assumptions. They are neither verifiable nor falsifiable by any scientific tests.

The Spirit Taboo

“Materialism”, in the sense I take Gould to intend, means the belief that awareness, consciousness, and mind, whatever they may be, are attributes of matter — that is, that they manifest when matter, for whatever reason, happens to get arranged in certain complex ways.

Materialism is not a new belief. It was proposed by thinkers in both those ancient hotbeds of the earliest sophisticated critical thought, Greece and India. They worked out materialistic theories conceptually, down to imagining atoms — though their atoms were little solid items surviving today only in the minds of some non-physicists. The belief in materialism was proposed, but remained a philosophers’ notion hardly anybody actually believed. It was a seed lying dormant, and only very recently, within the last century or so, due to the influence of science, has it sprouted to become popular and a dominant intellectual paradigm.

The seed sprouted when conditions were ripe. Those conditions were the religion and social arrangements of medieval and renaissance Europe. Among the arrangements was that religion was controlled by the church, which set itself up as an authority. You professed to believe what it told you to believe, or suffered severe consequences. You could be tortured and burned if you disagreed.

The scientific pioneers thought: we can’t trust church doctrine for empirical truth; our only hope is to question nature carefully and test the answers as best we can. We won’t count anything as proved until confirmed by experiment. Even then everything is more or less tentative. And we will resort only to natural laws in our theories. No supernatural stuff allowed.

This healthy attitude led to the eventual adoption of a materialist model of reality by most of the scientific community, beginning naturally enough in physics and chemistry, but finally extending to biology and psychology as well. Biology described and explained the processes of life, even the processes of the most complex organisms, as though consciousness did not exist. Academic psychology began as a program to investigate the functioning of mind or consciousness, but the program foundered. It

did not seem possible to conduct replicable experiments in a discipline based on introspective reports. At the heart of science is the idea that different researchers can confirm one another's findings, but the findings of introspection seemed available only to the introspector, and could not be observed by others. Strictly speaking, therefore, the discipline could not even be called a science. The behaviorist movement in psychology was a response to this embarrassment. The behaviorists hoped to gain scientific respectability by restricting their study to behavior observable by any experimenter.

So behaviorism banished consciousness, and terms traditionally used to describe events or processes in consciousness, from psychology, and therefore from science altogether. Some radical behaviorists went so far as to say that such terms were not even really meaningful.

These developments had their great influence mainly during the twentieth century, and were not, of course, foreseen by the early pioneers of science, who didn't think to abandon religion or belief in God, much less mind or consciousness. They merely conceived a world in which God plays a reduced causal role. This conception promised a world also of reduced dogma and superstition, a world whose processes could be comprehended by human reason, and so to some degree brought under human control. Such a conception, promising understanding and power, was very attractive. As scientific method spread to new domains, the role of God in explanations of reality was steadily reduced until it vanished. It became possible to conceive of reality without God, and religion could be abandoned altogether, with good riddance, as the opiate of the masses.

But what is God, in any notion beyond the superstitious and anthropomorphic, but spirit at the deepest or highest level? If science didn't get rid of spirit, God might come creeping back in. The concept of spirit played no role in scientific explanation either, so as science got rid of God, it could eliminate spirit as well. And since spirit is consciousness, in the crucial sense of that term of many meanings, eventually scientific rigor was thought to be served by either ignoring or denying consciousness, or mind, except perhaps as a peripheral something safely reducible to matter.

The motive behind this development, as is usually the case with such taboos, was not always clearly associated with its rationalizations. Huge social institutions, such as the Christian church in medieval and renaissance times, which endure for centuries and mold the thinking and behavior of millions of people, leave effects which don't vanish overnight. When the intellectual corruption of such an institution causes vast and prolonged suffering, the reactions against it are profound and fired by strong feelings which can persist for generations. The twentieth century taboo against consciousness in scientific explanation was a lingering effect of that reaction. The taboo was our protection against the vile superstitions always threatening to sneak back in.

Science was an adaptive move correcting the pathology of compulsory false beliefs. It has served that function well. It has given us both technique and profound forms of knowledge, but not spiritual meaning. Traditionally, spiritual meaning had been the realm of religion. But if religion is merely dogma, superstition, and wishful thinking, its

meaning is worthless. So, equipped with technique but spiritually impoverished, we are in the process of wrecking the world.

The Baby and the Bathwater

The foundation of human value has been expressed by many cultures in terms that we would call “religious”, “spiritual”, or “mystical”. The referents of these terms have something in common, yet each has its own rich and confusing field of connotations distinguishing it from the others. We might use any of them as appropriately as any other, provided that we were careful to specify the sense intended. All these terms have misleading connotations, so we have to be careful how we talk. The very terms we talk with are so confused as to invite immediate misunderstanding.

A debased currency loses its power to buy anything; we may have money, but the goods become unavailable. A debased vocabulary loses its power to express the concepts and values for which its terms originally evolved. We can continue to use the terms, imagining that we understand their reference, but the goods become unavailable.

Our own culture is here peculiarly impoverished. The terms are still familiar, and we may imagine that we understand their meaning, more or less, but the goods remain widely unavailable. For many of us — fundamentalists as well as atheists — the vocabulary of religion refers not to realities we can actually taste for ourselves, but merely to concepts, forms, and beliefs, and the emotional states they rationalize. If we have no actual taste, then the vocabulary can’t mean much.

Many of our best thinkers tend to assume that religion is mainly a matter of belief. Edward O. Wilson, in *On Human Nature*, wrote:

The predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature.... It is one of the universals of human behavior, taking recognizable form in every society from hunter-gatherer bands to socialist republics. Its rudiments go back at least to the bone alters and funerary rites of Neanderthal man....

Skeptics continue to nourish the belief that science and learning will banish religion, which they consider to be no more than a tissue of illusions. The noblest among them are sure that humanity migrates towards knowledge by logotaxis, an automatic orientation toward information, so that organized religion must continue its retreat before enlightenment’s brightening dawn.

But, he went on to note, this confidence is not encouraged by the facts:

If anything, knowledge is being enthusiastically harnessed to the service of religion. According to a Gallup poll taken in 1977, 94 per cent of Americans believe in God or some form of higher being, while 31 per cent have undergone a moment of sudden religious insight or awakening, their brush with epiphany.... Today, as always before ... Our schizophrenic societies progress by knowledge but survive on inspiration derived from the very beliefs which that knowledge erodes.

A fundamental principle of evolutionary theory is that, except for random chance, what is adaptive survives, and what is maladaptive perishes. So the evolutionist must inquire: what could be adaptive about a tissue of illusions? I once heard a psychiatrist give a talk on the dangers of religious sects; he characterised religion as an “adaptive delusional syndrome”, and raised this very question: how can delusion be adaptive? He suggested some of the usual answers: religion is socially cohesive; it helps us heal our grief and avoid crippling depression; it motivates ethical behavior. Even so, the rational mind must remain uncomfortable. The great philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine comments, in *Quiddities*:

There remains a burning question of the social value of the restraints and ideals imposed by some religions, however false to facts those religions be. If this value is as great as I suspect it may be, it poses a melancholy dilemma between promoting scientific enlightenment and promoting wholesome delusion.

The melancholy dilemma comes from the haunting sense that valuable restraints and ideals are at risk because grounded on incoherence or on the untrue; if we reject religion some baby may indeed perhaps get thrown out with the bathwater.

It is those who reject religion who suffer the melancholy dilemma. They may sorely miss the baby (even while assuming that something else is at the root of their yearning), but conceptualize only the bathwater. Believers suffer the burden of a different problem: the justification of faith. In some cases propositions implausible to the point of absurdity must be justified somehow. Justification is ordinarily by reference to an authority, and especially in the case of the great theistic religions, to the authority of a founder or sacred texts. Beliefs and authorities differ from group to group, so religion becomes one more badge of social identity, distinguishing insiders and outsiders. Religious belief then justifies these distinctions and condones torture, wars, crusades, massacres. The burning question is not merely theoretical, but — in our rapidly changing world of beliefs false to facts, erosion of traditional moral and social codes, and grasping at straws — urgently practical as well.

Religion as Adaptation

Along with Wilson and Quine, any materialist is challenged to explain — usually in psychological, sociological, ecological, anthropological, neurological, or historical terms — how and why such an evidently maladaptive trait as delusion could survive in the evolution of societies. There must be some hidden adaptation, and, if so, that adaptation cannot be merely its own rationalization as antiquated conceptual models or systems of false belief. As might be expected of false beliefs, some have proved to cause problems, to say the least. The content of a belief (about, say, gods, ghosts, or spirits) may sometimes seem to have little relevance to the actual hidden adaptation, to the socially or ecologically adaptive behavior it is thought to motivate and rationalize.

To assume that religion is based on inherited belief creates a critical blind spot. It's like assuming that marriage is based entirely on the rituals and costumes of weddings while ignoring love, sex, and reproduction. A psychiatrist may puzzle over the paradox of

religion as adaptive delusion if he assumes religion to be a matter of belief. But religious belief is better understood as merely the rationalization of religion, not as religion itself. By “rationalization” I mean the process of trying to make sense of something, using reason, the formation and organization of concepts, the telling of stories. The process may be crude, clumsy, superstitious, and stupid, or it may be refined, intelligent, and insightful. In either case it leads to beliefs, and to theories — structural networks of belief.

Rationalizations are always constrained by the limits of an individual’s intellect and of a culture’s conceptual resources. Rationalizations of religion are necessarily defective to some degree. That most religious beliefs centuries old are false to facts is only to be expected. If the tissues of illusion are taken to be religion’s substance, the very notion of religious insight becomes meaningless; there can be no incentive to explore it, and the baby goes with the bathwater. But if, as in science, religious beliefs are regarded as hypotheses to be discarded, improved, or refined with experience, we might hope for some spiritual progress to match our scientific progress. Systems of scientific and of religious beliefs alike are formal gardens which require scrupulous pruning.

If we are to discard inherited beliefs as bathwater, how are we to understand and keep the baby? What is religion about, if not beliefs? Etymologists tell us that the word “religion” derives from the Latin “religare”, meaning to rebind. The original sense is of connecting or rejoining two somethings which have been separated. (The etymology of “yoga”, too, reveals the same core meaning: to join or connect together. An English cognate is “yoke”.) This etymology suggests that religion is about spiritual reconnection or integration. Religion is the attempt to conceptualize and heal spiritual separation or alienation. Genuine healing requires genuine insight. Inherited beliefs as dogma, or beliefs which are false to facts, can only inhibit actual religious insight. To mistake religious beliefs for the core of religion is to mistake a map for the territory, and to dismiss religion because of implausible beliefs is to ignore the territory because some maps appear implausible. No wonder we can hardly help getting lost.

In this book I use the word “religion” to refer to processes of spiritual reconnection or integration. In theistic terms, religion is about reunion with God, or, in Buddhist or Vedantist terms, about realization of fundamental non-duality. Given the common view that religion is basically a matter of belief, it might be argued that “religion” is perhaps not the best word to convey the basic meaning I intend. Such alternatives as “mysticism” or “spirituality” may be offered as less misleading. All three of these terms have been used both in the sense I intend and in other senses. Their meanings diverge in some contexts, but in others overlap to the point that they might be used interchangeably. “Religion” may seem to emphasise the social aspect, “spiritual” the aspect of individual development, and “mystical” the specific content of the insight. Each term comes with connotations misleading for somebody. And real distinctions are at stake. People sometimes say, for instance, that they are spiritual, but not religious. The meaning of crucial interest, though, is not where these terms diverge in meaning, but where they overlap.

In this basic sense, the religious significance of such things as beliefs, rituals, social organizations, sacred objects and symbols, or costumes is entirely derivative, and varies of course with culture. These things don't define religion (or spirituality, or mysticism), though they are involved in its expression, just as beliefs, rituals, and social organizations may be similarly involved in the organized and ritualistic devotion of fans for a football team. In what follows, "religion" is not meant to refer to these derivative expressions. Nor is "mysticism" meant to refer, as in one familiar use, to something contrary to reason or common sense. Here I refer to mysticism, not as an occasional feature of some "religion", but as the very root and core of any empirical "religion". So let "religion", "mysticism", and "spirituality", as used here, be considered approximate synonyms when referring to the area of their overlapping meanings.

Spinoza

The seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza began his revolutionary essay, *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, with some personal remarks. He said that experience had taught him that "ordinary life" (life in pursuit of pleasures, wealth, and fame) was "vain and futile". He had concluded, too, that the things he was in the habit of regarding as good or bad were not properly called good or bad in themselves, but only in their impact on his mind and feelings. That is, value, while it may be related to the objective realm, is basically subjective. Beyond the realm of somebody's experience, there is no objective "good" or "bad".

He said these two observations had prompted him to wonder whether there might be, however, some "real good", underlying the apparent relativity of value, on a deeper or more comprehensive level. The discovery of a fundamental principle underlying the subjectivity and relativity of value would end the chronic futility and frustration of ordinary life, and lead instead to genuine happiness and freedom. He finally resolved to take the inquiry seriously:

I say "I finally resolved," for at first sight it seemed unwise willingly to lose hold on what was sure for the sake of something then uncertain. I could see the benefits which are acquired through fame and riches, and that I should be obliged to abandon the quest of such objects, if I seriously devoted myself to the search for something different and new....

I therefore debated whether it would not be possible to arrive at the new principle, or at any rate a certainty concerning its existence, without changing the conduct and usual plan of my life; with this end in view I made many efforts, but in vain. For the ordinary surroundings of life which are esteemed by men (as their actions testify) to be the highest good, may be classed under the three heads — Riches, Fame, and the Pleasures of Sense; with these three the mind is so absorbed that it has little power to reflect on any different good.

Spinoza's assessment of what men esteem may have been a bit too bleak. He neglected to mention that many lives are motivated in part by other values as well: by love, artistic creativity, scientific curiosity, or compassionate generosity. (Unlike Riches, Fame, and the Pleasures of Sense, these already provide clues to the nature of the "real

good”, if their implications are pursued far enough.) He did not take the ascetic position that Riches, Fame, and the Pleasures of Sense are bad in themselves. On the contrary, he thought that if they are regarded as means, rather than as ends, they might sometimes even be helpful. It is only when they are taken as ends in themselves, while the true end goes unrecognized, that they become obstacles. He says that he hesitated at first to abandon the usual quest for “all these ordinary objects of desire”. If not ultimately satisfying, they were at least familiar, and the alternative, as he said, was uncertain. But having already realized this much, and reflecting on the transience of the usual objects of desire and their inability to provide lasting fulfillment, he recognized that to regard them as ends was to place himself “in a state of great peril”. He had in mind a state which has become commonplace today; many of us get a taste of it in alienation, in meaninglessness, in the absurdity of life. This is a miserable taste. His subsequent actual recognition of the “true good”, on the other hand, had the opposite implication:

Love toward a thing eternal and infinite feeds the mind wholly with joy, and is itself unmingled with any sadness, wherefore it is greatly to be desired and sought for with all our strength.... Although these intervals [of transcendent love] were at first rare, and of very short duration, yet afterwards, as the true good became more and more discernable to me, they became more frequent and more lasting.

Spinoza’s case provides a paradigm for a kind of questing story which may seem today to have the quaintness of a fairy tale. First the hero realizes that something essential is missing in ordinary life, as conceived by most people. Without this missing something, life is basically unsatisfying. He realizes that the usual goals and pleasures, pursued by most people, can’t provide that missing something. It dawns on the hero that the missing something might actually be realized, and he begins his search. It turns out that the path of this realization requires particular kinds of conduct and attitude, and old habits and attachments must be broken. At first the hero is uncertain, but the path becomes clearer as he proceeds. Eventually he achieves a new understanding at a deeper level, which provides relief from the original meaninglessness or dissatisfaction, and a happiness which is secure.

The form of this basic story is familiar to most people nowadays. Sometimes, though, it’s mistaken to be about “conversion”, but this suggests merely the exchange of one set of beliefs for another. Some people balk at its opening step — the proposition that life is basically unsatisfying, no matter how much fun you try to have. It’s a common opinion that, as a matter of practical strategy, you should grab what fun you can in life, and not spoil it by dwelling on the inevitable aches and pains.

The central, ancient, classic paradigm of this hero is, of course, the Buddha, who in more fully developed terms had made the same point some twenty-one centuries earlier, but nobody in Europe had even heard of the Buddha in Spinoza’s day, and the possibility of such an enlightenment was then, in Europe, a radical and prohibited idea, except as interpreted in a particular theistic frame. At that time the power of the church over religious and philosophical thought was not yet broken, and it was still risky to suggest ideas the church found objectionable.

But Spinoza was a free thinker who had the good fortune to live in Holland, which then provided a refuge for dissenters. And he was a Jew, unbound by Church dogma. And if he was a virtual Buddhist (lacking mainly the label and vocabulary), he was also a kind of early scientist.

His field was optics, which was at the cutting edge of the physics of his day. Much was being discovered about the properties of light. The controlled focus of light through lenses was rapidly developing. Spinoza, in his time, was on the experimental, rather than on the theoretical side of physics; he was a designer and maker of lenses, in close touch with the infant technology of telescopes and microscopes, which were beginning to reveal amazing and wonderful things. This is the kind of work likely to have nourished Spinoza's emphasis on clarity and rigor.

Rigorous thought is rare enough; combined with mystical insight it is rarer still. Unlike the many mystics who are unsystematic thinkers (and so routinely found implausible by reasoning skeptics), Spinoza tried to demonstrate his fundamental insight through an elaborate system of deductive reasoning on the model of a geometry textbook. Consequently most readers would probably find his main work, *The Ethics*, impenetrably dry; it is full of crucial technical abstractions he took pains to define precisely, such as "cause", "substance", "attribute", "mode", "eternity", "infinity", and "necessity". In any case, he was writing for a tiny audience among the educated elite.

The Dutch Jews expelled him from their community and the synagogues, denouncing him as an atheist. A number of Christians too accused him of atheism. The charge may seem odd today, since Spinoza's entire topic was the nature of God, the human relationship with God, and the implications of that relationship for human conduct. The reason many of his contemporaries called him an atheist is that their definition of "God" differed from his. They thought that God is a being, a particular and separate being. Whether a particular being exists or not is a question which can be argued. Spinoza said that God is not a being, but Being itself: "Being absolutely infinite". He also proposed to use the terms "God" and "Nature" in senses which converge to the degree that they are understood. So his topic can be described, alternatively, as the human relationship with God, with nature, or with "Being", and the implications of that relationship for human conduct. If you think God is a particular individual being who created a nature separate from himself, then Spinoza was an atheist.

The problem of Spinoza's "atheism" goes all the way back to the story about Moses in conversation with God. Moses took the opportunity to ask God who he was. In reply, God first identified himself as the God of Moses' ancestors, but since this didn't tell Moses much of importance, didn't get to the real heart of the matter, God went on to explain: "I AM THAT I AM. Tell the children of Israel that I AM sent you to them."

These were two very different answers, on two entirely different levels. Moses was the ancestor of all the great Semitic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — those now classified in the bookstores as "western". As they evolved into complex social structures with doctrines and official bureaucracies, it was on the basis of something like God's first answer. For centuries the common definition of God in the west was, and still is, a case of what might be called Sectarian Objectification — which means that

believers conceive God objectively — as Somebody Else — and then fight about who or what that Somebody Else might be. And “religion” tended to refer, more or less, to something inherited.

The second answer was more often ignored, misunderstood, or left a mystery. God didn’t identify himself as this or that. What does “I am” actually mean? Is insight into our own being possible?

Spinoza chose a kind of search implied by the second answer, and said that the mystery could be penetrated: “If the way which, as I have shown, leads hither seem very difficult, it can nevertheless be found.” For his orthodox contemporaries, this was atheism. For them, religion was a matter of belief, while for Spinoza it was a matter of insight.

The “true good” sought and found by Spinoza has been given many names, depending on a variety of individuals and cultures, and bearing somewhat different connotations. The insight consists, in the end, of seeing through the illusion of being a separate self with boundaries in a universe divided in two, into “I” and “not I”. It implies a realization of what “I am” actually means. As for Spinoza, he suggested as a preliminary definition of the insight: “that it is the knowledge of the union of the mind and the whole of Nature.”

It has often been pointed out, if to little effect on the prevailing view of the conflict, that real science and real religion — considered as modes of inquiry and enlightenment rather than as collections of beliefs — are complementary, not adversarial. The complementarity is sometimes described in terms of facts and values, but a more precise and revealing account can be made in terms of subject and object. Empirical science is oriented towards objects, the experienced universe. It is the methodical investigation of objects.

A similarly simple characterization of “religion” is not quite so easy, because of the huge variety of beliefs and behaviors, often mutually contradictory, which the term “religion” has been used to cover. But essentially, in the sense used here, as science is oriented towards the object, toward the manifold experienced universe, empirical religion or mysticism — as contrasted with inherited conventions — is oriented toward the subject, the I-AM. It involves insight, or at least investigation, into the nature of the subject, into spirit. Insight into spirit is not about dividing the universe into self and other. Subject, or consciousness, in the crucial and deepest sense of the word, is realized as singularity. As in science, this mystical insight or investigation is not only conceptual, but direct and empirical.

The term “empirical” is usually taken to refer to knowledge grounded in sensory experience. In early modern philosophy, the empirical tradition was contrasted with the rational tradition, grounded in formal reasoning. Mathematics has long been the model for pure reason; its meanings are totally abstract, not grounded in sensory experience, so it was not considered empirical in the sense mentioned. But mathematical thought or research is nevertheless an orderly and methodical investigation. It asks questions; it seeks and finds answers. You don’t make up just any old answers; you have

to find the true ones. Mathematical knowledge, sense-based knowledge, and spiritual or mystical knowledge all involve such investigation, and all may be called “empirical” in this broader sense.

Science and mysticism share a crucial characteristic. Each — beginning in confusion and diversity of opinion — moves towards unanimity. Each is not merely a body of information, or a matter of particular beliefs, but a process, both open and meticulous, which leads different individuals toward the same realization.

Beliefs are always merely the best we can manage conceptually at the time. They are best adopted and discarded with the growth of knowledge or insight. In religion, the problem of “false to facts” vanishes as soon as religion is recognized to be the process of reconnection, or realization of connection or unity, in which beliefs must be, as they are in science, hypotheses subject to revision and correction. What has long been misconstrued as a dispute between science and religion thereby evaporates. There is a dispute to be sure, but a reframing allows us to see that the adversaries are not science and religion, but a naïve materialism and a naïve theism. Materialism is not a necessary metaphysical assumption for science. Nor is theism for religion. The defect of a naïve theism is that it conceives God as other, as Somebody Else, as object. The defect of a naïve materialism is that it conceives the self, or subject, as object. These are variations on the same mistake. Both materialism and theism have seemed plausible to many people, but neither does justice to the difficult truths it is supposed to frame.

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