

## BOOK REVIEW



Wolfgang Smith, *Cosmos & Transcendence: Breaking through the Barrier of Scientistic Belief*, Angelico Press / Sophia Perennis;  
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Nowadays, one of the surest methods of intellectual suicide is to question Science. By this I do not mean challenging various techniques and methods of measurement used in natural research, but rather denying Science the absolute monopoly in the quest for Truth.

Occam's razor, polished by scientific successes and by the notoriety of Newton, has become in modern times the positivist criterion which defines without a doubt everything which can be said, whether it is meaningful or not. The general rule - at least since Descartes and Newton - states that everything which cannot be translated in mathematical language must be disqualified to the category of epistemological nonsense. Blinded by the technological achievements of modernity, there were fewer and fewer people left to ask themselves radical questions about the totalitarian claims of Science. Even more, the methods of positive sciences, together with their arbitrary assumptions, have been borrowed by the social sciences, with most ridiculous results.

Wolfgang Smith is a professor at MIT and UCLA, with a PhD in mathematics from Columbia University. In his thesis called

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„*Cosmos & Transcendence: Breaking through the Barrier of Scientific Belief*” Smith wants to prove how the scientific image of the world is based on metaphysical suppositions, rather than the value-free research of facts, incomplete induction, experiments, and observations. Smith’s thesis is that the reduction of universe to physical-mathematical categories does not represent a scientific discovery, but a metaphysical assumption introduced from behind the counter. Moreover, Smith claims that this supposition did not play any role in the success of modern science, and did not bring about any significant contribution. Irrespective of this latter thesis, the fundamental idea of this American professor is that despite metaphysical claims of the positivist model, what we receive in fact in the scientific package is a certain anti-metaphysical metaphysics, which lays - or is based - on philosophical reasons rather than quantitative measurements.

Following A. N. Whitehead, Smith identifies the origin of modern scientism in the writings of Descartes, the main theoretician of the “bifurcation”, i.e. the distinction between the primary qualities of things (which can be translated into mathematical language) and secondary qualities (which are immune to formalisation, such as colour).

„The bifurcation postulate is tantamount to the identification of the so-called physical universe (the world as conceived by the physicist) with the real world *per se*, through the device of relegating all else (all that does not fit this conception) to an ontological limbo, situated outside the world of objectively existent things”. (page 8) In other words, as Newton stated so bluntly in *Principia*, everything which cannot be reduced to number and length disappears from the landscape of scientific dignity.

The attack strategy employed by Professor Smith goes into two directions. The first analyzes the impact of scientific achievements of the 20th century - especially the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics - over Newton’s ideas. More precisely, the research conducted by Werner Heisenberg and

Erwin Schrodinger directly challenges the idea that natural sciences deal with fundamental entities. These sciences describe, as Wolfgang Smith reminds us, our relations with Nature rather than the real Nature or the things per se which Newton supposed. The distinction between mind and matter, emphatically enacted by positivism, is practically destroyed by the results of modern science, which highlights the fundamental role of observation as part of experiments. According to Wolfgang Smith, the consequence derived here is not necessarily an invalidation of the Newtonian concept of the physical universe, but rather the invalidation of scientific claims regarding this hypothesis. Practically, this hypothesis becomes completely irrelevant for scientific research, being just a metaphysical supposition among others. „For as Schrodinger has observed, it was precisely during the years or decades which let us succeed in tracing single individual atoms or fundamental particles, that we have been compelled to dismiss the idea of such particles as fundamental entities”. (page 19)

But Professor Smith is not content with this consequence derived from the success of quantum mechanics, and proceeds to philosophically demolish Descartes' bifurcation. The historico-metaphysical demonstration undertaken in the second chapter of the book is shown quite clearly by the vigorous resistance of some first class thinkers to Cartesian reductionism. Starting with Bishop Berkeley - who decisively attacked the theory of bifurcation strictly on Cartesian premises, and denied the whole physical universe - passing through Kant and up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the masterpieces of Husserl or Whitehead, the suppositions of modern science have been challenged, and with most solid reasons.

Otherwise, the radical separation between „res extensa” and „res cogitans” - and the limitation of the universe strictly to „res extensa” governed by mechanics - has posed some serious philosophical issues to Descartes himself, issues he tried to override by appealing to the Divine. Nonetheless, Wolfgang Smith

states that the metaphysics of modern science looks the same as it did some hundreds of years ago. Even the collapse of Newtonian physics could not eliminate the baggage of Cartesian philosophy. „Now as before, it can be said that men of science have learned their philosophy from the *Principia*. They have learned it so well, in fact, that these modes of thought have become ingrained to the point of conferring upon the Newtonian philosophical premises a status of self evidence (which is no doubt the reason why ‘any doctrine which does not implicitly presuppose this point of view is assailed as unintelligible’). (page 34)

Cartesian reductionism throws the whole universe outside the sphere of irrationalism, using reasons found outside empirical tests. Upon the objections raised against the philosophical infrastructure of modern science, the positivist could reply that science does not need metaphysical suppositions, as it rather is about the „Weltanschauung“ of a computer. Everything could be based, in this case, upon operational definitions. But for Wolfgang Smith, this defence cannot be real as it is unlikely that someone becomes so „dehumanized“ as to resume strictly to a positivist perspective; and second, assuming such status would practically mean a denial of the essential claim of science, that of being the image of the physical universe. „The fact remains that science does promulgate a doctrine. It makes claims about the physical universe which have a fundamental bearing upon other spheres of thought. Whether directly or indirectly, it inculcates certain metaphysical beliefs, and predisposes against others. (...) It has something very general to say about the world and our place in the world. In short, it has a truth to proclaim, a truth which according to official belief is founded upon hard and incontrovertible discoveries“. (page 35)

Upon review, the very explicit thesis of professor Wolfgang Smith is that this doctrine of Science is based on contradictory metaphysical pillars. Despite some pragmatic attempts to introduce the theory of patterns or to replace the idea of truth

with the idea of utility, the truth of Science still remains reductionist.

And if everything which scientist metaphysics offers as reality is a formalised universe and an „illusory subjectivity“, a natural question arises, according to Professor Smith: what have we lost, in fact , when we believed we had won it all? The answer leaves no room for doubt: we lost the entire world and its Creator. “(...) the real, objective cosmos, which turns out to be a live universe full of colour, sound and fragrance, a world in which things speak to us and everything has meaning. But we must learn to listen and to discern. And that is a task which involves the whole man: body, soul, and above all, heart”. (page 142)

Wolfgang Smith explicitly operates with a creationist hypothesis, and his reasons are drawn from ancient main traditions - in the spirit of a true “Sophia perennis” - with some obvious platonic inflexions, mostly recognized. From this point of view, the chapter “Lost Horizons” is trying to trace out a map of lost opportunities by eliminating metaphysics and traditional wisdom.

According to Professor Smith, the universe is nothing else but a manifestation of God, the created world receiving life only through the participation to Being. Physical reality has no self-identity, being a continuous flow (a idea familiar also to some deeply different thinkers such as Heraclites or Schrodinger.) The only One we can firmly state It exists is God, as preached by the Old Testament (Exodus, chapter 3,1-4). Following Neo-Platonist traces, the American philosopher identifies the main attribute of the Divine as being the idea of One. But the same attribute seems to be traced also by Science, even if in a perspective that looks like a dead-end from the start. “The object of science, therefore, is to reduce the multiplicity of phenomena to the unity of principles, and ideally - if that be possible - to the unity of one single principle”. (page 51) It is unnecessary to recall how useless it looks to Professor Smith the quest of One inside created things, by

means of Science. The Eternity and The One can be found, as Wolfgang Smith states, only in the heart, where the “nous” - the true epistemological organ for detecting the Divine, I would add - finds itself.

With this epistemological and metaphysical arsenal, the author goes on to unravel evolutionism, Freudian and Jungian psychology. His arguments are not at all negligible, especially when it comes to Jung’s theories: Smith sees in Jung nothing but a modern ideologist of the Gnostics, gnostics which nowadays are not as captivating for the audience, since cultural patterns have expired or are about to collapse under the weight of their own inconsistencies.

More fertile and fresh is the last chapter of this very dense book, where Wolfgang Smith identifies the cultural and moral consequences of adopting the scientist paradigm. First, he points out that all values and norms have become a subjective matter, a question of taste. Everything which cannot be translated in mathematical language became of an irrational nature, which also explains why scientism goes along very well with nihilism, a compatibility already anticipated in literature by Turgenev or Dostoevsky. „Nothing is sacrosanct anymore, and at last everyone is at liberty to do as he will. Or so it may seem; for in reality the manipulation of culture has become a serious enterprise, a business to be attended to by governments and other interest groups”. (page 151)

At an anthropological level, the human being has his spiritual dimension amputated, certain features cut off and later on standardised by social mechanisms. Moreover, the technological advance is dramatically changing the inner life of the human being, who wakes up exiled in a monstrous impersonal universe. „(...) he has become a precarious anomaly – one could almost say a freak. There is something pathetic in the spectacle of this ‚precocious simian’; and behind all the noise and bluster one senses an incredible loneliness and a pervading *Angst*”. (page 150)

Additionally, art is no longer rhetoric but aesthetic. In other words, its objectives are limited to producing pleasure rather than revealing the Truth. At the same time, the subjectivity inaugurated by modernity, based on the principle of bifurcation, throws away from art as well any notion of sense and rationality. „The history of modern science teaches us that the merely human, cut off from spiritual tradition and the touch of transcendence, is unstable; it degenerates before long into the infrahuman and the absurd”. (page 156)

Professor Wolfgang Smith attributes the debacle and chaos produced by the scientific modernity to a morbid curiosity, which repeats the biblical scenario from the Garden of Eden. „It (the fall – n.b.) is re-enacted on a smaller or larger scale wherever men opt for what is contingent and ephemeral in place of eternal truth”. (page 164) The remedy results naturally from the precision of the diagnosis, and this offers an extra reason to read this book, so unfairly neglected.