



Cosmic Conversations

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IT IS IMPORTANT for the SMN to forge links with organisations with allied interests, so last month I was delighted to be invited to join Chris Parish, Director of the EnlightenNext centre in London, for a dialogue on the theme *Cosmos and Consciousness: From the Innermost to the Outermost*. The purpose was to explore the frontiers of science and spirituality from the perspective of a “cosmologist and philosophical enquirer” (myself) and “a spiritual adept and exponent of enlightenment teachings” (Chris). It was gratifying to find how well our worldviews complemented and enriched each other, so I will devote this editorial to recapitulating some of the points raised.

A recurring theme in our dialogue was the role of *consciousness* in the universe. Although most scientists regard consciousness as being outside their professional expertise – or even try to banish references to it altogether – it is hard to avoid the impression that consciousness (or more generally mind) is a fundamental rather than incidental feature of the universe. James Jeans famously remarked that “the universe is more like a great thought than a great machine” and the unity of the physical world from the largest to the smallest scales seems to hint at some great intelligence behind creation. At the very least, the coherence of the physical world and the beauty of the laws which regulate it seem to point to some underlying organising principle.

To physicists of a religious disposition – like Schrödinger, Eddington and Jeans – it is natural to associate this organizing principle with some form of cosmic mind, which one might even label “God”. On the other hand, the materialistic view to which most scientists subscribe suggests the opposite conclusion. The more we understand the universe, from the vast expanses of the cosmos to the tiny world of particle physics, the more it appears to become stripped of divinity. The extent of physical space is now so all-encompassing that there is nowhere left for the soul. In the words of Steven Weinberg: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless”. Small wonder then that some physicists – like Susskind, Weinberg and Hawking – are passionate atheists.

One of the questions posed by our moderator, Dave Pendle, was why great physicists can have such very different views of the same universe. The answer perhaps is that scientific studies of the *outer* world can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, so religious convictions can only come from *within*. The evidence for a divine element from science may always be equivocal, which is why John Polkinghorne argues that it can only provide “nudge” factors. Indeed, I suspect that even mystically inclined scientists do not usually base their faith on scientific revelations. Given this ambiguity, it is therefore no surprise that smart physicists (like lawyers) are able to argue for whatever conclusion suits their ideological propensities. This is a natural extrapolation of the finding from neuroscience that our perception of the world is influenced by our preconceptions of its nature. Thus for some scientists the miracle of matter provides an intimation of

the divine, while for others the universe is a God-free zone.

Another recurring theme was that both science and mysticism involve an *expansion* of consciousness. For science this expansion is on the intellectual front, for mysticism it is on the spiritual front, but these both entail some form of *evolution*. Of course, individuals may not develop on both fronts to the same extent – scientists and mystics evidently differ in their background training and motivation – but humanity as a whole clearly exhibits both kinds of advance. This brought out an interesting point about the nature of evolution. Darwin’s theory of (biological) evolution is often regarded as symbolising the gulf between science and religion. But evolution is not only manifested in the body; since the emergence of *homo sapiens* at least, it is also apparent in the mind and the spirit, these being driven by scientific and religious activities, respectively. Indeed, one of the highlights of the dialogue for me was the consensus that evolution understood in this broader sense – far from separating science and religion – brings them closer together. For biological, intellectual and spiritual evolution surely proceed in parallel, this representing a gradual unfolding in which the universe becomes ever more conscious of *all* its aspects and potentialities. This is why the role of evolution is so strongly emphasised in the philosophy of EnlightenNext.

A common feature of intellectual and spiritual evolution is that they are both driven by the allure of the mysterious. In this context, the mysteries probed by the scientist and the mystic are equally profound and underlying both is the mystery of consciousness. Aldous Huxley clearly appreciated this when he said: “I am entirely on the side of the mystery. Any attempts to explain away the mystery is ridiculous. I believe in the profound and unfathomable mystery of life, which has a divine quality about it.” One could argue over whether the mysterious implies the divine but if the divine is real, it must surely be manifested in all the realms of existence – including the physical world.

Embracing the mystery entails giving up the illusion that we can know the truth with certainty. On the scientific side, at least, our perception of reality is always evolving via paradigm shifts and the answer to every question always opens up new ones. This doesn’t mean that scientific effort is wasted, because the old paradigms continue to serve their purpose within a limited context. But it does mean that the advance of science involves opening up to ever broader contexts and that the path to truth is more important than the destination itself. Indeed, it is not even clear that the search for truth will ever end. This implies that scientific progress requires humility and open-mindedness, a willingness to embrace uncertainty and venture into the unknown.

The discussion of the extent to which these features also apply on the spiritual front highlighted an important distinction between religion and spirituality. One impediment in uniting science and religion is that religious views are *space-dependent*, reflecting the culture and history of the particular part of the world where they originate, but *time-independent*, adherence to scriptures tending to freeze beliefs. On

the other hand, scientific views tend to be *time-dependent*, the favoured model constantly evolving, but *space-independent*, science by its very nature being a global enterprise. So while science progresses by a series of paradigm shifts, each providing a better approximation to reality than the previous one, religion claims to possess absolute (God-given) truths. I believe this is a weakness because it leads to a “God of the Gaps” view, in which religion is always on the retreat as science advances.

However, religions are only *localized* manifestations of spirituality – contingent on a specific cultural context – and spirituality itself need not be subject to this criticism. For spiritual truths – unlike religious dogma – may also undergo paradigm shifts, and this allows science and spirituality to illuminate each other. For example, some questions addressed by religion in the past (such as the location of heaven and hell) must be reassessed or even deemed meaningless in the light of modern cosmological knowledge and a spiritual paradigm shift would surely be triggered by contact with extraterrestrials.

One possible resolution of this difference between religion and spirituality (suggested afterwards by a member of the audience) is that while *individual* religions tend to be fixed in time, streams of religious thought taken as a *whole* might be viewed as a sequence of revelations that lead to an ever closer relationship with the divine. Just as Abraham’s advocacy of monotheism was a significant advance on the paganism of his day, so the followers of Christ and Buddha might regard their teachings as representing an advance on the Judaism and Hinduism of their day. However, this is a very tentative suggestion. I have no expertise in comparative religion and do not wish to offend adherents of particular religions by suggesting that some belief systems are more advanced than others. The SMN itself has no religious affiliation.

A final theme to emerge from the dialogue was that the evolution of consciousness involves some sort of *conversation* or *communion* with the cosmos and it is this thought that prompted the title of this editorial. Whatever the purpose of creation, at least on Earth (and possibly elsewhere) cosmic evolution has generated billions of brain-based consciousnesses, possibly through the fragmentation of some precursor cosmic consciousness, thereby allowing the universe to perceive itself from a myriad of different centres. The constant interaction or information exchange between those centres might be interpreted as a mechanism through which the universe comes to know itself. In this case, both intellectual and spiritual evolution are powered by a form of ongoing cosmic dialogue” with “cosmic conversation in which the universe talks to itself and compares all possible perspectives. This may sometimes lead to tension but it is ultimately a creative tension and I like to think that my dialogue with Chris Parish was itself a manifestation of this process!