

Vedanta and Modern Science

PRAVAS JIVAN CHAUDHURY

Science arose as man, finding himself in a world alien to him, started to deal with his environment intelligently. At one stage of his life on this earth, he knew only a few things about nature—such as lighting fire, breeding a few useful animals, and growing corn. He was subject to changes of season and natural calamities like storms, floods, earthquakes, and failure of crops; fierce animals preyed on him. His first response to such hostile conditions was magic. He thought like a child that if he drew on earth clouds and rain and sprinkled water, then there would be real rain; if he performed dances imitating a harvest scene, there would be a good harvest. Magic was primitive science. It was a pathetic effort of man to deal with nature.

Magic was bound to fail, and the cleverest of the magicians took to observation of nature and experimentation for knowledge. This was a slow but effective means of coping with the situation. Science emerged from magic, and as it progressed there developed greater and greater faith in its method and in the outlook underlying it.

According to this outlook or philosophy of science, nature is 'out there' on its own account, an independent, self-subsisting realm of matter in mechanical motion and, therefore, of blind force or energy. The various phenomena, like light, heat, electricity, and sound are forms of matter in motion; and there are rigid laws of motion which govern the occurrences in the world. Preoccupation with such a world induced in man a belief that mechanical matter and energy form the basic reality, while consciousness and sense of freedom are illusory. Mind must be a by-product of matter, and we must be bound by rigid laws.

This scientific outlook makes man an outsider and a poor, insignificant creature in a vast, indifferent world and breeds in him fear and unrest and a desire to exploit nature for his security and pleasure.

The idealists have always pointed out the falsity of this materialistic philosophy, and its unhappy consequences in our life and society. While the scientist regards matter and blind laws as ultimate, the idealist point out that matter is but what it appears to the mind, and it cannot be conceived to be uncreated or self-subsistent. The laws must presuppose a law-maker, who may be a conscious spirit willing matter to behave in certain ways. The capacity of our mind to observe nature and to find laws in it reveals our affiliation to this creator-spirit. But this idealistic argument has not succeeded very much in the West, which has been increasingly given to the pursuit and worship of science.

Happily enough, certain findings in science itself have recently led some leading scientists to revise their earlier notion of the external world. Towards the end of the last century, a number of phenomena were discovered in quick succession which led to the view that matter was made of electricity. A little later it was found that some minute particles of matter could be transformed into electrical waves and waves back into particles. Thus matter may be said to be dematerialized. But there was a lingering ghost of matter in the form of what was called 'ether', supposed to be a subtle all-pervading medium for the electrical waves into which matter had been reduced. Certain experiments in the early twentieth century, together with Einstein's very cogent theory of relativity, which explained many facts, led to the

abandonment of this hypothesis of ether. So ether was no longer considered a medium which undulates or in which the waves are formed. The waves are now recognized as mathematical expressions describing the modes of movements of phenomena themselves, and not of any abstract unobservable matter. Mysterious matter, which had been thought to be the substance behind the appearance of things, became a myth. Recent science has come to talk of the observable data or the sensible appearances as the basic objects, the other entities being constructs or mental inventions that help the scientist to organize the data.

Matter therefore ceased to be something 'out there', beyond and behind the sensible appearances. With respect to laws, it became increasingly apparent that there are no very rigid laws in the finer or submicroscopic levels, where only average or statistical laws operate; so it is not impossible to conceive, for example, of water suddenly boiling off at ordinary temperature. There is a regularity, instead, of a strict necessity in natural phenomena. Moreover, laws may be subject to change. There is no law of unchangeability of laws. The scientist does not know why there are laws at all, or why there is regularity in nature. And he has not observed *all* nature and found it *all* regular.

Now, how can we comprehend this situation in new science? I submit that a philosophical vision of the world offered by Vedanta may be helpful here.

The world is all appearance, *māyā*, of names and forms. There is nothing ultimately real in it. The appearances are in some cosmic mind that projects them or its sport (*līlā*), according to its own sweet will which becomes law. But for individual minds the appearances seem to be given or impressed from outside, and, so, we think of a material substance behind them. But we may as well

think of our individual minds as freely assumed modes of cosmic mind, so that what the latter projects or creates in imagination appears to us as given. We are the dream-selves of the cosmic mind and we can, if we desire, awaken from this dream of life and realize the illusoriness of this world. This is liberation or passing into the cosmic consciousness.

This view explains why, though there are laws of nature, these laws are flexible and not rigid. An intelligent Spirit in projecting a world for His delight must follow some rules, but He is not bound by them. Rules are of His own making. The laws are neither blind nor rigid, such as inert matter has been conceived. There is no such thing. All is an expression of a cosmic artist. All is full of joy. That is what Vedanta tells us. The Upanishad says: 'Whatever is revealed is a form of His joy, His immortality.' Again, 'The aesthetic delight (*rasa*) is the character of the Highest Spirit.'

Therefore nature must not be treated as strange and hostile, since only our cleverness is required to harness it to our selfish ends. Nor must nature be regarded with undue fondness as our permanent home. It is, after all, *māyā* or dream-like; and our business is to seek our own true Spirit, the cosmic mind behind nature and our individual minds. We may have scientific knowledge and technology, but these activities should impress upon us our essential kinship with the author of nature. Science, if pursued in the right manner, will lead us to the recognition of the proper place of nature in reality; neither too high nor too low. A reflection on science will point to us the true character of things and, so, our higher task of Self-realization. The quest cannot stop with finding the items in nature and their laws, but must pass on to the source or ground of all these. Nothing but the Infinite can give us complete satisfaction and rest. ■

* Dr Pravas Jivan Chaudhury (1916-1961) was formerly head of the Department of Philosophy at Presidency College, Calcutta. This is one of Dr Chaudhury's unpublished papers.