

Regenerating Science Through Metaphysics

Wolfgang Smith, Foreword by Jean Borella,

*The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology: Contemporary Science in
Light of Tradition,*

[ISBN 0-9629984-7-8; 252 pages; available from the Foundation
for Traditional Studies for \$16.95]

Reviewed by Marilyn Prever

Is boredom and meaninglessness the price we have to pay for the blessings of scientific progress? Yes, says Wolfgang Smith, unless we can effect the regeneration of science itself — from subatomic physics all the way up to the big picture, cosmology — by putting it back on the right metaphysical foundation. Nobody does scientific research in a vacuum; it is shaped by, and shapes, the culture around it. The picture of reality that we think has been “discovered by science” owes more than we realize to the philosophy it was built on.

There is nobody quite like Dr. Smith. Some scientists tinker with philosophy, and some philosophers specialize in the philosophy of science, but here is a man of high achievement in both fields: a physicist and research mathematician whose work in aerodynamics laid the groundwork for the solution of the re-entry problem, and also a philosopher rooted in the classical realism of the Aristotelian/Thomist synthesis as well as in Buddhist and Vedantic thought.

This, his fourth full-length book, builds on the work of two of his others: *Cosmos and Transcendence: Breaking Through the Barrier of Scientific Belief* (1984), and *The Quantum Enigma: Finding the Hidden Key* (1995).

In the former, he liberates us from some dangerous philosophical dogmas disguised as science, tracing them back to their roots in Descartes’ “bifurcationism,” which leaves us in a position where “the soul has no windows.” (In my opinion, two of the chapters, “Lost Horizons” and “Progress’ in Retrospect” ought to be made up into leaflets and air-dropped like CARE packages over our Ivy League universities.)

The Quantum Enigma is a ground-breaking solution to the "quantum reality problem" which eliminates the paradoxes (though not the mystery!) of the bewildering world of quantum physics without any *ad hoc* hypotheses. (If you can read a description of the famed "double slit experiment" and go on with your life without being bothered by it, don't read Wolfgang Smith; just go back to sleep.) He accomplishes this feat by integrating the latest observations of modern physics into the ancient Perennial Philosophy, the traditional metaphysical wisdom of mankind.

The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology continues from where *The Quantum Enigma* leaves off. It's a collection of articles published between 1997 and 2002, revised and unified, explaining this new approach and then expanding it into the realm of modern cosmology... insofar as such a thing exists! The trouble is, we hardly have a cosmology anymore, only a cosmography. Our universe is too small; we get off at the first floor, thinking there are no storeys above.

Smith's main thesis is that we moderns, in rejecting the traditional understanding of the cosmos in favor of some form of reductionism, and turning science (really, an ideology called scientism) into a religion, have not only lost a priceless heritage of truth, but have even prevented ourselves from understanding science, especially the new discoveries whose meaning is so puzzling as long as our hidden philosophical premises remain unexamined. And yet this very fact indicates that science itself may be pointing the way to the correction of scientism.

The book invites us to join him in exploring the new world opened up when the latest scientific discoveries are illuminated by almost forgotten ideas, such as Aristotle's hylomorphism, or by Dr. Smith's brand-new and crucial ontological distinction between the "physical" and the "corporeal" worlds. The book begins and ends with essays that put his ideas into a wider cultural context: an Introduction outlining the principles of the traditional wisdom, and a chapter called "Science and the Restoration of Culture" which would be required reading for anyone applying for a job in education or government if we lived in a just society. Or even a sane one.

In between, there is an intellectual feast: I hardly know where to begin. He ranges from physics and astronomy to biology and information theory. Some of the articles will be of help to Christians seeking to harmonize Biblical and Patristic teachings with modern science (Dr. Smith is a Ro-

man Catholic). If you look at the Index, which is actually an index of names, you will find the most diverse collection of thinkers imaginable: everyone from Max Planck to Dante Alighieri, from Vivekananda to Alfred North Whitehead to Suhrawardi. Here are some sample chapters:

- “Interpreting Anthropic Coincidence” maintains that the debate on the ‘anthropic principle’ has been distorted by a hidden philosophical assumption shared by both theists and naturalists: the old philosophy of atomism, which goes back to Democritus and Lucretius, and which is scientifically untenable since the quantum revolution.
- “The Pitfall of Astrophysical Cosmology” suggests that the old distinction between celestial and terrestrial substances may have something to it after all.
- “Celestial Corporeality” explores the possibility of non-material bodies, finding a common thread in the New Testament, the *Upanishads*, medieval alchemy, Jacob Boehme’s theosophy, and the Lorentz transformations of relativity theory.
- There is a chapter called, believe it or not, “The Status of Geocentrism”, which takes a fresh look at a controversy most people didn’t even know was a controversy. Copernicus, Galileo, St. Robert Bellarmine, and Albert Einstein all contribute to this one.
- “Intelligent Design and Vertical Causation” builds on the work of Behe, Dembski, and other biologists and mathematicians exploring the new evidence for “irreducible complexity” in living organisms.

C.S. Lewis would have loved Smith’s books. In *The Abolition of Man* he expresses his distrust of the spirit of modern science, likening many of its practitioners to Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, who made a pact with the devil:

“There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the “wisdom” of earlier ages. . . . The modern scientific movement. . . was born in an unhealthy neighborhood and at an inauspicious hour. Its triumphs may have been too rapid and purchased at too high a price: reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required.

“Is it, then, possible to imagine a new Natural Philosophy. . . ? I hardly know what I am asking for. . . . The regenerate science which I have in mind would not do even to minerals and vegetables what modern science threatens to do to man himself. When it explained it would not explain away. When it spoke of the parts it would remember the whole.”

Professor Lewis, meet Wolfgang Smith: he’s working on it.