

Is God an Illusion? The Great Debate between Science and Spirituality

Deepak Chopra and Leonard Mlodinow

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Deepak Chopra is a prolific author: over 60 titles are listed at the start of this publication. A controversial figure, he emphasises holistic and alternative medicine with 'New Age' overtones. Leonard Mlodinow is physicist at Caltech University, with seven titles to his credit. The catchy title of this present book reads: *Is God an Illusion*, but the real subject is *A debate between Science and Spirituality*, for 'God' is neither the God of the monotheists nor the God of the polytheists, but rather 'consciousness' which Chopra identifies with 'spirituality'. In their opening debate Chopra and Mlodinow establish their respective positions. For Chopra, consciousness cannot be defined but has to be experienced. The universal consciousness is the source of all forms of consciousness, and takes on limited form in the various gods etc. This view is entirely in keeping with the Hindu background from which Chopra springs.

In defence of his position, Chopra quotes the eminent British physicist Sir James Jeans: "The inverse begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine" (43). However, Chopra opposes religion and spirituality, even God and spirituality (4). Spirituality is the transcendent domain which "Buddha, Jesus and Lao-tzu" (4) proclaimed, and this domain is consciousness. The source of religion "isn't God. It's consciousness" (6). Consciousness is impersonal; the personal "face" you put on God is "your own private choice" (7). Chopra demonstrates, in this way, a tendency to reduce all to one thing: 'consciousness'.

This basic viewpoint is at loggerheads with Mlodinow who, in a similar yet opposing reductionist way, sees all reality as arising "from the laws of physics" (12). Experience is not sufficient. Any proposition must be proven. "Science proceeds in a loop of observation, theory and experiment" (14). Mlodinow argues "for a worldview grounded in observation and evidence" (299) but he won't admit the observation of universal consciousness which is at the heart of Chopra's position. Chopra puts the basic issue well: "the source of creation is uncreated ... The uncreated is an intellectual nightmare" (289) for science, and sums up the whole debate as "a tussle over this one problem, really" (286).

The book is structured in the form of a debate. A question is handled by one of the protagonists and the other responds. The work is divided into five sections. 'Part I: War', in which they establish their basic positions. They go further into debate in the succeeding sections: 'Part II: Cosmos'; 'Part Three: Life'; 'Part Four: Mind and Brain'; 'Part Five: God'. These cover seventeen topics such as 'How did the universe emerge?' 'Is the universe consciousness?' 'Is the Universe alive?' 'Is there design in the Universe?' 'What makes us human?' 'Is God an illusion?' 'What is the Future of Belief?' 'Is there a fundamental reality?'

Chopra has an engaging way of writing “You can’t pet a star or walk and electron in the park, but deep down, they are both alive” (103). He adduces interesting facts such as Stephen Hawking proposing, in order to explain the oddity of the laws of our universe, that “there are trillions upon trillion of other universes (the exact number being 1 followed by five hundred zeroes)” (40). So does Mlodinow, telling us that Galileo used his own pulse to time the swings of the chandelier in the Cathedral of Pisa (68). They pull no punches in their debate. Chopra is frank. “Clearly Leonard’s basic allegiance lies with fixed mechanisms.” (230) Mlodinow states bluntly “The idea of universal consciousness is ... barren, so it is best to abandon that idea, too” (48).

Mlodinow does not exaggerate the powers of science, and his observations give some interesting glimpses of the world-view of some scientists today. “Why nature follows laws is a mystery? Why the specific laws we’ve observed exist is also a mystery” (108). Yet he does not see the need for “any immortal hand or eye executing the design” (108). Mlodinow admits “the powers of science are not without limit. Science does not address the meaning of life” (256). Indeed, “Today science does not even have a good operational definition” (298). He is open-minded. He rejects the idea of the creator God, but does not exclude God completely. He admits “science does not – and cannot – conclude that God is an illusion.” (256) “Is there also room for another hidden reality, a reality that includes God?” (284). These views on the limitations of science were for me the most valuable part of this book.

Mlodinow is opposed to the idea of consciousness as the source of everything, but he is not opposed to spirituality as he understands it. “Though I believe neither in the God of the Bible nor the immaterial world Deepak advocates, I don’t agree with him that to embrace the scientific view is to turn my back on spirituality” (235). He understands spirituality as “love, trust, faith, beauty, awe, wonder, compassion, truth, the arts, morality, and the mind itself” even if these have “their source in the flow of charged ions within nerve cells” (17).

Both protagonists have ideas of God that would be questioned in the Abrahamic tradition. For Mlodinow, God is the “Ruler” (275) who answers all our questions and supplies all our need “to believe that events happen for a purpose; that the world is just; that death is not the end, but a beginning” (276). For Chopra: “We don’t need God ... All we need is a universe that contains consciousness as in inseparable aspect of itself” (43). Chopra complains that science has destroyed faith, creating “a spiritual vacuum” (104). He warns that “we may wind up with marvels of technology serving empty hearts and abandoned souls” (204).

The debate is vigorous and wide-ranging, at times rambling, with the protagonists speaking past each other, but always insightful. Who has won the debate, Chopra or Mlodinow? The reader is the undeclared third person involved in this debate, and as adjudicator must decide.

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