

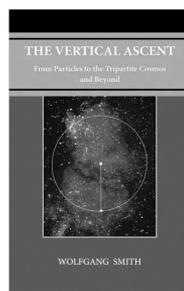
# The Vertical Ascent: From Particles to the Tripartite Cosmos and Beyond

By Wolfgang Smith

Foreword by Olavo de Carvalho; Prologue by Bruno Bérard

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Reviewed by M. Ali Lakhani



**A** brief overview of the trajectory of science, contrasting the traditional and modern ways of apprehending reality, will serve to explain the significance of this new book by Wolfgang Smith, titled *The Vertical Ascent*.

Science, like metaphysics, is concerned with understanding reality. Before the advent of the modern sciences, the approaches of these modes of enquiry, as well as of religion and philosophy, were allied: one could therefore speak of the *scientia sacra*, which regarded reality, not merely in terms of its external aspects and atomized constituents, but also of its internal essence and ontological states, as a *cosmos* or ordered whole. In this traditional view, reality was viewed as a continuum, descending hierarchically from a transcendent Source or Principle (the Divine) through intermediate levels of being, each informing the level below, down to the substantial realm of corporeal existence. The

traditional understanding, therefore, is of three cosmic levels—the Spirit/Intellect (Animus), psyche/soul (anima), and the material body (corpus)—functioning according to a normative holistic order in which the Spirit (which exists ontologically in a transcendent realm beyond space and time while being immanently present in existence) governs the soul (existing in a psychic realm, temporally but not spatially), which in turn governs the body (existing in a corporeal realm situated only in time and space). One finds this view expressed in the faith traditions going back to the Vedas, as well as in classical thought. In the traditional sciences, Man could know the world not only by observing and analyzing its operations outwardly, through the senses, but also by experiencing its qualities inwardly, through the mind and spirit, the sensible object being viewed as a referent of an intelligible quality. Those qualities were understood to have their origin in formal archetypes deriving from the Font of all qualities, the Divine. In this view, creation was understood to be hylomorphic, occurring through the imprinting of form (*morphe* or *forma*) into matter (*hyle* or *materia*). Knowledge was built on an ontological continuity of planimetric hierarchy which, in admitting of verticality, did not reduce perception to only the time-and-space-bound level of matter and of the senses. The traditional cosmos, qualitatively incandescent, was therefore iconic, a world of ‘signs’ that could be apprehended inwardly, pointing to the Divine, and, in this understanding, knowledge was therefore sacred.

From the earliest times, however, there was also a tendency in Man to view the world aniconically and reductively, as opaque matter existing only on a horizontal plane cut off from any higher source. So, for instance, Democritus speculated that the world was ‘in reality, only atoms and the void.’ This aspect, based on an epistemically occluded vision of reality, deracinated knowledge by severing it from its ontological roots. From a philosophical standpoint, one of the great influences of this tendency in Western thought was Descartes, whose philosophy, as it came to be interpreted, was known for the so-called ‘Cartesian schism’ or bifurcation of subject and object, its division between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, Man and the World, which severed the microcosm from the macrocosm, and sundered knowledge from its sacred foundations. His contemporary, Galileo, dubbed (by Einstein) as the father of modern science, turned the gaze of knowledge outward,

toward the modern scientific empirical methodology of observation and experimentation, away from its sacred roots, and, after Galileo, Newton reinforced that methodology, with the result that the modern sciences came to hold greater sway as a way of apprehending reality than the traditional epistemology. Henceforth, reality came to be understood primarily in materialistic ways, as the knowledge of things that were capable of being quantified, measured, and computed, rather than of ontologically and qualitatively related aspects of a whole. The technological successes of the new sciences ushered in the Industrial Age, and then the post-industrial Information and Technology (IT) Age of our times, which fueled a creed of individualistic progressivism, and a worldview in which God and religion became seemingly dispensable. Modern science, in effect, became the new religion, Scientism—what Dr. Smith aptly terms ‘*a philosophical postulate masquerading in scientific garb.*’ The scientific subversion of metaphysical truths was eased by theories such as Darwinism, spontaneous abiogenesis or materialistic cosmogenesis, that sought to explain the origin and continuity of life and the cosmos in purely mechanistic terms. These and other similar theories—including unprovable or unfalsifiable theories like that of the multiverse—have, in the name of science, undermined human exceptionalism and the traditional view of what it means to be ‘human.’ Modern science claims Earth and Man to be accidental creations, portraying them as insignificant specks in a vast cosmos, with the result that Man is increasingly disenchanting and life is devoid of meaning. All this, needless to say, is completely contrary to the traditional worldview of a divinely created cosmic order, and a semantically meaningful world of ever-renewing theophanies, in which each human being, having been created through love and with purpose, finds their individual dignity.

With this overview, we now turn to Wolfgang Smith’s book, subtitled ‘From Particles to the Tripartite Cosmos and Beyond,’ providing a clue to his traditional orientation and approach. The book, composed of fourteen articles written for the website of the Philos-Sophia Initiative Foundation, which is devoted to his work, is a sort of ‘summa’ of his thinking about the relationship between science, physics in particular, and metaphysics. Trained as both a physicist and a metaphysician, Dr. Smith has the ability to bring both aspects of his training to bear on the subject which is, as the book’s title suggests, the recovery of the

vertical dimension, one which has been lost in the pursuits of modern science. Dr. Smith is keenly aware of the degradation of science, and of the scientific trajectory described in the earlier paragraphs of this review. For example, he observes: ‘... ever since the Enlightenment, Western civilization has warred against *form* in a Promethean endeavor to reduce the world to quantity. And whereas the universe as such evidently remains what it is, our conception thereof has morphed to the point that a realist ontology has become *de facto* unthinkable.’ While Dr. Smith’s theology is Christian, his metaphysics are Platonic: he affirms that ‘The central claim of Platonism—which I deem to be definitive—can now be stated with astounding brevity: it affirms that *the sensible derives its reality from the intelligible*, to which it stands in principle as a *signifier* to its *referent*.’ Describing what Jean Borella calls ‘the scientific disappearance (*disparition scientifique*) of the universe of symbolic forms,’ Dr. Smith comments on the semantic and spiritual consequences of this disappearance: ‘History ... reveals a human propensity—in the Occidental world especially—to rebel against that immemorial symbolism: to raze the “upward pointing” monuments, and in the name of “progress” shift the collective gaze “downwards.” A man-made symbolism emerges thus to challenge and displace the archetypal; and this “anti-mythos” in turn reacts upon the *Zeitgeist* to exacerbate its “progressivist” tendency.’

Focusing on the claims of physicists that reality can be reduced to its basic material elements—the ‘particles’ of the book’s subtitle—he emphasizes how his colleagues have lost sight of ontological and holistic reality. Taking the example of an object, an apple, a physicist is likely to conflate its quantitative *physical* elements with its qualitative *corporeal* substance, its qualities of, say, redness or sweetness, considering the latter to be mere disembodied subjective impressions whose reality only has meaning, in this understanding, if reducible to physical explanations such as neuronal impressions. Dr. Smith disputes this rejection of corporeality and its distortions of common human experience, holding that his physicist colleagues are committing a cardinal metaphysical error by failing to recognize that the physical and corporeal domains are situated on separate ontological planes: the physical is subcorporeal, and its subatomic ‘particles’ reduce, in Scholastic terminology, to *potentiae*, since they are, as Heisenberg put it, ‘midway between being and nonbe-

ing.’ Obsessed with discovering the physical foundations of reality ‘the physicist is looking “downwards,” in the direction of *materia prima* where nothing—not even a “quantum particle” of any kind—exists.’ Dr. Smith demonstrates, citing examples from physics, such as the ‘quantum enigma’ which points ultimately to the lack of a physical substratum in the universe, or the ‘uncertainty principle’ which holds that, at core, quantum measurements can only be probabilistic, or the evidence of ‘entanglement’ and multilocating particles, which suggest that the universe transcends materialistic explanations, that the universe cannot be understood in merely physical or atomistic ways, but it must be understood holistically and in ontological terms.

The ‘measurement problem,’ for instance, is based on the fallacy of failing to recognize that the corporeal measuring entity and the physical quanta it seeks to measure are located on different ontological planes and possess different ontic realities; not everything can be assumed, therefore, to conveniently reduce to a merely physical conception of the universe. In Dr. Smith’s words, ‘... *corporeal entities do not reduce to the categories of physics*: ... they partake incurably of the Content as opposed to reducing to the Container.’ He elaborates that ‘The act of measurement entails ... a transition from potency to act, and thus from one ontological plane to another.’ It brings into play ‘vertical causation’ or what Plato refers to as ‘*formal causation*,’ the causation effected by wholeness, through which a higher plane interacts with a lower plane, without being reduced to it. Because the source of all vertical causation is effected from a domain that transcends time and space, its operation is instantaneous—unlike ‘horizontal causation,’ which operates in time and is an effect of vertical causation. The very act of measurement by a corporeal body (one that participates substantially in wholeness) of a physical system of quanta or *potentiae* (with no ontological wholeness) can instantiate a discontinuity—as is evident in ‘the collapse of the wave function.’ The key point here is that the reality with which physics is concerned lacks wholeness because it excludes the ontological dimensions essential to wholeness. Dr. Smith points out that ‘*a whole which does not reduce to “the sum of its parts” cannot be fully described in quantitative terms*.’ He adds, ‘inasmuch as the cosmos constitutes an “unbroken wholeness,” it does not reduce to quantity, and cannot therefore be fully described or comprehended in terms of physics alone.’

He rejects the materialistic fragmentation implicit in physics because ‘we live in a world not made of quantum stuff, but composed rather of wholes.’ Building on his arguments about the ‘measurement problem,’ he states, ‘... *physics itself can no longer be understood on a bifurcationist basis.* The true significance of the measurement problem resides in the seemingly paradoxical fact that decoherence does take place, even though “within quantum mechanics itself there is no decoherence.” But if not “within,” there must be a “without”’: and this recognition opens the door to a rediscovery of the authentic “unfiltered” world, along with the fullness of our humanity.’

Modern physics, lacking a planimetric metaphysics, is bumping up against a reality which it is unable to account for without accepting the ontological wholeness and the vertical causation it implies. For example, multilocating particles defy both Newtonian and Einsteinian explanations, and point not only to a horizontal or physical holism, proposed by David Bohm, but to a vertical or archetypal holism described in traditional metaphysics—one involving the ‘tripartite wholeness’ referred to in the book’s subtitle, of the Spirit-psyche-corpus continuum, and involving a hylomorphic vertical causality based on a reality of wholeness where ‘the whole has primacy over the parts.’ The systems of Man and the World comprise a whole whose transcendent Center is its operating Source, ‘the Center where, ultimately, all wholeness resides.’ This sense of wholeness is in the end what connects the ‘knower’ to the ‘known,’ providing the ‘binding element’ without which science remains at a loss to explain even how the mere perception of something external can be confirmed as real. As Dr. Smith asserts, ‘it is evidently the soul that “binds” not only the neurons in the visual cortex, but every discernible component of the body into the unity of the living organism.’

We have earlier mentioned Dr. Smith’s opposition to Scientism and, in particular, its materialistic presuppositions. Commenting that ‘the ontology of “raw masses wandering to no purpose” proves to be incurably fallacious,’ he laments the ‘stupendous impoverishment and dehumanizing impact inflicted upon present-day civilization’ by the modern scientific epistemology. In its denial of metaphysical ontology, the modern sciences have ceased to practice science, preferring instead to promote pet theories such as string theory or supersymmetry. He cites the concern shared by Sabine Hossenfelder, a particle physicist of

some renown, that physicists are slipping into crisis and are in danger of abandoning the scientific method. He devotes a chapter of his book to eviscerating ‘Evolutionist Scientism,’ citing, for example, William Dembski’s research on ‘complex specified information’ (CSI), and noting that the nuclei of living cells are encoded with massive amounts of CSI, that cannot be accounted for by Darwin’s theories which are the accepted scientific gospel. Darwinism results in a fluidity of species (macro-evolution) which disregards the basic stability of species and the philosophical and theological foundations for this stability. Dr. Smith traces briefly how the ‘religion’ of Darwinism, basing itself on a purely horizontal worldview in contrast to the vertical descent of species, and its integral foundation in the scriptures, came to infect not only science itself but, through Teilhard de Chardin, religion too in the form of the Catholic Church.

Dr. Smith is also critical of certain aspects of Einsteinian scientism. He cites how Einstein, in seeking to account for insufficient matter to support gravitational fields strong enough to produce galaxies and stars, invented ‘dark matter.’ Recently (May 2021), scientists have been reporting that there appears to be insufficient of this putative ‘dark matter’ to support Einstein’s view. Dr. Smith also cites the example of ‘dark energy’ (another Einsteinian postulate), which fails, by an order of magnitude of some 120-fold, to account for its corresponding vacuum energy in quantum theory terms. Further evidence against Einsteinian astrophysics is its assumption of cosmic homogeneity, which is disproved by the Planck satellite’s recent findings of the existence of a global ‘axis’ in the CMB or ‘cosmic microwave background’ (nicknamed, for this reason, the scientific ‘axis of evil’). Dr. Smith concludes, ‘A point has been reached where “all the king’s horses and all the king’s men” simply can’t put the Einsteinian theory “back together again.”’

Both Darwinism and Einsteinian scientism are, for Dr. Smith, evidence of a neo-Gnosticism whose principal features are built on, in Eric Voegelin’s phrase, ‘the speculative decapitation of being.’ Following Gnostic ideology, Scientism reifies the World and deifies Man, stripping them of their sacred foundations—their connection with the Divine—immanentizing the material realm and replacing the telos of the vertical ascent to God with a horizontalist creed of material progress, the new Eschaton. Following his refutation of ‘Gnosticism Today,’ in the chapter

titled 'Beyond the Tripartite Cosmos,' Dr. Smith reaffirms his commitment to a Christian worldview based on a metaphysics that incorporates sound science while exposing the errors of Scientism. In that chapter, Dr. Smith provides a critique of the theological immanentization of the Eschaton, arguing that it is not reducible in Kūngian terms to an 'event' because the 'Kingdom of God' transcends both time (and even the aeternity of the Platonists) and the cosmos in its entirety. He argues that Christianity is unique in its offer of the 'Kingdom' to each believer. It is this offer which, he claims, distinguishes Christianity from other faith traditions and from the *religio perennis*. While this is a debatable matter as Dr. Smith himself recognizes (a Muslim, for example, would also claim that the Quranic Calling of Return to and Union with the Beloved, is an invitation to that same transcendent Kingdom which lies beyond the cosmos), his faith in the Christian calling is commendable from the point of view of a devout Christian, for each faith requires an element of exclusivity as an aspect of its participation in the Absolute. Having affirmed the Transcendent, in the chapter titled 'Does Physics Admit a Teleology?' he avers that it unwittingly does. He finds evidence of this in 'the principle of least action,' which, he claims, tends to the Transcendent which stands above all action, at the level of the Immobile Mover, or God. Dr. Smith concludes the book by arguing that there can be no conflict between authentic science and faith in God. It is not science but Scientism that is toxic to the spiritual life. He argues that 'the ongoing de-Christianization of Western society has a great deal to do with the fact that, ever since the Enlightenment, our cosmology has been abandoned to the mercy of the scientists—to the neo-Gnostic gurus ultimately!' With Borella, he laments the loss of the iconic and theophanic dimensions of the cosmos, arguing that science, in order to remain objective and authentic, must reconnect man to the cosmos, to the ontological wholeness of the Divine bond.

As the book's subtitle signals, this book, which will likely be regarded as Dr. Smith's *magnum opus*, ranges from physics to metaphysics and to the Transcendent dimension grounded in his Christian worldview. Elegantly written and argued, the book will be accessible not only to scientists and theologians but to general readers. While one can dispute whether Christian theology and its metaphysics are unique in issuing the Divine calling to Transcendence, the main argument of Dr.

Smith is compelling: by cutting itself off from the Transcendent and the ontological dimensions that connect Man and the World within the tripartite wholeness of traditional metaphysics, science cannot explain the universe it seeks to understand; by cutting itself off from verticality, from the archetypal qualities that are essential to affirm corporeality, physics errs in reducing reality to merely the physical plane; and by denying God, science, in alliance with a neo-Gnostic ideology, falsely divinizes Man and immanentizes the World. Instead, we are invited to rediscover the Sacred, which, as Dr. Smith emphasizes, is the true *métier* of authentic science.