

A newborn baby hardly begins to breathe the conditioned air of the hospital room into which he or she is ushered with the help of the ubiquitous technologies which now fashion our lives from birth to death before a computer-generated wristband is attached to the tiny wrist; instead of a solemn prayer or amulet welcoming this marvelous creation into our world, the band displays a number. From this point on, until the inevitable passing away of the ephemeral body, the child remains constantly besieged by numbers. Numbers permeate our earthly existence like the air that surrounds us; they envelop the entire spectrum of our lives—from personal identifications to global economic transactions. They identify our means of transportation, places of dwelling, educational and health records. This tyranny of numbers has also invaded the realm of sacred rites. Each year, the ancient site of Minā is now filled with neatly numbered tents in which pilgrims, tagged with computer-generated numbers, dwell for the duration of their stay.

Unlike Pythagorean numbers, envisaged as principles of existent entities, these modern numbers stand alone, in stark isolation from anything higher than their own empty notations, representing nothing but quantities devoid of qualities. This “reign of quantity”, to employ the apt phrase of ‘Abdul Wāḥid Yahya (René Guénon)—one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century—now overshadows all other aspects of contemporary life and learning, science being its most important territory.

Whether it is natural or social, science today thrives on numbers. This supremacy of quantity is a result of the severance of modern learning—of which sciences are an integral part—from the metaphysical principle which binds all learning to a principium Unity from which flows the kinetic energy of their myriad forms. With the eclipse of this principle, which keeps all forms connected to itself like a center to the spokes of a wheel, numerous stray sciences have emerged. These disconnected entities float through the vast canvas of

contemporary learning like independent, self-subsisting and self-serving bodies, yet attached to nothing higher than their own limited and profane principles.

If multiplicity is a direct result of this severance, specialization is a corollary that cannot be avoided. This notion of specialization has now produced innumerable isolated circles of detailed knowledge that no human being can ever hope to grasp. This multiplicity has also produced the illusion that humanity today possesses the most advanced form of sciences. This illusion is perpetuated by numerous marvels of modern science and its applications which have given humans unprecedented abilities such as sending a creature of their making to Mars. Like the misguided practitioner of some occult science who spends a whole life-time mastering the art of floating over water to cross a river, only to be told by the true mystic that all along he could have given a penny or two to the boatman to take him across, these feats of science and its applications now conceal their deeper crises to such an extent that even the consciousness of the existence of a higher order of knowledge, capable of steering the course of humanity in a manner that would not cause this terrible rupture with the higher order of existence, has almost disappeared. Indeed, it would not be wrong to say that the notion of specialized sciences, accessible to only a small group of practitioners, has now become so firmly established in the Academy that even the possibility of a single science treating nature as one integrated whole has become inconceivable for the large majority. The extent to which the reign of quantity has gripped us today is reflected by the fact that instead of treating it as malaise, it is made into a virtue, as if this multiplicity was a crowning achievement of humanity.

Of course, things could not be otherwise. The very process which drives so-called learning today takes the lesser and the lower as its starting point and renders the greater and the higher as a relative entity which can only be conceived in relation to the lesser or the lower. This inversion of the means of learning was bound to eliminate the awareness of quality and reduce it to only that which can be measured by the senses or their extensions, produced by the application of scientific principles, which in turn are products of the same analytical mind that refuses to conceive of anything higher than the sensible. This Cartesian malady has rendered even primary

entities—such as space and time—utterly meaningless by reducing them to quantities. Indeed, by reducing everything to its quantitative aspect, time itself has been hollowed out, as if there remains nothing sacred in its ceaseless motion. Thus reduced, time unrolls with a monotonous uniformity, generally represented by a straight line in modern mathematics and physics. This simplification obscures numerous inalienable links between time and the events that unfold in it—links that bind us with the realm of quality and point to the true nature of things as they really are.

The quantification of modern science is not accidental. It has come about through a pervasive process which continues to affect all spheres of contemporary life. Originating in Europe and rapidly spreading to the rest of the world, this sway of quantity over quality has rendered all other scientific traditions obsolete. This eclipse of other traditions has now become so complete that except for a few small and isolated domains—such as traditional medicine—almost the entire breadth of learning that explored various aspects of nature is now occupied by quantity-driven disciplines. The very notion of matter being merely an aggregate of atoms quantifies both space and time. This atomism then reduces the whole domain of manifest reality to the sensible and the measurable and insists on imposing this tyranny upon all modes of investigation, making the very notion of the sacred a foreign idea.

The true nature of the calamity brought about by this incessant stress on quantity cannot be realized without understanding its pervasive nature. Anything that is not “scientific” is now considered to be lesser, not only by scientists but also by the masses. On the other hand, anything which carries the stamp of being “s c i e n t i f i c” is granted a higher hierarchical status. Needless to say that this label comes in myriad forms—from the statistical breakdown of various nutrients on a box of highly processed food to the numbers reflected in an opinion poll in the marketplace or in the political arena, where the same ideology is paraded by different candidates under different names.

Objections are generally raised against such descriptions of the contemporary human condition by asking questions such as: So how else would you do science? What is this sacred science? Obviously such questions cannot be answered by merely outlining a different program of scientific research, because science does not stand alone in the

scheme of things rooted in the principle of Unity; it is part of a greater whole, and unless one begins with the trunk, branches cannot be constructed. What is being said is simple enough: the reign of quantity and the reduction of the manifest reality to a quantitative plane *at the expense* of quality is a malady of titanic proportions that has reduced every aspect of modern science to the lowest possible plane of learning. Numbers as such are not the issue here; after all, the ancients did count, carried out their economic transactions and enumerated the most beautiful Divine Names using numbers. But they did so by keeping in full view the limited range of the domain of quantity. What is tragic today is the fact that quantity has obscured all other aspects of reality and this reduction has, in turn, concealed the higher order, leaving us bereft of guiding principles .

Fortunately, the true nature of the multiple crises of modern science—and indeed of all learning—has not remained undetected, and even though a large majority continues to propagate the illusion of scientific and material progress, the actual state of humanity today itself destroys this web of illusions by the sheer force of its stark realities now visible in all domains of life and learning. Alternatives are not abundant but they do exist. There are sages who have sketched out paths to connect the marketplace to the vineyard (invoking Matthew XX: 1-16); they may not be numbered in the millions, but they do exist, and one needs only a single sun to illuminate the days of one's passage.



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