

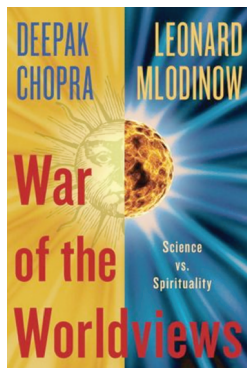
Is Science the Antidote to Deepak Chopra's Spirituality?

MARK ALFORD

Can skeptics and scientists learn anything from reading a Deepak Chopra book? In this case I think they can. It helps that this book is coauthored with Leonard Mlodinow, physicist, screenwriter, and coauthor with Stephen Hawking of the best seller *The Grand Design*. (He also received the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry's Balles Prize for his book on randomness, *The Drunkard's Walk*.) The book is formatted as a debate, each author setting out his side and responding to the other. It covers all the big questions: cosmology, life and evolution, the mind and brain, and God. Chopra advocates his own brand of spirituality, claiming that the universe is conscious and evolving. He presents his spirituality as the reasonable alternative to the soulless materialism of his critics. Mlodinow acts as the spokesman for science, countering Chopra's expansive claims and giving very clear explanations of conventional scientific knowledge.

The title invites us to read the book as documenting a struggle between science and spirituality, but Chopra clearly loves science and vies with Mlodinow to explain topics like the history of the cosmos and the role of DNA. In some cases Chopra misstates the content of scientific knowledge and Mlodinow corrects him, but in many cases Chopra and Mlodinow agree on the content of our scientific knowledge of the world.

Their disagreement is over a question that is not itself scientific: What deep truth does science tell us about the world? Does it tell us that there is a universal consciousness that we can access by going to a special place where it



War of the Worldviews: Science vs. Spirituality. By Deepak Chopra and Leonard Mlodinow. Harmony Books [Random House], New York, 2012. ISBN: 978-0307886880. 306 pp. Hardcover, \$26.

will be “drawn to your side” (Chopra, p. 251)? Or does it tell us that understanding one’s essence means “to think of myself as a biological machine governed by the same laws that govern Pluto” (Mlodinow, p. 133)? This is a difference of two worldviews, but they are both metaphysical extensions of what science itself tells us.

The proper skeptical answer, I would argue, is a third view: “none of the above.” Science *doesn't* tell us deep truths about the world. Chopra goes beyond science in one direction, using it as a springboard to launch his inspirational metaphysics. In his statement quoted above, Mlodinow jumps in another direction by espousing “philosophical” materialism, which, as Chopra says, is also a form of metaphysics. The skeptic rejects both spiritualistic and materialistic metaphysics. We don’t have evidence that there is a universal consciousness with which we can commune, nor does science tell us the “essence” of anything.

From this point of view, the crucial division is not a battle line between science and spirituality but rather a differ-

ent line, more like a geographical boundary, that separates science from metaphysics. Mlodinow steps over this line when he argues against Chopra’s metaphysical castle-building by offering a competing metaphysical picture that says “No, the evolution of the universe isn’t guided by a universal consciousness: it evolves through physical law, and has no guiding purpose” (p. 62). The problem with this is that it goes beyond what science tells us. Science does not measure the amount of purpose in the universe. I found myself agreeing with Chopra when he described such claims as philosophical materialism. By representing metaphysical overstatements as being part of the “scientific worldview,” one puts real science in danger of being discredited. The proper “scientific” response to Chopra’s spiritualistic metaphysics is to confine oneself to Laplace’s admirably minimal comment, “We have no need of that hypothesis.”

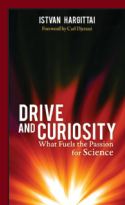
To be fair to Mlodinow, his metaphysical overstatements are much rarer than those of other popular writers such as Richard Dawkins. At various

points in the book, he clearly states the limits of science. He acknowledges that “science does not address the meaning of life . . . and science will never be able to explain why the universe follows laws” (p. 256). Concerning the soul, he says that science does not claim to have proved that there is no such thing, only that there is no credible evidence for it (p. 131). He nicely summarizes the role of science as follows: “When [a] particular belief does not lead to conflict with what we observe in the physical world, there is nothing *science* says to oppose it,” (my emphasis). The crucial point, which he doesn’t state explicitly, is that there may indeed be arguments against it, but rather than being scientific they will be of a more general logical or philosophical nature.

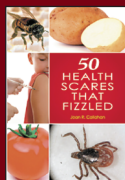
Chopra’s central claim provides an immediate example. What he advocates is a form of panpsychism, the proposition that mind is a fundamental feature of the world and exists throughout the universe. There is a lively ongoing debate concerning panpsychism, not among scientists but among philosophers. Reputable figures such as Galen Strawson and Timothy Sprigge argue in favor of panpsychism, though not anything like Chopra’s ornate version, while others such as John Searle and Colin McGinn refute it (see “Panpsychism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2010 edition).

Chopra and Mlodinow’s book is a wide-ranging and stimulating read. The presence of two perspectives, of an insider and of an outsider, gives stereoscopic depth to the explanations of the science. But by framing the debate as “science vs. spirituality,” I think the book blurs an essential point. The counterpoint to Chopra’s speculations is not science, with its complicated structure of facts, theories, and hypotheses, but something much more basic. The antidote to Chopra is Occam. ■

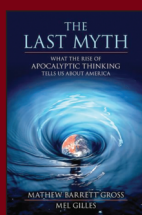
Mark Alford is professor of physics at Washington University in St. Louis. His 2011 debate with Deepak Chopra and others on “The Nature of Reality” was written up in the *Skeptical Inquirer* (May/June 2011) and can be viewed online at <http://tinyurl.com/7qf5c4v>.



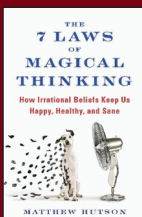
DRIVE AND CURIOSITY: What Fuels the Passion for Science. Istvan Hargittai. Foreword by Carl Djerassi. A physical chemist and writer examines the careers of fifteen eminent scientists who have made some of the most notable discoveries of the past century and uncovers in each case a singular personality characteristic, motivating factor, or circumstance that, in addition to their extraordinary drive and curiosity, led these individuals to make their discoveries. Prometheus Books, 2011, 338 pp., \$26.



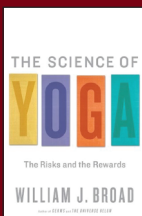
50 HEALTH SCARES THAT FIZZLED. Joan R. Callahan. Interesting and comprehensive review of failed health scares from a zoologist and epidemiologist, including AIDS, Ebola, MSG, power lines, and killer bees. ABC-CLIO, 2011, 360 pp., \$85.



THE LAST MYTH: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us about America. Mathew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles. An exploration of the origin and meaning of apocalyptic thought in America today, from belief by the Christian Right in the imminent occurrence of events foretold in Revelation to nonreligious worries about peak oil, global warming, and the end of civilization as we know it. Prometheus Books, 2011, 255 pp., \$18.



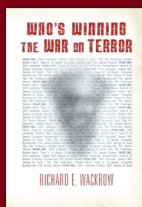
THE 7 LAWS OF MAGICAL THINKING: How Irrational Beliefs Keep Us Happy, Healthy, and Sane. Matthew Hutson. Most of us engage in magical thinking to some degree, even when we don’t think so. Hutson, a former *Psychology Today* news editor, draws upon cognitive science to discuss seven such “laws”: objects carry essences, symbols have power, actions have distant consequences, the mind knows no bounds, the soul lives on, the world is alive, and everything happens for a reason. Hudson Street Press/Penguin, 2012, 296 pp., \$25.95.



THE SCIENCE OF YOGA: The Risks and the Rewards. William J. Broad. A veteran *New York Times* science journalist and longtime practitioner of yoga presents what he calls the first impartial evaluation of the thousand-year-old practice, celebrating what’s real and uplifting and showing what’s illusory, flaky, and dangerous, while offering a vision of how the practice can be improved. Simon & Schuster, 2012, 336 pp., \$26.



STANDARDS: Recipes for Reality. Lawrence Busch. A fascinating sociocultural and scientific examination of standards: those necessary (and sometimes arbitrary) rules by which we measure the world, delineating what is acceptable from what is not. MIT Press, 2011, 296 pp., \$35.



WHO’S WINNING THE WAR ON TERROR. Richard E. Wackrow. An insightful, skeptical analysis of the American “War on Terror” initiated after the September 11, 2001, attacks and its consequences, exposing exaggerated warnings, lies, and flawed assumptions in how the U.S. Government has responded “in the interest of national security.” Empiricist Press, 2012, 233 pp., \$29.95.

—Benjamin Radford and Kendrick Frazier