

12 A MORE ON SCIENTISM

Anti-supernatural Prejudice

Many of the adherents of pure physicalism (naturalism) and scientism reveal a strong bias against all things religious or supernatural. Richard Lewontin is famously quoted as follows:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism.

It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated.

Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. [1]

There is the strong belief that science holds the key to solving all of our problems; and indeed, that if some other discipline of human thought does not use scientific methods it is suspect. ...indeed, this naïve positivism elevates science to the role of a religion; when this happens, science has become scientism- a worldview that excludes any legitimate role for Christian faith. [2]

Philip Johnson writes:

(Some believers) explicitly or implicitly concede that their theism is a matter of “faith” and agree to leave the realm of “reason” to the agnostics. This is true in every field of study, but especially so in the natural sciences, the discipline that has the authority to describe physical reality for all the others. ...For professional purposes, atheistic and theistic biologists alike must assume that nature is all there is. [3]

Walsh and Middleton suggest that Scientism is one of a set of “new gods of our age” which have captivated the public imagination, become the basis for education, and ultimately failed us: [4]

1. Scientism – Science will explain everything.
2. Technicism – Technology will solve all our problems.
3. Economism – Producing wealth and maximizing profit will provide purpose.

Signs of Scientism

S. Haack suggests six ways to recognize the presence of scientism in scientific discussion: [5]

1. Using the words “science,” “scientific,” “scientifically,” “scientist,” etc., honorifically, as generic terms of epistemic praise.
2. Adopting the manners, the trappings, the technical terminology, etc., of the sciences, irrespective of their real usefulness.
3. A preoccupation with demarcation, i.e., with drawing a sharp line between genuine science, the real thing, and “pseudo-scientific” imposters.
4. A corresponding preoccupation with identifying the “scientific method,” presumed to explain how the sciences have been so successful.
5. Looking to the sciences for answers to questions beyond their scope.
6. Denying or denigrating the legitimacy or the worth of other kinds of inquiry besides the scientific, or the value of human activities other than inquiry, such as poetry or art.

Oxford chemist Peter Atkins explains his position this way: “The scientific method can shed light on every and any concept, even those that have troubled humans since the earliest stirring of consciousness and continue to do so still today...I consider that there is nothing that it cannot illuminate.” [6]

(Scientism) becomes an all-encompassing world-view; a perspective from which all the questions of life are examined; a grounding presupposition or set of presuppositions which provides the framework by which the world is to be understood. Therefore, from scientism spring many other influences on thought and behavior, notably the principles that guide our understanding of meaning and truth; the ethical and social understanding of who we are and how we should live; and ultimately our answers to the ‘big questions’: our religious beliefs. [7]

Weak and Strong Scientism

Moreland distinguishes between “weak scientism” and “strong scientism”. Weak scientism acknowledges other sources of truth, although not as strong as science. Strong scientism holds that science alone reveals truth about the world.

If either strong or weak scientism is true, this would have drastic implications for those who try to integrate their scientific and theological beliefs. If strong scientism is true, then theology is not a rational enterprise at all and there is no such thing as theological knowledge. If weak scientism is true, then the conversation between theology and science will be a monologue with

theology listening to science and waiting for science to give it support. For thinking Christians , neither of these alternatives is acceptable. [8]

Fallacies of Scientism

There are four presuppositions of science that science itself cannot justify, says J.P. Moreland: [9]

1. A world exists “out there,” independent of mind, language, or theory.
2. The nature of the world is orderly, especially the deep structure that lies under and beyond the manifest world of ordinary perception.
3. Objective truth exists.
4. Our sensory and cognitive faculties are reliable for gaining truth and knowledge of the world, and they are able to grasp the world’s deep structure that lies beyond the sense-perceptible world.

There are at least four basic reasons why scientism fails as an exclusive worldview, [10]

1. It is based on the assumption that the scientific method is the only way to obtain knowledge or truth. But since this assumption cannot be derived scientifically, it cannot be considered to be universally true. Philosophically the view cannot be internally consistent, but must start with an act of faith.

2. Having an essentially impersonal orientation, scientism is unable to deal with the intrinsically personal aspects of human life. If it attempts to deal with them in its own terms, it reduces them to impersonal mechanisms and thus deprives the human being of his personhood.

3. Scientism does not carry within itself the power to deliver human beings from their problems, but is at the mercy of the human choices of those scientists and non-scientists alike who must decide how to apply the findings of science. Even when the motives of scientists and appliers of science are pure, the application of technology in an imperfect and complex world generates imperfections while solving others.

4. Human choices are driven by a decision as to what ought to be done. Science is incapable of providing the basis for this ought, but can only describe what is. Once again the driving power for human living must be provided from a source outside science itself. Attempts to provide a scientific basis for ethics, as for example considering evolution as the source of such ethics, are always a case of unscientifically declaring what is to be the measure of what ought to be.

Marsch adds:

We must reject scientific triumphalism, the idea that scientific truth reign supreme over all knowledge. Science cannot reduce the essence of a Monet painting to a prescribed orientation of pint blotches, each of which is defined by a specific absorption spectrum , and science cannot

better introduce us to George Washington with a clone from his DNA than history can with his letters and the records of witnesses. [11]

Alister McGrath makes this case:

Why should this “core set of principles” from the scientific world “apply to everything else people do”? It is a dogmatic assertion that lacks any scientific basis and has the distinct disadvantage of failing miserably when applied to the real world. It is like saying that because microscopes work well in biology, we must use them to sort out the meaning of life, the price of bread, and the causes of the First World War. [12]

John Lennox writes:

Think about it: If science were the only way to truth, you would have to get rid of half the faculties in any school or university—history, literature, languages, art and music— for a start... Unfortunately, the idea that science is the only way to truth often leads people to think that “scientific” means the same as “rational,” that is, in accord with reason. This is false, and obviously so, for all of the disciplines mentioned above—history, literature, and so on—require the use of reason, as do most things in life. Reason has a far larger scope than science. [13]

Conclusions

Four reasons for Christians to love science-

According to John Collins Christians should appreciate the sciences more than people from any other worldview. [14]

1. Science gives us specific reasons to praise the Creator for His creativity.
2. The sciences make it possible for believers to enjoy God’s goodness while satisfying their creativity.
3. The sciences provide ways to serve mankind, “to harness the powers of nature for the sake of human good,” in areas such as medicine.
4. The sciences provide an answer to unbelief (as we explore the design evident in the universe).

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