

Scientism

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Term Coined: 19th Century

Credited: August Comte

INTRODUCTION

The term “science” pervades culture in such a way that it seems impossible to avoid. Its influence has left an indelible mark on the minds of every person. But what is meant by the term “science”? For the purposes of this Profile, “science” will be defined as: “A branch of study which is concerned either with a connected body of demonstrated truths or with observed facts systematically classified. . . under general laws, and which includes trustworthy methods for the discover of new truth within its own domain.”¹

While there is nothing at all problematic with this definition or the practice of science generally speaking, an increasing emphasis on secularism in Western societies has created a more dogmatic adherence to science as the only way in which we can know the truth about the world. As philosopher J.P. Moreland notes, over the years, many have attempted to define what constitutes pure “scientific” knowledge including such characteristics as a focus “on the natural or physical world. . . guided by natural law. . . empirically testable. . . held tentatively. . . measurable or quantifiable. . . involv[ing] predictions. . . repeatable.”² But as Moreland shows, no such line between “science” and other forms of knowledge has ever been successfully drawn.

However, there exists a widely popular idea that “science” is the best or only legitimate form of knowledge available to mankind. This particular view of science is what is known as “scientism.” The term is a critique of a scientific philosophy called *logical positivism*.³ Thus, scientism is not a formally recognized subdiscipline of science, but rather a philosophy of science, which includes unjustified beliefs. Philosopher Mary Midgley observes, that “science and religion are in conflict” but that “this battle has already been won – that science has in some sense ‘disproved’ religion, and reigns instead of it.’ This is an extremely odd idea,”⁴ Midgely notes, “since it has to mean that they have somewhere been competing for the same job, and it is not obvious what that job might be.”⁵

DEFINING SCIENTISM

MIT physicist, Ian Hutchinson, provides a concise definition of “scientism.” He states that, “science, modelled on the natural sciences, is the only source of real knowledge.”⁶ This sentiment is seen in popular science as well. Within the context of “scientism”, Oxford chemist and outspoken atheist Peter Atkins offers a useful definition of the scientific method as a “mode of discovery . . . to make observations and then to compare notes. . . . The observations are made on domestications of the wild phenomena: they are made on cats rather than tigers (I write metaphorically).”⁷ Atkins contends that:

The scientific method can shed light on every and any concept, even those that have troubled humans since the earliest stirrings of consciousness and continue to do so still today. . . . I consider that there is nothing that it cannot illuminate. Because the scientific method has not yet encountered a barrier, except the one asserted to exist by those fearful of its illumination, my optimism leads me to suppose that the reach of its beam is boundless and in particular that it can replace (or even conceivably confirm) the myths that surround all the great questions of being.⁸

Atkins immediately acknowledges that “extrapolation from present success is not a convincing argument.”⁹ Atkins states that “we see no objective evidence for the non-physical,”¹⁰ but this – interpreted literally – is self-defeating: if one could see it, it would be physical. And more generally, arguments for the non-physical are usually either philosophical (e.g. cosmological arguments) or historical (miracle claims). Here, scientism is both premise and conclusion: philosophical modes of

inquiry are not scientific and so not reliable, and one can always start a historical inquiry by asserting that miracles are impossible, or at least, never probable. At least Hume argued for his conclusions. Consider how Atkins responds to the claim that some forms of knowledge are subjective and private, and thus not open to empirical inquiry: “science can penetrate into people’s heads and into their minds.”¹¹ This simply assumes everything at issue; one wonders if he realizes that he has equated “brains” with “minds.” Needless to say, the existence of electrodes is no answer to philosophical arguments.

Finally, Atkins gives an argument for scientism: “If absolutely and unreservedly everything is an aspect of the physical, material world, then I do not see how it can be closed to scientific investigation.” If naturalism, then scientism. No argument for naturalism is forthcoming from Atkins.

CRITIQUE OF SCIENTISM

There are two fundamental issues with the concept of scientism. First, the claim is self-defeating since it is not itself a scientific claim. Second, it is more commonly encountered as an attitude than an explicit claim. Scientism is predominantly advocated by atheists within the sciences, though most would dismiss “scientism” as a pejorative created by theists inherently opposed to science in general. Atheist and biologist Jerry Coyne, author of *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*, has attempted to show the superiority of scientific ways of thinking over religious, “faith-based” ways of thinking. Edward Feser has taken Coyne to task over his slippery definitions of “religion.” Feser argues; “Coyne speaks repeatedly of ‘religion’s methods,’ as if there were some common technique applied by scholastic logicians, Buddhist monks, and Appalachian snake handlers.”¹²

Feser elsewhere notes that if such adherents of scientism “want to take this position, they’ll need to defend it and not simply assert it; otherwise they’ll be begging the question against their opponents and indulging in just the sort of dogmatism they claim to oppose.” Yet, “the moment they attempt to defend it, they will have effectively refuted it, for scientism or positivism¹³ is *itself* a metaphysical position that could only be justified using metaphysical arguments.”¹⁴

By reducing religion’s methods “to gain knowledge” to “unverifiable authority of ancient books, faith, subjective experience, and personal revelation”,¹⁵ Coyne can quickly (and even then, unconvincingly) dismiss them as inadequate. When it comes to science, Coyne is not much better. He eventually settles on a definition of the “methods of science broadly construed: verifiable, tested, and generally agreed-upon results of empirical study.”¹⁶ In the section titled, “The Scientism Canard”, Coyne says:

I’ve argued that science, construed broadly as a commitment to the use of rationality, empirical observation, testability, and falsifiability, is indeed the only way to gain objective knowledge (as opposed to subjective knowledge) about the universe. . . . mathematics and philosophy produce a more restricted kind of knowledge: the logical results of assuming a set of axioms or principles. In the first sense of the term, then, most of my colleagues and I are indeed guilty of scientism. But in that sense scientism is a virtue—the virtue of holding convictions with a tenacity proportional to the evidence supporting them.¹⁷

As Feser points out, seeing Coyne call scientism a “canard” and then approving the title is “like watching him play tennis with himself. And losing.”¹⁸ The important point to note is that Coyne has, in fact, produced absolutely no argument at all that “science . . . is indeed the only way to gain objective knowledge (as opposed to subjective knowledge) about the universe.”¹⁹ He has argued that scientific knowledge is reliable, but that is hardly at issue. Take, for example, his discussion of morality:

But is morality itself a way of knowing? That is, are there objective moral “truths” to be discovered? I think not, for ultimately morality must rest on preferences: something seems “right” or “wrong” because it is either instilled in us by evolution, or conforms or fails to conform to how we think people should behave for their own good and for the good of their society.²⁰

This assumes everything at issue. He confuses how one arrives at moral beliefs (epistemology) with whether such beliefs can be true (ontology). One’s beliefs about the external world have been instilled by evolution too, but that hardly implies that the external world isn’t there.

He contends that objective, external claims (like empirical observations) are more reliable than subjective, internal claims (like religious experiences) because they can be independently checked.

Internal claims, however, are *immediate*: for example, Descartes affirmed “I think therefore I am”²¹ as the foundation of his philosophy because one cannot be mistaken about the statement “I am thinking.” In some ways, then, internal claims are more reliable. But even so, it does not follow that subjective, internal claims cannot be reliable at all, even if they are less reliable.

Further, it is not true that religion relies exclusively on internal claims. Coyne never considers the kind of reasoning that Christians, for example, have always used. If historical claims can be reliable (which Coyne affirms), and a set of religious claims are based on historical claims, then religious claims could *in principle* be reliable. If there is a God, surely there is *some* way that God could reliably demonstrate his existence, at least in principle. Coyne, by restricting religion to “ancient books, faith, subjective experience, and personal revelation,”²² doesn’t consider this possibility. Why think that some form of scientism is correct? If science is the only reliable source of knowledge, then only science can show someone that scientism is correct (or at least, plausible). Coyne, in an improvement over Atkins, can see the problem of circularity, and responds:

In the end, it may smack of circularity to use empirical results to justify the use of the empirical toolkit we call “science,” but I’ll pay attention to the circularity argument when someone comes up with a better way to understand nature.²³

Coyne’s statement presents problems in two ways. First, one strongly suspects that the only criteria for “a better way” are scientific criteria, which makes his response as circular as the original objection. But second, the question is not: what is the best way to understand nature? One could admit that science is the best way, and still allow other ways. Further, one could admit that science is the only way to understand nature, and still say that religion has ways to understand supernatural reality.

The underlying assumption is naturalism. If nature is all there is, then of course the study of nature is the only reliable form of knowledge. This becomes the standard by which to judge all other claims, as when Coyne charges that “religion has never been right in its claims about the universe.”²⁴ If there is only the universe, and one is not correct about the universe, one is not correct about anything. If naturalism, then scientism. As before, no argument for naturalism is forthcoming from Coyne. Coyne is not alone in his overreach. Dr. Lawrence Krauss, while not expressly discussing scientism, exudes the trenchant materialist spirit stating:

For more than two thousand years, the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” has been presented as a challenge to the proposition that our universe—which contains the vast complex of stars, galaxies, humans, and who knows what else—might have arisen without design, intent, or purpose. While this is usually framed as a philosophical or religious question, it is first and foremost a question about the natural world, and so the appropriate place to try and resolve it, first and foremost, is with science. . . . I want to show how modern science, in various guises, can address and is addressing the question of why there is something rather than nothing.²⁵

Curiously, when pressed on this point by Jerry Coyne, Krauss responded in the comments of a blog post:

It may not be a fundamentally interesting question from a scientific perspective.. (sic) That may be disappointing, but that doesn’t mean it cannot be true.. (sic) If it is a bait and switch that is because science as (sic) done the switching.. (sic) I may not be focusing on the classical question that has bothered philosophers, but I don’t think I ever claim to..(sic)²⁶

Here, the hubris of scientism is on full display – if there is anything of worth to be said about the question “why is there something rather than nothing,” it must come from science. If science can’t quite answer the question, then one must redefine and equivocate and bait-and-switch to get a new question. Krauss repeatedly demonstrates a lack of understanding about the philosophical issues raised by this question. He can drop philosophical howlers, such as “surely nothing” is every bit as physical as “something,”²⁷ and nonsensically accuse theologians of defining nothing as “that from which only God can create something.”²⁸ But that does not deter him: philosophy and theology are not science, and so they cannot possibly have anything to say of value.

Whereas Atkins and Coyne assume naturalism to prove scientism, Krauss simply assumes scientism. Some scientists know better: Sean Carroll, for example, because he respects the enterprise of philosophy, argues for naturalism in cogent terms. Productive, challenging conversations with philosophically literate scientists like Carroll are possible. Conversations with scientists like Krauss and Atkins tend to be bogged down in first-year philosophy fallacies. The presumption of scientism could be summarized in this manner: “Once you accept that science is the

only source of human knowledge, you have adopted a philosophical position (scientism) that cannot be verified, or falsified, by science itself. It is, in a word, unscientific.”²⁹

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Scripture is the fundamental source of theological and spiritual knowledge, but for the minds of the unbelieving, God has no place in the natural sciences. The Apostle Paul writes, “But a natural man does not accept things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

The Bible reveals that the physical world, the subject of many of the sciences today, was not finally brought into being by other physical mechanisms. Rather, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11:3). Christians know that the Lord Jesus Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3b) and that “by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible...all things have been created by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). “Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

Christian and physicist Dr. Michael Strauss plainly states, “The universe seems to be so well designed that some explanation of its design is required.”³⁰ Oxford mathematician Dr. John Lennox notes,

The rational intelligibility of the universe. . . points to the existence of a Mind that was responsible both for the universe and for our minds. It is for this reason that we are able to do science and to discover the beautiful mathematical structures that underlie the phenomena we can observe.³¹

Scientism, let alone science itself, has no explanation for why the universe is so wondrously intelligible, so suited to life. However, the pervasive influence of secular scientific thought has, as Mooreland suggests, “forced the church to offer the gospel simply because it works rather than because it is true and can be known as such.”³² Scientism has tainted the way people read the story of God’s love toward mankind. It has deceived people into thinking that the beauty and truth of Scripture are fundamentally irrelevant to science at large. The “Mind” beyond the universe, the “Love” that created and sustains the heavens and the earth, is none other than the risen Lord Jesus Christ, the “light of the world” (John 8:12), “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), the heavens declare His glory and show forth His handiwork (Psalm 19:1).

Notes

- 1 “Science; 4.a.”, *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991), 1674.
- 2 J.P. Moreland, *Science and Secularism – Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 163-64.
- 3 This is a philosophical position that purports that the only meaningful statements are analytical or empirical. Therefore, only statements that can be verified through experimentation should be accepted as true. Thus, any other attempt to define a concept is, at best, empty.
- 4 J.B. Stump and Alan G. Padgett, editors, *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 63.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ian Hutchinson, “Monopolizing Knowledge: A scientist refutes religion-denying, reason-destroying scientism,” monopolizingknowledge.net. Fias Publishing: Belmont, MA, 2011, accessed October 1, 2020. <http://monopolizingknowledge.net/contents.html>.
- 7 P. Atkins, *On Being: A Scientist's Exploration of the Great Questions of Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2012), Kindle Location No. 53 (Preface).
- 8 *ibid.*, Kindle Location No. 37 (Preface).
- 9 Peter Atkins, *On Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), x.
- 10 Atkins, *On Being*, x.
- 11 Atkins, *op cit.*, Kindle Location No. 88 (Preface).
- 12 Edward Feser, “Omnibus of Fallacies.” *First Things*, February 2016, accessed September 29, 2020. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2016/02/omnibus-of-fallacies>
- 13 This is a 19th century philosophy founded by August Comte; built on David Hume’s empiricism and skepticism. Comte denied metaphysics and claimed that the only valid source of data is that which can be experienced through one’s senses. Thus, all supernatural and immaterial explanations would be viewed as unscientific.
- 14 Edward Feser, *The Last Superstition – A Refutation of the New Atheism* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2008), 84.
- 15 Coyne, J. *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*. (Penguin, 2017), 195
- 16 *Ibid.*, 195.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 18 Feser, “Omnibus of Fallacies.”
- 19 Coyne, *Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible*, 198.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 21 René Descartes, “Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences.”1637.
- 22 Jerry Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015) 195.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 206.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 25 Krauss, L. *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing*. (Free Press, 2012), Kindle Location No. 83 (Preface)
- 26 Alber, David. “David Albert pans Lawrence Krauss’s new book.” *Why Evolution is True*. April 2, 2012, accessed September 29, 2020. <https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2012/04/02/david-albert-pans-lawrence-krauss-new-book/>
- 27 *Ibid.*, Kindle Location No. 105
- 28 *Ibid.*, Kindle Location No. 105
- 29 Thomas Burkett. “What is Scientism?” *AAAS*. n.d., accessed October 3, 2020. <https://www.aaas.org/programs/dialogue-science-ethics-and-religion/what-scientism>
- 30 Michael G. Strauss, *The Creator Revealed – A Physicist Examines the Big Bang and the Bible* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2018), 130.
- 31 John C. Lennox, *God’s Undertaker – Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion, 2007), 176.
- 32 Moreland, *Science and Secularism*, 33.



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