

For Science, Against Scientism

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to go to Israel. It was one of the highlights of my life. I had intended to go with a few pastor friends, but unfortunate incidents or mishaps befell each of them in turn. One was in a car accident; another suffered a heart attack and was unable to travel during his recovery. A third met me in the Newark airport but no sooner had we found our gate than he received a call about a church member who had passed away unexpectedly forcing him to return home to meet with the family and perform the funeral. In the end, I went on the trip by myself. Although I was disappointed to travel alone, God used the situation. On the flight over, I found myself seated next to a lovely young Jewish lady, who along with her husband, owned a small startup company in California. We struck up a conversation, which quickly turned to spiritual things. It was wonderful. As soon as she perceived my love for the Jewish people, she opened up like a flower in the morning sun. We spent the entire flight discussing Bible passages, talking about the relationship between Jews and Christians, and especially about the plausibility of the Christian worldview. It quickly became apparent that although she was ethnically Jewish, her mindset was utterly secular. Growing up in California, she was a product of her environment. She had an advanced degree in chemical biology, and thus she looked at the world through a mostly "scientific" lens. She assumed Darwinian evolution and was leery of any challenge to its tenets. On the other hand, and rather ironically, she made several statements that betrayed her as a postmodernist. For example, after my testimony of faith in Christ and the difference He has made in my life, her remarks were to the effect of "I'm glad that has helped you, but I've got something else that helps me." In her mind, in other words, "truth" is not universal and thus any claim to truth has no relevance beyond a personal application. I have since become aware that her objections reflect the two most dominant and culture-shaping worldviews that compete with Christianity in Western society today: philosophical naturalism (aka scientism) and postmodernism. You may not be familiar with these terms, but you are undoubtedly familiar with the slogans used to champion them. In one form or another, we are bombarded with them remorselessly. Apostles of scientism such as Mustafa Kemal Ataturk aver that "science is the *only* true guide in life" (emphasis added). Proponents of the so-called "March for Science" claim that "science is the only method of obtaining knowledge about the world," and the high priest of the church of scientism, Stephen Hawking, notes that "scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge."¹ Devotees of postmodernism, by contrast, contend that there are no absolutes because all truth is relative. David Samuels, for instance, wrote in New York Times magazine "It is a shared if unspoken premise of the world that most of us inhabit that absolutes do not exist and that people who claim to have found them are crazy."² It is but a short step from there to the conclusion of Jean-Paul Sartre, "Life has no meaning *a priori*... It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose."³

False Worldviews Must Be Attacked: These mantras capture the way our society thinks (especially the younger generations). Hence the gospel is never getting a "fair" hearing. The people to whom we preach bring these ideas to the table as the lens through which they filter our message. So long as we allow that filter to remain intact, the gospel will continue to get "strained out" as nonsense. As J. Gresham Machen explained, "God usually exerts [His regenerative] power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion."⁴ Paul put it more succinctly in 2 Corinthians 10:5. He calls on us to "attack the underlying worldview by *"Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."* But how, specifically, do we "cast down" scientism and postmodernism?

Scientism is Unscientific: First some definitions. Scientism comes in two forms: strong and weak. Strong scientism claims that "a belief is true/rational to hold if and only if it is a well-established belief that has been (or can be) successfully formed, tested and used according to appropriate scientific methodology"; (i.e., there is no "truth" apart from scientific truth). Weak scientism is slightly less audacious; it claims that "beliefs formed by scientific methodology are ultimately authoritative, all other beliefs and methods of intellectual inquiry are inferior to those methods operative in the sciences."⁵ Ironically, strong scientism is the weaker position since it is blatantly self-contradictory. To assert that there is no truth apart from scientific truth is to make a truth claim, yet the assertion itself is unverifiable by the methods of science. It is instead a *philosophical* claim about the extent and domain of knowledge/rationality. In other words, it is making an epistemological claim, which is properly within the field of philosophy. So, for all its bluster, scientism is *philosophy* masquerading as *science*. It is a *philosophical* assumption which comically asserts that *all* such assumptions are wrong. Weak scientism sounds humbler and thus more plausible, but under scrutiny, it too withers like a leaf in the breath of an oven. It claims that beliefs held on the basis of "science" are more certain than those formed on any other basis. This premise is patently false.

Consider a thought experiment conducted by J. P. Moreland. "Which," he asks, "do we know with more certainty, (a) that torturing babies for fun is wrong, or (b) that there are electrons? A brief history of the electron will show that first there was the German wave theory of the electron, and then there was J. J. Thompson's view that the electron was a particle. After that came a new

¹ <https://www.nobeliefs.com/ScienceSlogans.htm>, last updated April 19, 2017, accessed January 26, 2019.

² <http://www.jameswatkins.com/articles-2/heavy/absolutes/>, last updated January 2019, accessed January 27, 2019. (The irony of this quote is too comical to be left untouched. He argues that there are absolutely no absolutes. Hence by his own standard *he* is crazy.)

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/post-modernism>, last updated January 2019, accessed January 26, 2019.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen, "Christianity and Culture," in *What is Christianity? And Other Addresses*, ed. Ned Stonehouse, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), p. 162-163.

⁵ Both definitions are from Ross D. Inman, "Truth and Apologetic Method" (Classroom Lecture Notes, Spring, 2017).

view that the electron exerted a force on protons by creating a vortex through the ether that sucked the proton toward the electron. Then arose the Bohr electron, and today we have the quantum electron. So, when somebody says, 'Do you believe in electrons?' We have to ask them, 'Which model of the electron are you talking about? After all, every view of the electron except the current quantum view, we no longer accept. No one today believes there are such things as Bohr electrons or Thompsonian electrons.' So, isn't it possible that in fifty years nobody will still believe in the model of the electron that we have right now? Couldn't evidence be discovered that would completely discredit the quantum theory? Of course, that could happen. By contrast, could *any* new evidence make the belief that it is wrong to torture babies for fun seem irrational to hold? Please don't misunderstand; it *is* possible the culture could change to such a degree that nobody *believed* that any longer, but no evidence could show that my belief that torturing babies for fun is wrong or an irrational and false belief. Thus, it is more certain that it is wrong to torture babies for fun than it is that electrons exist."⁶ This single exercise proves that there are other valid (perhaps even superior) domains of knowledge outside of science (e.g., ethics, aesthetics, philosophy, theology, and the like.) The third problem with scientism (in either form) is that it is a foe and not a friend to science because it undermines the very preconditions for doing science. Let me explain. There are several "tools" that are necessary for the scientific enterprise to proceed. The laws of mathematics and logic, for example, the existence of objective truth about the natural world, and so on. Science cannot defend these tools scientifically; it rather *assumes* their validity.⁷ As Moreland again points out, "The job of stating these assumptions and critiquing or defending them is actually a task in the field of philosophy. It's called philosophy of science. Thus, by undermining anything outside of science, including philosophy, scientism leaves science hanging in midair because it undermines the only field that can state and defend the assumptions on which science itself rests."⁸ Finally, although it is technically not a tenet of scientism, there appears to be an unintended consequence inflicted on those who ascribe to scientism. Namely, there is a common practice of confusing science with the opinions of scientists. Such a blunder is committed every time a political talking head cries, "97% of *scientists* in the world agree that climate change is an existential threat that must be confronted by every responsible nation in the world... so stop denying *science*." Whether you think such a claim is complete balderdash (as I do) or not, is immaterial. The point is that the practice of counting noses is not "scientific" methodology. If a poll shows that a large majority of scientist prefers neutral colors in bathrooms, for example, it does not follow that this preference is "scientific."⁹ All it reveals is their opinion, the appropriate response to which is, "who cares!" From these critiques alone, it seems safe to say that scientism is an impoverished worldview. It is self-contradictory and decidedly unscientific. Anyone who is for science should be against scientism. Due to the constraints of space, I will reserve discussion of the fallacies inherent in postmodernism for the next article.

⁶ <https://www.booksataglance.com/author-interviews/interview-with-j-p-moreland-author-of-scientism-and-secularism-learning-to-respond-to-a-dangerous-ideology/>, last updated January 26, 2018, accessed January 26, 2019.

⁷ Inman, "Truth and Apologetic Method"

⁸ www.booksataglance.com, interview with J.P. Moreland

⁹ Austin L. Hughes, "The Folly of Scientism," *The New Atlantis*, Number 37, Fall 2012, pp. 32-50.