

Scientism Fiction

While the advent of the sciences has been a mixed blessing, giving us dentistry on the one hand but also the automobile and electronic amplification of sound, its

philosophical consequences have been purely unfortunate. In particular, we have suffered the rise of scientism. This consists of mechanistic materialism applied beyond its reach. The sciences endeavor to understand things that are scientifically (i.e., materialistically) understandable. Scientism is the belief that everything is scientifically understandable. The success of the sciences in producing iPods is such that anything scientismists say is received with reverence. We now believe in pure pool-ball materialism, whether it makes sense or not.

Consider a little girl of three romping with a puppy in a field of summer flowers. (I have in mind a certain daughter in a certain field.) She is charmed by her puppy, the puppy by her, and both rush about in the joy that only the very new to the world can feel. Watching them, I would see, and probably you would see, sunlight and gladness and perhaps think that just maybe, though probably not, the world was a better place than we had thought.

A scientismist would not see these things. He would see child and doglet as chemical reactions, differing only in complexity from the fizzing of vinegar and baking soda. He can see nothing else. Prettiness, affection, delight in bouncing—these are not scientifically admissible. They have no physical definition and therefore cannot exist. If in some awkward and irritating sense they do have being, it is of a trivial order and best ignored. Those with real understanding focus on the wave equation.

Scientists, certainly the greats, do not have such tinker-toy minds. A Newton, seeing a little girl with her puppy, would see a little girl with her puppy. Large minds know their limitations and even welcome them: who but a hopeless drone, however bright, would want to live in a mindless, thumping, banging world ruled by subatomic pool balls in meaningless motion? But the scientismist needs a mechanical explanation for everything.

The which worketh not. There is more to a small girl and to a puppy than metabolic pathways and adenosine triphosphate produced by the citric-acid cycle in the mitochondrial cristae to fuel muscular contractions involving actin and myosin, thus inspiring linguistic horror in all about. There is more to a sunset, rolling way in molten dunes in some unfathomable desert, slowly burning out to purple and grey, than refractive indices and water vapor.

Explaining a puppy to a scientismist is like explaining an orchestra to the congenitally deaf. “Yes, I see. All these people are sawing away at things and blowing into other things and waving back and forth, but what is the point of it?” A deaf man can be very bright, but he cannot hear. A deaf man knows that he is deaf. A scientismist does not.

Like other approximately religious systems, scientism requires wanton disregard of the inconvenient. Consciousness, for example. It has no scientific definition. It cannot be instrumentally detected. (Is a brick conscious? How would you know?) Does consciousness interact with matter? It would seem so.

If I consciously will my hand to move, it does, and a cinderblock, falling on my foot, robustly affects my consciousness. Well, if consciousness affects the physical behavior of matter, would not physics take it into account? But how?

The usual response to these questions, as I have encountered it, is to pooh-pooh consciousness (“It’s just a metaphysical construct”) or to say that it evolved for some purpose or another. Since fossilized consciousness is rare, I do not see how one knows that it evolved at all, and I note that evolution does not contain purpose, though evolutionists generally do.

And, of course, the scientismo-mechanistic view falls completely apart when it bumps up against such difficult matters as right and wrong or, worse yet, Good and Evil. These lack physical definitions, as does consciousness, and so don’t exist.

I say to the scientismist, “I think I’ll burn your daughter at the stake tonight. Surely you can’t object? I’m merely substituting one set of chemical reactions for another.”

To which he will respond that he objects because an evolutionary instinct (physical definition, please?) makes him want (how does a purely physical system want things?) to pass on his genes via his daughter. Oh. “Then may I burn your post-menopausal wife instead, since she isn’t going to pass along any further genes?”

Behind all this convolution lies a profound unease with the mysteriousness of life and with the limits of human understanding. We overrate ourselves. Perhaps scientismists ought to say to themselves every night, “The brightest of a large number of hamsters is, when you get down to it, a hamster.” ■

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