

Scientism isn't Science

© 2016 Paul Henebury

[This article was adapted from a Telos Theological Ministries newsletter.¹]

Scientism isn't Science

Every Christian is familiar with the problem of the strident dogmatism of many scientists and their disciples. They love to poke fun at faith and the Bible, seeing themselves as having outgrown such myths. They trust in Science. Science and the declarations of its knowledge elites is their god. In his book *Monopolizing Knowledge*, MIT Nuclear Physicist Ian Hutchinson has labeled Scientism, the belief that all knowledge comes from the natural sciences, as “a ghastly intellectual mistake.” Yet it is a persistent and habitual mistake which shows no signs of abating.

Many a scientist will say they are simply looking for natural explanations of phenomena they come across. If that really were the case, there would be no difficulty at all. But that is not so. Scientism is on a quest. The goal is driven by a rigidly held belief that “Science” is a God-free edifice. Hence, “looking for natural explanations” is actually “permitting only naturalistic explanations.” Once we change the adjective to “naturalistic” we can see better what the project is that is being pursued. It is an anti-supernaturalistic

universe that is so urgently desired by these people, and the device used to insure the supernatural realm keeps out of the way is the philosophical procedure called “methodological naturalism” (MN).

In a strange twist of fate MN was actually introduced by Christian natural theologians embarrassed by the “awkward” or even “evil” design of things in the world. These men did not wish to ascribe such things as disease and parasites to God. But, as the Enlightenment came into full swing, the Bible was attacked and Christianity doubted and science as naturalism went its own way with MN to guide it. Oftentimes today science is actually defined as MN, whether it needs to be defined that way or not. It does not. As Phillip E. Johnson notes,

MN in science is only superficially reconcilable with theism...When MN is understood profoundly, theism becomes intellectually untenable... A methodological naturalist defines science as the search for the best naturalistic theories. A theory would not be naturalistic if it left something (such as the existence of genetic information or consciousness) to be explained by a supernatural cause.²

Or as Stephen Meyer describes it,

1

<http://telosministries.cmail20.com/t/ViewEmail/j/4EF975ABCF68A4A2/1F06E90BA3D00A816A4D01E12DB8921D>

² *Reason in the Balance*, 208.

scientists should accept as a working assumption that all features of the natural world can be explained by material causes without recourse to purposive intelligence, mind, or conscious agency³

But true science need not be enclosed within a naturalistic paradigm; methodological or metaphysical. Indeed, to do so is to close off purpose (teleology) to science. That sounds good to the naturalist until it is realized that scientists routinely employ purpose in their theories, and expect to find it in the extended world (e.g. medical diagnosis, forensics, SETI, or archaeology). Ah, but teleological answers are fine if we can confine them to the physical world. They are not fine if they lead to God!

Scientism and Information

But as Johnson shows in the above quote, and as Stephen Meyer, Michael Behe, William Dembski, Werner Gitt and others have demonstrated, science so straight-jacketed is incompetent to explain informational systems. And yet it is the presence of complex information which is confronting MN everywhere.

To say such a thing is not to say that science done by Christians is superior to science done in the non-Christian mode. Non-Christians can and have made great scientific breakthroughs. But as Cornelius Van Til stated:

Non-Christian science has worked with the borrowed capital of Christian theism, and for that reason alone has been able to bring to light much truth.⁴

Whether we acknowledge the fact or not, we function as image-bearers discovering things which inform us in some way about the Creation. Claiming we can acquire knowledge about the world via methodological naturalism, which is a denial of the revelatory character of the world, leads naturally to the teaching that we should think independently of God (i.e. knowledge can be arrived at by NOT thinking God's thoughts after Him). But since all that is within the world is pre-known and pre-interpreted by God this position is anti-biblical. Van Til said,

The knowledge of God is inherent in man. It is there by virtue of his creation in the image of God. God witnessed to them through every fact of the universe from the beginning of time... God made man a rational moral creature, he will always be that. As such, he is confronted with God, he is addressed by God. To not know God, man would have to destroy himself; he cannot do this. There is no non-being into which man can slip in order to escape God's face and voice.⁵

As he said in another place, "*Man is revelational to himself.*" The upshot is that

³ *Darwin's Doubt*, 19. (Meyer rejects this view.)

⁴ Cited in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, 377.

⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, (1955), 172.

whatever we do, whether driving a golf buggy or potting a plant or calculating the density of a star, or conducting a lab experiment, we are using God's gifts in God's world, and we should use them in ways pleasing to God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31).

Science certainly deals with the natural world. But the natural world is revelatory. MN denies this. Thus,

Holy Scripture teaches that God very definitely, consciously, and intentionally, reveals himself in nature and history in the heart and conscience of human beings. When people do not acknowledge and understand this revelation, this is due to the darkening of their mind, and therefore renders them inexcusable.⁶

This "inexcusability" does not cease when a person dons a lab coat or enters a university lecture hall. How could it?

Here is another quote from a Dutch theologian:

He is the Creator, to whom also the mountains belong, but in the light of his universal power as Creator, all things are revealed in their absolute creatureliness. Everything which is able to impress us deeply, partakes of this creatureliness. All variations of nature do not cancel the common denominator: creature.⁷

The "creatureliness" of the world, and our status as spokesmen for the world, will not allow us to employ any naturalistic outlook. Scientism is not on a search for truth. It is a highhanded and arrogant

dismissal of God and His General Revelation in nature. It is "a ghastly mistake" because it is so obviously the invention of intellectual pride. Confessing themselves to be wise, they became fools (Rom. 1:22).



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org

⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume I, 340.

⁷ G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, 123.