

Engaging Today's Militant Atheist Arguments

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The designation “New Atheists” has been gaining ground as a name given to this century's best-selling authors, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens and company, who attack religion. I greatly prefer the designation “Militant Atheists”. It is far more accurate. There is very little new in their critiques. Their *militancy* is the distinctive feature of their writings. Calling them “Hysterical Atheists” is funny and makes the same point, but it is a bit too provocative to be useful.

Engaging their arguments has been undertaken already by a very respectable variety of commentators, including both Christians and unbelievers.¹ It is not altogether a rewarding task, because while the militants' writings are fluid and stylish, the arguments are often silly. David Bentley Hart's tone is more disdainful than charitable when he refers to their “embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning ... that raises the wild non-sequitur almost to the level of a dialectical method”², but his criticism's content is right on target. Terry Eagleton, no Evangelical apologist, begins his blistering critique in the *London Review of Books* “Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology”.³ There is plenty in the militant atheist writings to criticize.

What I want to do here is not to recap the philosophical ideas in the rebuttals that have already been published. Nor am I really qualified to propose a winning public relations strategy for Christian apologetics in response to militant atheist popularity, important though that might be. I am conscious that my own sensitivity to popular culture is filtered through too many years as an academic for me know what will or won't find a resonance in twenty-first century media, or individual hearts. Instead, I want to explain what I take to be the most important idea that enables us to understand the true relationship between science and the Christian faith;⁴ and then to examine the extent to which this idea answers the militant atheists.

The idea, put in its simplest terms, is that the predominant basis of confrontation between science and religion as well as between science and other intellectual disciplines is *scientism* — the belief that science is all the real knowledge there is. What's more, the error of scientism is committed not just by scientists or secularists or atheists. In fact significant threads of scientism permeate the modern Church's thinking, including the thinking of many Evangelicals. But science does not entail or establish scientism. Scientism is actually a philosophical, and in the end a religious, commitment that is internally incoherent, not to mention inconsistent with Christian belief. Making sense of science and Christianity therefore absolutely requires us to draw a clear distinction between science and scientism: to value science for the truths it unveils about nature, and to repudiate scientism as an intellectually bankrupt fallacy. This might seem straightforward but it isn't.

The first thing that makes scientism difficult to repudiate is that it is rarely explicit. Even scientism's most ardent believers almost never get up and say “I believe that science is all the real knowledge there is.” Even in the long-past heyday of Logical Positivism, its criterion of meaning through testability was not explicitly scientific, though it was in a subtle sense an adoption of the methods of science. Rather, and especially now that Logical Positivism is intellectually unsupportable, scientism is implicit. The illustration of implicit scientism that I like to use is this passage from Nobel prize-winning biologist, Jacques Monod, who writes, “The cornerstone of the scientific method is the postulate that nature is objective. In other words, the systematic denial that ‘true’ knowledge can be got at by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes — that is to say, of ‘purpose’.”⁵ See in this quotation how there is an almost imperceptible transition

from “nature is objective” to “true knowledge”. The second sentence makes sense as an explanation of the first only if all true knowledge is knowledge of nature, i.e. science. He is of course correct that modern science's approach (in contrast to Aristotle) is to avoid final causes and purposes in its description of the world. But to extrapolate this characteristic of `scientific' knowledge so that it becomes for Monod a feature of any `true' knowledge is pure presumption, pure scientism.

The second feature of scientism that makes it difficult to combat is historical and philological. It is that the original meaning of `science', based on its derivation from Latin, was simply any kind of systematic knowledge. The meaning of the word science is still volatile, and that volatility makes it susceptible to misuse. In common usage today, science means what was once called `natural philosophy', or in today's terminology *natural science*, the science of the natural world, epitomized by physics, chemistry, biology, geology and so on. When we talk about reconciling Christianity and science we don't mean struggling to understand the consistency of our faith with current economic, sociological, historical or political theories. We mean, and everyone else means, asking how the Bible and Christian doctrine can be consistent with modern cosmology, genomics, and neurology for example: the natural sciences. If, in the teeth of common modern usage, one insists upon a classically-derived meaning of the word — that science simply means *any* systematic body of knowledge — then scientism is a tautology. On that basis all knowledge is science by definition, and theology, even if it is no longer the Queen of them, is a science like other disciplines. Many discussions of science and scientism founder because of a vacillation between these meanings. If science describes *any* systematic knowledge, then of course all of our disciplines are science. Yet when we talk about the penetration, power, persuasiveness, or prestige of science we are referring to *natural science*. It is vital to have in mind a stable meaning of science. I mean *natural science*.

A third substantial problem in distinguishing science from scientism is made all the greater because current opinions in the philosophy of science emphasize the difficulty in *demarcation* between science and non-science. It is pointed out that there is no convincing algorithm either for the practice of science (of which a candidate might for example be induction) or for evaluating what is or is not science (for example falsifiability). If then, the thought goes, we are uncertain how science is to be practiced or identified, then who is to say where its boundaries lie? Why should we concede that there are any limits to science's knowledge? And if there are no limits to science, then scientism starts to look very plausible. Maybe we don't yet have really scientific knowledge of some aspects of the world, but that's perhaps just because those aspects are at an early stage in scientific development. We just need to keep working to turn them eventually into truly positive sciences. Actually (and here we touch on the questionable novelty of the militant atheists) these sort of arguments echo the early nineteenth-century positivists: Saint-Simon and Comte.⁶ But they are erroneous.

It is true that the common simplistic descriptions of the scientific method are largely mythological. But, nevertheless, there are identifiable characteristics in science as it has been practiced since the scientific revolution, and these constitute substantial limitations of the scope of science's ability to describe the world. I identify the two key characteristics as *reproducibility* and *Clarity*. Science describes the world in so far as it is describable in terms that are reproducible. An experiment done here, and now, by me, if it is part of science will give the same result when done somewhere else, sometime else, by someone else. Or if we are discussing something inaccessible to manipulation, for example the stars in astronomy, then multiple consistent observations at different places and times, by different observers must be possible, providing reproducibility in practice even if not necessarily at will. Moreover science requires that its descriptions have a specialized Clarity (capitalized to indicate my use as a technical term), so that they are

unambiguously understood by the trained scientist. This often (but not always) involves quantitative measurement and mathematical theory. Such mathematical forms of expression most abundantly possess Clarity but other forms such as systematic description or classification also provide it in ways that would not normally be described as mathematical. In any case Clarity is required even to know whether reproducibility has been attained, and these requirements place limitations on science.

Many of life's most important matters simply do not possess reproducibility. History, for example, cannot be understood by appeal to reproducibility. Its most significant events are often unique, never to be repeated. There is no way to experiment on history, and no way to repeat the observations. Some parts of historical study benefit from scientific techniques, but the main mission of history cannot be addressed through reproducibility; its methods are not those of science. Yet history possesses real knowledge. Or in respect of Clarity, consider the beauty of a sunset, the justice of a verdict, the compassion of a nurse, the drama of a play, the depth of a poem, the terror of a war, the excitement of a symphony, the love of a woman. Which of these can be reduced to the Clarity of a scientific description? Yes, a sunset can be described in terms of the spectral analysis of the light, the causes of the coloration arising from light scattering by particles and molecules, and their arrangement and gradient in the sky. But when all the scientific details of such a description are done, has that explained, or even conveyed, its beauty? Hardly. In fact it has missed the point. Many-layered connections and implications are intrinsically part of the significance of these subjects. We appreciate and understand them, we know them, through sharing conceptually in the interwoven fabric of their often only evocative allusions.

One of the attitudes within Christianity that feeds scientism is a premature pretension to unification of knowledge. "All truth is God's truth" is undoubtedly correct, but it does not follow that there is just one way to discover that truth. Our Christian forebears taught that there were two books of revelation, the book of God's word, the Bible, and the book of God's works, the creation. And the Christian scientists of the early modern period argued, rightly I believe, that each book needed to be studied in the first place on its own terms. Our human impulse to form an integrated, coordinated understanding of the one self-consistent world we believe we inhabit, is not to be denied. Of course, we strive to see how the two books fit together, developing a more or less integrated conception of reality. This striving for an integrated understanding is natural and praiseworthy, but there are dangers in it. Perhaps none of those dangers is greater than to persuade ourselves that we can have or do have a purely scientific proof of the truths of revelation. In the first place, such a proof is impossible. We can no more prove scientifically the love of the heavenly father than we can prove scientifically the love of a human father. Both are beyond the inherent limitations of the scope of science, properly understood. In the second place, and I believe even more damaging to Christian witness, the enchantment by and striving for a scientific demonstration of God, or the supernatural, or design, effectively cedes to scientism. It has the perhaps unintended effect of confirming scientific demonstration as the supreme arbiter of truth. It betrays by its program the attitude (at the very least) that science is the most convincing form of knowledge. From there, a full blown scientism is only a step away. Please don't misunderstand me. I am not disavowing all intellectual arguments for God or the reasonableness of faith. Quite the contrary, I came to faith as an undergraduate in part because I was (and am) convinced by intellectual arguments that Jesus is who he says he is. I am saying simply that with few exceptions the arguments for God are not, and cannot be, scientific. That is not a cause for concern provided we repudiate scientism, provided we accord due credit to modes of thought and knowledge other than science.

Distinguishing science from scientism is at the heart of the attitude towards origins that is represented by BioLogos. There are some extremely convincing scientific descriptions of the development of the cosmos, the earth, and of biological organisms. All the scientific evidence indicates that the universe is just over 13 billion years old, the earth perhaps 4 billion, and multicellular life on earth close to a billion. As best we can tell — and the evidence has strengthened greatly recently — the exquisitely adapted diversity of life came about by a process of common descent over immense time spans through natural selection. But nothing in science demonstrates the unwarranted additional a-theological assertions, which scientism's advocates often add, that this process is 'impersonal', 'unguided', 'blind', or 'purposeless'.

The scientific enterprise shows every sign of steadily progressing towards what may be a seamless account of the physical basis of life, and perhaps (though we are very far from this as yet) a physical description of the workings of the brain. But if science is not all the knowledge there is — if scientism is false — then having a physical description does not *explain away* descriptions at different levels: physical, personal, or spiritual. A physical description of the processes of my brain does not prove that I don't have true thoughts. If it did, then the thought that embodies that idea, in my brain or any other, ought not to be believed. The reality of human thought and agency cannot be disproved by constructing some sort of scientific description of its embodiment. We, like other animals, may well be complicated self-regulating biochemical factories guided by a vast code written in our DNA. But it does not follow that we are *nothing but* biochemical factories.

Similarly, an evolutionary explanation of origins does not disallow an explanation in terms of God's design or providence. Indeed the idea that there might be a perfectly natural explanation of events attributed to God's action is a commonplace of the Bible. When Our Lord spoke of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field as being fed or clothed by the heavenly Father, for example,⁷ he was not ignorant of the fact that these things had a perfectly natural explanation. It was precisely the naturalness that gave force to his teaching about worry. Jesus seemed completely comfortable with the idea that events which are natural are also attributable to God's care, in other words that explanations at different levels, the natural and the spiritual, are sometimes simultaneously valid.

In broad strokes, the case made by the militant atheists consists of three assertions: (1) God is a scientific hypothesis that has been essentially disproved by science. (2) Evolution explains religion as nothing more than a natural phenomenon. (3) Religion is demonstrably evil. How convincing is their position? Here, I'm going to have to skip the third point about how evil religion is. I don't believe that argument stands up to serious scrutiny⁸ but my discussion of scientism bears immediately mostly upon the first two claims.

*The God Delusion*⁹ returns time after time to statements like "the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other". Occasionally this is a "suggestion", but more often it is a bare assertion. The remarkable thing about this basis for the book's whole argument is how contradictory it is to common understanding. Surely if ever there were a topic that is not a question of science, it is metaphysics, theology, and the existence of God. The only way that Richard Dawkins' assertion could possibly make some kind of intellectual sense is in the context of scientism. If indeed all matters of real knowledge were matters of science, then presumably it would follow that science and science alone is competent to answer this question, because it alone is competent to answer *any* question. Under scientism, God is a "scientific hypothesis like *any* other". But scientism is a fallacy. The existence of God is, in my view, a *factual* question. "Either he exists or he doesn't" is the way Dawkins puts it. I see no reason to dispute that statement. But insisting that God's existence is a *scientific* question is a giant leap further that only the most blatant

scientism could justify. That today's atheists can get away with this scientific presumption without being summarily dismissed is a sign of how rampant scientism is in our culture today.

When the militant atheists tell us that there's no evidence for God or Christianity, what they are saying is that there's no *scientific* evidence. Actually even that is an over-statement. There are some aspects of scientific understanding that favor a theological position. But I am willing, for the sake of argument, to grant the simplistic version that there is no scientific proof of God. My response, though, is that there is no scientific proof, either, of the assassination of Julius Caesar on the 15th March 44 BC. Yet historians think that's a fact. There's no scientific proof of the genius of a Bach or a Michelangelo; yet musicians and artists think they know that genius. And there's no scientific proof of the love between me and my wife; yet that may be the surest thing in my life.

There's nothing much new in these arguments. Perhaps the only significant novelty in the recent militant atheist writings is an insistence that evolutionary explanations are intrinsically more satisfactory than others because they explain the complex in terms of the simple.¹⁰ Complex life is explained in terms of simpler chemical and physical laws of nature. In contrast, it is argued, explaining anything in terms of God is to explain the simpler (things in the world) in terms of the *more complex* (God). But this argument, too, rests on a scientific presumption. It is far from self-evident that evolutionary explanations are meaningfully 'simpler' than theological explanations. To most non-scientists, explanations in terms of personal agency are far more familiar, and in that sense 'simple', than explanations in terms of the laws of physics or biology. It is only scientific presupposition that underwrites a view that scientific explanations are intrinsically more satisfactory. At the origins end of the explanatory chain (contradicting the unwarranted recent interpretations of Stephen Hawking) no amount of science answers the question where do the fundamental laws of physics come from. And even if there were a fully comprehensive scientific explanation of the development of the physical or biological aspects of nature, we would in any case be forced at the other end of the explanatory chain to regard complexity, in the form of our own human, personal, mental capacity, as intrinsic to the act of knowing it. That's one of the long-recognized philosophical insufficiencies of the scientific viewpoint: scientific knowledge itself rests upon lots of non-scientific and unspecifiable "personal knowledge"¹¹ possessed by humans. Scientism cannot account for science itself.

Here an important distinction between evolutionary viewpoints is essential. Scientists who see the strength of evidence for common descent (and this applies to other scientific descriptions of the evolution of nature) may well be persuaded that inheritance of naturally selected favorable variations is the mechanism by which the adaptation of organisms to their environment came about. But such an acceptance of an evolutionary 'physics', does not compel one to adopt the evolutionary 'metaphysics' embodied in such atheistic fundamentalism as "Darwinism is the only known theory that is in principle *capable* of explaining certain aspects of life."¹²

Christians need to distinguish between science and scientism. Appreciating and participating in science, as Christians have throughout history, does not entail adopting scientism. Ironically, however, insistence by some Christians on *scientific* proofs of an Intelligent Designer, sells the Christian birthright for a mess of scientific potage. At best such arguments arrive at an undefined Designer, suggestive perhaps, but far short of the Trinity in whom we believe. The cost, though, is an implicit endorsement of scientism — that science is the standard by which all truth is to be judged. Besides any weakness of the arguments, it is a bad apologetic strategy: accidentally undermining all the human, historical, moral, and spiritual evidences on which our faith is founded.

The second claim of the militant atheists is that evolution explains away religion as a natural phenomenon.

Explaining away religion as a natural phenomenon is not new. Seeing religion as a product of human psychology is as old as religion itself. Christianity recognizes the religious impulse as a universal part of human nature and, of course, argues that a universal religious tendency is just what one might expect if God really exists. Seeing religion as having developed over human history is a similarly ancient understanding. The Bible portrays God's self-revelation as developing through a sequence of events of history. Explicitly Darwinist explanations of religion are, practically speaking, as old as Darwin, even though the *Origin of Species* was at pains to avoid that hot issue. So there's nothing new in the idea that religion is a universal part of human nature or in atheists arguing that religion is *nothing but* a natural phenomenon. What is taken to be the recent arguments' additional plausibility is based upon (1) the 'progress' in evolutionary psychology and sociobiology in recent decades and (2) the growth of fundamental measurement and understanding of mechanisms in the brain. It might not be obvious to non-scientists, but actually the scientific status of evolutionary psychology is (unlike evolutionary biology) highly suspect within the (natural-)science community. Its problem is that there is practically no scientific evidence to support it. When Edward O Wilson¹³, or Steven Pinker¹⁴ (or, second hand, Daniel Dennett¹⁵) offer us evolutionary stories that purport to *explain* some aspects of moral or religious behavior, there is, practically speaking, no moral or psychological fossil evidence to which the stories can be compared. Remarkably, it was some of the champions of biological evolution such as atheist Richard Lewontin and agnostic Stephen Jay Gould¹⁶, who were most vociferous in their criticism of sociobiology when it first emerged. They saw, and thoughtful scientists today see, a fundamental difference between the evidence for biological evolution, and the lack of evidence for sociobiology and evolutionary psychology; and they are at best embarrassed by the unfounded claims for these psychological just so stories.¹⁷

For the most part, the arguments offered to explain away religion are not scientific. We do not require any evolutionary theory to tell us that humans can deceive themselves, are prone to wishful thinking, exercise commitment to ideas, or have heightened ability to detect agents. These traits might lead to stubborn belief in the supernatural, which might be mistaken. But the ideas surrounding them are not scientific. They are pop-psychology to which is being attached a spurious honorific as if they were derived from scientific analysis. Yet, trite as they are, these are essentially the explanatory options that evolutionary psychology supposes itself to have 'discovered'. What's more, the atheist polemicists have no basis for making specific choices between the options, so they leave them open. For their purposes, it does not matter which of the dozens of different and incompatible evolutionary explanations might be correct. Provided we can be persuaded that *some* natural explanation or combination of explanations is going to work, their point is made. A truly scientific explanation ought to be different. It ought to be uncomfortable with the myriad of possible explanations (with no way to decide between them) not, like the polemicists, seemingly happy to pile up more and more possibilities as if their multiplicity somehow made the argument weightier. In any case, psychological analyses, whether evolutionary or not, do not decide whether the content of the beliefs analyzed are true.

There is serious progress, by contrast, in brain science. We do now have the beginnings of an ability to measure the functions of the brain as it is working. And I think this century will see steady technical progress in measurement and towards an understanding of the physical mechanisms that constitute the brain. Does this threaten the Christian faith? It depends.

If we maintain that Christian belief inherently requires a dualist and explicitly supernatural understanding of the mind, then probably that *will* be challenged by the progress of brain science. If however we adopt the more rational, and I would argue more Biblical, viewpoint of seeing the soul as the totality of the person, including mind, body, humanity, consciousness, and spirit, then I do not believe Christian belief needs to be on the defensive. I don't doubt that atheists will argue that understanding the mind at a scientific level disproves religion. But it is a poor argument. Psychological determinism, it has long been realized, is logically self-defeating. If one supposes that the ideas humans have are fully explained by a physical analysis of the brain, or by a behaviorist analysis of training, or an evolutionist description of inherited predispositions, or some combination of these or other so-called scientific analyses, then presumably the very belief that this is the case is determined just by these influences. If that were so, then why should we suppose the content of the belief to be true? In short, if our beliefs are determined by evolution or psychology, why should one believe so? No, the mind is not explained away by a physical analysis of the brain. Nor are other levels of description, including the spiritual.

A desire to protect the faith of Christian young people and engage agnostics who might be persuaded by atheist arguments ought to motivate us to hard thinking about the questions they raise. That's true even though it is intellectually somewhat unrewarding. The intellectual weaknesses of the atheist arguments should not lead us to discount their influence. Christian teachers and pastoral leaders need to find natural moments to respond. But we also have to have something serious to say. In my experience, both Christian and agnostic students are interested in this debate and open to thoughtful responses on either side. But they rarely hear the issues addressed in a respectful way. While some individual Christian writers have engaged directly, most churches have done little to help young people understand the debate. Perhaps pastors feel inadequate, but really the academic credentials of the militant atheists are not all that intimidating. At university inquisitive students usually face either bombast or embarrassed silence. At a place like MIT, there are few students who are unaware of the strength of the scientific evidence for common descent. All undergraduates take a course in biology, which naturally touches on molecular and genetic topics. Christian students, especially if they come from evangelical backgrounds, often experience a crisis if their church has taught an excessively literalist view of origins. They are looking for a thoughtful intellectual response from more experienced Christians, faculty and researchers, on both how to understand the relationship of science to faith, and how to respond to the claims of the militant atheists. Agnostic students are also often on a search for the transcendent. It is, I believe, very helpful when major campus speaking events open up these questions in the manner of a set-piece or a formal dialogue. But also, when a Christian faculty colleague and I held a discussion seminar a couple of years ago on the topic of "Is Belief in God Ridiculous?", addressing the critiques of the new atheists, it was attended by agnostics as well as Christians. They *all* reportedly found it an interesting and stimulating discussion opportunity. Who knows what seeds were sown? Moments of challenge are also moments of opportunity.

Notes

1. Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* IVP books, Downers Grove, IL, 2007, is an approachable place to start. Dinesh d'Souza *What's so great about Christianity*, Regenery, Washington DC, 2007, is also easy to read. H. Allen Orr's review "A Mission to Convert". *New York Review of Books* 54 (1) January 2007 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19775>, is an example of critique coming from an agnostic.
2. David Bentley Hart *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. Yale University press. New Haven 2009, p4.
3. Terry Eagleton. *London Review of Books* Vol. 28, No. 20, 19 October 2006, p 32.
4. The present essay is based on my book currently in preparation called *Monopolizing Knowledge* which addresses scientism on a broader canvas.
5. Jacques Monod. *Chance and Necessity. An essay on the natural philosophy of modern biology*. Vintage, New York, 1972, p 21.
6. The original Positivists, whose ambitions actually led them to the foundation of alternative churches complete with rituals and religious hierarchies
7. Matthew 6:26-30.
8. And there are some very interesting recent historical studies that address this question. For example William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Oxford University Press, 2009.
9. Richard Dawkins *The God Delusion* Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 2006
10. Actually Dawkins has been making this argument for at least 25 years, but it has become a central theme more recently, dubbed the ultimate 747 gambit".
11. Michael Polanyi in his *Person Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, Chicago University Press, 1958, makes this point the centerpiece of his classic critique of scientism.
12. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Norton, New York, 1986.
13. Edward O Wilson, *Human Nature*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978
14. Steven Pinker, *How the mind works*, Norton, New York, 1999.
15. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Viking Penguin, New York, 2006.
16. See Elizabeth Allen et al, Against "Sociobiology", *New York Review of Books* 22, 18, 13 Nov 1975 for a non-technical indictment, or for example S.J.Gould and R.C.Lewontin, "The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme", *Proc Roy Soc, B.*, 205, 581 (1979), for a technical critique.
17. A more recent critique is from biologist H Allen Orr, "Darwinian Storytelling", *New York Review of Books*, 50, 3, 2003.