

IS SCIENCE REPLACING RELIGION?

By

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Richard Dawkins, the well-known writer on evolution, was recently in Ireland promoting his book, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Penguin, 1998). He claimed in a radio interview that science is replacing religion and said - 'Science has nothing to learn from religion, and neither does anyone else'. Dawkins does science a disservice by promoting this idea. Obviously, if science takes over from religion, this will be bad for religion. But I believe it will also be bad for science. Science and religion have different functions and neither should stray beyond its function.

The function of science is to discover how the physical and material world works, using natural methods. Science is very powerful and successful, but is limited in scope. Science can answer only certain types of question. The sort of questions science can answer are (a) how does the world work?, (b) what consequence will result if a certain manipulation is carried out on a particular part of the world?

There are many types of question that science alone cannot answer. For example, science has accumulated a vast body of knowledge about the world. Much of this knowledge can be applied (technology) to do useful things. It can also be used for bad ends. Science cannot tell us which are good applications and which are bad, which are better and which are worse, which we will like and which we will dislike (although science can help us to answer these questions). Science cannot devise codes of ethics and morality. By and large, science cannot tell us what will make us happy. And, by definition, science has nothing to say about the spiritual dimension.

The philosophy of materialism holds that nothing exists except matter and that the properties of matter explain all phenomena in the universe. A materialist cannot believe in God. It is not necessary to be a materialist to be a scientist. Many scientists are materialists, many are not. It is not necessary to be an atheist to be a scientist. Some scientists are atheists, many are not.

Science deals only with the natural world, the world of the material. But a scientist can study the natural world without denying that a supernatural realm also exists. Of course, the scientist must explain the natural world by natural mechanisms and cannot import a supernatural explanation into science.

Scientists who are also materialists feel that science has the potential to answer just about everything. They will not agree with me about the types of question that science cannot answer. They will feel that, if science cannot answer these questions at the moment, future advances will provide the answers. Many popular science writers are materialists, e.g. Peter Atkins, Stephen Rose, and Richard Dawkins, which leads them to make very large claims for science. But only time will tell if science has any power to handle the types of question that are, in my opinion, beyond its competence.

One function of religion is to answer questions like what is the purpose of life? Another function of religion is to help us to lead moral lives. Science can tell us how we got to where we are today as biological organisms, and it can predict where we are going in the biological sense. But science cannot tell us if there is a purpose to our existence and where we might be going in that sense.

Questions about the purpose of life, about a supernatural realm existing independently of the body, have always preoccupied the human mind. Religion provides a comprehensive answer for very many people. If religion was abolished, these questions would remain. Science cannot provide answers, but there is no shortage of primitive superstitions and magic to fill the vacuum. From a utilitarian perspective alone, mainstream religion plays a very useful role.

In pre-scientific times, religion not only answered the question of the purpose of life, but it also explained various parts of the natural world. Thus for example we have the Genesis creation account in the Bible and, later, the Church endorsed the earth-centred structure of the universe. Neither of these interpretations stand up against the alternative explanations provided by science. The Church has long since accepted the scientific description of the structure of the universe and mainstream Christian traditions are now happy to accept Genesis as a story rather than as a literal account.

In the past the Church at times bitterly opposed science, but no longer. But new and powerful opponents of science have emerged. These include a hodge-podge of New Age philosophies and, surprisingly, bitter criticism from social sciences and the humanities. Science should concentrate on its new critics and not waste energy poking an old dog that no longer barks at science.

Dawkins is correct in a limited sense to claim that science is taking over from religion. But only in the sense that the Church cedes the ground where science can show that a particular part of the natural world works differently to an explanation previously provided by the Church. In deferring to science in this manner religion loses none of its essence, which is to explain the purpose of life. The essence of science is to explain the natural world. Each to its own.

I think science is great. But there are many other things in the world that are great - family, love, friendship, literature, music, art, natural beauty, etc. And, of course, religion. Bryan Appleyard, in his powerful book *Understanding the Present* (Pan Books, 1992), charges that science is unable to co-exist with other values and, in the long run, takes over the niches that had been occupied by these values. He likens science to a crocodile, unable to turn its head and only able to move forward blindly with all-devouring jaws. I do not accept this but I cringe when I hear some of the florid pronouncements of popular science writers. By all means let us advance in science, but let us make haste with some humility.

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