

Further Book of Note

The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers by Curtis White. New York: Melville House, 2014 (augmented edition, first published 2013). 272 pp. \$13.55 (hardcover or paperback), \$11.95 (ebook, Kindle, PDF). ISBN 987-1612193908.

Scientific explorers might enjoy this rant against scientism and how it has insinuated itself into popular culture.

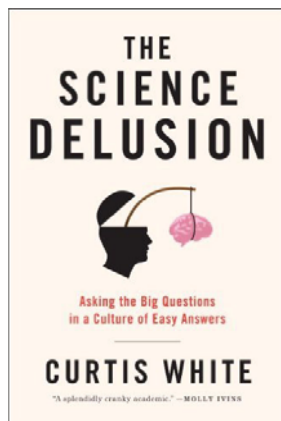
White singles out as leaders and gurus of scientism two groups: neuroscientists and the New Atheists, the latter including Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. When they or anyone else talk about the beauty of some scientific finding, or about any other aesthetic judgment or about an emotion, White charges hypocrisy, or at last failure to understand the implications of what these people write and claim, which is a rather plain version of reductionist mechanistic materialism: “Confess to the superiority of science and reason” (p. 8). How to explain “eagerness, . . . appetite, excitement for what the future holds for scientific discovery?” (p. 81). As White notes, “there may be nothing special about our place in the cosmos, but there is something very special about our ability to say so” (p. 82).

In places, White succumbs to oversimplifying, or perhaps to writing a little too much off-the-cuff. Thus he reveals his political leanings by charging that materialist scientism fits all too well with capitalism and that there is a synergistic relation between them. But so there is too with left-wing extremism: Dialectical materialism, after all, was preached by Marx, and claimed overtly as the worldview of the Soviet Union—in ways not at all congenial with actual science, as geneticists and theorists of chemical combination found.

Still, White has a good case to make and does so stylishly:

The problem for science is that it doesn't know what its own discoveries mean. (p. 25)

Scientists are weirdly comfortable with the idea that the universe and human life is [sic] meaningless. We're just products of physics and chemistry and so is the universe. (p. 80)



Perhaps it is White's political inclinations, or perhaps he himself normally believes what "science" has to say, when he charges "free-market economies . . . largely responsible for changing the climate" (p. 91). This willingness to take a mainstream scientific consensus as infallible is surely a symptom of the endemic scientism against which this book is railing.

Another instance of loose writing comes in charging that "science has extended its ambitions beyond the debunking of Christian dogma. It has now turned its attention to another old competitor, the secular world of the humanities and the arts" (p. 103). It is not "science" that debunked Christian dogma, it is scientism. And there are no grounds for calling arts, humanities, and science "competitors," in any intellectual sense.

Still, the New Atheists and their ilk provide White with ample fodder. Steven Pinker is cited for describing the mind as a biologically selected neural computer and for describing art as a biologically frivolous and vain activity (pp. 103–104). Jonah Lehrer wrote that "We can take snapshots of thoughts in brain scanners and measure the excitement of neurons as they get closer to a solution" (p. 110); "thoughts" and "excitement," really?

Those sorts of claims are widely accepted as legitimate descriptions of what science does and can do.

What's disturbing is what this all says about American culture. . . . in which self-evident lies, supported by stunning lapses in argument, are eagerly taken up by our most literate public, which is happy to call it 'fascinating' and 'provocative.' (p. 182)

Indeed. This book's central thesis is important and well-grounded, and the author's passion makes for some delightfully cutting, often sarcastic debunking of what the materialist extremists have to say.

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