

## Saturday Series

## The arrogance of scientism

**BOOKS** | Its pervasiveness in our culture attempts to push ethical and religious thought aside

by J.P. Moreland  
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*Just about every college student now learns that natural science is the supreme intellectual authority, while theology depends on blind faith, emotion, and cultural upbringing. In *Scientism and Secularism*, philosophy professor J.P. Moreland points out that such scientism—making science supreme—is not “a friend of science but rather its enemy.” Humble science tells us what is testable, but believers in scientism pretend to know about past and present what they can’t possibly know. Assumptions about what supposedly happened a billion years ago are untestable, and that makes scientific arrogance detestable. Read on, courtesy of Crossway, please.*

*Scientism and Secularism made WORLD’s short list for 2018 Book of the Year in the Science category. —Marvin Olasky*



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## The (Scientific) Air We Breathe

I was in the middle of a nine-day stay in the hospital following the removal of a cancerous tumor in my colon on April 27, 2016. During that time, several different shifts of nurses had come and gone. On this particular day, a new nurse came to care for me and take my vital readings.

As we chatted, she asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a philosophy professor. “Where did you go to school?” she asked. Working backwards, I explained that my PhD in philosophy is from the University of Southern California, my MA in philosophy is from the University of California at Riverside, my ThM in theology is from Dallas Seminary, and my BS in physical chemistry is from the University of Missouri.

A puzzled look came on her face. She mused out loud that I had taken two very unrelated, divergent paths.

Before she could explain, I asked if this was what she meant: I started off in science, which deals with reality—hard facts—and conclusions that could be proved to be true. But theology and philosophy were, well, fields in which there were only private opinions or personal feelings, where no one was right or wrong, or if they were, no one could know who was right. Science was cognitive, and theology and philosophy were personal and emotional.

Looking surprised, as though I had read her mind, she acknowledged that my understanding was exactly what she had in mind.

My nurse was expressing the view called *scientism*. Since scientism is so pervasive today—it is the intellectual and cultural air that we breathe—she could not have even named the worldview she was presupposing and articulating.

## What Is Scientism?

Roughly, *scientism* is the view that the hard sciences—like chemistry, biology, physics, astronomy—provide the only genuine knowledge of reality. At the very least, this scientific knowledge is vastly superior to what we can know from any other discipline. Ethics and religion may be acceptable, but only if they are understood to be inherently subjective and regarded as private matters of opinion. According to scientism, the claim that ethical and religious conclusions can be just as factual as science, and therefore ought to be affirmed like scientific truths, may be a sign of bigotry and intolerance.

Before looking in more depth at scientism—the view that the hard sciences alone have the intellectual authority to give us knowledge of reality—let me show some concrete examples of it and how it is part of everyday common sense.

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## Scientism Illustrated

### **Example: Michael Kinsley**

On June 25, 2001, *Time* magazine featured an article by journalist Michael Kinsley defending stem-cell research on human embryos. He wrote, “These [embryos] are microscopic groupings of a few differentiated cells. There is nothing human about them, except potential—and, if you choose to believe it, a soul.”<sup>1</sup>

Now the first thing to note about his conclusion is that it is bad science, claiming that there is nothing really “human” about human embryos, which is itself a scientifically absurd statement, contradicted by all of the standard textbooks of embryology!

But that’s not my point here. Rather, I want to draw your attention to a part of Kinsley’s sentence that you may not have noticed. Reread it carefully and note what he presupposes: we *know* scientific facts about human embryos, but we only *believe* things about human souls. For Kinsley, belief in a soul is not an item of knowledge. In his view, there is no evidence for it. He would probably put it in the same category as a unicorn. You can believe it if you want, perhaps because someone told you that it exists or because you wish that such a creature is out there, but you’ve never seen or heard or touched a unicorn and therefore it does not really count as knowledge. Kinsley undoubtedly thinks this kind of belief belongs in the pages of fantasy literature, not in the items of what we can truly know and be justified in believing. But Michael Kinsley is not advocating science. He’s expressing scientism.

### **Example: Marilyn vos Savant**

For a long time, Marilyn vos Savant (listed in five editions of the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the human with the highest recorded IQ) has written a column in *Parade* magazine titled “Ask Marilyn,” where people submit questions and Savant provides answers. In one post, a man explains that his parents raised him in a certain religion. Now an adult, he still likes the religion, but his friends are trying to get him to rationally consider others. He wonders if Savant thinks he should consider his friends’ arguments or just go on accepting his parents’ religion.

Here is Savant’s response: “You’re smarter than those friends. Religions cannot be proved true intellectually. They come from the heart—and your parents—not the mind. In my opinion, you have behaved wisely [by not listening to your friends’ “arguments”].”<sup>2</sup>

Marilyn vos Savant has no problem with this man holding to his parents’ religious beliefs—“No harm, no foul,” she might say—but she’s critical of his friends for trying to reason with him or to persuade him that other religious beliefs are more compelling or truthful or best accord with the evidence.

From reading her columns over the years, I assure you she would not say that *science* comes from the heart and not the mind, or that it comes from what your parents told you. Scientific claims can be proved true. But in her worldview, religious claims cannot. This is not science but scientism.

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### **Example: Scientism in School**

Scientism is found not only among those writing columns in popular magazines. It is also the required dogma in our schools, where it directly challenges Christianity’s claim to be a knowledge tradition. For example, consider the “Science Framework” issued by the state of California in 1989, designed to guide its public schools’ science curricula. The document offered teachers advice about how to address students who expressed reservations about the theory of biological macroevolution:

At times some students may insist that certain conclusions of science cannot be true because of certain religious or philosophical beliefs they hold. ... It is appropriate for the teacher to express in this regard, “I understand that you may have personal reservations about accepting this scientific evidence, but it is scientific knowledge about which there is no reasonable doubt among scientists in their field, and it is my responsibility to teach it because it is part of our common intellectual heritage.”<sup>3</sup>

This statement's significance comes not so much from its promoting evolution over creation as from the *picture of knowledge* it presupposes: knowledge about reality comes solely from science, and empirical knowledge claims derived from the hard sciences are the only claims that deserve the backing of public institutions.

This kind of reasoning seems to imply that religious and philosophical claims are simply matters of private feeling, which, by extension, means ignoring claims at the core of ethics, political theory, and religion. Words such as *conclusions, evidence, knowledge, no reasonable doubt, and intellectual heritage* become associated with science, giving science the “right” to define reality, while words like beliefs and personal reservations are associated with nonempirical claims, framing religious beliefs as mere ungrounded opinions. Put simply, the state of California is requiring that all students abide by the dictates not merely of science, but of scientism.

## Scientism Defined

We have looked briefly at some popular-level expressions, or presuppositions, of scientism, but now let's hear from actual scholars who propose a definition. According to philosopher of science Tom Sorell, “Scientism is the belief that science, especially natural science, is ... the most valuable part of human learning ... because it is much the most [sic] authoritative, or serious, or beneficial. Other beliefs related to this one may also be regarded as scientific, e.g., the belief that science is the only valuable part of human learning. ...”<sup>4</sup> Sorell notes that “What is crucial to scientism is not the identification of something as scientific or unscientific but the thought that the scientific is much more valuable than the non-scientific, or the thought that the non-scientific is of negligible value.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, when you have competing knowledge claims from different sources, the scientific will always trump the nonscientific.

In scientism, therefore, science is the very paradigm of truth and rationality. If you look carefully at both of Sorell's quotations, you may discern two forms of scientism: strong and weak. Strong scientism implies that something is true, rationally justified, or known if and only if it is a scientific claim that has been successfully tested and that is being used according to appropriate scientific methodology. There are no truths that can be known apart from appropriately certified scientific claims, especially those in the hard or natural sciences. Lawrence Principe correctly notes that, when it comes to strong scientism, the central idea is that “science and its methods provide the only fully valid route to gaining knowledge and for answering questions, to the exclusion of other methods and disciplines.”<sup>6</sup>

*Weak scientism* is still scientism, but it allows for more “wobble room.” Weak scientism acknowledges truths apart from science, granting them some minimal rational status even if they don't have scientific support. Nevertheless, weak scientism still implies that science is by far the most authoritative sector of human knowing.



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For practical purposes, weak scientism amounts to pretty much the same thing as strong scientism, though, technically speaking, they do differ. As noted above, weak scientism does not say that the sciences—especially the hard sciences—are the *only* way available to us to achieve knowledge of truth about reality; rather, advocates of weak scientism are willing to grant minimal rational status to at least some disciplines that most would not classify as scientific fields. If some field lacks scientific status or backing, then it is of negligible intellectual value and, if at all possible, the hard sciences (e.g., neuroscience) must take over nonscientific areas (e.g., spiritual teachings—note the number of books claiming that new insights from neuroscience have put spiritual growth on a new plane of authority) or must exert its influence in the more human sciences (psychology, education, etc.) in order to increase the credibility of those fields and to provide us with solid knowledge in them.

And of course, *ideas matter*. Indeed, we are largely at the mercy of our ideas. As the ideas that constitute scientism have become more pervasive in our culture, the Western world has turned increasingly secular and the power centers of culture (the universities; the media and entertainment industry; the Supreme Court) have come increasingly to regard religion as a private superstition. It is no surprise, then, that when our children go to college, more and more of them are just giving up on Christianity.

*Content taken from Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology by J.P. Moreland, ©2018. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.*

## ENDNOTES

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1. Michael Kinsley, “If You Believe Embryos Are Humans ...,” *Time* (June 25, 2001), 80.

2. Marilyn vos Savant, "Ask Marilyn," *Parade* (October 7, 2001), 25.

3. Cited in Mark Hartwig and P.A. Nelson, *Invitation to Conflict: A Retrospective Look at the California Science Framework* (Colorado Springs: Access Research Network, 1992), 20.

4. Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science* (London: Routledge, 1991), 1, his emphasis.

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

6. Lawrence Principe, "Scientism and the Religion of Science," in *Scientism: The New Orthodoxy*, ed. Richard M. Williams and Daniel N. Robinson (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 42, my emphasis.



### **J.P. Moreland**

J.P. is distinguished professor of philosophy at Biola University.

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