

Beyond Polemic, Part I

The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers

By Curtis White

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Unreal Solutions to False Problems, Adam Riggio

Curtis White's *The Science Delusion* (TSD) isn't all that interesting in itself. What it means, however, is extremely interesting. TSD is a modern popular polemic, and as such drastically oversimplifies the philosophical ideas to which White refers. Someone with a reasonable university education in humanities, who is the book's target demographic, will probably not learn much of anything from it that he or she didn't already know.

But TSD can teach us a lot about how modern popular polemic books work and the problems of the discourse that such books shape.

White depicts himself as articulating a middle ground between two angrily opposed hostile groups in Western intellectual life. On one hand, we have such luminaries as Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens, and the fraudulent Jonah Lehrer on the side of reductive materialists. Advocates for the scientific way of understanding the world, which he says reduces a vibrant and interesting universe to a series of 'nothing-but' statements. On the other hand, we have the polemics of fundamentalist religion who would destroy most knowledge institutions to replace them with the delivery of pat and oppressive dogma. White finds in Romanticism a middle ground whose ideas were once at the forefront of Western thinking, but have now slipped away.

I would say that the biggest problem of his way of thinking is that he proposes Romanticism as an alternative to science, and considers science as an institution incapable of understanding the beauty of the world. For White, scientific ways of thinking declare, for example, an organism to be a conjunction of metabolic processes, protein and gene chemistry, little different from any other and not really noteworthy. Science uncovers the mechanisms by which formerly mysterious objects work. And he considers demystifying the world equivalent to making the world boring, uninteresting, and worthless. He thinks that understanding the world as mechanical and material robs existence of its value. Romanticism views the human world as a creation of spirit, and understands human endeavour as art. As such, the world retains its worthiness to exist without being forced to accept the stagnant religious dogma of socially conservative Christianity.

But this whole way of thinking mistakes the scientific practice of revealing the inner workings of once-mysterious processes as robbing them of value. When a young person decides to become a scientist, they are rarely inspired by conceptions of the scientific disciplines as explaining all the joy and wonder away from the world. Their sense of wonder takes the form of an incredible enthusiasm for understanding the amazing and intricate ways the world puts itself together. The genuine scientific attitude is not making

the world a duller place. Awe at the world does not come from the mute mystery that Romantic concepts of sublimity rely on. Awe is that excitement that comes from discovering how the complexity of the world works. Picture a little girl in a chemistry lab or a planetarium for the first time, being told how stars, galaxies, computers, humans, cells, and societies are made: “Look how cool all this stuff is!”

White teaches us how little this real motivation for going into the sciences is understood by the contemporary popular intellectual debate about what science really is. His concern that scientific thinking devalues human life and the universe doesn’t need to go back to Kant and Rousseau for correction. Alan Moore in 1986 described what the scientific worldview really is:

Thermodynamic miracles. Events with odds against so astronomical they’re effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold. ... And yet, in each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg, multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive; meeting; siring this precise son; that exact daughter. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air into gold ... you are life, rarer than a quark and unpredictable beyond the dreams of Heisenberg; the clay in which the forces that shape all things leave their fingerprints most clearly

Who needs Romanticism when we already have the wonder of science?

Highlighting Wonder Outside of the Natural-Physical Sciences, Gregory Sandstrom

In regard to the closing question, “Who needs Romanticism when we already have the wonder of science?” perhaps it is possible that we could have both. One might also ask: Who needs (the wonder of) art, music, sports, literature, journalism, religion, politics, etc. when we have (the wonder of) science? Is ‘science’ (by which White means ‘natural sciences’) any more a source of ‘wonder’ than these other fields or realms of human life? My guess is that most people need (or want) some or all of these fields in one way or another, as alternate sources of ‘wonder’ to natural sciences.

It is indeed problematic when non-scientific fields are subsumed, marginalised or subverted by natural scientific rationality, sometimes or even oftentimes at the cost of ‘romance’ or ‘enchantment.’ It therefore seems that the ‘delusion’ White wishes to acknowledge in his book is when mainly natural-physical scientists and those who beckon to their logic embrace the ideology of scientism. These are the people who think we cannot have both Romanticism and natural science, while Romanticists and others (artists, musicians, athletes, writers, pastors/ priests/ rabbis/ mullahs/ laypersons, politicians, et al.) that are not seduced by scientism believe we can.

One particular point regarding “western intellectual life,” Adam has saved me from raising in my review. That is, it is obvious that I am not the audience of White’s book; at least, not as he selectively declares his audience. When he writes ‘western’ he really

means ‘U.S. of American,’ an audience strategy that non-USAmerican ‘westerners’ have grown accustomed to even as a sign of narrow-minded disrespect. In fact, he speaks more often of ‘American’ than ‘western’ in the book. The point is that this book is a ‘modern popular polemic’ specifically aimed at USAmericans, though there are features of the work that go beyond the Anglo-American stage and which could likewise be explored there.

White refers to ‘our’ and ‘us’ as the United States and Americans (28, 38) and to their ‘culture war’ (103). To suppose that a Canadian or Brit or other (potentially) English native speakers (or anyone else reading the book) is an ‘American’ too simply because they are ‘western’ is in some ways similar to the complaint that White expresses regarding natural scientists dismissing humanists and social scientists as not possessing legitimate knowledge. Indeed, there are real differences in national and academic frameworks, but the similarities can also be explored, preferably done respectfully to other sovereignties (nations or academic fields) than one’s own. As a professor of English, White quite obviously feels he is dismissed by natural scientists, just as many ‘westerners’ feel dismissed by USAmericans who expect their ‘culture war’ to be ‘ours’ too. Much criticism of the ‘modern popular polemic’ can be seen as uniquely USAmerican, while solutions to that polemic are available elsewhere.

As for “science as an institution incapable of understanding the beauty of the world,” I tend to agree with White (and M. Weber, et al.). The humanities, and to some extent the social sciences are the more appropriate fields for studying the “beauty of the world,” though this does not exclude an enchanted natural scientist from reflexively finding beauty in nature outside of their scientific profession. Unfortunately, White’s text doesn’t do an especially good job at elevating philosophy in the face of reductionist natural science and doesn’t really explore the notion of ‘enchantment’ outside of Romanticist ideology.

To propose an ideology or ‘style’ of thought such as Romanticism as an alternative to another ideology in scientism does not necessarily provide any forward-looking way to fruitfully integrate science, philosophy and worldview. In that sense, I would agree with Adam; there’s not much new in the book (aside from humanities-neuroscience criticism), but that criticism of scientism as promoted by ‘new atheists’ from a dissenting atheist-humanist is a significant event to witness. It would be helpful for Adam to explain further what he finds “extremely interesting” about what the book ‘means’ taken in the perspective of worldview studies and the role (or lack) of philosophy in the USAmerican landscape.

The Perils and Politics of “Wonder-Talk”, Monique Dufour

White doesn’t ask us to choose between “the wonder of science” and other ways and means of amazement. White acknowledges that nature — from quark to cosmos — may stir feelings of awe and may inspire people to engage in scientific work. That scientific inquiry has named and explained natural phenomena through empirical methods inherently diminishes, for White, neither the validity nor the impressiveness of the

accounts of this material world. He sometimes expresses admiration for the erudition of scientists and their insights. In short, White is not arguing that “nature” isn’t worthy of wonder, and that scientific discovery doesn’t enhance our appreciation of what is. Instead, White observes and considers the prevalence of what we might call “wonder-talk” among prominent people who speak on behalf of science. What is this wonder of science, and to what ends has it been deployed?

As a rhetorical commonplace used by many eminent advocates of science, wonder-talk troubles White for a number of reasons. First, while it seems profound, we are expected to accept it at face value, as obviously and essentially meaningful. Second, we are to believe in expressions such as “the wonder of science” on the basis of the authority of the person reporting the experience of wonder, an expectation that is both elitist and unscientific. “Amazement-before-the-cosmos,” White asserts, “cannot be tested or proved by observation, and it is not predictive of anything other than itself. In the hands of science, beauty is just a tautology, or a dogma.” Third, and most important, it is an effective way of talking about both the object of scientific study — which is to say everything that can and should be known — as well as the methods of science *as though they have no politics*. White is disgusted with wonder-talk — along with swooning uses of words like “beauty” and “imagination” and “wisdom”— because it actively disguises the ideological dimensions of science; worse, it scripts interpretations and encourages mute assent among the rest of us, agog at the universe it represents for our enjoyment. Look. Be enthralled, or be irrational.

Wonder is a historically-contingent way of facing and contending with the strange new world presented (and created?) by some scientific claims. In the 19th century, wonder was dark, alluring, unsettling, as the drive to know confronted the search for meaning. In contemporary wonder-talk, we seem left with something more like a “childlike sense of wonder,” an infantilizing position that may rightly leave some of us unsatisfied and suspicious. As White observes of the contemporary moment, “when science tells us that we are mere products, or ‘code,’ or that our minds are like computer networks, and when we are then provided with lives best fit for machines, some of us despair in large part because the scientific worldview has come to feel repressive, to feel like part of the cause of our despair.” Although White does not invoke it, the most iconic expression of this dilemma caught between knowing and meaning comes from Charles Darwin. *On the Origin of Species* not only presents one long argument about modification by descent and natural selection, but, I think, does so in the voice of a narrator who tries to perform a way to accept and live in “the Darwinian condition.” “There is grandeur in this view of life,” Darwin famously writes, at the close of *Origin*, “with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Shall we hold Darwin responsible for his pale imitators, who try to end their scientific investigations by eloquently transporting the reader from the things presented toward what they may mean? It hardly seems fair. But White’s book reminds me that to write well about meaning and affect is no mere linguistic flourish; it’s more than a scientist’s

florid signature at the end of a report from the cosmos. White’s criticism of wonder-talk, then, is more than a rhetorical dressing-down of lesser writers. White may be dismissed as an aesthete when he writes, “[w]hen scientists gush about the splendor of the universe, they are speaking like poets, but very bad poets.” But his criticism matters when language matters, when it’s more than a slogan or admonishment. Life is always also “a view of life” — a perspective, a point of view, a world made of words, a way to live.

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