Beyond Polemic, Part III

The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers
By Curtis White
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Circulating Scientism, Monique Dufour

The recent and much circulated Steven Pinker piece, “Science Is Not Your Enemy,” scolds recent critics of scientism, and extends “an impassioned plea to neglected novelists, embattled professors, and tenure-less historians.” What does he ask of this beleaguered group whom he deigns to address? Acknowledge that all great modern thinkers were actually scientists, and that scientism is little more than a “boo-word.” Accept that they need science and that science will enhance all of their endeavors, endeavors that would otherwise wallow in nostalgia, irrelevance, and resentment. And revel in the “gifts bestowed by science:” “the exhilarating achievement of scientific knowledge itself,” and “images of sublime beauty” that “science has provided the world.”

As we conclude our discussion of White’s book and its attendant issues, I would like to amplify and concur with a few of White’s points that speak to Pinker’s piece in particular, and to the current cacophony of articles and blog posts about the humanities-science divide. Adam and Gregory have been articulate and insightful about the philosophical and argumentative commitments and shortcomings of The Science Delusion (TSD), including its myopic emphasis on US culture, its vague positive program, its shifting definitions of science as an object of study, and its tacit acceptance of a theory of “unified science.” Still, I think that White has something worthwhile to contribute to a few other aspects of these debates: 1.) the significance of specific forms of scientific authorship, 2.) the unexamined normative dimensions of the dominant modes of producing, disseminating, and most importantly, receiving ideas, and, finally, 3.) the political dimension of artistic disruption.

As I noted earlier, White identifies and aims at a compelling target: the scientific literati—a small specific group of famous celebrity authors whose names and works are disseminated in august venues. White may have many targets in his book, and they are sometimes diffuse, but this one is clear. Pinker’s article is a theatrical display of White’s observations about how some prominent authors expect to speak to culture on behalf of science. Why should we take them at their word about the meaning of scientific discovery or the truth of beauty? Why do they expect that scientific authority entails the moral authority to offer normative dictates about the nature of knowledge and the imperatives of inquiry? In short, why are we obliged to listen, nod, and obey? The answer is scientism. The analytic and rhetorical power of crying “Scientism!” may have been weakened by its artless uses, but that does not mean that scientism isn’t real. It is on display as a mode of authorship: a role available for some people to produce and circulate ideas. By the logic of scientism, elite science and reason authorizes the scientific literati to speak (down) to others about all manner of cultural matters, and it allows them to mock, condescend to, and dismiss those who disagree. In the context of social epistemology, what is most alarming is that the scientific literati expect to dictate the
reception of their ideas. Not only do they expect and get a platform from which to speak and be heard. They expect consent.

In response, White suggests the disruptive function of Romantic art. We have agreed that White’s positive program of Romanticism does not offer a concrete plan of alternative action. However, it does suggest that one may be wary of the imperative to “cooperate” with science. It may sound cranky to resist the new norm of interdisciplinarity — more, better, newer knowledge efficiently generated by the power of working together! Admittedly, White doesn’t seem concerned about being perceived as cranky, or old-fashioned, or as an aesthete. Still, there’s more at stake here than White’s idiosyncratic authorial persona, or the rhetorical stance it represents in the scripted roles available in the humanities-science-religion debates. In White’s exhortation to take up the disruptive function of art and the disruptive role of the artist, he knows that those doing this sort of work will not always be celebrated or well-liked or pleasing. They may be called cranky, or cynical, or uncooperative. But this sort of name-calling often serves to repress debate, to belittle alternatives, and to enforce obedience (see: the history of feminism). Who wants to be the person who argues against the seemingly benign act of “working together”? It’s worth considering, though, whether, in these debates, one cooperates in order to meet with approval, both to avoid the discipline of threatened exclusion and to get a share of the goodies.

White further suggests that dissonance — rather than harmony—may open imaginative and generative alternatives. We might consider the political motives of the dominant value of harmony inherent in calls for cooperation and working together. To put it more broadly, we might consider how the aesthetics of inquiry — our preferred forms of making and representing meaning—is also a politics of inquiry. Consider some of our contemporary preferences—for harmonious interactions across the disciplines, for knowledge that unfurls through the power of self-correction, for seeing the figure science in all human endeavors, for the confident voice of the powerful scientist who tells us what is beautiful and what it all means. In contrast, dissent and disruption, or, as White puts it when he quotes Frank Zappa, “freaking out,” can seem grotesque or rude because they are defined within and against the dominant social norms inherent in our aesthetic preferences for producing, circulating, and receiving meaning.

The trouble is, disruption is risky. It isn’t always understood or appreciated. Such risk is all the more perilous in the current marketplace of ideas, which rewards profitable novelty, which requires product™, and in which value must accrue quickly and predictably according to established metrics. White’s aesthetic and political alternatives are suggestive, but they also leave the author or artists out there as an individual, for whom risk is, well, especially risky.

In the cul-de-sac of debates about the humanities-science-religion divides, recent widely circulated defenses of the humanities seem stuck in their own shopworn positions. For instance, Mark Edmunson’s Chronicle Review essay, “The Ideal English Major,” is currently making the rounds to amens, argues that English majors “revel in language for a purpose” and major in “becoming a person.” The piece is lovely, and often inspiring. Ultimately, though, it’s safe. It focuses on the development of the inner life of
individuals, whose skills include sensitivity to language, wonder (that again), taking “tips from the wise,” and being “up for debate and open for change.” In the end, there’s really nothing disruptive about this English major. He’s getting on with living a full life, and I’m the last to suggest that happiness is overrated, but this is the sort of happiness that won’t bother anybody, and that doesn’t entail taking responsibility for the unhappiness of others. It’s an individual project, and it’s entirely optional. And in Gary Gutting’s response to Dawkins in the *New York Times*’ “The Stone,” Gutting defends philosophers and science humanists against Dawkins charges by pointing out that many prominent philosophers are also trained in science. While being an educated person may entail some degree of scientific literacy and understanding, it seems odd to suggest that humanities must gain their credibility as humanists by also being trained as scientists.

Whenever I begin to plan a class that I will teach, I ask, “who does this class ask the students to be?” I’ve been thinking about this question as we’ve shared ideas about TSD. Who do these debates invite humanists to be? And, more broadly, what roles seem available to us in the current culture of scientism? Amid these roles, it’s clear that we have become profoundly and understandable risk-adverse, especially given the material realities of work in the humanities. In order to move beyond roles that discourage dissent, that follow the economic model and logic of science, and that isolate us on individual career tracks, we may need to engage in the risky project of aligning our work with our values. This sort of risk means that we will need to do one of the hardest things of all for many humanists: work together on the political project of collective dissent.

**Fight the Real Enemy, Adam Riggio**

A book like White’s can be difficult, despite its being written so clearly, with such a simple argument. *The Science Delusion* (TSD) is difficult because what is most interesting about it is not an argument in the book itself, but trying to understand why it exists in the first place. Its author thought it was worth publishing, and its publisher decided it could appeal widely enough to make money.

Gregory’s earlier contributions have rightly attacked the book for oversimplifying a complex set of intellectual fields and ignoring the true nature of scientific practice in favour of a false image of a monolithic science. The real problem of TSD is why this false image is so popular that enough people buy into it to make this book a good investment for a publisher. Monique and I have, in my view, considered different aspects of this broader problem.

Believing in the power of science to reveal the truth used to be a form of rebellion, and sometimes it still is. People who live in religious communities that shun scientific discoveries and technological creations sometimes rebel against those oppressive structures and rules. The power of scientific knowledge and the institutions of its dissemination can help free people from genuine oppression. Monique is right to point out the hegemonic character of scientism. Gutting’s stirring defense of the humanities is brought down by his ultimate reason: that humanities scholars and students can act like scientists too. The irony of defending the humanities from the assaults of scientism by
swearing that the best humanities practitioners measure up to the standards of scientism already is hilarious. But one person’s hegemony might be another person’s emancipator.

Such is the tricky field we have found ourselves negotiating, with no small degree of tension among our perspectives, since the beginning of this collaboration. Humanist scholarship must be defended on its own terms. There is some knowledge that cannot, or at least should not, be mathematized. But all the opponents and advocates of scientism we have been engaging with throughout our collaboration come from humanities backgrounds. To me, it remains an open question how much the various communities of scientists care about their reception in humanities. Perhaps instead of conceiving of some scientistic assault on the traditional venues of the humanities, we should instead discuss the identity crisis in the humanities that has developed as universities shift to modes of production more hostile to the slow pace, careful thought, and wise words of the best projects in our fields. The traditional images and goals of humanities should be defended on their own terms. Humanities degree programs and research projects do not face pressure from scientific institutions themselves, but from corporate pressure to oversimplify our material and conform to rules that exploit students and create a generation of lifelong debtors.

We should not fight the enemy of the humanities, but the enemy of humanity.

Monique hopes that we humanities practitioners will not lose sight of our critical perspectives or lose our power to destabilize the powerful. As we close our collaboration, I am prepared to suggest that scientism might even be a straw man for the real struggle in the university of the twenty-first century, a set of thin excuses for perpetuating a regime where the rich grow richer and ordinary people fall deeper in debt and financial decrepitude that kills one’s feelings for community, solidarity, and friendship.

Humane Science and Philosophy as Difficult Reality, Not a Dawkinsian Delusion, Gregory Sandstrom

Why is USAmerican culture supposedly one of ‘easy answers,’ and what are instead the ‘difficult answers’ or indeed the difficult questions? As a non-USAmerican citizen, this is a challenge for me to answer and one I wish White had addressed more specifically in his book (the duo ‘easy answer’ is found only in the subtitle, just as is the duo ‘big question’). One thing I can say from experience is that people around the world are generally not scared of Darth Vader anymore, realising that the heart of humanity is more organic than mechanical, and even more spiritual than scientific.

Monique speaks about “the current culture of scientism.” This gets to the heart of the matter more directly than White’s book. If the scientistic narrative in the USA is bankrupt or leading towards collapse, then it should be openly challenged and corrected. And if the situation can’t be changed from within, then ideas and approaches from other countries and peoples where scientism currently does not reign should be learned and eventually incorporated into the USA. This can potentially help to overcome the scientistic attitude there, in case alternatives do not exist or are heavily muted due to their unfortunate association with religious fundamentalism.
Monique’s final call to action is noteworthy as a challenge: let us “work together on the political project of collective dissent.” But this cannot simply mean a call to action that heads into a “cul-de-sac of debates about the humanities-science-religion divides.” Indeed, the field known as ‘sociology of science,’ which originated in socialist countries (Russia and Poland, in the first 1/3 of the 20th century) is largely about communal storytelling on the value and goals of science for people, listening to the stories of natural scientists and responding as a society of ethically responsive voices. Unlike the scientific atheism that was promoted, if not always imbibed in those societies, we now more easily recognise that natural scientists are not (and should therefore not be treated as) priests or shamans. Scientists shouldn’t (or needn’t) ask people to confess to them as laypersons, as if Dawkins was to become the next August Comte in creating a positivist religion of humanity or ‘atheism of humanity’ for all reasonable people to embrace.

My biggest problem with White’s book is that he offers no alternative solution other than an ideology or literary style: Romanticism. It’s obviously o.k. to be romantic, just as most people like listening to love songs. But to suggest that Romanticism alone addresses “the big questions” or that it is an appropriate alternative to Science as ideologised in scientism is far too naïve a position to hold. And likewise, acting as if the humanities are inferior or ruined (Speigel 2013) is simply not a healthy alternative. That is the feeling I was left with after reading White’s book; without something healthy and hopeful that could move the discourse forward to fresh ground.

White’s TSD is delivered as an English-language message. Yet it might be helpful to admit that a large part of the problem of ‘scientism’ is due to the Anglo-American thought in which it is housed, which has indeed fragmented humanities as apart from other ‘knowledge’ realms. Bringing a more holistic or synthetic, rather than reductionistic or analytic dimension to the debate would serve to enable post-scientistic approaches to potentially flourish. Indeed, from the recent responses to Pinker’s ‘scientism,’ it would seem there are voices awaiting elucidation that could serve to heal some of the ‘humanities-science-religion’ divides that Monique acknowledges.

Social epistemology can help us regain a sense of the unity of knowledge (i.e. reflexively speaking) by highlighting both the possibilities and limits of various scholarly fields, including natural-physical sciences, social sciences and humanities. Likewise, ‘philosophy in science’ can be safely but confidently promoted, to identify limits of scientific explanation where humanities, philosophy and theology/worldview must be called in for important (‘big’) questions and problems. What this asks for is nothing less than a Renaissance of the humanities in the 21st century global village, across language barriers and cultural misunderstandings; helping to ‘put science in its place’ and stopping natural scientists from giving it exaggerated importance.

On one particular point I must tactically disagree with Adam. I don’t think there is (any longer, if there ever was) an “identity crisis in the humanities;” to me that is a defeatist attitude and one that should not be entertained. Just having attended the Horizons for Social Sciences and Humanities event in Lithuania with several of the leading SSH scholars in Europe (see Horizons for Social Sciences and Humanities – Post-
Conference Interview) it is clear that social sciences and humanities are not actually ‘suffering’ from a self-invented crisis. SSH is deeply significant for society and both the present and future of knowledge. It is nevertheless important for humanities scholars to actively engage society, to come out of their ‘ivory towers’ in the digital age, to establish greater ‘public understanding of the humanities,’ to renew the arts of speaking, reading and writing in order to break through some of the barriers and underdevelopments in human-social thought for communities and peoples worldwide.

Part of this realization is the need to push forward with interdisciplinary projects where humanities are not considered as ‘add-ons’ simply to discuss the ethical implications of ‘actual’ (other) knowledge realms. We must involve ethical considerations, as well as social and cultural realities during the early stages of scientific research. The SERRC is a good example of this, where multiple voices are interacting via open access on a variety of scientific and humanitarian themes, even if it is taking place digitally on-line and thus outside of the typical modern tradition of paper-journal publication.

In closing, it might be worth considering that in a competition between scientism and humanism, undoubtedly scientism would lose; people value their humanity more at the end of the day than any novelty of the latest scientific announcement, no matter how ‘revolutionary.’ That is, unless natural science can do the unthinkable, specifically medicine that can serve to indefinitely extend human life, the value of human life (and of any life-resonating religious sensibilities) will always be seen as greater than any sacrifice to the gods of ‘Modern Science’ that any new atheist or naturalistic scientific practitioner could ever attempt to play.

We don’t need White’s post-modern version of humanities-inferiority ‘romance’ to realise this already. Thus, as a last word, I do hope we (as an international community, but specifically USAmerican scientism advocates) have learned our lesson from the dialectical materialism of the 20th century Soviets to realise that it is indeed a delusion to worship science or to embrace a scientistic worldview. Instead, together with science as one of the wonderful tools of humankind we can work socially towards a situation of greater common flourishing and more humane living on Earth.

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Selected References for “Beyond Polemic” Parts I, II and III


**Responses to Pinker**