Beyond Polemic, Part II

The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers
By Curtis White
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Can ‘Romanticised’ Humanities Help Overcome Natural Scientism Delusions?
Gregory Sandstrom

Part I: The Reflexive Negative

“We Romantics, we Free Spirits (as Nietzsche liked to say), are in exile.”
— White (197).

White’s The Science Delusion (TSD) is framed as a way of taking back the city of Knowledge in contemporary higher education and returning Romantic-Humanists or ‘Free Spirits’ from exile to positions of honour, dignity and worth. What jumps out in the book instead is an unnecessary inferiority complex demonstrated by a Professor of English when it comes to the hierarchy of disciplines in the contemporary academy.

From a humanities perspective, natural scientists, so goes this complex, are often arrogant and proud at how ‘hard’ or ‘pure’ or ‘exact’ their sciences are, at how difficult and special it is to become a natural scientist; what a privileged and small company they are. A major problem for White’s thesis is when natural scientists are not arrogant, proud and domineering, but rather humble, curious and ideologically cautious, which might actually be the case more often than not. And besides, why should sympathy accrue just because humanities scholars complain that the world doesn’t pay them enough attention (cf. Steven Pinker 2013, and several responses to it, in the Selected References section at the end of Part III)?

White doesn’t engage the reality of doing natural science or add to uncovering the psychology of natural scientists. He gives no time to exploring the interdisciplinary views of natural scientists that are not close-minded atheists or anti-theists, but who are searchers or theists open to learning from the humanities while rejecting scientism. It would have been helpful for balance if White had called upon such scholars as Alistair McGrath (biology), John Lennox (mathematics), who have both written contra-Dawkins, or George Ellis (physics, cosmology) instead of writing a ‘pop culture’ book aimed at further exposing the scientism of ‘new atheists.’ This makes White’s TSD a simple polemic, as Adam contends above, with perhaps entertainment value but little academic worth.

White says that some scientists are “arrogant in the sense that they tended to be dismissive of every discipline outside of the hard sciences” (47). What is missing from the book, however, is a clear and concrete platform that would uplift the ‘soft’ humanities and social sciences to receive the attention they deserve in society. Thus would need to be done in a way that cannot (or only unwisely) be dismissed by a minority of natural-
physical scientists. For example, aside from dramatic appeals to Romanticism, White offers no serious program to elevate even his own field of English literature, let alone other ‘humanities’ fields such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics and politics (as some non-Americans view the term ‘humanities’) as relevant beyond the limits of natural-physical scientific explanations for our lives.

White claims that “science [meaning, scientists] ought to open itself to other forms of thinking, if not knowing, and it might if it felt a little less besieged” (53). Okay, but that just sounds like a case of justifying one’s own belittlement. It sounds as if nice, gentle, cooperative humanities scholars are always already ‘open’ to ‘natural scientific’ forms of thinking, but that it is the cruel, uncooperative, narrow-minded specialist natural scientists that are not open to humanities forms of thinking. They are guilty; we are not. But where is the actual evidence for this?

White claims that scientists are fed this type of disciplinary triumphalism from within their ranks: “Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge,” he quotes Stephen Hawking as saying (23). What we don’t learn from White is about the distribution of natural scientists’ attitudes. This is an area where social epistemology and sociology of science can contribute. But the empirical research must be done by actually conducting surveys and working together with natural scientists rather than broad-brushing them as all ‘deluded’ and writing off all scientists as willing comrades to a fanatical few atheist fundamentalists. Will humanities scholars like White support the ‘empirical’ research of social scientists in this endeavour or is the book’s platform one of Romanticised humanities against all forms of ‘scientific’ activity?

White may not like it that neuroscientists and ‘[new] atheists’ sometimes ask us to ‘submit’ and to “[c]onfess to the superiority of science and reason.” (8). But unfortunately, he doesn’t go a positive step further by invoking a sizably credible alternative. White raises a red flag regarding “neuroscience’s encroachment on the humanities” (5), but provides little of value for defending the sovereignty of the humanities against this encroachment. He roughly identifies the dangers of scientism, yet without offering any solutions other than Romanticism.

Part II: The Reflexive Positive

White writes that “For science, the only thing deader than God is philosophy” (23). Yet this is certainly not true for Francis Collins, current Director of the USA’s National Institutes of Health and author of The Language of God. It would provide a reflexive positive for the book to promote a collaborative, interdisciplinary science, philosophy and theology/worldview conversation, but White stops short of this.

Why not encourage a push to re-ignite philosophy in a dialogue about humanity and the limits of science? If so, then social epistemology is a good place to start. This would help us to understand how knowledge (scientific, artistic, cultural, political, etc.) is produced,
where, by whom and how ideologies and worldviews such as ‘God is dead’ inevitably influence the conversation.

What natural sciences don’t have/do should be openly taken into account. Reflexivity is a clear example. Natural scientists attempt pure objectivity, eschewing subjectivity in the legacy of positivism. By positing the humanities-originated notion of ‘reflexivity’ in the face of natural scientific positivism, we can then encourage the practise of ‘philosophy in science’ (W.R. Stoeger, M. Heller and J.M. Zycinski 1985 and M. Heller [1986] 2011). And by establishing the inevitable presence of philosophy in science, we may bring philosophy to life again, not only ‘in science,’ but also beyond it. This is the kind of constructive possibility White’s text is missing.

To his credit, White does at least reflexively declare his worldview orientation openly in the book: “Like Hitchens, I am an atheist” (28), according to a particular definition of ‘God.’ As a humanities scholar then, White shows that he personally lacks ‘enchantment’ or ‘religious musicality,’ as M. Weber called it. In other words, it is not just natural scientists who believe ‘God is dead,’ but also postmodernist English professors like White.

White speaks this way about his opponents: “Freed at last from the limits imposed by religion, 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” (103). Yet it does not seem true that humanities and the arts are all ‘secularised’ (cf. C. Taylor 2009 and D. Martin 1979) as if religion in the humanities and arts no longer is relevant (then again, since I am not from the national audience for this book, it may just be that outside of USAmerica, the secular has not triumphed over these realms as it has there). White somehow actually seems to be interested in the phenomenon of secular science or anti-theistic science (R. Dawkins, J. Coyne, P.Z. Meyers, et al.), but doesn’t explicitly make that the object of his pro-Romantic book.

A broad disenchantment is carelessly applied to all natural scientists, secular or otherwise: “scientists are weirdly comfortable with the idea that the universe and human life is meaningless. We’re just products of physics and chemistry and so is the universe” (80). Yet this is where White could actively work towards a more fruitful assessment than he does, by arguing that the universe and human life is meaningful. To do this, he should directly attack his real opponent, which is the ideology of scientism, citing help from natural scientists who likewise criticize it (e.g. Hutchinson 2011). Indeed, when he writes that “the scientific worldview has come to feel repressive, to feel like part of the cause of our despair” (101), as Monique referred to in Part I, what he really means is scientism, not Romantic or ‘enchanted’ natural science or theistic natural scientists.

Why then isn’t the book called *The Scientism Delusion* instead of *The Science Delusion*? This change in strategy would allow White to appropriately criticize the natural scientists that promote scientism (as Adam named in Part I), while nevertheless still advocating for scientific advance by those who are not scientistic ideologues. Such an approach would offer a middle ground, so as not to seem fanatically or blindly Romantic or isolationist pro-humanities.
There is another feature, however, that operates in the background. Romanticism for White seems to be a codeword for anti-capitalism. He hints that there is “an abuse of science by people with social and political agendas” (10), and explains how he wants to reveal in the book “How the ideology of science meshes with the broader ideology of capitalism.” (11.) This raises the question: how realistic are his calls for a return to Romanticism in the face of “the most massively destructive social system in human history — capitalism and capitalist militarism” (38)? In this sense, to be a ‘Free Spirit’ for White seems to be equivalent with throwing off the shackles of capitalism and American militarism. But what earth-shaking alternative to capitalism and American militarism does White actually propose that the world should pay attention to? There is nothing in TSD on offer except a rather blurry Romanticism.

White puts his focus on “something science is mostly clueless about: how we ought to live” (167). On the other hand, how then can the humanities give clues as to “how we ought to live” in a non-relativistic, post-post-modernist meaningful way? Surely people would like to hear solutions and how humanities are champions of “how we ought to live” in today’s day and age, if they are available. Yet, isn’t it one of the greatest knocks against the humanities: that there are more questions than answers and they are mainly, if not entirely, of subjective relevance only? Truth for you might not be truth for someone else; at least, not in a ‘hard,’ empirical, scientific sense.

It may be true as White claims that qua scientist, “the scientist is insensible to the nuance of what-it’s-like to be human” (185). Nevertheless, let us not forget that natural scientists are human beings too and not just robots in laboratories. They still may be ideological humanists; they might (and probably do) read literature, enjoy music, watch sports and participate in other ‘humanities’ activities in their societies.

Perhaps White could have been more specific: Natural scientists are oftentimes not aware of the impact of ‘social epistemology’ on how, where, when and why they are ‘doing science.’ Recognizing this or learning something about the field and seeking to collaborate with social epistemologists and other sociologists and philosophers of science who closely study the activities of natural scientists, who speak with and interview natural scientists, who seek to understand the motivations of natural scientists, the values, the beliefs, the goals and dreams of natural scientists, would help build a productive platform for shared knowledge on an equal playing field. That’s something positive that White could have proposed.

The main problem identified loosely by this book is the danger of the ideology of scientism and a type of hypothetical naturalistic imperialism over what counts as socially important knowledge. The solution may not end up being ‘Romanticised’ humanities as White proposes. But at least humanities scholars could rally to what White ‘feels’ is problematic in the ‘doesn’t play nicely with others’ attitude taken by a few natural scientists towards other non-natural scientific kinds of knowledge and wisdom for the purpose of helping elevate humanity.
Today’s Lesson: Everything You Know Is a Lie, Adam Riggio

I don’t want to respond to Gregory’s take on Curtis White point-by-point, if only because if I do that, we’ll be here all day. I do, however, have one central critique of Gregory’s analysis: I think he misses the cultural narrative in which White wants his book to play a role. This is the narrative in which the arrogance of science displaces and delegitimizes all other forms of knowledge, reducing the world to a mechanistic assemblage to make existence mundane and banal.

Gregory is right to point out that the majority of actual scientists do not carry themselves with such arrogance. He is right to cite writers in the scientific and humanities communities with far more complex ways of understanding the world than pat reductionism. He is right that we should not go to Curtis White if we want the actual facts of how scientists think about the world. But White is replying to a cultural narrative, and empirical facts of the matter have very little to do with our major cultural narratives.

This is the cultural narrative that I like to call the triumph of unified science. It’s an egregious falsehood that is widely believed. It is difficult to pinpoint its origin, but I think it has its roots in several historical developments over a period of centuries. These events have served only to entrench this false narrative in common sense. Here are three of them.

The debate between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle on how the new experimental techniques in science should be presented to the public is one key event, about which I learned from the work of Steve Fuller. Hobbes thought experiments should display the new scientific institution’s transparency, and be a form of mass public education. Boyle wanted to present them as the special exclusive techniques of the new, true priesthood. Boyle was more persuasive to the community of scientists, and so began the cultural narrative of science as a monolith of mechanism, separate from the public (Fuller and Collier 2004, 113).

I think another important event was the public uproar over the development of statistical science. For this interpretation, I am indebted to Ian Hacking. The public image of scientific knowledge as mechanistic and deterministic had been cemented, and in the 19th century, statistical science was perceived as revealing human behaviour and thought to be “nothing but” a mechanism. The single person who did the most to perpetuate the narrative that science was a mechanistic monolith whose growing comprehensiveness assaulted humanity’s ontological freedom was Charles Dickens, who decisively mocked the determinism and anti-humanism of science in Hard Times (Hacking 1990, 117-8). No one could beat Dickens in popular influence, so this image of science remained prominent.

My declared discipline being philosophy, I’d be remiss not to mention the logical positivists. This scene accepted the monolithic conception of science and considered it wonderful precisely for its reductionism, so tried to build a detailed philosophical system to flesh out the vague concept of this narrative. That their program failed had little impact on the popular acceptance of the image of science as mechanistic monolith, because by
this point the narrative is centuries old and practically ubiquitous. Even Dickens at his peak would have lacked the power to overthrow it. The only group with a similarly receptive audience who oppose this cultural narrative are religious fundamentalists who oppose scientific learning in general. This is the context in which White wrote TSD. It has nothing to do with how science actually works, and is only about a cultural narrative that has permeated our society for so long that is has become common sense. But here, common sense is itself a delusion.

Gregory says that White’s book is extremely flawed and inaccurate as to what scientists, a complex community of diverse people, think and believe about the world. But that does not mean that one cannot learn from what White’s mistakes are and why he makes them. It is certainly the case that White tells us nothing explicitly that can be useful for understanding the world. He just pontificates the same bankrupt cultural narrative that lies at the heart of all common public misconceptions and vilifications of science. Yet White tells us a lot, implicitly, about this powerful cultural narrative that does great harm to understanding our history, our scientific institutions, and our world. The lesson isn’t in what he says, but that he says what he says.

**Our Contemporary Gods, Monique Dufour**

Gregory and Adam, you’ve helped me to identify what I find most consistently frustrating about White’s indictment of “the science delusion.” The book is weakest when it uses “science” or “scientists” as the subject or object of a sentence. As both an agent of history and as the culprit in White’s polemic, the science in question shifts around, and signifies many different ideas and forces. Science may be large and contain multitudes, there may be many different types of scientists, and, as a cultural force, it can seem amorphous. But an account of a complex, amorphous thing need not necessarily be vague or sloppy. As Gregory makes clear, speaking generally in these ways disregards “the reality of doing actual science,” and “the psychology of natural scientists.” Because White “gives no time to exploring the interdisciplinary views of natural scientists … who are searchers or theists open to learning from the humanities while rejecting scientism,” generalizations about “scientists” come off as a patently unfair representation of the whole lot. Often, when White talks about scientists or science, as Gregory productively suggests, he seems often to be instead talking about scientism. If the book were more careful and explicit about this matter, perhaps it would be more effective in targeting an ideological dimension of contemporary culture rather than whole class of practitioners. And I think that Adam also makes a good point when he notes that speaking of science as a singular force often has the rhetorical effects of reifying rather than debunking a commanding figure of “unified science.”

Still, I’ll take a something of a stand in White’s defense. One theme that I see running through Gregory’s criticism is that White should “be more specific.” Sometimes, however, White’s objects of scrutiny are in fact more sharply and specifically drawn. Most effectively, for instance, in chapter one, White takes aim at the upper echelon of “the new atheist” literati: Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, mainly, as well as Jim Watson, Steven Hawking, and Richard Feynman. White’s topic here is not science-in-general or all scientists; rather, he targets specific individuals who have taken on the
role of cultural authorities, and who claim to speak on behalf of science and reason. White doesn’t criticize the scientific work or abilities of eminent scientists such as Dawkins and Hawking, nor is his problem with some overall “arrogance of science”. Rather, he wants to tweak the arrogance that he sees in these writers’ sense of entitlement to cultural authority, in their disdain for those who disagree, and in the paucity of their musings about the meaning of their scientific findings. And the “science delusion” of the title, as we know, is White’s way of expressing the hypocrisy of their arguments, which, he argues, are as dogmatic as that of their theistic enemies. He sees all of these marks of privilege as the concrete manifestation of scientism. In other words, the dominant discourse of science is a real part of “how science actually works.”

In this chapter (as well as in the later chapter in which he targets the mechanistic arguments of specific contemporary neuroscientists), White also locates these dominant ideas about the power of science as the product of human agency, and asks us why we have accepted, on their authority, that they are right and good. As I noted earlier in my discussion of his critique of “wonder-talk,” White’s analysis is most compelling to me when he takes the production and circulation of language and discourse about science as his object of study. Who is responsible for representing reality? What are the dominant cultural narratives about science and its relationship to us, and how are we to engage actively with the stories about what it is and what it means? For White, perhaps science is only as good as its language. Or, perhaps it’s only as good as the ways in which that language is received in society.

As for the specifics of White’s “positive” alternative, I agree with Gregory that the Romanticism on offer won’t likely send many people running with torches into the streets. And while Gregory’s call for cooperation and understanding across the putative science/humanities divide may promote a more productive and mutually satisfying social epistemology, by my reading, I think that part of White’s “splendidly cranky” point is that he doesn’t give a rip what scientists — especially the scientific literati — think about what art and literature might offer their endeavors. He’s not asking for a dialogue, because he seems tired of trudging to “science” as the inevitable arbiter and interlocutor. If science is an alienating force in culture, White is opposed any plan that expects those who experience alienation to bend a knee to science for reconciliation.

Clearly, this is a tricky position to take. On some levels, it works: one can question, oppose, and ignore particular authorities, those powerful people who, White claims, say dangerous, trivial things about deeply important matters. And anyone who has been the token humanist on interdisciplinary research projects may likely have experienced the alienation born of the deep scientism among many otherwise thoughtful, self-aware, and interesting scientists. As one of the PIs on such a project wondered to me, “We ask humanists to the table. Even when they come, they don’t stay.” They don’t stay, because it’s your table. The harder work — the work that Gregory suggests — of creating a shared alternative space for the making and adjudicating of knowledge and meaning — well, that seems to be a different project, a long and difficult one, that entails a different mode of relating to one other. Admittedly, our best hope is a home for such an experience that may not necessarily be in English departments. As any one who has ever spent any
extended time doing so will know, reading great works of literature doesn’t necessarily
make us better people.

In his excellent novel, *Memories of My Father Watching TV*, White eviscerates the US
culture of passivity. Passivity, it seems to me, and its servile, lonely way of life, is one of
White’s targets over the course of his work as well as in TSD. If White is asking anyone
to “rally” behind anything, it’s behind a more active mode of engagement with the reality
that is presented to us by our contemporary gods.

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