

SCIENTIFIC HUMANISM

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“In the natural sciences,” said J. Robert Oppenheimer (one of the developers of America’s atomic bomb) in a speech in 1954, “these are, and have been, and are most surely likely to be heroic days.” Few would doubt such a statement—especially in our time of great scientific achievement. What great strides for mankind science has made! The World Health Organization has announced, for example, that we have eradicated smallpox worldwide. Add to that the successful assaults being made on many other diseases (e.g., polio, tuberculosis, etc.), and the story is quite an impressive one. Consider, further, the many technological advances that science has made possible—man on the Moon, communication and transportation systems, agricultural expertise for feeding the world’s population, genetic engineering, etc.—and one is likely to get the idea that science can do **almost anything**.

That is, in fact, what many have come to believe. This “do virtually anything through science” attitude is exactly what scientific humanism is all about. And no less an eminent humanist than Antony Flew of England has asserted exactly that.

...as I construe the phrase scientific humanism the first word indicates an approach to matters of fact while the second refers primarily to fundamental criteria of evolution. To adopt such a scientific approach unreservedly is to **accept as ultimate in all matters of fact and real existence the appeal to the evidence of experience alone; a court subordinate to no higher authority, to be overridden by no prejudice, however comfortable** (1973, p. 109, emp. added).

So there you have it. The scientific humanist appeals “to the evidence of **experience alone**” as a “court subject to no higher authority.” M.C. Otto, professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, viewed the matter in these terms:

Dependence upon human effort more and more replaced dependence upon God.... In proportion as men have ceased to lean upon God, they have opened up undreamed-of resources for the satisfaction of the noblest desires of which they are capable. Whenever men and women have been able to act as if there were no divinity to shape human needs, and have themselves assumed responsibility, they have discovered how to turn their abilities to good account. **Not believing in God has worked well. It has worked better than believing did....** I have for myself arrived at an affirmative faith in the non-existence of God (1940, pp. 322-325, emp. added).

Sir Julian Huxley, the famous British biologist and humanist, couched his sentiments in these clear terms: “A scientifically based philosophy enables us in the first place to cease tormenting ourselves with questions that ought not to be asked, because they cannot be answered—such as questions about the Cause or Creation or Ultimate or Reality” (1965, p. 101). Corliss Lamont, the renowned humanist author of our day, framed the topic in these words:

The development, over the past four centuries, of a universally reliable method for attaining knowledge is a far more important achievement on the part of science than its discovery of any single truth. For once men acquire a thoroughly dependable **method** of truth-seeking, a method that can be applied to every phase of human life and by anyone who faith-

fully conforms to certain directives, then they have as a permanent possession an instrument of infinite power that will serve them as long as mankind endures. Scientific method is such an instrument.

Humanism believes that man has the power and potentiality of solving problems successfully, relying primarily on reason and scientific method to do so and to enlarge continually his knowledge of the truth.

Humanism believes in a naturalistic cosmology or metaphysics or attitude toward the universe that rules out all forms of the supernatural and that regards Nature as the totality of being and as a constantly changing system of events which exists independently of any mind or consciousness (1949, pp. 236-237, 20, 19, emp. in orig.).

Indeed, scientific humanism demands a refusal of anything with which the sacrosanct scientific method cannot deal. Arlie J. Hoover correctly assessed the situation when he wrote:

Reality in its fullest sense is extremely complex. It contains intuitions of value and significance; it contains love, beauty, mystical ecstasy, and intimations of divinity. Science does not possess intellectual instruments with which to deal with all these subjective, non-empirical aspects of reality. Consequently, it ignores them and concentrates its attention upon those traits of the world that it could deal with by means of arithmetic, geometry, and the various branches of higher mathematics.

Why does the scientific method reject subjective factors, emotions, feeling? Simply because it is not convenient! Because the method will not allow you to deal with the immense complexity of reality. The scientist, therefore, selects from the whole of experience only those elements that can be weighed, measured, numbered, or which lend themselves to mathematical treatment. By using this technique of simplification and abstraction the scientist has succeeded to an astonishing degree in understanding and dominating the physical environment. This success was intoxicating and thus many scientists and scientific philosophers jumped to the conclusion that their useful abstraction from reality was reality itself.

This is a fallacy we call **reductionism**. You commit the reductive fallacy when you select a portion of a complex entity and say the whole is merely that portion. You do this when you say things like: love is nothing but sex, man is just an animal, music is nothing but sound waves, art is nothing but color....

Someone has well said that science gives perfect answers to trivial questions. This is largely true. When it gets down to the real serious questions of life—origin, purpose, destiny, meaning, morality—science is silent. Like a helpless computer it confesses: “I’m not programmed to handle that kind of question....”

If science can’t handle morality, aesthetics, and religion that only proves that the scientific method was reductive in the first place. Sir Arthur Eddington once used a famous analogy to illustrate this reductionism. He told of a fisherman who concluded from his fishing experiences with a certain net that “no creature of the sea is less than two inches long.” Now this disturbed many of his colleagues and they demurred, pointing out that many sea creatures are under two inches and they just

slipped through the two-inch holes in the net. But the ichthyologist was unmoved. "What my net can't catch ain't fish," he pontificated, and then he scornfully accused his critics of having pre-scientific, medieval, metaphysical prejudices.

Scientific reductionism or "Scientism"—as it is often called—is similar to this fisherman with the special net. Since the strict empirical scientist can't "catch" or "grasp" such qualities like freedom, morality, aesthetics, mind, and God, he concludes that they don't exist. But they have just slipped through his net. They have been slipping through his net all the way from Democritus to B.F. Skinner to Carl Sagan (1981, 98[4]:6, emp. in orig.).

In addition to the three scientists mentioned by Dr. Hoover in the last paragraph of the above quotation, many others could be added to the list of scientific humanists. Such a list would include, for example, Sir Francis Crick, Isaac Asimov, Linus Pauling, Preston Cloud and literally hundreds of others, both living and dead. The list might look like a "Who's Who" in science. The names of many of these men are to be found among those who signed either the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933) or the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973). The fact that their signatures appear on these documents, or the fact that they avidly support what these documents advocate, should leave little doubt about the position taken by some of our leading men of science.

Jesus spoke of such a sad state of affairs—being a scientific "giant," but a spiritual "dwarf"—when He said:

When ye see a cloud rising in the west, straightway ye say, "There cometh a shower," and so it cometh to pass. And when ye see a south wind blowing ye say, "There will be a scorching heat," and it cometh to pass. Ye hypocrites, ye know how to interpret the face of the earth and the heaven, but how is it that ye know not how to interpret this time? (Luke 12:54-56)

Pity the people of Jesus' day. They could read the scientific signs, but were not able to (i.e., refused to) read the spiritual signs. While they saw themselves as scientifically precocious, they were in reality spiritually retarded. Paul, too, wrote of such men. He said:

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He that taketh the wise in their craftiness": and again, "The Lord knoweth the reasonings of the wise, that they are vain." Wherefore let no one glory in men (1 Corinthians 3:19-21).

Paul spoke of men who, "professing themselves to be wise...became fools" (Romans 1:22). He also said:

And even if our gospel is veiled, in them that perish; in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them (2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Pity the people of our day who fall into the same trap—and to whom these words spoken of old still apply. While the scientific humanist is busy measuring, weighing, numbering, calculating and classifying, he has "left undone the weightier things of the law" (Matthew 23:23). He has reduced everything to science—not because the evidence demands that he do so, but because he "refuses to have god in his knowledge" (Romans 1:28). Professor D.C. Macintosh well stated the issues when he said: "There is almost nothing upon the destruction of which leading humanists seem so determined as any vital belief in God as a superhuman intelligent Being worthy of human faith and fellowship" (1931, p. 55). From the pages of their own Manifesto come the words that document the truthfulness of professor Macintosh's statement:

As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons,... is an unproved and outmoded faith... We believe, however, that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species (*Humanist Manifest II*).

Sir Julian Huxley wrote:

This new idea-system, whose birth we of the mid-twentieth century are witnessing, I shall simply call **humanism** because it can only be based on our understanding of man and his environment.... It must be organized around the facts and ideas of evolution, taking account of the discovery that man is part of a comprehensive evolutionary process, and cannot avoid playing a decisive role in it.... [I]t will have nothing to do with absolutes, including absolute truth, absolute morality, absolute perfection and absolute authority... (1964, pp. 73, 74, emp. in orig.).

What a glowing description of the scientific humanist! Whatever is to be accepted **must** have to do only with man and his environment, **must** be based on evolution, and **must** refuse any association with absolutes of any kind. The scientific humanist suddenly finds himself involved in the sin of which he has accused the believer in God—bigoted narrow-mindedness! In the words of Sir Arthur Keith of Great Britain: "Therein lies the weakness of their case, for the human mind craves for a solution of the great mystery and is restless until it is satisfied as to its place in the great scheme of the universe" (1928).

The scientific humanist needs to understand that altruistic love, morality, ethics, rational thought, aesthetics, art, and a hundred other things simply cannot be explained **solely** on the basis of scientific humanism. Humans will indeed "crave for a solution" and remain "restless" if the only diet upon which they are able to feed is the steady diet of naturalism, hedonism, uniformitarianism, utilitarianism, and atheistic evolution. Something is missing in scientific humanism. That something is **God**.

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