



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

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One of our most brilliant social critics—and the author of the bestselling *The Middle Mind*—presents a scathing critique of the “delusions” of science alongside a rousing defense of the role of art and philosophy in our culture

The so-called new atheists, most famously Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, made a splash in the new millennium. They told the evangelical and the liberal believer that they must give up religion and submit to science.

More recently, neuroscientists and their fans in the media have delivered a variation on this message: the mapping of the human brain will soon be completed, and we will know what we are and how we should act. Their faith is that the scientific method provides the best understanding not only of the physical world but also of art, culture, economics, and anything left over. The message is nearly the same as that of the new atheists: submit to science.

In short, the rich philosophical debates of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been nearly totally abandoned, argues Curtis White. An atheist himself, White fears what this new turn toward “scientism” will do to our culture if allowed to flourish without challenge. After all, is creativity really just chemicals in the brain? Is it wrong to ponder “Why is there something instead of nothing?” or “What is our purpose on Earth?” These were some of the original concerns of the Romantic movement, which pushed back against the dogmas of science in a nearly forgotten era.

In this brilliant multipart critique, White aims at a TED talk by a distinguished neuroscientist in which we are told that human thought is merely the product of our “connectome”—neural connections in the brain that are yet to be fully understood . . . He examines the ideas of a widely respected physicist who argues that a new understanding of the origins of the universe trumps all religious and philosophical inquiry . . . and ends with an eloquent defense of the poetry and philosophy of Romanticism, which White believes our technology and science-obsessed world desperately needs to rediscover.

It’s the only way, he argues, that we can see our world clearly . . . and change it.

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

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From Reader Review The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers for online ebook

Jason says

Less a refutation of Dawkins, Hitchens and the rest of their "New Atheist" ilk than an extended meditation on the importance of philosophy, the arts and other ways of knowing besides the scientific method, this is an important work arriving at a significant time. As a fan of the aforementioned Dawkins and Hitchens and a believer in the ability of science and Enlightenment reason to find answers where myth, superstition and theology fail, I did not expect to get much out of this book and read it only for another perspective and to eliminate as much confirmation bias from my beliefs as possible. Imagine my surprise at not only enjoying this but seriously allowing for some adaptation in my way of thinking about the world.

White, like Hitchens and Dawkins, is a nonbeliever and takes the two, as well as a variety of science writers and TED talk lecturers, to task not for their unwillingness to acknowledge a supernatural creator but for their ignorance of the influence of art, poetry and philosophy on their own beliefs and ways of conceptualizing the world they claim to understand on a purely scientific basis. In the process, he urges his audience not completely sweep away the tenets of Romanticism in their zealotry to usher in a new Enlightenment. His tone can be a little harsh particularly in his indictment of science as a willing accomplice in industrialized, corporate fascism, but his jokes are legitimately funny, his pop culture references are appropriately hip and his warning for all of us not to forget about knowledge that comes from places other than the experimental sciences is prescient and relevant. Open minded readers, even those who've firmly cast their lot with science and reason, should check this out.

Chris says

Tried to give it a chance, since I'm always willing to see the other side of an argument. The problem is lines like "faith in science." There is no faith in science, there's evidence to back up claims. I've already begun to doubt that I would get any enjoyment from this book. As I understand it, this book is supposed to be satirical but it falls very short of this. The author spends far too much time showing his disgust for science and those who are in those fields trying to further their subject. I wanted to hear something that had a compelling set of reasons, even if they were misguided, but all I got was a rant that had me hate reading this book just so that I could get it over with.

Suffice to say, I'm not turning this into my near by used bookstore because if I can make sure one less of these is in circulation, all the better.

P says

This is the worst book I've ever read.

Richard says

Curtis White is angry, and he's probably right to be angry, but unfortunately he's so angry that he can neither write nor think clearly. This is a pity, because he has (buried somewhere under the drifts of unnecessary verbiage, half-baked arguments, and non sequiturs) a couple of very good points to make here.

His target is a certain kind of shallow, philosophically and historically uninformed "scientism" that now forms a dominant part of our culture. There is (critics of the book please take note) little here that could be fairly construed as anti-science, even if White's rhetoric (and this is a very, very rhetorical book) sometimes drifts over that line. What White is virulently anti- is something else, something that in itself is external to science: a particular kind of lazy, arrogant Pollyanna-ism about the reach of current (or just-around-the-corner-we-promise) science, which so often pervades talk about the brain, the mind, and the scientific explanation of human nature and human culture. For, despite all those fMRI scans, *who we as subjects really are* is, as White sensibly says, in some ways as deep a mystery now as in the time of Plato, and it has (at least in some ways) been philosophy and art, rather than science, that have confronted this mystery most honestly.

Thus White's refreshing canter through the philosophical and historical significance of the Romantic movement, which, he reminds us, is not about prettiness and daffodils but about alienation - the sense, deriving from Kant and before, that there is a profound impossibility of fit between the individual subjective consciousness out of which we each peer and the external world in which we seem to find ourselves floating.

(At this point some grinning neurologist walks onto the stage and tells us of his earth-shattering discovery that the debate's all over: we "just are" our "connectome." Here is the key figure in the culture White wants to deflate: a guy with multiple PhDs and a nice suit who is *so* pitifully ill-educated - in everything except his own technical specialty - that he doesn't even know, any more than the clapping saps in the audience do, that he's giving an undergraduate's B-/C+ answer to a suite of questions that have utterly stumped far more intelligent, far more imaginative people for at least twenty five centuries.)

In defense of the idea that things are more complicated than they seem - and that we need something more than just the guy in the suit if we're ever going to wrestle seriously with them - White can drop all the right names, from Schiller to Wittgenstein. But a real grip on what's wrong (and what might be righter) is going to require so very much more care than this book can offer.

Just to take one small example: you can't go around complaining that Richard Dawkins doesn't know his ass from his elbow about philosophy, or history, or art, and then have a page in which you apparently (it's hard to tell, because it's so confusingly written) rip into Thomas Nagel - a figure who has recently been pilloried by the "science culture establishment" - for thinking, about the relationship between the subjective point of view and empirical science, precisely what you were (at least apparently) just saying yourself.

And then there's "mathematics as the language of reality." White could have really made some good points here, because it's precisely mathematics, the scientist's most indispensable tool, that presents one of the most acute mysteries about the whole project of empirical science as the "one true story" about the world's constituents. White sounds (once or twice, fleetingly) as if he gets that. But the discussion is so diffuse and so muddled that it's impossible to be sure.

As other reviews indicate, *The Science Delusion* deserves either one star or five, or both. It's as if White wanted it to be haughtily dismissed by all lovers of science; wanted it to be gratefully embraced, without too much thought, by those who are rendered queasy in the presence of the average TED talk, or boosterish Sci-Am article on brain imaging, or bovine politician announcing that it's the STEM subjects that really matter in our competitive global economy.

I offer up my three stars as a sacrifice to the god of more plausible averages.

Kevin Marshall says

Are you a "Romantic"?

Why does the science establishment support capitalism? Is science the extension of Christianity? Good questions and answers are to be found in this book.

Ethan Misaghi says

When I started reading this book, I expected a rational critique of some scientific findings and of course, as someone in sciences, wanted to get a sense of a critic who looks from the outside. However, I feel like I have wasted my time on this book, to talk in the language White talks about science! The 'critiques' White contends are nothing more than what we hear from flat-earthers and science-haters and faith-healers everyday. Science doesn't have an answer to that? OK, what has? It is true that some scientists are full of themselves, but for someone who talks about Philosophy being left aside, using the ad hominem fallacy is the last thing you would expect, yet White makes sure to use that fallacy time and again while rambling for 125 pages (I read the eBook version). There is a converging scheme I've seen in the ideas of science-'critics' and that's that they try to predict that science can't answer a specific question without identifying an alternative. Until they start being reasonable and use at least the philosophy and humanities they so proudly describe as being elbowed aside by science, I, for one, will not start taking their 'ideas' seriously.

Chinook says

This basically reads to me like on long straw man argument. I find his ideas contradictory and I feel like he spends a lot of time doing exactly what he claims his opponents do. I get the sense that he doesn't really understand much about science but at some point some scientists (or atheists?) were mean to him and hence we get this rant. That said, I made myself read the whole thing a DJ attempted really strongly to try and see his point of view because understanding people I don't agree with is something I'm struggling to do better.

One thing that really struck me is that if his Romantics must be alienated from society to think their truths, if science ever did what he wants it to do, what could they be alienated from next?

I also strongly question his ideas about how science relates to economics and power structures. I think his view is simplistic and misses all of the important subtleties.

Manny says

This recent book has annoyed a good number of people; I started off feeling that way, but by the end I was simply bemused. Curtis White, a 60-something professor of English, decides to write a critique of modern science despite knowing absolutely nothing about it. He reads a few pop science bestsellers, then wades right

in and spends a couple of hundred pages telling the scientists how they've got everything wrong; his main targets are the New Atheists (Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Hitchen's *God is Not Great*, Krauss's *A Universe from Nothing*) and some popular writers on neuroscience, of whom the most visible is the disgraced Jonah Lehrer. He has numerous complaints, but the one he keeps coming back to is that modern science, to its great loss, has ignored the tradition of post-Kantian German philosophy, which he claims has been destroyed by analytical philosophy.

Well, I hardly know where to start, but here are a couple of the more obvious points that occurred to me. First of all, White seems like an intelligent and cultured man, so why on Earth does he think he can gain even a superficial understanding of what science is about from this absurd reading-list? A scientist might just as well write a critique of literature after having completed *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* and the first half of *Macbeth*. Two of the authors that White takes most to task (Hitchens and Lehrer) aren't even scientists.

Second, if White ever does get around to reading some real science, he will find that the central discoveries of 20th century physics, relativity and quantum mechanics, were made by Germans who were very familiar with the philosophical tradition he keeps referring to and integrally based their work on it. A book that might be helpful to consult in this context is Weyl's *Philosophy of Mathematics and Natural Science* ; another more recent one is *Philosophie de la science contemporaine* , by Omnès.

It would be easy to go on, but why bother? Professor White, you can do better than this. C-

Adam Ross says

Curtis White is a skilled essayist and a delightful contrarian. In this book he takes on the claims of the New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, et al). White's interest, however, is not so much with their religious arguments as with the assumptions that stand behind their scientist worldview. That is, he is attacking the reductionist viewpoint of pure rationalism that characterizes the assumption that the whole of reality and life can be quantified in scientific terms, without reference to any other discipline, such as philosophy, religion, or art. He argues that science has been co-opted by the capitalist order and, as a result, no longer serves its descriptive and deconstructive purpose, and has become a prescriptive ideology attempting to work beyond its natural limits. White then uses Romanticism as a philosophy and artistic movement to discuss sites of resistance, to both the capitalist order and scientism. A really challenging and captivating book, worth reading even when you disagree.

Jim says

I started this an audio book thinking it would address a middle ground between science & religion, but it didn't. White railed against other atheists & scientists using so many fallacious arguments from the very start that I couldn't listen any more, so I got the ebook & tried to skim past the rants to find the gems.

Did he read any of Dawkin's books? I've only read 1.5, but his autobiography *An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist* is filled with poetry & he admits a disappointment at not being a better, more creative musician, & really appreciates the talent in others. Putting down Feynman's science due to his love of playing the bongos or going to strip clubs doesn't make any sense. What do they have to do with each other? I don't believe either of these scientists feel that empiricism (sciencism) is the end-all-be-all of life. I think their sense of wonder & joy in life prove just the opposite even though they don't specifically speak for it

most of the time, they just seem(ed) to live it.

It's a shame, because I think White agrees more with Dawkins & Feynman than he disagrees, but he doesn't see it. He misinterprets the Dawkins-Watson conversation about being products of an uncaring universe & still finding purpose in something as small as having a good lunch. They're doing exactly what he advocates, finding meaning in life without resorting to religion, but apparently the point was too subtle for him. It's stunning how badly he can twist & misinterpret what they're saying. (See the bottom of #3 link at the bottom of this review for a good take on this point.)

Dawkins, Feynman, & Hitchens have focused on the positives of science & the negatives of religion, so why didn't White just expand into an area they don't really address - what we should fill the gap with - instead of focusing, often incorrectly, on what he perceives as slights to his profession?

He's an English teacher & essayist, not a scientist. Exploring what 'god' has meant & now means would be a good avenue for him to take & what I was looking forward to. Dawkins does that in *The God Delusion* pretty well, but surely White could do better. It's his field of expertise. This is his rebuttal to Dawkins & that book, so it's disappointing not only that White doesn't do any better, but doesn't really try. He just bashes like-minded individuals.

We're all agreed that we're rationalizing, not rational beings. We have a lot of emotions, thoughts, & brain bugs that science can & should describe, but empiricism is cold comfort in the middle of the night. There's not only room, but a need for 'spirituality', method(s) for reconciling our irrational side with the rational world. This important part of our existence certainly shouldn't be left to religion which fosters tribalism & is stifled by superstition, vanity, & ignorance. We need to make united ethical & moral judgements based on our best understanding of the world & that means facts, not the irrational beliefs & thoroughly disproved or, at best, unproved myths of religions.

White's idea that we should embrace the intellectual romanticism of the 18th century, especially the need for an individual meaning of life while losing the old shared myths such as church, state, and family, has some merit. I wish he'd focused more on it, but it doesn't seem like he has much to say.

There are few, if any gems to be found here. Not only were they difficult to sort from the dross, but I didn't trust the few that I found when I finally managed to sort them out. I really don't understand White's thinking at all, so the book was a failure on all fronts.

Other, interesting takes on this book:

1. The real problem with Curtis White's *The Science Delusion*
2. The Case Against Reason
3. The Science Delusion argues that science wrecks truth and beauty

Brian says

White makes the case that science can't solve all the world's problems. Perhaps nothing can. He proposes a new Romanticism, modeled on the reaction against science and reason in the early 19th century, but also following beatnik and hippie culture. The case is almost convincing. I sympathize with his view on the limits of science and religion both. I will concede that art, poetry, and literature cannot be explained by science. Romanticism offers the attraction of an alternative culture to religion. I'm also interested in learning more about the relationship between Romantic thought and holism as an alternative to scientific reductionism and empiricism. White does little more than wave his hands in the air in explaining it.

Luke says

I couldn't even finish this.

Ad hominem galore.

All the author does is offer straw men and attacks with rhetorical questions claiming the questions and statements cited imply some sort of ideological agenda.

The author characterizes Richard Feynman (discoverer of the Feynman electron) thus: "someone who was almost as famous for playing the bongos and going to strip clubs as he was for physics".

If the alternative White wants to offer to science is straw man attacks, I'll have to stick with science.

Save yourself. Don't buy this. It's bad. Real bad.

Joshua says

White is just a cranky man. He's angry that no one pays attention to 19th century philosophy and rants for 200 pages because of it.

His arguments don't hold up. Many times he provides no evidence for his assertions, and when he provides evidence it often does not back up the claim. He seems paranoid, and an ex-hippie just longing for the halcyon days of the 60s.

Kind of sad to read, honestly. Very disappointing.

Manny says

I love engaging atheist polemics. (Bertrand Russell. Can't get enough of him). And I love well-prepared attacks on overconfident scientists. If you haven't read Helge Kragh's brilliant *Higher Speculations*, check it out now!

Then there are the other guys. Without further introduction, I am proud to present:

Celebrity Death Match Special: *The Science Delusion* versus *The God Argument*

Good evening everyone from the Surrealist Boxing Stadium, tonight's event is the big one, everyone's wondering what's going to happen, I see frantic action down at the bookmakers as fans jostle to place some last-minute bets, and what *is* going to happen, ladies and gentlemen your guess is as good as mine, A.C. "God Killer" Grayling is maybe the favorite on paper but there's a lot of people who think Curtis "Chopper" White has what it takes to put him in his place and this is it, here they are, in the red corner I see Grayling, he's being pushed into the ring, his seconds are greasing the axles of his wheelchair and they're strapping him in, the crowd is loving it and oh yes! here's White in the blue corner, sounds like a piece of abstract art doesn't it and maybe that's no coincidence, his wheels are reflecting the flashes as the paparazzi cluster round, polished to a mirror-like finish, he always pays so much attention to the details, and oh my god if I'm allowed to say that I see they're attaching a second oxygen tank, he means business here and no mistake.

And yes! it's the bell and they're off! White is gripping the tyres and pushing himself forward with those

powerful hands, the crowd is going crazy, he's accelerating, could easily have reached one mile an hour here, I'm hoping the computer can tell me, yes! one point three even, he's close to breaking the record, heading straight for Grayling who's just sitting there not doing anything, it may look like he's asleep but I know Grayling I've watched all his fights this is a trap he has something in mind but what is it? and White's getting closer, you can feel the tension, a woman in the front row throws her panties at him but he doesn't even notice, the only thing he sees is Grayling, he's closing the gap, nearly there, another couple of seconds, yes! he's in range and Grayling still looks like he's asleep, White pulls his arm back and gets ready to throw a punch, Grayling still motionless, White strikes! and oh this is incredible, he missed, White missed and hit his own head, he's knocked himself out, the ref is counting, three, four, will he recover, six, seven, no, I think this is it, nine, ten, the ref is lifting Grayling's arm in triumph, Grayling still pretending he's asleep, such showmanship, first round knockout and he never even moved, this match will be remembered for ever, signing off now.

CarolynKost says

White's thesis is that while on the one hand science has freed humans from "the destructive authority of religion as well as the myths of family and state" (p 192), science is also co-opted by capitalism ["the broader ideology of social regimentation, economic exploitation, environmental destruction, and industrial militarism"], especially governmental agencies that provide funding, and is at its worst when it treads in inappropriate realms, namely the application of scientific methodology to comprehend the origin and function of issues like creativity, imagination, and consciousness formerly addressed by the philosophers, theologians, and poets of the humanities.

Using the current obsession with neuroscience, White demonstrates the shockingly simplistic absurdity of believing in the metaphor: i.e., the "brain is simply a reflection of the super-complex electrical circuits it has created" (111). While neurologist Donald Stein states unequivocally that "The search for a road map of stable, neural pathways that can represent brain functions is futile," the bio-mechanical camp of neuroscientists assert that with more money (already in the billions) and time, they will be able to tell us why certain individuals do x and how creativity originates, the implication being that we will then be able to affect areas of the brain to achieve certain results. Brains do not work like a computer, nor does mapping a genome reveal the infinite ways that genes interact with one another. There is constant flux, constant synergistic activity, but that complexity is reduced to the most simplistic for public consumption and we believe what we are told based on the other wonders that the scientific community has wrought.

White insists that humbly embracing that flux and the temporal and necessarily limited nature of understanding is key. "In short, science and art are at their best when they are, like nature, dynamic. When they seek finality, they are dead. Science fails when it insists too strongly upon Fact, Truth, Knowledge, or aligns itself with a social order that is fundamentally hostile to change..." (195). He writes, "There is something pleasurable and happy-making about science's inexhaustible capacity to show that the most certain things are illusory. And much to its credit, most of the time those certain things that are undermined are the earlier certainties of science itself" (194). Hence, we have to be comfortable in the current and not assume the security of the shore, for the sands shift according to the tides.

Readers expecting something akin to Sally Satel's *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* will be unlikely to get through the first chapter. This is a volume of philosophy and much time is spent with the New Atheists, German philosophers Shiller and Schelling, Bronowski's *Ascent of Man*. White is successful in his attempt to expose scientific relativism, that is, that the scientists have one story, among a matrix of conflicting stories presented by infinite sources. They do not and will never have all of the answers and would do well to recognize their ethical and moral responsibility and proper role and not

overstep it. The proclivity of the scientist is for taking things apart and examining the pieces, rather than looking at the holistic and transcendent. That is the task of the individual and collective humanity with tools to be found in the arts, in play and in the recognition of the beauty in the dissonant and ephemeral.
