

UNMASKING NATURALISM, THE “SCIENCE WARS,” AND FREEING THE SPIRIT

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This talk¹ consists of three parts: unmasking naturalism, the science wars, and freeing the spirit and how these relate to one another. It is partially based on a chapter I wrote for the book *The World Transformed: Swedenborg and the Last Judgment*.² The main point is this: the conventional view is that peoples of Western culture have largely freed themselves from the restrictions and dogmas of religion, especially Christianity; this began in the eighteenth century (during the Enlightenment) when reason, especially scientific reason, criticized sacred writ, theology, the church, and dared to offer counter explanations for everything from the solar system and the development of mankind to morality, politics, and religiosity itself in naturalistic terms. A certain segment of the Western intelligentsia (postmodernists primarily) claims that while we have successfully avoided the Scylla of religion, we have not avoided the Charybdis of science. Thus we have the cultural moment known as the “science wars.” These so-called wars are motivated, at least in part, by the desire to be free, to not be imprisoned by a false objectivity and dictatorial disciplines (physics and biology especially), and the desire by non-scientists to be recognized as intellectual equals of scientists. The postmodern solution to this predicament is to assert that we invent reality and that nothing should function as a “god” or ultimate narrative, that is, not God, not the church, but also not science and not reason. I believe that this proposed solution is illogical (because it is self-referentially incoherent) and impractical (because its goal of pure a-theism of no ultimate reality, is unattainable: achieving it entails one’s extinction as a person). I won’t argue for this assertion now,

¹ This article originated as a talk given at the New Church Associated Publishers (NCAP) Book Expo on Saturday, April 11, 2015, in Pendleton Hall auditorium on the Bryn Athyn College campus.

² “Naturalism and the Last Judgment,” in *The World Transformed: Swedenborg and the Last Judgment*, Dan A. Synnestvedt, general editor, (Bryn Athyn, PA: Bryn Athyn College Press, 2011), 595-699.

but we can discuss it during the question and answer period this afternoon if desired.³

How are the science wars related to freeing the human spirit? In one sense the human spirit has already been freed, and several chapters in *The World Transformed* confirm this by discussing the origins of the antislavery movement, the emancipation of women, the promotion of childhood as a state of innocence, and the profoundly liberating discoveries in modern mathematics and the sciences. In another sense, a new form of theism is needed to fully realize this freedom, but more on this later.

One caveat before we go further: This is a very incautious talk for a philosopher, but since philosophers are not typically daring during professional meetings, a book exposition such as this provides an opportunity to throw caution to the wind. So please do not expect me to justify every assertion!

Part I. Unmasking naturalism

Naturalism has many meanings and distinctions, but for the sake of brevity, we will confine ourselves to these three: methodological naturalism, ontological naturalism, and epistemological naturalism. Methodological naturalism is the view that explaining processes and phenomena of the world involves identification of the natural causes responsible for them and testing any given explanation with regard to the consequences that must hold if it is true. So, for example, instead of explaining an earthquake and the resulting tsunami as the result of spiritual or supernatural forces such as the wrath of God, methodological naturalism commits us to finding an explanation in terms of natural forces, causes, and theories, such as plate tectonics, the fluid dynamics of water and so on. Methodological naturalism is also generally known as science.

³ Here is the argument I had in mind: An argument for this position begins with the premise that love is the life of a person. It is the nature of every kind of love to have an object. It is impossible to love all things equally, or to have all of a person's loves be equally strong or weak. Therefore, humans love one object more than another, or have at least one love that is stronger than the others. This object or the strongest love functions as a person's god. Thus, postmodern atheism is practically or psychologically impossible. As Sartre so cheerfully put it, we humans are "condemned to be free" that is, to choose, and every time we choose, we make something more important and real from our perspective than something else, thus we end up with an ultimate reality after all.

Ontological naturalism is the view that the only kind of being that exists is natural, that is, everything real is sensual, physical, or material. This form of monism is the positive definition. The negative definition of ontological naturalism is that there is nothing transcendental, supernatural, spiritual, or immaterial. There is no room for or need for non-natural forces, events, objects, causes or beings; such things do not exist. Quite often, accompanying these metaphysical commitments are derivative beliefs that the universe exists spontaneously, is self-caused, or is an accident; that the universe is causally closed; and that humans are merely complex animals that have evolved through a combination of chance and necessity.

Epistemological naturalism is the view that only science can give us knowledge, or that the only way to acquire knowledge is through the natural method, namely, science, especially the natural sciences (in contrast to the social sciences or philosophy). This form of naturalism has nearly the same meaning as “scientism.” In philosophical literature, “scientism” is the view that only science gives us an unproblematic conception of nature, that it is the exclusive foundation for thinking about and answering important, meaningful questions, it is much the most valuable part of learning because it is the most serious and beneficial. So when we read that an academic (such as Daniel Dennett) proposes that a certain field of inquiry or subject (such as religion) be “naturalized” it means that this field should belong to science and be placed on a scientific footing after being subject to scientific investigation. The only way to have religious knowledge or rationally justified beliefs about religion is through science, not theology or philosophy.

As a theistic scientist and philosopher, Swedenborg used methodological naturalism, but argued against ontological and epistemological naturalism. As a Christian theologian, Swedenborg not only argued against ontological and epistemological naturalism, but also revealed their causes and consequences while unmasking the presence of naturalism in what one might think a rather unlikely host: the first Christian church. This work was essential for freeing the human spirit from the domineering established Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches of the eighteenth century. While I am happy to report that some Christians in the U.S. are aware of the dangers of epistemological and ontological naturalism and

have written books critical of them, they still seem somewhat blind to the causes of naturalism within Christian theology and practice. The theology that helps produce naturalism is the doctrine of salvation by faith alone because it makes no account of repentance, the Ten Commandments, and the works of charity, and the practice that helps produce naturalism is the lack of a methodology for repentance in life and character reformation. At the time of the judgment on the first Christian church in the mid-eighteenth century, Swedenborg reports that the hells grew because outwardly pious Christians were concealing their inwardly selfish, materialistic lives. These people are naturalists, most of them not of a philosophically sophisticated sort, but they lived in such a way as to consistently deny the reality of God and the spiritual world. They were ontological naturalists in life whether they were conscious of such a label or not, and as intellectuals found then—and many people have found today—epistemological naturalism is a great support for ontological naturalism and certain ways of living.

In my article for *The World Transformed* I review some arguments in favor of naturalism and several recent arguments against naturalism. We don't have time to explore these now, but one common tactic used by naturalists to support their worldview is to appeal to the success of natural science. The strategy is fairly simple: link the unquestionable results of science with naturalism so strongly that to question the latter is to question the former; thus anyone who does so is patently absurd. There are two drawbacks to this otherwise effective strategy. One is the existence of legitimate scientists who are not naturalists, but who are instead theists or deists (for example, Robert Boyle from the beginning stage of modern science in the seventeenth century or Francis Collins from our own century). The other drawback of this strategy is the disdain for other viewpoints and the authoritarianism associated with this linkage. This brings us to the so-called "science wars."

Part II. The science wars

The science wars are debates among intellectuals over the status, role, and claims of science and scientists in contemporary Western society.⁴

⁴For a general introduction, see the anthology entitled *The Science Wars: Debating Scientific Knowledge and Technology*, edited by Keith Parsons (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003).

Science has been criticized from both the political left and the political right. From the political right, conservatives such as Phillip E. Johnson have criticized Darwinian biologists for proposing wildly inadequate evolutionary explanations for phenomena that seem to be products of intelligent design. Dr. Duane Gish has criticized the theory of evolution from the perspective of a young earth creationist. From the political left, social constructivists such as Bruno Latour and postmodernists such as Donna Haraway criticize scientists for presenting their findings as if they were the objective truth rather than the result of processes biased by money, politics, language and gender. The social constructivists assert that scientists do not discover facts; instead, they produce artifacts of their social and linguistic conventions based on their communities. Here are a few examples to illustrate what is going on. Instead of assuming that modern Western natural science is true and then wondering why backward ethnic groups still practice witchcraft, Bruno Latour turns the tables on this standpoint by approaching a group of scientists as a foreign tribe and analyzes their behavior and beliefs through anthropological categories. Postmodern literary critics assert that scientific reasoning is just another form of discourse, no more objective or rational than any other. The debate became very heated and public when, in 1996, Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted an article titled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to the postmodern journal *Social Text*. The editors did not notice that his article was full of nonsense from the standpoint of physics, and so published it. Sokal then announced in the journal *Lingua Franca* that the article was a hoax, written to expose the absurdity of postmodern cultural analysis.⁵ Defenders of science might not understand the formidable vocabulary used by the postmodern critics, but they understand the postmodernist aim to cut science down to size, to debunk scientific authority.

What do these critics from both the left and the right have in common? They point out that science is a contingent human endeavor, not a monolithic machine of necessity, and what inspires their criticism is the sense

⁵ For information on these events, see *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy* (Bison Books, 2000) by the editors of *Lingua Franca* or *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (Picador, 1998) by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont.

that some scientists have a strong desire to control other people and aspects of life to the point that a monoculture is produced that reflects the scientists' image and likeness. The critics respond to the lack of equality among cultural institutions, the lack of understanding among some scientists for perspectives radically different from their own, and the lack of freedom that accompanies the presentation of scientific truth. Granted, there is a lack of scientific and mathematical literacy among postmodern critics, yet likewise, there appears frequently a lack of philosophical literacy among the scientific critics of postmodernism.

The Sokal hoax took place in the mid 1990s, and one might have predicted that an era of peace would ensue. But the attacks upon religion by the New Atheists have provoked new skirmishes. Two books, *The Science Delusion* by the atheist Curtis White and *The Devil's Delusion* by the secular Jew David Berlinski, and an article, "New Atheism and the Scientific Turn in the Atheism Movement" by the atheistic philosopher Massimo Pigliucci are critical. I will describe briefly the perspectives of these authors.

White's thesis is that the message of neuroscience advocates is much the same as that of the new atheists, namely, submit! "Confess to the superiority of science and reason," and this message is sent not only to evangelicals, but also to "another historical adversary—art, philosophy, and the humanities."⁶ Against the ideology of Enlightenment scientism and its "social regimentation, economic exploitation, environmental destruction, and industrial militarism," he writes to rehabilitate the "the poorly understood tradition of Romanticism."⁷

Berlinski's aim is to deflate the scientific pretensions of the new atheists, especially when it comes to cosmological physics and evolutionary biology, and the assertion that people must choose between religion and the allegedly rock-solid findings of science. Approvingly, he quotes physicist Alexander Vilenkin's observation that "sadly, quantum cosmology is not likely to become an observational science." "Correct," writes Berlinski.

⁶ Curtis White, *The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2013), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

“Quantum cosmology is a branch of mathematical metaphysics.”⁸ He shows that some scientists develop and support theories, or repress dissenting views, primarily for philosophical—that is, anti-religious, not scientific—reasons in both physics and biology. White’s and Berlinski’s books add support to the sociological view that the new atheism is part of a contemporary crisis of authority.

Pigliucci’s thesis is that the new atheism is marked by a turn toward scientism. He maintains that “such a move has been a bad one for public atheism for three reasons: 1. Scientism is philosophically unsound . . . 2. Scientism does a disservice to science . . . 3. Scientism does a disservice to [philosophical] atheism.”⁹ Instead of this new turn in atheism taken by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Victor Stenger, he counsels a more holistic approach to knowledge. It seems that science has moved from the postmodern frying pan into the atheistic fire!

Part III. Freeing the spirit

In the eighteenth century, Swedenborg showed that Christian piety was often a mask for naturalism, and that naturalism, at its heart, was a love of the world and of self, especially the love of ruling for the sake of self and the world, above the love of God and the common good. This is merely natural freedom.¹⁰ He exposed both the falsity and evil associated with naturalism rooted in materialism as a way of life or rooted in the sciences. Like some of his contemporaries, Swedenborg knew that the hypocrisy of Christian piety was evil and that it must be exposed for the good of humanity. Unlike some of his contemporaries though, his solution to this problem was not to get rid of Christianity or religion because “we tried it and it did not work, and so we must replace it with scientific reason.” Instead, Swedenborg argues against naturalism in all its forms

⁸ David Berlinski, *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* by (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 107.

⁹ “New Atheism and the Scientific Turn in the Atheism Movement by Massimo Pigliucci in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: The New Atheism and Its Critics*, XXXVII (2013), 151–153.

¹⁰ *Angelic Wisdom concerning the Divine Providence* by Emanuel Swedenborg, translated by William Dick and E.J. Pulsford (London, The Swedenborg Society, 1949), § 73.

(whether in religion, philosophy, or science) and points us in the direction of finding a useful relationship between Christianity and the sciences.

Ontological and epistemological naturalists hide behind methodological naturalism, and they are being unmasked by their critics today. They assert that methodological naturalism is ontologically neutral when it is not. Even if the critics from the left are wrong to take an anti-realist stance regarding science and reality, they are right to show that science is a human endeavor, conducted by finite beings, producing limited and potentially fallible results.

Swedenborg's work is essential for freeing the human spirit from the controlling grasp of naturalism. Both Swedenborg and the history of science show that scientific research can be conducted by people who are religious (theists) and by people who are non-religious (atheists). They also show that scientific findings can be used to support a theistic worldview or a naturalistic worldview. Scientists won't be free of criticism until non-scientists perceive the respect they think they are due in an egalitarian ethos and until they perceive the freedom to interpret the meaning of scientific facts for themselves and the significance of their own lives. Ultimately, humanity won't be completely free until we willingly accept and gratefully acknowledge the reality of spirit and live in a spiritual way. According to Swedenborg, there are certain things that the human soul knows, and one of them is that there is a Divine Spirit, namely God.¹¹ As he acknowledges, at first spiritual freedom does not appear to be freedom, but spiritual freedom increases as natural freedom decreases, and then it conjoins itself with rational freedom and purifies it.¹² Once these levels are integrated through a life of integrity with God and our neighbors, then we are made whole—and free indeed. □

¹¹ *The True Christian Religion* by Emanuel Swedenborg, translated by John Chadwick, (London, The Swedenborg Society, 1988), § 8.

¹² *Divine Providence*, § 73.