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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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Science and World View

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III. Christianity and Science

A. *When did modern science begin?*

This is a favorite, if meaningless, topic of debate among scholars. Some would point to the work of the astronomer Copernicus in the mid-16th century, others to the biologist Vesalius in Italy in the same century. The present writer looks to a somewhat later date, 1666, the year in which young Isaac Newton during a school vacation invented differential and integral calculus, began some fundamental inquiries into the nature of light, and laid the foundation for the theory of universal gravitation. When his "How I spent my summer vacation" essay was published in 1687 under the title *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, it quickly became the textbook of a revolution that is still turning our world upside down--the Scientific Revolution.

2. *A more important question is "Why did modern science begin?"*

In reviewing the misconceptions ancient cultures had concerning themselves and their world, it is easy for us to wonder "How could they have been so blind for so long?" However, when we consider how strange our modern scientific views would have seemed to them, we come to better questions: "How did we ever come to view the world in this way? Why did people ever look at our world and dare to consider that it might be understood scientifically?"

Scholars such as Oppenheimer^{5} and Whitehead^{6} affirm that it was the Christian world view that gave birth to science. Specifically, the Christian views of man and of nature during the Renaissance and the Reformation were the spark that ignited the fires of science.

3. *It is said that philosophy begins with the question, "Is anything there?"*

That is, Does anything exist? Is anything really real? It may seem a foolish question, until we remember that the ancient Chinese answered, "No" and as a result Chinese science was stillborn . In contrast, the biblical teaching that God has made a real world, not as a pantheistic extension of himself, but with an objective existence of it own, is of fundamental importance to any philosophy of science.

4. *Furthermore, the Bible affirms that our world is an orderly world, obeying laws ordained by God himself.*

Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the
skies.
Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded
and they were created.
He set them in place for ever and ever; he gave a decree that
will never pass away
(Ps. 148: 3–6).

In commenting upon this passage, historian Joseph Needham remarked that the "influence this outlook had upon all Western thinking of the Christian era would be hard to over estimate." {7} Under the influence of the Christian world view people began to understand that the forces of nature are not the whims and caprices of spirits or demons. They are the orderly decrees of the creator *and as such they can be understood by men made in His image.*

5. *So, the world ceased being a vast enigma. Instead it became a book to be read, a revelation from the Creator to be understood.*

In the words of Sir Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor of England in the 17th century:

To conclude, therefore, let no man out of weak conceit of sobriety, or in ill applied moderation, think or maintain, that a man can search too far or be too well studied in the book of God's word [i.e., the Bible], or in the book of God's works [i.e., the world].{8}

6. *The early modern scientists also realized that the creation is worth knowing.* Rejecting the Platonic over-emphasis upon the world of ideas and the other-worldly spirituality it had produced in the Middle Ages, early modern scientists saw the value of scientific knowledge.

1. As a means of knowing the Creator.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have

been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Rom. 1:20).

The Austrian astronomer Johannes Kepler echoed these words in comparing his three laws of planetary motion to the "harmonies" in the mind of the creator himself.{9}

2. As a tool of practical value for human beings.

In Islam, spiritual fatalism undermines any human significance. In the Bible, however, man, the image of God, is given dominion over all of creation. As faithful stewards, we are to care for it under God. Science is a valuable tool to aid in the exercise of human dominion and in a fallen world, to assist in repairing the effects of our sin.

Sir Francis Bacon wrote:

Man by the Fall fell at the same time from his state of innocence and from his dominion over the creation. Both of these losses, however, can even in this life be in some parts repaired; the former by religion and faith, the latter by the arts and sciences.{10}

4. The Limitations of Science

In seeking answers to the "hows" of existence, science makes a valuable contribution to the larger picture of our world view. However, there are questions that science by its nature cannot answer.

A. *Questions about what it means to be human.*

The chief irony of 20th century life lies in the fact that we know more about the scientific functioning of the universe we live in than ever before in history. At the same time we may have less of an understanding of what it means to be a human being than at any time since the birth of Christ. In the words of the late Walker Percy, modern man "is like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything, knows everything except himself."{11}

Our dilemma results from trying to turn the scientific contribution to our world view-- seeking answers to the "how"--into the entire picture. A good world view should allow us to see all of reality, both the physical and the personal. It should give us answers to the "hows" of science, but also to the "whys" of philosophy.

At the heart of the biblical message is the teaching that there is more to being human than can be reduced to biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics. We are like God, made in His image.

The Christian world view encourages legitimate scientific *research*, but it

stands against scientific *reductionism*.

2. *Questions of morality.*

Scientific advances have multiplied the complexity and number of moral choices facing people. For example, prior to becoming U.S. Surgeon General, pediatric surgeon C.E. Koop once faced a unique dilemma: Siamese twins joined at the chest, sharing one heart. In the past such people simply died. Modern surgical techniques made it possible for one to live, and so forced a terrible question on Dr. Koop. What ought he to do? Who should live and who should die?

When facing such dilemmas we should be thankful for the new capabilities that science gives us, capabilities that make possible longer and healthier lives. At the same time, we must realize that in expanding the scope of what we *can* do, science does not automatically guide us in what we *ought* to do.

In the absence of a creator whose character is our moral standard, our new scientific powers may be as destructive as they are beneficial; e.g., the destruction of millions in the name of science under the regimes of Hitler and Stalin.

3. *Questions of ultimate origins.*

Of all the limitations of science, this is perhaps the most controversial. In the name of science evolutionary philosophy has claimed the territory of origins, not just of human beings and of life, but of reality itself.

And yet of all the limitations of science this is perhaps the most obvious. That which stands behind reality is by definition metaphysical, i.e., it *transcends* physics, it goes beyond science. However, in acknowledging this we do not forever doom ourselves to ignorance of the eternal.

In 1 Corinthians 2:9 Paul speaks of things "no eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived," i.e., things that are beyond empirical, scientific investigation. The wisdom of things "before time began" (v. 7) *is* hidden from us.

Still, he continues in verse 10, "But God has revealed them unto us by his Spirit."

God has spoken to us of ultimate reality, of Himself. He has revealed Himself to us in words, in the Bible, and in the flesh, in Jesus Christ. Therefore we can know even though we have not seen.

Notes

1. J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989), chapter 2.

2. Cited by Stephen Mason in *A History of Sciences* (New York: Collier, 1962), 87.
3. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), see chapter one, "The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean."
4. Plato, *The Republic*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Mortimer Adler, ed. (Chicago: Britannica, 1952), 388.
5. J. Robert Oppenheimer, "On Science and Culture," *Encounter*, vol. 19, no. 4 (October 1962), 3–10.
6. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 1–28.
7. Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 287.
8. Cited by Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), 142.
9. Johannes Kepler, *The Harmonies of the World* in Volume 16 *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), 1009–85.
10. Cited in Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, 143–45.
11. Walker Percy, "The Delta Factor," *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 9.

For Further Reading

Evans, C. Stephen. *Preserving the Person*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1977.
Philosophy professor Evans makes an eloquent case against a reductionistic view of human beings.

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1962.
This book--a classic in the field of the philosophy of science--created a revolution of its own 30 years ago in declaring that scientific revolutions are not fundamentally sparked by discovering new facts, but rather by changes in world view. Dr. Kuhn's insights are valuable here, but in the end he carries the subjectivity of science too far. In the absence of a creator, Kuhn's universe becomes almost unknowable.

Mason, Stephen F. *A History of the Sciences*. New York: Collier, 1962.
A well-written one-volume history of science from a secular perspective. Reading the entire volume may be valuable only for students of the history of science, but as a reference it has worth for anyone with an interest in the field.

Moreland, J. P. *Christianity and the Nature of Science*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1989.
Dr. Moreland very ably dispels the notion that science is a matter of reason and Christianity a matter of irrational faith. His chapters on "The Definition of Science" and "Scientific Methodology" are especially helpful in clarifying the complex nature of the relationship between science and world view. But be forewarned: Dr. Moreland is a philosopher and he writes like one. *Christianity and the Nature of Science* is an immensely satisfying book, but it is no easy read. For the merely curious, let me recommend instead chapter seven, "Science and Christianity," from his book *Scaling the Secular City*, as a concise summary of his most valuable insights from *Christianity and the Nature of Science*.

Pearcey, Nancy R., and Thaxton, Charles B. *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994.

If you have time for only one book on Christianity and science, make it this one. The combination of Thaxton's scientific expertise and Pearcey's writing skills have produced that rarest of books, one which educates without boring. Pearcey and Thaxton deftly explore the relationship between science and world view over the centuries and eloquently reaffirm the bond between Christianity and science. For anyone who aspires to be a thinking Christian and a scientist, this book is must reading.

Ratzsch, Del. *Philosophy of Science: the Natural Sciences in Christian Perspective*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986.

This book is an excellent introduction to the basic questions inherent to a philosophy of science, addressed from a solidly evangelical perspective. Anyone with the will to finish *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* will relish Ratzsch's critique of Kuhn in the chapter entitled "Philosophy of Science in the Sixties: Kuhn and Beyond." Here he deftly steers a course between logical positivism and Kuhnian subjectivism. Perhaps the greatest compliment that I can pay Dr. Ratzsch is that unlike many philosophers of science, his desire is to communicate with a broad audience. I imagine that his courses at Calvin College are interesting and well-attended.

Schaeffer, Francis A. *How Should We Then Live?* Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976.

Dr. Schaeffer's analysis of the impact of world views on the development of Western culture is of enduring value. Chapters seven and eight--"The Rise of Modern Science" and "The Breakdown in Philosophy and Science"--are especially helpful in understanding the contributions of the Christian world view to the rise of modern science and the dangers of science based upon philosophical naturalism.

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