Does science make belief in God obsolete?

Mary Midgley

Of course not.

Belief—or disbelief—in God is not a scientific opinion, a judgment about physical facts in the world. It is an element in something larger and more puzzling—our wider worldview, the set of background assumptions by which we make sense of our world as a whole.

We seldom notice these assumptions, but we often use them in resolving our inner conflicts. As life goes on, we shape them gradually into patterns by which to relate the things we find most important. And occasionally, when something goes badly wrong, we realize that we must somehow think differently about our whole lives. Doing this is not an irrational substitute for formal proof. It is the groundwork without which new thought is impossible. This is clear if we consider for a moment a few unprovable assumptions we quite rightly use at this level:

Other people are conscious beings, not mindless robots.

They have thoughts and feelings more or less like our own.

Most of what they tell us is true.

The physical world itself will, on the whole, go on acting pretty much as it has done so far (the "regularity of nature").

We trust the world around us, and its relation to ourselves. That trust—that faith—is not irrational; it is, in fact, the foundation of our rationality. If we really did start to doubt other people's consciousness and truthfulness or the regularity of nature, we would lose not just our science but our sanity. We could not act at all.

Worldviews, then, are foundational for human life and underlie every culture. On the points I just mentioned, they mostly agree. But on other points, they differ because they emphasize different aspects of the human experience. What is now seen as a universal cold war between science and religion is, I think, really a more local clash between a particular scientistic worldview, much favored recently in the West, and most other people's worldviews at most other times.

Of course, those other views differ hugely among themselves. Some center on Godhead; some, such as Buddhism and Taoism, don't use that idea at all. But what they all do is to set human life in a context. They don't see our species as sealed in a private box that contains everything of value, but as playing its part in a much wider theatre of spiritual activity—activity that gives meaning to our own. Scientism by contrast (following suggestions from the Enlightenment), cuts that context off altogether and looks for the meaning of life in Science itself. It is this claim to a monopoly of meaning, rather than any special scientific doctrine, that makes science and religion look like competitors today.

Science does have its own worldview that includes guiding presuppositions about the nature of the world. The founders of modern science expressed these very plainly for their time. Cosmic order (they said) flows wholly from God, so science redounds to his glory. When, however, God went out of fashion, new prophets—Comte, Marx, Freud, and the rest—crafted new and different background pictures, which were all supposed to be scientific. But these eventually became so confusing that Karl Popper exiled them all. Science was then deemed to consist only of falsifiable statements about the physical world. This is extremely neat, but what then happens to psychology?

Behaviorism gave this question an answer that was widely accepted for much of the last century, but one so strange that its implications are still not fully understood. Scientific psychology must (they said) deal exclusively with outside behavior. Consciousness, if it exists at all, is something

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trivial, unintelligible and ineffective. They thus rejected the first two assumptions that we have identified as being basic for human thought—the consciousness and inner similarity of other people. They did not notice that losing these assumptions would land us in an alien world and that it would actually undermine our other two foundation stones as well. If we really did not believe that others think and feel as we do, we could surely not understand what they said. And if we were thus deprived of all communication, how could we ever form the notion of an objective, reliable world?

In fact, it finally became clear that the behaviorists' starvation diet cannot support intellectual life, so the taboo on mentioning consciousness in scientific circles has been lifted. Unfortunately, however, the visions by which people consoled themselves in their time of starvation—Jacques Monod's dream of a cosmic casino run by natural selection and Richard Dawkins's drama of domination by selfish genes—are still with us, causing confusion.

But our main trouble now is perhaps our ambivalent response to the idea of visions as such. We are still inclined to suspect that any talk except literal truths about the physical world is anti-scientific.

Scientism thus emerged not as the conclusion of scientific argument but as a chosen element in a worldview—a vision that attracted people by its contrast with what went before—which is, of course, how people very often do make such decisions, even ones that they afterwards call scientific. We ought, I suggest, to pay a lot more attention to these crises and take more trouble to make sure that our worldviews make sense.

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