

WHY ATHEISM IS UNSCIENTIFIC

Adriaan van Heerden

A 'THINK TANK' closely connected to the Labour Government has advocated that atheism be included in the Religious Education curriculum that is studied in British schools. Central to the argument of this group is the idea that atheism is rational and scientific.

In this article I will argue that atheism is unscientific. The argument is intended to counter the belief that adherence to the scientific point of view necessitates the adoption of an atheistic position on religious matters. This belief in the equation of science and atheism has arisen in part as a result of the historical advance of science: scientific research has shown that phenomena which were previously explained by reference to supernatural causes can be shown to have natural causes. These natural causes are much less mysterious and much more amenable to human understanding than their supernatural counterparts; *therefore* it is assumed that all supernatural explanations have natural counterparts, with the result that supernatural explanations are redundant. One may also conclude from this that supernatural phenomena do not exist, that supernatural explanations are simply false, and that scientific explanations approximate more accurately to the true state of affairs that pertains in the universe, including accounts of the origin of the universe and the appearance and position of humans in nature. From this it seems entirely natural to some people to go one step further and equate science with atheism: any *reasonable* person, it is argued, cannot do other than adopt an atheistic position on matters of religion. It is this last step that I want to question first of all, before arguing in addition that this debate basically revolves around a misunderstanding of religion, and that it is possible for science and religion to co-exist in a reflected position.

The main premise of my first argument is that there are at least two characteristics of science that are in conflict with atheism, in particular the more militant streak of atheism. These characteristics are (1) open-mindedness and (2) drawing conclusions only on the basis of sound physical/material evidence. The exposition of this argument will consist of three parts. First, I need to explain what the argument is *not* about; the argument itself can then be stated relatively briefly, after which I will attempt to anticipate one of the main counter-arguments that may be levelled against it.

In addressing the first part of the exposition, we need to note that there are four things that the argument is *not* about. First, in arguing that atheism is unscientific I do not wish to present an apology for any theistic doctrine or any particular religious faith. Second, I am not saying that atheism is not a viable personal or religious position – I am saying it is not a valid *scientific* position. Third, I am not saying that one cannot be an atheist and a scientist; I am saying that one should not *equate* the scientific and atheistic points of view. (In other words, one can be a scientific atheist but science cannot be atheistic.) Fourth, my argument should not be taken as a negative *moral* judgement on atheism.

With these qualifications in mind we can proceed to the argument itself. I have already mentioned the main premise of the argument, which is that at least two characteristics of science conflict with atheism. We may now state the argument briefly as follows: two essential characteristics of science are open-mindedness and only drawing conclusions on the basis of sound physical/material evidence; atheism is close-minded with respect to religious matters and its rejection of religion is not based on sound physical/material evidence; therefore atheism is unscientific. We now need to consider the two premises of this argument in somewhat more detail.

The first premise relies on the belief that we can identify a set of properties which is characteristic of science and which distinguishes it from other things like religion and ideology. Yet philosophers of science and scientists themselves disagree about exactly what science is, with the result that any definition of science one chooses to work with will be problematic to some degree. However, I think it is possible to show that the two characteristics I use in the argument are relatively uncontroversial in terms of defining science. We could say that they are necessary but not sufficient conditions, which means that they are not on their own enough to give a complete description of science, but if they were missing from a definition of science such a definition would be incomplete.

Scientific practice is often contrasted with religious belief in that the former is supposed to be open-minded whereas the latter is said to be close-minded and hence closer to ideology. Thus, in scientific practice one would typically (1) identify a problem to be solved, (2) suggest a hypothesis/theory about how the problem may be solved, (3) gather data in order to analyse the problem and test one's hypothesis, (4) evaluate whether one's hypothesis/theory was true or false. If the data support the hypothesis/theory, it is said that the hypothesis/theory is supported by physical/material *evidence*. However, if the data do *not* support the proposed solution then the scientist conducting the experiment must be open-minded and accept that the hypothesis/theory is unsupported. If the data point to a *different* solution, then the open-minded scientist might make this new solution the basis of a revised hypothesis for future study. For example, if the initial hypothesis was that eating biscuits causes obesity, and it emerged from the experiment that lack of exercise is a more likely cause, then the open-minded scientist might conduct an experiment to test whether it is the case that lack of exercise is a better indicator for obesity. By the same token, scientists are only allowed to draw conclusions that properly follow from the available evidence and they must eschew fanciful fabrications, both in the sense of 'doctoring' the data to fit the initial hypothesis, and in the sense of inventing a new hypothesis that bears no rational relation to the data. These conclusions can then be scrutinized by other scientists in the form of peer review. This positive culture of criticism is another indication of science's open-mindedness.

Religious beliefs, on the other hand, are said to function differently: they conform to a fixed set of doctrines, assumptions and practices which may include or consist of nothing but fanciful fabrications, and which are immune to change

and resistant to criticism. This difference is also exploited by some atheists to demonstrate the retrograde effect of religion on the advance of human knowledge, since religious people are supposed to have done nothing but slow the progress of science throughout history. Since open-mindedness thus seems to be a fundamental characteristic of the general scientific approach and the scientific method itself, its use in my argument would appear to be relatively uncontroversial. Of course, the conception of religious belief portrayed here is rather crude, but it is often presented as such, and not only by militant atheists. The fact that this is – sadly – an accurate description of religion in many cases should not seduce us into reducing the wealth of the religious phenomenon to one of its pathological forms. As mentioned earlier, I will try to argue for a different interpretation later on.

The second premise states that atheism is close-minded with respect to religious matters and that its rejection of religion is not based on sound physical/material evidence. In principle, science should be open-minded about the phenomena it investigates: anything in the field of human experience can potentially be the subject of scientific investigation. However, the state of affairs in the real world is very far removed from this idealized picture. In the real world, scientific communities are organized along the lines of paradigms (as Thomas Kuhn convincingly argued) and research programmes (ditto Imre Lakatos), and these paradigms and research programmes are not perspective-neutral: they contain inherent biases of what is worth investigating and what *should* be investigated. In other words, these paradigms and research programmes operate on the basis of assumptions which are themselves unproven (unsupported) by physical evidence. Furthermore, individual scientists have vested interests in their respective theories: research funding for a psychology department, for example, might depend on whether genetics or the environment is believed by the funders to play an overriding role in determining behaviour. The result is that certain types or kinds of phenomena are almost automatically excluded from the realm of scientific enquiry, not by any logical impediment but rather by the prejudicial assumptions of scientists and the communities to which they belong, as well as by funding limitations, research priorities, difficulty of the subject, return on investment, and the like. Thus one currently finds almost no scientific investigation of 'alternative' kinds of medical treatment such as reflexology and aromatherapy.

In the year of Darwin's death (1882) a group of eminent scholars from the humanities and the sciences – including Henry Sidgwick, then professor of philosophy at Cambridge University – founded the Society for Psychical Research, with the stated purpose of investigating so-called 'paranormal' phenomena in a scientific manner. In his introductory address to the society, Sidgwick said that the lack of scientific investigation into paranormal phenomena amounted to a scandal to science, pointing the finger at the absolute disdain on *a priori* grounds amongst scientific professionals. More than a hundred years on one may still detect a similar disdain amongst certain scientific atheists

regarding religious belief, and their rejection of religion is based not on sound physical/material evidence but on existing prejudices. There is no existing evidence that disproves the existence of a supernatural agent or agents; or which proves conclusively that other mechanisms/agencies are not at work alongside (or working *through*) ones already identified and canonized in orthodox science; or which proves conclusively that natural processes never possess a spiritual element if viewed from a certain perspective; or which proves conclusively that all conceptions of spirituality are false. Atheism in the strict sense of the term categorically denies the existence of God – and by implication also the possibility of any religious/spiritual dimension to human existence – not on the basis of positive evidence, but on the basis of what it takes to be a lack of positive evidence. Such close-minded attitudes are not characteristic of science in the ideal sense, but rather of ideology, which scientific atheists claim to eschew.

It is not difficult to see why the equation of atheism and science is often taken for granted. Conventional science has a hard time getting a handle on what religious belief might entail in a personal, existential context, and the temptation is then strong to reduce religion to some kind of psychopathy (as did Freud) or social disease (as did Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx) or false explanation of natural processes (as does Richard Dawkins, Britain's most prominent advocate of atheism). In fact, when we look closely we see that science implicitly performs what we (corrupting Edmund Husserl) might call a 'phenomenological reduction': it reduces the infinity of phenomena to something more manageable, to something that lies within the bounds of its own available intellectual and economic resources. We may call the conscious acknowledgement of this phenomenological reduction *agnosticism*, and it is this agnostic attitude, rather than atheism, which constitutes science's proper response to phenomena outside its chosen field of vision. It is entirely legitimate for science to plead ignorance of religious phenomena, because this rightly reflects science's lack of resources to make sense of such phenomena. (I am using the term *phenomena* here to refer to things like religious experiences and inclinations, rather than things like stigmata and miracles.) On the other hand, it is entirely *illegitimate* for science to act as if it *can* make sense of religious phenomena, for example by dismissing it as 'nonsense' on the grounds of preconceived atheism. The generous explanation of such negative behaviour is that it results from self-forgetfulness: forgetting where the boundaries of one's own knowledge lie. It is quite probable that using the scientific way of looking at things to examine religious phenomena will make the latter disappear, but this does not rule out the possibility that there might be other ways of looking at religious phenomena which better reveal their true, positive meaning.

Before considering the positive meaning of religious phenomena (*phenomena* again used in the sense mentioned above), we first need to think about a possible counter-argument to the analysis presented thus far. Contemplating the relation between science and atheism, the atheist could argue that, far from being opposed to scientific thinking in the ideal sense, as I have been arguing,

atheism is in fact *fundamental* to scientific thinking and progress. In this view atheism is the *engine* of science: it is what drives science forward and provides it with its energy and self-belief. Writing of the scientific sceptic who tries to refute supposed 'proofs' of paranormal phenomena, Christopher Scott remarks in the *Oxford Companion to the Mind* that 'At the very moment when the researcher begins to lose his belief in the phenomena he begins to lose his interest in the issue'. Scientific sceptics who go to the trouble of trying to refute proofs of reported paranormal phenomena are rare because to start with they do not believe in such phenomena and therefore consider it a total waste of time to investigate it. Conversely, one might conclude that what fires the imagination of the scientific sceptic is finding out how things work in nature *given that there is no supernatural power* that intervenes in natural processes. It is precisely by excluding belief in gods and paranormal/supernatural activity that science *proper* is able to make progress.

This is undoubtedly how many atheistic scientists approach their investigations, but we may once again wonder whether there is really any necessity about the equation of science with atheism. Atheism is not the only possible 'engine' of science: another one might be 'finding out *how* God did it'. After describing the movement of the planets and their moons in space, Isaac Newton writes in Book III of the *Principia Mathematica* that 'This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being'. Commenting on Newton's theology and natural philosophy, John Herman Randall, Jr, writes that Newton forms part of a long line of scientists (amongst whom we may count Albert Einstein) 'who have always found their science and their religion mutually buttressing each other and who, whatever wounds they may have incidentally inflicted on a sound theology, have clearly had their scientific imagination stimulated by their religious concern'. We see, then, that atheism is *not* the only 'engine' of science, and that there is no necessary equation between atheism and science. Scientific atheists might reply to this that Newton was unaware of Darwin's account of evolution, and that this account (combined with the modern science of genetics) does away with any need to postulate a God in the great scheme of things: Darwin solved the whodunnit riddle of the universe, and it was not God. The scientific atheists may or may not be right about this, but in either case I think it shows that they are labouring under the same misconception of religion as the scientists who think that there is no real conflict between science and religion because science tells us 'how God did it'. In the remainder of the article I want to look briefly at some of the functions (conceptions) of religious thought, and identify where I think some possible grounds of confusion occur.

Speculating broadly, one could say that religion originally combined at least the following four functions: (1) to explain the origin of the universe and man's place in it, as well as the appearance of natural phenomena (lightning, for example, might be interpreted as the anger of a god); (2) to manipulate man's environment by means of magic, prayers and rituals; (3) to provide a basis for

the morality of the tribe; and (4) to connect man with the world of the unseen, with what lies outside and beyond himself, as well as with the strangeness inside himself, and/or to overcome his alienation from what he sees and otherwise experiences in the natural world. Speculating further, one could say that science in the broad sense has taken over the first function traditionally fulfilled by religion, and technology the second. Secular philosophies have also largely taken over the third function of religion in many societies by providing alternative bases of morality. Many religiously-minded people find this 'encroaching' on the traditional territory of religion threatening and sometimes produce rather strange theories to reconcile accounts in religious texts with the dominant scientific paradigm of the time. But I would argue that religion should instead welcome the opportunity to discard functions that are in fact extraneous to its true purpose. Its true function, in my view, is to connect man in some way (however indirect) with what lies outside his realm of possible knowledge, but which he sometimes experiences as seeing 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12). Science is an evolving perspective which is constantly pushing the boundaries of knowledge. Religion, too, is (or should be) an evolving perspective, and one way in which it evolves is by taking account of science. Religion cannot simply dismiss science because it needs to take account of the current state of knowledge; science cannot dismiss religion in the atheistic sense because religion points to what lies beyond science.

Seen in this way, religion is an acknowledgement of our basic alienation from the world and an attempt to come to some kind of understanding of this fact, although acknowledging at the same time that any such understanding can never be fully rational. Science cannot fulfil this purpose because it *extends* alienation in the world by driving subject and object ever further apart in its reductive thinking. Mysticism, at the other end of the spectrum, claims the complete *elimination* of alienation. St John of the Cross, for example, speaks in one of his poems about the union of the soul with the love of God. Philosophical religious thought, however, can claim a measure of ignorance with regards to the possibility of overcoming man's basic alienation once and for all, while still pushing reason to its limit and taking account of science where appropriate.

This is in many ways a perilous journey, but it is one which every person must make who is not convinced that the enforced reductionism of science tells the full story of what it is to be human. Some atheists who posture as the only true bearers of the scientific spirit will have us believe that science tells us everything we need to know about our spiritual destiny, namely that there isn't one. But I hope that we will think again about spirituality and what it is to be human, and that we will not sell our spiritual birthright to the militant atheists on the basis of a false equation. In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein remarks that science is a way of sending people to sleep. I think we may interpret him as saying that it stops them from thinking about things that really matter at the level of higher existence. As Kierkegaard said, at this level science is boring. According to Kierkegaard, man's highest perfection is to *need* God. This insight moves us

closer to an understanding of true religion. True religion is not a matter of trying to account for natural, supernatural or paranormal phenomena, or of trying to manipulate the universe to serve one's own ends, and it is also not a matter of trying to believe a certain set of dogmas against reason 'because God said so'. Rather, it is a need that grows from the inside, a need to overcome the chasm that divides and alienates us from the spiritual source of our existence and to bring forth the good that is within us. This is how some people seek to overcome their raw genetic and psychological material and mould it into something better. It is only when we are confronted with the Absolute Good (which some call 'God') that we can strive for perfection in our existence. These are not scientific ideas, science cannot make sense of them, and it should admit that it cannot make sense of them rather than state categorically that they are nonsense. Atheism falls into the latter trap and is therefore rational but unscientific.

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