

Miracles
Richard Gunderman
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Our day is marked by a rather strident form of atheism. In a recent book, *The Grand Design*, the Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking argues that science renders God unnecessary. In *The God Delusion*, Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins declares that the universe we have is “precisely the one we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” In *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, journalist Christopher Hitchens identifies religion as “the main source of hatred in the world.”

Many highly accomplished and urbane people seem to regard faith as an illusion that requires explanation in terms of external causes. More specifically, they see religion as a primitive and largely obsolete means of restraining individual impulses and promoting social cohesion. They may grant that faith had its uses in the early days of humanity, but now that we view the world through the lens of science, it is time to put aside childish beliefs. In their view, religion has become at best excess baggage and at worst a positively harmful misconception that we should eradicate as soon as possible.

Yet caution is indicated, lest we overly esteem the powers of reason. Natural science is powerful, but it is not equipped to pronounce on all matters. In fact, a purely scientific worldview would be both narrow and superficial. Science and technology are good at drawing distinctions, but not so good at showing how everything fits together, nor do they offer much

insight on the inner life. A scientist can tell us a great deal about the mechanics of human sexuality, but not so much about the experience of falling in love. For that, we need the Song of Songs or Shakespeare.

In fact, the very idea of science is not so simple as it might seem. For one thing, science is often wrong. Any student of the history of science knows that its course is marked not by the gradual accretion of more and more truth, but by a series of revolutions, during which old ways of looking at the world are discarded. Some scientific ideas turn out to be not only false but harmful. Consider, for example, the history of eugenics in the 20th century, a story in which the State of Indiana played a sadly leading role.

Science is not the grinding of truth out of large collections of fact. It is a creative endeavor, requiring both insight and inspiration. In forming hypotheses, scientists imagine new ideas and then employ observation and experimentation to test them out. It is true that the crucible for this testing is reality itself, but human beings have the capacity to sustain false models of reality for lifetimes, centuries, and even millennia. Is the earth the center of the universe? Is the sun? What sense does it make even to attempt to define a center?

To speak of science as a monolithic enterprise is problematic. There is not one science. There are multiple sciences. We cannot explain macroeconomics in terms of psychology, psychology in terms of biology, biology in terms of chemistry, chemistry in terms of mechanical physics, or mechanical physics in terms of quantum mechanics. If we had to rely on the theories of particle physicists to sustain life on earth, we would instantly wink out of existence. This is not to say that any science is useless, but that none of the sciences is all-encompassing.

How likely is it that human beings in the year 2010 have finally figured out the universe? It was only 115 years ago that Roentgen discovered a totally new, unexpected, and seemingly impossible form of electromagnetic radiation that had escaped the notice of the world's greatest physicists for many years – x-rays. And it was only 50 years ago that we first realized that visible light is only a small part of the electromagnetic radiation produced by celestial bodies such as stars. We have much to learn, and we probably cannot even imagine all that we do not know and will never know.

It is quite possible that we lack the requisite sensory and intellectual equipment to grasp the ultimate order and beauty of the universe. Just as an ant crawling across a page might fail to discern its meaning, so we may be missing a big part of the picture. What does the ant know of mathematics, physics, or chemistry? What does it know of poetry, music, and the visual arts? Suppose an ant were crawling across the manuscripts of Newton, the folios of Shakespeare, or Van Gogh's paintings? What would it be thinking? "Gee, there is nothing to eat here – better keep moving!"

What if the universe does not exist for our security, comfort, and amusement? What if there are meanings and purposes at work in reality that escape our notice, let alone our comprehension? What if much of what is happening is not only beyond our control but beyond our ken? What if, like the builders of the Tower of Babel, we make a serious mistake when we suppose that our science and technology can elevate us to the heavens, making us like gods? What if the pursuit of salvation through science represents a seriously misguided project?

Religion asserts a realm of meaning beyond the senses. It is a realm that is largely or wholly beyond our powers of apprehension and exceeds in significance the one we know.

Though full of many wonders, ours is a pale reflection of this higher reality. Religions provide us myths that describe the human realm in terms of this larger and more significant Is, like Plato's cave and the divine revelation to Moses. They are not so banal as to be merely true or false. Instead they are catalysts of insight and understanding, beckoning us to see anew.

Human fulfillment is not mere security and pleasure. It represents the realization of our full nature, which requires that we participate in this larger and more significant reality. Myths help us to see where and what we really are, how we fit into the larger scheme of things, and what our lives are really about. They help us to become more fully ourselves, or what we are intended to be. If we seek meaning and joy, we must be open to the possibility that such truths will be revealed to us, through books and conversations, microscopes and telescopes, no less than through meditation and prayer.

Suppose there is a god, and that God is interested in – perhaps even concerned about – creation. Suppose human beings are the kind of creatures who are made to understand, and that we help bring the world more fully into being by doing so. Suppose our capacity to understand hinges powerfully on the lenses – the myths -- through which we approach reality, and that some reveal more order and beauty than others. Is it reasonable to suppose that a god who is concerned about creation would provide lenses through which it might be more fully apprehended?

Some interpretations are more comprehensive, deep, and beautiful than others, precisely because they bring us more in tune with this higher reality. It is not only possible but reasonable that such a god might make available lenses by which creation could be more fully apprehended. To be sure, human beings would always need to make choices, and we would

undoubtedly make mistakes. Yet perhaps human imagination is always being drawn through such divine myths to a fuller understanding of what is. Perhaps the goal is not to explain it away but to glimpse the full wonder of it.

The natural sciences need to be mindful of their own limits and avoid strident declarations of irrationality they cannot support. Reason will always have a role in faith, but it is neither its alpha nor its omega. The ant cannot rule out the possibility of science or art, and reason cannot explain away the possibility of revelation. Our human mission is not arrogantly to dismiss the miraculous, but rather to open ourselves up to it. Our calling is not arrogantly to cram creation into the box of our reason but humbly to open ourselves as widely as possible to a higher reality.