

EXPLORING THE METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATION OF SCIENTIFIC HUMANISM

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Abstract

Scientific humanism is a worldview that professes absolute trust and sole reliance on reasoning and the use of the scientific method in the human quest for comprehending reality. Apart from the fact that its proponents push it forth as a rival conceptual scheme to religion, it nurtures a view of science which promotes the conflict thesis in the religion-science debate. In this paper, attempt was made to evaluate scientific humanism via a critique of its metaphysics with the goal of delineating its logicity, adequacy and level of reliability in furnishing us with knowledge of reality. The qualitative method was adopted in the analysis of literature. It was concluded, after careful study, that scientific humanism is grossly lacking as a reliable worldview, and that it could mar fruitful engagement with reality because of its inadequate ontology and epistemic prowess, flawed logic, and a number of unwarranted assumptions at its core. It also evinces a conception of science that is grossly inaccurate and could hamper fruitful dialogue between religion and science.

Keywords: Metaphysical, foundation, scientific, humanism.

Introduction

In considering the interplay of religion and science; an area that is attracting significant but slow attention in Nigeria and Africa in general, (Dopamu, 2003: x), it is quite important to acknowledge that, beneath any option taken on the propriety and possibility or otherwise of engaging in this fecund interdisciplinary approach to comprehending reality, lie a whole lot of worldviews. These worldviews involve facts no doubt. The presence of facts nonetheless, these worldviews also harbour serious assumptions on the nature of both religion and science.

In relation to science, an important worldview on which general antipathy towards science is premised on, is scientific naturalism or to use the term that constitutes the focal point in this paper - scientific humanism. Ignorantly, or at face value consideration, such antipathy are rubbed on science. While science could be an honest, careful, and possibly, humble pursuits towards comprehending reality, the metaphysics underlying the description of scientific activities might contain more than science does. An underlying metaphysics is not such an intruding jerk anyway! After all, most human activities, including the ones in religion, are often based on underlying metaphysics. (Jack, 2006:42ff) But the logicity, propriety, level of coherence and adequacy of a metaphysics cannot be sacrificed without dire consequences for the goals of investigations.

It is in view of this consideration that the researcher attempted, in this paper, to evaluate the concept of scientific humanism with a view to pointing out whether or not it is an acceptable lens through which science and scientific activities can be perceived and described. The ultimate goal in doing this is to determine the extent to which scientific humanism can make or mar

fruitful attempts at bringing religion and science in dialogue. This consideration also involves the determination of the reliability of scientific humanism as a worldview in the human attempt to understand reality.

Scientific Humanism

As the name implies, scientific humanism is a brand of humanism, a movement that evolved primarily from the ancient Hellenistic philosophies, Hellenistic pagan religions, the enlightenment, and science (Schafersman, 1998: 6). In the list are: secular humanism, democratic humanism, naturalistic humanism, and so on (Oshitelu, 2002, Lamont, 1997: 15). Before proceeding with a description of scientific humanism, a description of humanism was attempted before discussing the conceptual scheme with the adjective – ‘scientific’.

Humanism is a conceptual framework that lays premium on the pre-eminence of humanity in the scheme of things. It is the belief that human beings should occupy a pivotal position in the scheme of things and are capable of responding adequately to the constraints of being human (human limitations and challenges) without the need to invoke anything supernatural. Arguing, correctly though, for the significance of philosophy as that of pursuing the quest for intelligibility, using the method of painstaking critical reasoning with the goal of bringing “us closer to those standards of truth and methods of truth-seeking that are most reliable”, Lamont (1997: 8) charted the course of humanism as a philosophy.

This philosophy is that which

represents specific and forthright view of the universe, the nature of human beings, and the treatment of human problems. ... it is a philosophy of joyous service for the greater good of all humanity in this natural world and advocating the methods of reason, science, and democracy (Lamont, 1997:12 – 13).

The core principle of humanism is naturalistic metaphysics with an outright rejection of anything super(supra) natural(nature), which is tantamount to a reductionism canvassed by Carl Sagan in which he argued that nature alone is all there is, there was and will ever be (1980: 4). The possibility of other explanation(s) for the appearance of man apart from being part of the evolutionary process is ruled out in humanism, leaving humans with the responsibility of evolving ethical and moral, as well as social process and progress only to the dictates of human ‘this-earthly’ experience. All these, it must be stated, were contained in the “scripture” of humanists - The Humanists’ Manifestos.

Humanism taking a clue from Leaky is described thus:

Unquestionably mankind is special, and in many ways, too There is now a critical need for a deep awareness that, no matter how special we are as an animal, we are still part of the greater balance of nature.... During that relatively brief span evolutionary pressures forged a brain capable of profound understanding of matters animate and inanimate: the fruits of intellectual and technological endeavour in this latter quarter of the 20th century give us just an inkling of what the human mind can achieve. The potential is enormous, almost infinite. (1977, p. 256)

What then is scientific humanism? This is no more than an offshoot of humanism. It is the thinking that humans can do all there is to be done in the universe through the methods of science alone. In this line of thought, the scientific method is conceived of as an all-embracing method, which is capable of probing all aspects of the universe, thereby giving us “objective and

reliable' knowledge of what is being investigated. Stating this more precisely, it is believed that "we need to extend the use of scientific method, not renounce, to fuse reason with compassion in order to build constructive social and moral values (The American Humanists, 1973: 3). Note that among the people who compiled the Humanist Manifestoes – a compilation of the beliefs of humanists, were Roy Wood Sellars and Raymond Bragg, Paul Kurtz and Edwin Wilson, with many humanists as signatories.

Explaining it further, an eminent scientific humanist puts it thus:

As I construe the phrase scientific humanism, the first word indicates an approach to matters of fact while the second refers primarily to fundamental criteria of evolution. To adopt such a scientific approach ... is to accept as ultimate in all matters of fact and real existence the evidence of experience alone: a court subordinate to no higher authority, to be overdriven by no prejudice, however comfortable (Kurtz, 1973: 109)

Though there is an implicit acknowledgement of the existence of realities which the scientific method cannot probe, scientific humanists are of the opinion that such questions or issues should not be considered or entertained in the first place. Huxley (1965: 101), describing scientific humanism, pointed out that "a scientifically based philosophy enables us in the first place to cease tormenting ourselves with questions that ought not be asked, because they cannot be answered – such questions about the Cause or Creation or Ultimate Reality".

Scientific humanism is therefore a belief in a naturalistic metaphysics, an attitude towards the universe that rules out all forms of non-natural and instead, regards nature as the totality of being and as a constantly changing system of events, which exist independently of any supreme being. This sweeping skepticism could not but arise in Thompson (1981: 26) who wrote that "scientific humanism demands a refusal of anything with which the sacrosanct scientific method cannot deal".

Scientific humanism has wide ranging implications for views about reality in general, and for Christian belief in particular. A few of these were pointed out while describing this conceptual scheme, and one needs to point out that a detailed treatment of these implications as well as detailed historical background of it shall not be attempted in this paper. That, which is pertinent to the scope of this paper is an exploration of scientific humanism with the view to determining its appropriateness as a necessary metaphysics that should be employed in our quest to understand reality. It is such evaluation that is also capable of impacting on a clear picture of issues involved in religion – science discussion.

Offering A Critique of Scientific Humanism

In an analysis of scientific humanism, one finds out that this conceptual scheme is premised on some underpinning ideologies, which are inadequate in a wholesome picture of reality. As such, scientific humanism rests on flawed logic, rendering it inappropriate. The (scientific humanism) worldview's ontological and epistemic defects and overall metaphysical inadequacy under four ideologies lie substrate to scientific humanism. They are: materialism, scientism, absolute relativism, and assumed universal uniformity of nature.

Materialism

The first ideological assumption of scientific humanism is its clench to materialism. This is the thinking that all that exists is the material and as such, recourse should not be made to anything

metaphysical. It is the belief, as explained by Barbour, that “matter is the fundamental reality in the Universe and that all phenomena can in principle be explained by the law of matter” (Barbour, 1998: 258). Haught defines it as “the naturalist belief that matter is all there is to reality” (1995: 170).

It takes not much effort to see that scientific humanism rests on this materialistic stance to assert that only that which is accessible to the senses could be said to be real. Thus, this theoretical construct affirms the denial of metaphysical postulates such as God, angels, miracles, objective reference point, and a host of other postulates that lies beyond the realm of the immediacy of experience. But, is there any justification for holding this belief? The answer is obviously in the negative. This is because everyday events have revealed to us that there is much more to reality than that which is material. This is a fact even in science. There are theoretical entities; the effects of which are explainable, but are not immediately accessible to sense perceptions. Can one therefore legitimately claim that these entities are non-existent and irrelevant? Any answer to this question in the affirmative surely portrays an unscientific attitude. As such, it should be held that there are realities, which are though, not accessible to sense perception, yet apart from their effects, their non-existence cannot be logically and experientially affirmed. If in effect, it could be ascertained that, “more than three hundred scientific studies demonstrated the medical value of religious commitments” (Matthews, 2000: 103), would it not be illogical and unscientific to hold that religious convictions are irrelevant and nonsensical?

Materialism is therefore, not an adequate representation of the situation in the world. It is rather a perversion of it. It is an elaboration of a part at the detriment of the whole. An astrophysicist-cosmologist has this to say about the fact that the whole reality cannot be limited to a materialistic representation of the universe and phenomena in it.

And what of questions to do with personal significance and value of “the spirit”, and of what may lie beyond death?

These are also outside the limits of physics; chemistry; biology and even psychology (Stoeger, 2000: 166)

The implication of embracing materialism is no doubt catastrophic and would inevitably result in a misunderstanding of reality. This is because the metaphysical as well as the physical make incontestable contributions to the progress of humans, and these have a number of implications for humans and the formulations of views about reality.

Scientism

Another ideological substrate of scientific humanism is scientism. By this, it refers to the belief that through the methods of science alone, we can render intelligible any aspects of reality. Haught sums it up as the belief that only physical analysis can give us a satisfactory understanding of matter or reality (1995: 170). It should be noted that this idea is a fallout of the materialistic view of the universe. It is the thinking that since the real is the material and science preoccupies itself the material, science could therefore be deemed fit to be capable of studying all there is to know. As already pointed out, this belief is less than an approximation of the truth. Ehusani expressed this clearly:

... reality cannot be fully understood through scientific knowledge alone. By refusing to admit the limitations of scientific knowledge, the modern man has disrupted the harmony in nature, and dislocated the complex coherence within reality. (1997: 23)

Also, a vital background implication of scientism is the belief that the scientific method is completely an objective enterprise. But experience has proven this to be contrary to what is the case. Preoccupations in philosophy of science by Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and the very relevant Duhem-Quine thesis, all reveal the level of subtlety and complexity involved in scientific explanation. Dress succinctly expressed the inappropriateness of such unrealistic attribution of overall objectivity to scientific explanation when he writes that “[t]he demise of the idea that science delivers undisputable truth in an impersonal and historical way saves us from seeing science in all to lofty, almost miraculous terms” (2010: 44). Subjectivity also creeps into the results of science, particularly in the interpretation of data. Moreover, it is a truism that through the methods of science, humans have achieved so much in the course of history, yet there are many areas of reality which the scientific method cannot resolve. An eminent applied Mathematician, George Ellis summarized this point thus:

... but we cannot expect it [science] to solve ethical or moral or metaphysical issues. Science forms a viable part of human life. We shall always need to study and teach ethics, aesthetics and philosophy... those who claim science will supplant any of them are indulging in a little fantasy ... (Ellis, 2002: 165).

The scientific method cannot probe the intricacies of ethics and other metaphysical realities. There has been no device, say an aesthetic meter that can be used to measure how beautiful a lady or picture is (Ellis, 2002: 163).

Thus, it becomes apparent that though useful, the method of science cannot adequately fashion an all-embracing epistemology that is capable of teaching everything there is to know about humans, the universe, and all of reality. It is therefore clear as Hewlett pointed out that scientism is a “misunderstanding of the goal of investigation of the physical world” (2002: 178) as practiced by everyone from Galileo to Charles Darwin to James Watson and Francis Crick. Science is only one of many possible ways of viewing the world as it exists. The self-imposed methodical limitation of the sciences restricts the kind of knowledge that can be gained by them (2002: 179).

Absolute Relativism

Scientific humanism also allows for an absolute relativism in the appropriation of things particularly in the area of morality and ethics. It lays so much emphasis on the concept of individuality and as such truths and meanings are considered to be the prerogative of the individual rather than the community as opined by Durkheim (Davies, 1996: 14)

While there is no doubt that that individuality is a plausible concept if humans are to live their lives meaningfully in authenticity, they nonetheless are relational beings who must be guided in the society in which they exist. An absolute relativism that scientific humanism advocates would surely have myriads of devastating effects on some societal structures apart from religion. It means for example that the legal system must be reshaped in another way such that it can effectively respond to the needs and aspirations of individuals considered independently. Such system is definitely a utopia! If the present system cannot effectively curb the excesses of individuals in the society, how much more defective would the system advocated by scientific humanists be. Moreover, the formulation of these ethical, moral, or legal principles has never been known to be an area in which science can effectively function. Humans are remarkably different from the objects of investigations in the natural sciences, which are susceptible to scientific manipulations, predictions and control. Thus, absolute relativism espoused in scientific

humanism would in fact be inimical to the attainment of a truly human world, which is the goal of scientific humanism (The American Humanists, 1973).

Assumed Universal Uniformity of Nature

A basic assumption in the natural sciences is the concept of the uniformity of nature. This is the thinking that what is the case in an instance will also be the case in another. Thus, an electron in Europe will not cease to be electron if and when one comes to Africa. Inasmuch as this is true, it is true only of the natural objects in the universe. The same does not hold for human beings. There are phenomena or experiences which are specific to particular set of people in particular geographical location. One major factor that account for this is the peculiarity of cultural patterns in particular locations. It would therefore be a logical flaw to fail to put this in consideration while making general statements about reality. In scientific humanism, this assumption plays a pivotal role. Scientific humanists make generalizations from a particular pattern, an affirm such to be the case in every part of the universe. They fail to recognize that phenomena that are non-existent or considered trivial in a pattern could be a core concern of people in another structural pattern. Does that then mean that complexities that are considered trivial among a people must also be considered trivial among other set of people? The answer is obviously in the negative. We can therefore see that the assumption of universal uniformity transferred to the humanities from the natural science will ultimately becloud reality or what Kant referred to as “noumena”, that is the reality of things as different from how it is perceived.

From the above, it appears obvious that scientific humanism is not free of fundamental limitations which are of course based on scientism; the belief that science can do all there is to be done or known about man and nature. This, simply, is not scientific! It is rather an ideology portrayed by certain scientists and others who relying on the pace of scientific advance and records of success, claim science to be the only sure route to knowledge and understanding. According to this view, other modes of investigation or enquiry can be dismissed as unnecessary and irrelevant (Stannard, 2000: 161).

Conclusion

In a piece, *Christianity and Humanism*, Bert Thompson (n.d.) pointed out the inappropriateness of embracing a humanistic attitude where unfettered human potential in realizing existential goals without the need for reference to anything supernatural, as well as a rejection of anything that is beyond the natural is affirmed. In one's estimation, such repudiation is not as radical as it should be. Rather than such normative apologetic evaluation, the researcher is of the view that scientific humanism is incoherent with a reliable and moderate description of the nature of reality. He therefore opines that the very nature of scientific humanism exposes it to fundamental inadequacies in understanding nature and reality. The argument here amounts to pushing that scientific humanism suffers from inadequate metaphysics, thereby capable of resulting in flawed methodology.

Consequently, in considering the relationship between religion and science, it should be noted that science does not invalidate supra-natural realities as scientific humanists would have it. Rather, humans shall continue to pursue a wholistic epistemic vocation by paying attention to realities, or knowledge of things, that the scientific method of inquiry has revealed. However, other modes of comprehending reality, including religion, which do not adopt the scientific method, can definitely open us up to the rich variety of human experience. Of note is that this does not call for the acceptance of mediocrity.

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