

Does science make belief in God obsolete?



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No, and yes.

No, as a matter of reason and truth. The knowledge we have gained through modern science makes belief in an Intelligence behind the cosmos more reasonable than ever.

Yes, as a matter of mood, sensibility, and sentiment.

Not science itself but a reductive “scientific mentality” that often accompanies it, along with the power, control, comfort, and convenience provided by modern technology, has helped to push the concept of God into the hazy twilight of agnosticism.

Superficially it may seem that the advances of science have made God obsolete by providing natural explanations for phenomenon that were once thought to be the result of direct divine activity—the so called “God of the gaps.” But this advance has been the completion of a program of purification from superstition begun thousands of years ago by Athens and Jerusalem, by a handful of Greek sages, and by the people of Israel, who “de-divinized” Nature to a degree unparalleled in the ancient world. Summarizing an established tradition 750 years ago, St. Thomas Aquinas taught that the wise governor ordinarily governs by delegation to competent subordinates. In the case of Nature, God’s ordinary providence governs by means of the regularities (“laws”) built into the natures of created things.

This theistic outlook has been fully vindicated. As the ancient Greek materialists recognized long ago, if we wish to explain the observed world in terms of Matter without reference to Mind, then it must be explained by things material, ultimate, and very simple all at the same time—by indivisible, notional “atoms” and a chance “swerve” to set them in random motion. If the things of everyday experience are mere aggregates of these “atoms,” and if the cosmos is infinitely old and infinitely large, then chance can do the rest. To be the

complete explanation of material reality, these “atoms,” and whatever natural regularities they exhibit, must be so simple that their existence as inexplicable “brute facts” is plausible.

Fast-forward to the present: Modern science has shown that Nature is ordered, complex, mathematically tractable, and intelligible “all the way down,” as far as our instruments and techniques can discern. Instead of notional “atoms,” we have discovered the extraordinarily complex, beautiful, and mathematical “particle zoo” of the Standard Model of physics, hovering on the border of existence and intelligibility (as Aristotle predicted long ago with his doctrine of prime matter). And order, complexity, and intelligibility exists “all the way up” as well. We see a teleological hierarchy and chain of emergence that continues all the way from quantized physics, to stable chemistry, to the nearly miraculous properties of carbon and biochemistry, providing the material basis for the emergence of life. Beyond this astounding order and intelligibility, we now know of the precise fine-tuning of the physical laws and constants that make possible a life-supporting universe. In short, the Nature we know from modern science embodies and reflects immaterial properties and a depth of intelligibility far beyond the wildest imaginings of the Greek philosophers. To view all these extremely complex, elegant, and intelligible laws, entities, properties, and relations in the evolution of the universe as “brute facts” in need of no further explanation is, in the words of the great John Paul II, “an abdication of human intelligence.”

But the modern mood is entirely a different matter. In terms of modern sensibilities, the intellectual culture of the West is dominated by a scientific mentality that seeks to explain qualitative and holistic realities by quantitative and reductive descriptions of the workings of their parts. Though the scientific program that gives rise to this mentality has been quite successful in explaining the material basis for holistic realities, and in allowing us to manipulate natural things to

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our advantage,, it fails to grasp the reality of natural things themselves. The unlimited application of the “scientific mentality” is scientism, the philosophical claim that the scientific method and scientific explanations can grasp all of reality. For many, scientism is accompanied by agnosticism or atheism.

In terms of popular sentiment, however, scientism has not carried the day. Most people still intuitively cling to the notion that at least human nature and human experience are not reducible to what is scientifically knowable. But with no rational alternative to scientism, most people live in a “soft,” non-rational, and relativistic world of feelings, opinions, and personal values. The increase in leisure and health brought about by our mastery over Nature has not resulted, as the ancient sages supposed, in an increase in wisdom and the contemplation of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Instead, our technology-based leisure is more likely to result in quiet hedonism, consumerism, and mind-numbing mass entertainment. While many still claim belief in God, the course of their lives reflects de facto agnosticism in which the “God hypothesis” is far from everyday experiences and priorities.

In all our scientific “knowledge” of the inner workings of things, and our technology-based comforts and distractions, there seems to be no place for the still, small voice of God. In that practical and existential sense, science and

technology seem to have pushed belief in God toward obsolescence.

Or have they?

In our innermost being, we moderns remain unsatisfied. Sooner or later we face an existential crisis, and recognize in our lives something broken, disordered, in need of redemption. The fact that we can recognize disorder, brokenness, and sin means that they occur within a larger framework of order, beauty, and goodness, or else in principle we could not recognize them as such. Yet brokenness and disorder are painfully present, and the human soul by its nature seeks something more, a deeper happiness, a lasting good. Consideration of the order and beauty in nature can lead us to a Something, the “god of the philosophers,” but consideration of our incompleteness leads us beyond, in search of a Someone who is the Good of us all.

Science will never make that quest obsolete.

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