

Does science make belief in God obsolete?



Robert Sapolsky

No.

Despite the fact that I'm an atheist, I recognize that belief offers something that science does not.

Science isn't remotely about a scientist announcing truths or The Truth. It's about stating things with a certain degree of

certainty. A scientist will say, "In this experiment, I observed that A causes B; it didn't happen every single time, and my statistical analyses show that I can be X percent certain that this A/B connection didn't happen by chance." The convention in most scientific papers is that you don't report something until you're more than 95 percent certain. It is impossible with statistics to state something with 100 percent certainty.

Now, I'm not trying to be a postmodernist gibbering about how science is a purely subjective process and there are no objective truths. There are truths, and scientific knowledge produces temporary points of solid ground in pursuit of them. An observation must have predictive power and be capable of independent replication by others. And scientists must be willing to abandon supposed knowledge when a completely different explanation arises—"Hey, this is an orangutan jawbone stained dark, so Piltdown Man really isn't our grandfather." Far more often, scientists are asked to *modify* their knowledge: "Remember when you said that A doesn't cause B every single time? It turns out that A causes B only when C is happening." This increases the subtlety and nuance of science. As a surprising example, it turns out that the most iconic "fact" in the life sciences is only a temporary foothold: DNA doesn't always form a double helix, and those exceptions are mighty interesting.

So it doesn't even make a whole lot of sense to frame a science/religion fight as who has the truthier truth. But you can state it as, "Which approach gives you more predictive power and

ability to change an outcome?" When stated this way, science wins hands down. There's no question that when faced with, say, a sick child, it's better to prescribe antibiotics than to invoke some ceremonial goat innards or to employ a fetish gee-gaw. Even in a country as throttled by religion as our own, the courts have consistently ruled that a parent cannot deny medical care to a sick child and instead substitute attempts at religious cures. That's not why belief resists obsolescence.

The next logical arena in the culture wars is the issue of whether religion or science is better for society. On this front, there's no question which approach has produced more historical (and contemporary) harm. Sure, science has come up with Lysenkoism, eugenics, lobotomies, and the people who methodically tested new uses for Zyklon B. But that doesn't even begin to nudge the scale from its one-sided tilt. And the argument that the likes of Torquemada are aberrations of religiosity is nonsense; they are the only logical consequences of some facets of religiosity. The blood on the hands of religion drips enough to darken the sea.

It might be argued that religious belief remains relevant because of the comfort it can provide. But this one doesn't do much for me. Solace is not benign when reality proves the solace to have been misplaced, nor are beliefs that reduce anxiety when the belief system is so often what generated the anxiety in the first place.

So why is belief still relevant? To this I'd offer a very a-scientific answer. It is for the ecstasy. I'm not talking about glossolalic frothing in the aisles, nor other excesses that most religions neither generate nor value. I mean those instances where you're suffused with gratitude for life and experience and the chance to do good, where every neuron is flooded with the momentness of feeling the breeze on its cellular cheek. A scientist or a consumer of science may feel ecstatic about a finding—that it will cure a disease, save a species, or is just stunningly beautiful—but science, as an explanatory system, is not very good at producing

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ecstasy. For starters, there are good arguments to be made for why science shouldn't do ecstasy. One reason is that scientific progress so often constitutes minutiae that lurch you two steps back for every three steps forward. It is also because of the content—the gratitude part of ecstasy is particularly hard if you spend your time studying, say, childhood cancer, or the biology of violence, or causes of extinction. By contrast, the potential for ecstasy is deeply intertwined with religiosity, where the mere possibility of belief and faith in the absence of proof is where it can be an ecstatic, moving truth.

This may seem an unfair tilting of the debate against science. After all, you wouldn't write an essay trashing the profession of commodities broker because it doesn't produce ecstasy. But building your life's explanations around science isn't a profession. It is, at its core, an emotional contract, an agreement to only derive comfort from rationality.

Science is the best explanatory system that we have, and religiosity as an alternative has a spectacular potential for harm that permeates and distorts every domain of decision-making and attribution in our world. But just because science can explain so many unknowns doesn't mean that it can explain everything, or that it can vanquish the unknowable. That is why religious belief is not obsolete. The world would not be a better place without ecstasy, but it would be one if there wasn't religion. But don't expect science to fill the hole that would be left behind, or to convince you that there is none.

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