

# Late Modernity, the Challenge of Scientism and the Quest for Meaning

*Dr. Gordon E. Carkner*

*Author: The Great Escape from Nihilism*



# THE HEAVY HITTERS

- ▶ **Key Resources on a Critique of Scientism:**
- ▶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.
- ▶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (especially Ch 15)
- ▶ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (first half)
- ▶ Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*.
- ▶ Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science*.
- ▶ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.
- ▶ John Polkinghorne, *One World: the Interaction of Science and Theology*.
- ▶ Stefan Klein, *The Science of Happiness*.



- ▶ Leading neuroscientist William Newsome of Stanford School of Medicine, in a recent talk at UBC, noted that the major conflict between science and faith stems from an ideology, not from the nature of science itself. For a belief to be considered valid or credible, scientism requires that it be *scientifically testable*. Thus, many claims to knowledge are devalued, discredited or even excluded.

- ▶ Eminent Canadian Philosopher Charles Taylor captures Scientism's potency in language of **Immanent Frame**.
- ▶ We can come to see the growth of civilization, or modernity, as synonymous with the laying out of a closed immanent frame; within this, civilized values develop, and a single-minded focus on the human good, aided by the fuller and fuller use of scientific reason, permits the greatest flourishing possible of human beings.... What emerges from all this is that we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. (C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2007, 548)

# Five Cultural Identifiers of Scientism (malaise of modernity)

- ▶ a. **Epistemological Claim:** No knowledge is deemed valid or justified unless its claims can be tested and verified empirically through experimentation, observation and repetition. This criterion is part of an intellectual house of the mind which controls the way people think, argue, infer, and make sense of things. Truth claims that do not submit to this kind of scrutiny automatically become irrelevant, invalid, implausible, or unacceptable. This principle of knowledge is heavily weighted or biased towards the instrumental and mechanistic. Its attraction is to greater *certainty*, especially of the mathematical/statistical type.



- ▶ b. **The Utopian Sentiment:** Science is the futuristic guide to human *progress*, both intellectually and culturally. Past tradition, especially that influenced by Christian religion (any religion really), is taken as false opinion or superstition, *even dangerous* (Yuval Noah Harari). The growth of scientific knowledge is thought to guarantee social and political progress. Scientism entails a warfare model in the science-religion relationship, a posture that began in the mid-nineteenth century (C. A. Russell, *Cross-currents*, 1985). Secularity 2 (Charles Taylor) assumes that, as science advances religion will be culturally displaced, demoted in importance. This extreme optimism is found in the transhumanism discourse, and is the tone we often find in *Wired Magazine*, or the *Humanist Manifesto*. Quentin Schultze speaks to this in his *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* (2002).

## How's that Working Out?

- ▶ The next century can and should be the humanist century. Dramatic scientific, technological, and ever-accelerating social and political changes crowd our awareness. We have virtually conquered the planet, explored the moon, overcome the natural limits of travel and communication; we stand at the dawn of a new age.... Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our lifespan, significantly modify our behavior, and alter the course of human evolution. (Humanist Manifesto II, 5)

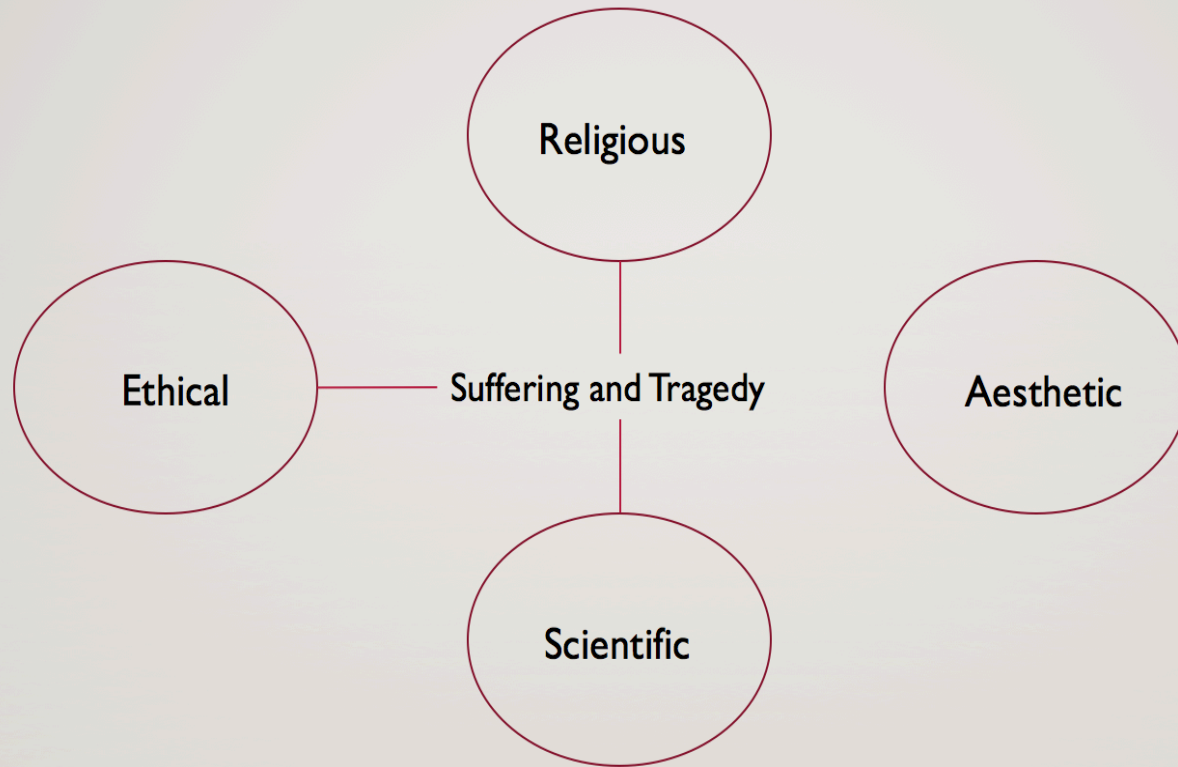




- ▶ **c. Intellectual Exclusion or Hegemony:** Insights from the humanities, philosophy and theology are treated with suspicion. The poetry of life is removed. Scientific rationalism dismisses faith as mere fideism (belief without good reasons, non-evidential). Scientism's inherent materialism entails that "science" refuses mystery, the metaphysical or anything transcendent, the miraculous, even the mythic, metaphorical or *epiphanic*. Certain common human ways of knowing are simply written off, ignored or treated with contempt. Example New Atheists.

- ▶ d. **Anthropological Consequences:** People are viewed as sophisticated cogs in the cosmic machinery, or simplified as merely the most intelligent animals (higher primates). All human characteristics, including the mind or the soul, are believed to be explicable in terms of bodily functions (neural networks, DNA makeup, biochemistry or physiology, or at bottom physics and chemistry). A philosophical (ontological) reductionism is at work: methodology morphs into ontology: the phenomenon of 'nothing but'. The higher order is explained in terms of the lower, mind in terms of brain, human social behavior in terms of ant colonies (E.O. Wilson). Humans are appreciated for their *instrumental value*: their earning capacity, socio-political usefulness and their excellence of giftedness (E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 1977; Craig Gay, *The Way of the Modern World*, 1998; Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*, 2012).

- ▶ e. **Scientism and Ethics:** Science is seen to normatively provide a more reliable and superior decision-making guide. It becomes the new alternative to religion and traditional morals in discerning the good and shaping the moral self, moral discourse (Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: how science can determine human values*, 2010). Science asserts dominance as a culture sphere, absorbs and redefines morality in *scientific* categories, meeting a scientific agenda. Other spheres: Aesthetics, Ethics, Religion: Calvin Schrag. Scientism claims that the scientific principle, scientific rationality is applicable to all things, all arenas of life, all culture spheres. Religious or personal moral values are to be kept to the private sphere of one's life, but not to be part of public discourse (Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1986). Moral subjectivism results and is also a major factor leading to anomie and despair: we become obsessed with justifying ourselves.



- ▶ **The Big Picture:** An admirably severe discipline of interpretive and theoretical restraint [modern empirical science] has been transformed into its perfect and irrepressibly wanton opposite: what began as a principled refusal of metaphysical speculation, for the sake of specific empirical inquiries, has now been mistaken for a comprehensive knowledge of the metaphysical shape of reality; the art of humble questioning has been mistaken for the sure possession of ultimate conclusions. This makes a mockery of real science. (D.B. Hart, *The Experience of God*. 2013, 71)



- ▶ Our language has lost its constitutive power: denotative versus expressive. This means that we can deal instrumentally with realities around us, but their deeper meaning (the background in which they exist), the higher reality which finds expression in them, is ignored and often invisible to us. Our language has lost the power to *Name* things in their embedding, their deeper, richer and higher reality. The current incapacity of language is a crucial factor in our incapacity of *seeing well* and our flourishing. Our language, our vision and our lives often remain flattened in late modernity. (C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 2007, 761; *The Language Animal*, 2016).







- ▶ **Scientism as a Prison of the Mind:** This ideology is a picture of the world that holds our minds captive. For some of the reasons above, scientism can lead us to nihilism, cynicism, addictions and despair (malaise of modernity—Bruce Alexander). There is a logical progression from the epistemology, ontology and anthropology of scientism to the moral confusion and identity crisis of late modernity. Scientism alienates and oppresses us. We intuitively see ourselves as *more* than machines, more than animals, beings with purpose. The dogma of scientism stifles, and even questions our freedom and agency. It cramps and constricts our imagination, even in the practice of science itself. Ultimately, it threatens the human quest for meaning.



# Scientism under Close Scrutiny

- ▶ Scientism holds an inaccurate view of science and a skewed view of the history of science (M. Polanyi, T. McLeish, P. Harrison)
  - ▶ Scientism perverts the principles of science itself (P. Medawar)
  - ▶ Scientism is not honest about the 'methodological' limitations of science (D.B. Hart)
  - ▶ Scientism entails serious logical problems: several top philosophers agree (A. Plantinga, T. Nagel, C. Taylor)
  - ▶ Scientism impoverishes anthropology (E.F. Schumacher, D. Ratzch)
- 
- A series of white lines of varying lengths and orientations are positioned on the right side of the slide, creating a modern, abstract graphic element.

# Recovery from Scientism's Opiate Impact

- ▶ All philosophy is a participation in humanity's common struggle to attain truth. We know well, especially in our *post-truth* era, that there can be no freedom or justice without a high value on truth and evidence-based conclusions. If scientism is destructive in its intellectual, moral and human consequences, what constitutes a more positive trajectory?
  - ▶ What is the integrated stance that takes seriously the full range of the human imagination and a robust, full-blooded human identity? What will bring reconciliation between science and the humanities, science and religion, to help us make better sense of our world.
  - ▶ What is science's proper place in late modernity amidst all culture spheres: beauty, goodness, spirituality, and other forms of knowledge?
- 
- A series of white diagonal lines of varying lengths and thicknesses are positioned on the right side of the slide, extending from the middle towards the bottom right corner.

# Relationship to Wisdom

- ▶ **Recovery Point 1.** Science must be more engaged with, and tempered by, wisdom. Natural philosophy or science is *philo-sophos*, the *love of wisdom about natural things*. That prompts persons to use all the skills of reason in the quest to make sense of the world. French intellectual Jacques Maritain cautions that ‘science without wisdom is blind’. Albert Einstein: ‘Let us not forget that *matter* is not all that really matters’: his concern about the ethics of splitting the atom.

- ▶ We know better than to swallow an inadequate narrative that portrays science as simply replacing an ancient world of myth and superstition with a modern one of fact and comprehension.... Science is ‘the love of wisdom of natural things’..... Its primary creative grammar is the question rather than the answer. Its primary energy is imagination rather than fact. Its primary experience is more typically trial rather than triumph. (T. McLeish, *Faith & Wisdom in Science*, 2014, 102)



# Retrieve Excluded Knowledge

- ▶ **Recovery Point 2.** We must retrieve *excluded knowledge*, break the hegemony of scientism, and address the refusal of *transcendent insights*. During the Cold War, the Soviets often constructed city maps that excluded churches, a practice that made it difficult for tourists to find some beautiful, historic landmarks. They wanted to eliminate all memory of religion. The West had its own version: scientism dismisses the transcendent, often quite roughly, and uncritically. This conference and the PP 2.0 paper is clearly sympathetic with this concern, recognizing that mature happiness involves values, virtues and the transcendent. This conference invites courage, faith and meaning to the table of serious discourse and scientific research.





# Faith is Involved in all Positions

- ▶ We can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can read it as answering to our deepest craving, our deepest need, and the fulfilment of the good. ... Both open and closed stances involve a step beyond available reason into the realm of anticipatory confidence. (Charles Taylor, Chapter 15, *A Secular Age*; John Polkinghorne, *One World*)

- ▶ Taylor is not worried by the plurality of spiritual journeys (Nova Effect), but is concerned about the kind of *spin* whereby someone claims that a closed view of the cosmos (CWS) is taken as obvious and conclusive: *that we exist unavoidably because of science as material beings in a material world*. This spin of closure, although not universal, is often taken as hegemonic in the Academy, rendering the supernatural dimension of life *unthinkable*. Taylor challenges, “My concept of spin ... implies that one’s thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one from seeing important aspects of reality.”  
[*Philosophical willful blindness*]

# Recalibrate Definition of Humankind

- ▶ **Recovery Point 3.** Our third move involves a challenge to scientism's caricature of human nature—a constricted materialistic/mechanistic anthropology. We want to recover our lost heritage as humanists (Andy Crouch, *Culture Making*; Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism*). Biology needs *meta-biology*, to allow for higher human capacities, and aspirations. Science was never equipped to sustain a worldview—exclusive humanism, which is collapsing (John Milbank).

# Biology and Meta-Biology

- ▶ **Humans must be distinguished from nature.** Certainly, a person is continuous with nature biologically. But we should not settle for views of our identity reduced to our biological origins or biological infrastructure. Humans are not only a part of nature, they definitely stand apart from nature in significant ways. We need to explore these carefully and fruitfully. Materialistic naturalism lacks the explanatory range regarding consciousness, morality and purpose (Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*; Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*). Example: the hard problem in philosophy of mind: How does consciousness emerge out of mere matter?

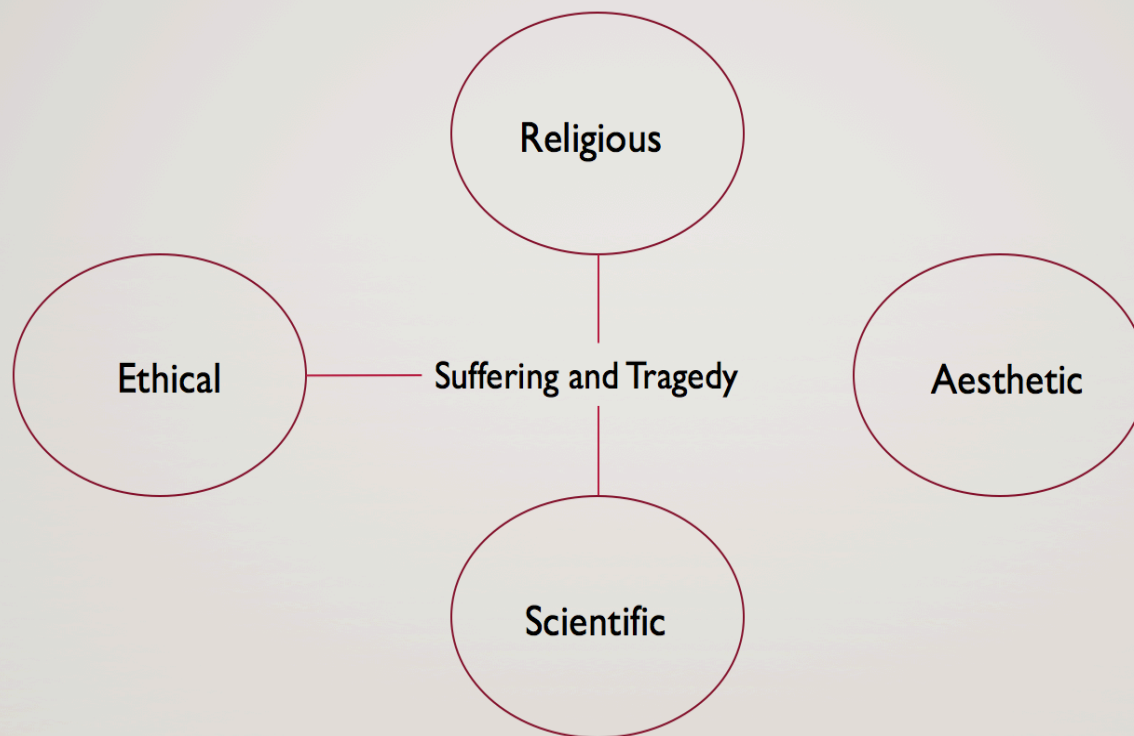
# Ethical Capacity

- ▶ **Humans have ethical capacity.** They *are* capable of apprehending the good and true, the evil and the false, quite an astounding ability for an animal. Without this critical capacity, one could not expect good science or good relations among scientists—no trust. I invoke the recovery of the ancient language of *the good* in Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self*). Ethics involves second-order desires, *qualitative* discriminations in one's relationship with the good--qualities of the will. Taylor offers a robust challenge to ethical relativism, a challenge to definitions of freedom without the good, and to moral subjectivism (my PhD).

# The Quest for Meaning

- ▶ **Human Quest for Meaning and Mature Happiness.**
- ▶ “Leading a meaning-centered life contributes to both happiness and virtue” (Wong and Bowers). Ilona Boniwell sees the balance in positive psychology’s eudaemonic happiness between the features of personal development and transcendence. Suffering is the nexus of the religious, the ethical and the scientific, calling all parties to the table of dialogue. Recovery of meaning brings us into direct confrontation with the ideology of Scientism.





# Scientism Leads to Nihilism, Cultural Decline & Human *Angst*

- ▶ To close ourselves off, to implode into a minimalist or reductionist language game, or to try to articulate all aspects of life with scientific language alone, to refuse theological, poetic, artistic and philosophical speech is a move towards cultural deprivation and decline. It is to be in denial of this longstanding, common human heritage: this larger linguistic and moral horizon, the *thick* understanding of human identity. It is to refuse our fullest humanity, to deprive us of the full academic and personal adventure, full flourishing in research, social and political life.



# Celebrate Science & the Humanities, Philosophy & Theology, but not Scientism

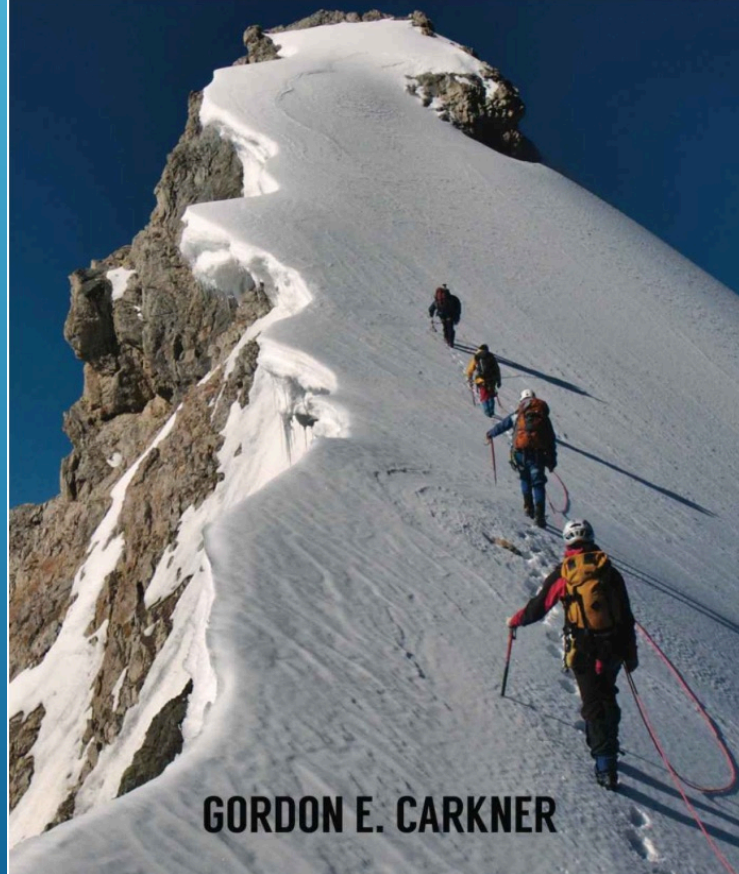
- ▶ We can wake up and escape the ideology of scientism with some effort and critical thinking. We want to affirm all the knowledge available to us as Schumacher writes in *A Guide for the Perplexed*. Scientific reason alone is unable to answer all the important human questions, and to offer us the robust identity and purpose we long for.
- ▶ In fact, we know things to be true in everyday life or society that we cannot prove with science; we need to search for other reasons, other forms of knowledge and wisdom to be whole persons (M. Stenmark—four types of knowledge). Blaise Pascal—reasons of the heart and mind.
- ▶ It is not scientifically valid or fruitful to assert that the observable and empirical is all that exists. We must be open to supernatural sources of knowledge and insight as well—revelation (Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*).
- ▶ Truth is an activity, a judgment inextricably linked to the good and to love. This kind of truth is an important prerequisite for healthy humans on the path to freedom, moral agency and responsibility. It operates within a robust meaning culture: Purpose, Belonging, Transcendence, a Redemptive Narrative. We cannot know what we do not love, and we cannot love what we do not know.

# Bibliography

- ▶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*
- ▶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (especially Chapter 15)
- ▶ David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God* (first half)
- ▶ Alister McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe*.
- ▶ Tom McLeish, *Faith and Wisdom in Science*.
- ▶ Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*.
- ▶ E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide to the Perplexed*.
- ▶ John Polkinghorne, *One World: the Interaction of Science and Theology*.
- ▶ Stefan Klein, *The Science of Happiness*.
- ▶ Jens Zimmermann, *Hermeneutics: a very short introduction*.
- ▶ Rupert Sheldrake, *Science and Spiritual Practices*.

# THE GREAT ESCAPE FROM NIHILISM

*Rediscovering Our Passion in Late Modernity*



- ▶ <https://ubcgcu.org/2018/07/15/decoding-jordan-peterson-live-event-august-5/>

- ▶ Epistemological versus the Hermeneutical

## Two Different Ways of Seeing