
The Role of Scientism in Myth-making for the Anthropocene

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The subjectivist states his judgements whereas the objectivist sweeps them under the carpet by calling assumptions knowledge (Bradshaw and Bekoff 2001: 462).

I greatly appreciate the invitation to respond to this thoughtful piece by Lisa Sideris, not least because I have a long-standing interest in the role of values in scientific thought. Given this interest, I am unsurprised when scientists such as Richard Dawkins, E.O. Wilson, and others, as detailed in Sideris's chapter, use their scientific credibility as a launching pad to promote their personal ideologies. I am therefore quite sympathetic to Sideris's overall argument that the varied forms of science-based ecospirituality overstep their 'scientific' bounds and thus could have insidious implications for diverse cultural expression and our relation to our home planet.

I'm particularly sensitive to her arguments after hearing a wonderful performance by an Inuit throat-singer last night. In a poignant opening, she noted that Inuit throat-singing was banned by the Roman Catholic priests in the twentieth century, but now she is helping to bring it back. I thought of the hubris—and suppression of the other—in their act, and then I reflected on the similar hubris—and suppression of the other—in the claims and objectives of the proponents of what Sideris calls the 'New Genesis' movement. In both cases, (mostly male) 'priests' conclude they hold a timeless and universal truth that should be imposed on others; in both cases, our shared world becomes a less vibrant and

diverse place. The former loss of socio-ecological, experiential knowledge contributed to our environmental problematic; the latter threatens to devalue such knowledge further to the point that we would lose additional living models of sustainable human–nature interaction.

There are two main occasions, however, where I think Sideris goes a little too far. First, she provides little basis for the claim that the New Genesis movement and its narratives will elevate scientific knowledge ‘over and above direct encounters with the natural world’. I think she’s correct that there is no necessary path from scientific knowledge to caring (e.g., Larson 2007), yet not until near the end of her chapter does she acknowledge that scientific knowledge can also encourage direct encounters. In fact, E.O. Wilson would appear to have a profound connection with the natural world, given that he spent much of his life getting to know intimately its ‘lowliest’ creatures, in particular ants (e.g., Wilson 2006). His attention to detail as a scientist undoubtedly helped to form this connection—it would be hard to argue that he isn’t ‘in love’ with biodiversity, and some of his popular writings have surely inspired others to become naturalists themselves.¹ Based on my own experience as a naturalist/educator, I would suggest the relation here is more complex and varied than Sideris implies (fraught as it is with the inconsistency that entomologists like Wilson have killed a lot of living beings to get close to nature!). This is not to say we should defer to ‘experts’ to interpret biodiversity for us, yet we need to acknowledge the insights they can provide. Perhaps the enigma here reflects the theological debate over apophatic versus cataphatic approaches to God.

Second, and conversely, I think that it’s easy to overstate the extent to which this small movement exacerbates a growing disconnection from nature, now found especially among children. There are several likely reasons (e.g., greater urban population and more time in front of screens), and furthermore, it’s worth noting that science has a tendency to contribute to this problem more broadly. One reason I left ecological science myself was that very few graduate students had any natural history knowledge and such knowledge was increasingly devalued relative to theory, computer models, and molecular techniques. Although this problem is increasingly recognized even by ecologists (e.g., Sagarin and Pauchard 2012), it remains unresolved, and neither more ecological knowledge nor the New Genesis movement will solve the problem.

Now, it’s a long way from Wilson’s origin as a naturalist to being a promoter of consilience and other ideologies—and even further to the

1. Yet, for an engaging account of how modern taxonomy conflicts with our intuitions about categories of organisms, see Yoon (2009).

New Genesis movement—yet this gap points to one of the places where Sideris doesn't go far enough in her analysis. Namely, a fundamental philosophical challenge for these movements is the naturalistic fallacy, which raises questions about whether it is so simple to extend claims about what 'is' (the 'facts' of science) to claims about what 'ought to be' (e.g., a myth that crystallizes social values and policies) (e.g., see Lodge and Hamlin 2006). In this light, these narratives are even less convincing: there is no clear path from scientific knowledge to how we ought to behave and what we ought to do. This transfer requires the imposition of an additional value; for example, Wilson's appears to be an ideology something like 'Scientific knowledge is value-free and primary', which supports the technocratic totalitarianism he appears to espouse. Note, though, that such a claim is itself not factual, not to mention that it is circular, contestable, and liable to alternatives. Accordingly, 'the story of the universe' can be used to justify beliefs along the moral spectrum for humans all the way from hedonism to philanthropism. Although science does have a role to play in determining what we ought to do, the connection between facts and values, science and society, is much more complex than often understood (for an entrée to this literature, see insightful works by Sarewitz 2004; Pielke 2007).

And things get even more interesting when one explores the circularity in many claims of this sort. A decade ago, I surveyed evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists, as well as members of a New Genesis group, the Foundation for Conscious Evolution centered in Santa Barbara, California,² to understand the extent to which they adopted 'progressive' and 'competitive' views of evolution (see Larson 2006, 2011 for details). The pertinent result here is that its members adopted a more progressive and more cooperative view of evolution than the evolutionary scientists. It's noteworthy that the metaphorical myth of progress is a key plank in the New Genesis narratives, even though it is highly problematic, particularly for those interested in a 'sustainable' future (for an extended discussion, see Larson 2011). In short, people often interpret science as they see fit to support their worldview. This is abetted by an uncritical acceptance of scientific claims (akin to how creationists and climate-change deniers get airtime because of their degrees, even if

2. See <http://barbaramarxhubbard.com>. Barbara Marx Hubbard is the creator and leader of this particular organization, which has its own movie and a leadership program. Anecdotally, my experience with the Foundation for Conscious Evolution also suggests they are generally much less motivated by environmental concerns than by—quite the contrary—a New Age desire to escape the confines of materiality and earthliness into a spiritual bliss of unity with the cosmos.

they're not in germane fields). Although Sideris acknowledges 'selective use' of science in the constitution of religious worldviews in her opening paragraph, she doesn't examine it enough in the context of the New Genesis movement.

Sideris could also go a little further to use theory related to scientism to explain the writing of those scientists who promote the New Genesis movement. One hallmark of the scientific worldview is falsifiability: science is a process and it is not suited to the universalistic and timeless claims often attributed (rightly or wrongly) to traditional religions, yet which also typify scientism. I think scientists who proselytize for the New Genesis movement—who are amply documented in Sideris's work—give scientists a bad name; it's difficult to know what goads them to become so outspoken, though I wouldn't be surprised to find there's self-selection bias here towards scientists who abandoned a conservative religion from their childhood only to adopt a similar conservatism in their scientism. Their knowledge seeking has therefore become their Godhead, and they therefore tend to see only the 'goods' of science and remain blind to the 'bads' to which it has contributed (e.g., blaming the effects of weapons of war and environmental destruction on 'technology'). It could be that they most need the existential meaning and security of their 'facts', perhaps facilitated by a shallow understanding—if not downright ignorance—of religious plurality and functions.

Regardless, calling the New Genesis narrative 'everybody's story' because 'it happens to be true' is simply naïve, mainly given how completely irrelevant it is for the vast majority of the world's people. The movement will have a long, uphill climb in providing a method other than force for cerebrotonic people to cross over to people's 'hearts' (regardless of the plural meanings of that term depending on cultural context). In this regard, Dawkins's feeble attempts to glorify his 'dead' world, where rainbows can't be beautiful any longer, remind me of Darwin's autobiographical lament about the loss of his childhood ability to appreciate poetry as a consequence of his analytic focus.

Another fundamental problem for the New Genesis movement, yet unmentioned by Sideris, is its synthetic narrative of diverse scientific fields, including evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, big-bang cosmology, and others. There are at least three critical problems here. First, philosophers of science recognize that fields such as these harbour contrasting epistemologies that are not as easily integrated as Wilson's 'consilience' might wish (e.g., Dupré 1993). These contrasting epistemologies can give rise to contrasting 'facts'; for example, my survey described above found that evolutionary biologists and evolutionary psychologists had contrasting views of evolution and its connection with

society. Second, it is fascinating to observe how these folks become self-proclaimed meta-experts, apparently able to understand the depths of each of these fields to the extent that they can derive grand syntheses. In fact, even experts in one field, such as Wilson (or Chaisson, a physicist, coming from quite a different perspective), must adopt a particular, supportive narrative from popularizations of other fields, not to mention that their views may even be a minority within their own field. It's remarkable that they feel warranted to make such grand claims beyond their areas of expertise, and I'd suggest the most parsimonious explanation is hubris. That 'the human mind [will] play the starring role' is also unsurprising,³ even though these authors largely reject the spiritual methods developed around the world over millennia for understanding one's own mind. Third and finally, there is the problem of competing scientific narratives that are intended to provide 'everybody's story'. An obvious alternative is that the universe is not nearly so anthropocentric but instead quite meaningless, whether or not this belief is associated with atheism.⁴

Finally, it is intriguing that Sideris uses the term 'Anthropocene' in her title, yet attends to it only briefly on the first page of her essay. There she states that it is a 'more descriptive term' than 'the term "Ecozoic" [which] is explicitly prescriptive, presenting a *positive* vision of a new anthropogenic stage in cosmic history in which humans shape the next stage of cosmic unfolding for the better' (p. 138). Ironically, she uncritically espouses another scientific worldview here: that of the 'Anthropocene', when there is a live argument right now about whether 'Nature itself may be the ultimate casualty of [that] worldview' (p. 146). There is not only debate among geologists about whether the Anthropocene is a valid concept; more importantly, many argue that it is anthropocentric and emphatically *not* descriptive but rather too accepting of—if not prescriptive of—human domination of the planet (e.g., Crist 2013; Wuerthner, Crist, and Butler 2014). Crist (2013) and Wuerthner, Crist, and Butler (2014), among others, suggest that the Anthropocene moniker reflects a globalizing juggernaut that has consequences for the maintenance of other ways of knowing, including disavowal of 'direct

3. The reader is encouraged to pick up Kurt Vonnegut's hilarious book, *Galápagos*, on this point, to wit: 'And why was quiet desperation such a widespread malady back then, and especially among men? Yet again I trot onstage the only real villain in my story: the oversize human brain' (Vonnegut 1985: 270).

4. The Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (1959) is often cited as a founding father of 'spiritual' evolution, even though he has been vehemently criticized by evolutionary biologists and those holding a much less 'progressive' view of the universe (e.g., Monod 1971).

encounters with the natural world' (see Ingold 2000 for a perceptive account of the 'global gaze'). Whether or not this is correct, Sideris implicitly endorses another scientific meme here, demonstrating just how difficult it is to avoid doing so these days. Critically, this debate also turns on whether a 'postmodern conception of science', which is endorsed by Sideris, undermines the basis for valuing 'Nature' (capitalized by Sideris) and wilderness. Not only do we have to sort out the role of science within religious worldviews, we also need to sort out the relation of science and religion in the interest of saving a much-problematized notion of Nature, and we can't uncritically defer to scientists (in this case, ecologists) here either.

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