

In Search of Reality: False Dichotomies and the Stumbling Block of the Literalist

Those who are trained in the art of philosophy can spot logical fallacies a mile off. From politicians to talk show hosts, debates will often be peppered with the most deceptive and disingenuous language dressed up to look like meaningful argument.

One of the classic fallacies is that of the false dichotomy in which the provocateur presents two alternative positions as both exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Take for example George W. Bush's famous "you're either with us, or against us" speech in November 2001. While this was an understandable and persuasive comment in his efforts to garner support for the fight against terrorism, it deliberately left no room for the likely possibility that some of those being addressed held neutral positions which neither sided with terrorists nor supported his response to them.

The nature of a false dichotomy is that it oversimplifies complex issues, which in turn hinders meaningful debate. This has been especially problematic regarding the debate between scientists and theologians.

Since the dawn of time mankind has tried to understand the workings of the Universe. During the last millennium, this insatiable quest for knowledge has yielded the greatest minds known to mankind. Against the backdrop of an ever-growing enlightenment, those minds have forged their theories in the crucibles of our greatest academic institutions, which stand like temples to philosophy, mathematics and the sciences.

From Galileo to Darwin, the immutable dogma of religion has been scrutinised and disputed, whittling away at the intellectual monopoly of these ancient doctrines. While the battle between science and religion is centuries old, in more recent years the front line has often been fought in the courtroom with both sides struggling over the right to educate our children in their own way.

From the Scopes trial in the 1920s to the landmark ruling in the Kitzmiller trial in 2005, this has only served to polarise the discussion even further. There is little choice; we are forced to either submit to an evidence-based scientific view of reality with its decidedly anti-religious aftertaste or subscribe in faith to religious dogma.

While both sides partly bear responsibility for the current climate, modern thinking has at best relegated religion to the status of a curious lifestyle choice to be tolerated but not encouraged and at worst casts religion as a sinister and often dangerous source of division, propagated by those whose backward thinking minds have not yet caught up with the enlightened intellectual elite.

By drawing on their academic credentials, some scientists who also advocate a rambunctious form of secularism have adopted deeply strident positions against religion. Presenting themselves as the Sultans of Sense, their writings have been highly popular and influential. Yet

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while their erudition and expertise in regards to science is indisputable, their failure to grasp the complexities of religion and philosophy lead to the schoolboy errors which result in this false dichotomy.

Their arrogant declaration, rooted in the dogmatic adherence to scientific materialism, maintains that since God does not exist, religious texts must have been written by man to record his primitive way of trying to explain the world. While this is understandable given that the scientific process demands evidence, it is not necessary or correct to dismiss God simply for lack of a means of detecting Him.

In addition, centuries of biblical commentary have shown that a literal understanding of the Torah which only engages with the plain reading of the text does not convey the depth of meaning hidden in the subtleties of the Hebrew language, further obscured by successive translations. Consequently, the intended messages which have nothing to do with science are often lost. Incidentally, many Christian proponents of Intelligent Design have also failed to grasp the intricacy of the Torah and lack the Jewish tradition to fathom it.

The latest offering guilty of these mistakes is a recent book by the renowned geneticist Professor Steve Jones called 'the Serpent's Promise'. He writes:

"Science is its [the Bible's] direct descendant and the factual, if not the spiritual, questions asked long ago can be explored with the latest technology. This volume is an attempt to do just that, to scrutinise the biblical pages from the point of view of a scientist."

The Torah narratives are not there to teach us about science, nor are they mere fairy tales about talking snakes and magical trees. Each element of Torah conveys the most profound observations about the human character, our interpersonal relationships and our relationship with God. As the late Chief Rabbi JH Hertz put it, The Torah is "not to serve as a textbook of astronomy, geology, or anthropology. Its object is not to teach scientific facts; but to proclaim highest religious truths respecting God, Man, and the Universe."

When science appears to contradict the Torah, it does not inevitably imply that the Torah itself is wrong, but that perhaps our interpretation of it requires further thought. Far from being a fly in the religious ointment, in the right hands modern scientific discoveries can help to stimulate a deeper understanding of the Torah's timeless message, bringing greater understanding and deep satisfaction from our own intellectual honesty.

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