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Abstract

"We all rely on others to draw valid conclusions about the world, both scientifically and theologically."

Posting about the book *Redeeming Expertise* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Scientists Aren't Hostile Alien Priests: A Review of *Redeeming Expertise*

Jeff Ploegstra

February 22, 2022

Title: *Redeeming Expertise: Scientific Trust and the Future of the Church*

Author: Josh A. Reeves

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How did things get this bad?

Recently, I had a friend ask for my opinion about part of the curriculum at the Christian elementary school her children were attending. She was questioning some of the “mythbusters” about evolution that her children were being presented with. I affirmed that she should be concerned. The arguments that were presented as “defeaters” for evolution were seriously flawed and easily answered by anyone with even a basic understanding of the theory. Tying our faith to arguments that are easily defeated is like building a house on shifting sands.

Evolutionary theory is not somehow unassailable. However, I would say that most people don't understand enough about biological systems to accurately assess the strengths and weaknesses of evolutionary theory, much less develop meaningful arguments that any evolutionary biologist couldn't easily refute.

The lack of understanding wasn't my central concern, however—it was the intellectual posture that was being encouraged. The implied message was that even a 6th grader can understand evolutionary theory well enough through a week of study to unravel the evidence and theory that has been interrogated by thousands of biologists over the last 150-ish years. It presents the theory as some kind of faceless one-dimensional enemy to be destroyed rather than a model to be understood. This approach might best be described as naively arrogant and unnecessarily antagonistic.

This isn't just uncivil; it is dangerous. True critical engagement starts with a deep understanding of the ideas at hand. It starts from a posture of humility, a careful assessment of our own

knowledge, habits of mind, intellectual skills, and bias. I would hope that Christian education at every level would embrace this posture.

So, should Christian colleges teach evolutionary theory at its best? Absolutely. We are not in the business of intellectual dishonesty or arrogant dismissal. If (and it's an enormous "if") there is a felt need to make this a battle, Christians should at a minimum understand what they are fighting about and how to fight fairly.

But let's back up for a moment: why should a scenario like the above be playing out in Christian schools across the country in the first place? There are many scientific ideas being taught and accepted by Christians all the time that don't line up with a biblical cosmology. Where is the fear and antagonism coming from, and why are battle lines being drawn where they are? More importantly, what do we do about it?

In his book, *Redeeming Expertise: Scientific Trust and the Future of the Church*, Joshua Reeves has provided us with a clear and compelling diagnosis for the current dysfunctional relationship between much of conservative Christianity and science. He also makes several reasonable proposals to move Christians towards a position that takes scientific expertise seriously without blindly handing our loyalty and agency over to experts.

In the first part of the book, Reeves explores how we reached the current cultural stage of Christianity's skepticism toward science. He explores insights from both the social sciences and history to illuminate this disturbing and—at least for me—often baffling trend.

Reeves clarifies how the skepticism is not directed toward science itself, but rather toward experts who are viewed as "worldly," elitist atheists blinded by their naturalistic assumptions and disconnected from reality by sin. These experts have apparently adopted assumptions and presuppositions that run counter to "a plain reading of scripture," develop theories and a worldview that run counter to an individual's ability to reason for themselves using common sense and their own direct observations of the world, and who seek to control individuals and influence society as some kind of new priesthood.

Reeves points out that these conclusions are not *completely* unwarranted. There are clear cases where scientists have drawn erroneous conclusions outside of their area of expertise or sought to use science to undermine a Christian worldview. However, the ability of science to draw accurate conclusions and drive innovation lend credibility to the overall endeavor. Further, the character of the scientific community as a whole and its fruitful history do not even begin to justify the kind of distrust we currently encounter among many Christian groups. Reeves goes on to point out that this skepticism is dangerous, making Christians vulnerable to conspiracy theories and undermining their ability to think critically.

What Do You Really *Know*?

As Reeves argues, we all rely on others to draw valid conclusions about the world, both scientifically and theologically. We all take for granted that we live on a spherical earth orbiting the sun, that we are made of cells, that we developed from a fertilized egg, that plants convert carbon dioxide into complex organic matter, that gravity holds the earth in orbit. We believe all of these things, despite the fact that none of these phenomena are readily accessible to our senses, and we have likely never even tried to verify them ourselves.

Many of our scientific conclusions are not only inaccessible to our raw senses; the technical skill and theoretical knowledge necessary to make these observations or utilize the conclusions of science to manipulate the world require a depth of training that most people are either unwilling or unable to acquire. This specialization alienates scientists from the average citizen.

Trust is implicit to knowledge, and Reeves argues that this shifts the real question from “what do we believe” to “who do we trust.” Unfortunately, the answer for many Christians seems to be their favorite political pundit, social media, or whoever is promoting a comfortable alternative perspective. As Reeves says, “Many Christians combine extreme mistrust of mainstream institutions of knowledge with a gullible trust of alternative news sources, social media, and cable TV hosts. If skeptical Christians held their own favorite sources of information to the same scrutiny they give perceived liberal sources, our situation would be much improved.” (p. viii)

True and Trustworthy?

After exploring the reasons that Christians often mistrust scientific experts, Reeves argues convincingly that science is trustworthy, even as it might not always be “true” in some absolute sense, and our paradigms may change. Science is also not a single uniform thing that is either true or not. Science is composed of empirical data, theories, models, instrumentation, and assumptions—many of which may reasonably persist through ground-shifting conceptual breakthroughs. Even should our understanding of gene regulation, quantum mechanics, or dark matter change, many of the observations and technologies we developed based on those understandings will still be valid and reliable. Paradigm shifts tend to encompass and reframe our current observations and techniques rather than completely replace them.

Reeves points out that reality pushes back against misrepresentation. Often our assumptions and presuppositions in science are challenged by the observations that we make and the success or failure of our models and technologies. This is actually what often leads to paradigm shifts. Science does not proceed in a purely intellectual space. For instance, based on sequence data from simpler organisms like yeast and nematodes, we expected the human genome to have about 100,000 protein coding genes. Initial sequencing analysis of the human genome revealed that it contains only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of that.¹ While science operates within certain intellectual boundaries that generally preclude supernatural explanations, this does not mean

that it can propose anything at all. The fact that scientific observations and technologies are expected to be universally accessible to an expert, regardless of their religious background, should be reassuring to Christians and calibrate “presuppositional” critiques of science. It is a good thing that a Muslim chemist working in a diagnostic laboratory provides you with the same medical test results that a Christian would.

Reeves also argues that all reasoning involves assumptions and “merely pointing out their role in your opponent’s argument is not sufficient to overturn it.” (p. 51) Young earth creationist arguments tend to rely on a whole host of assumptions about the nature and purpose of science. More importantly, they tend to leave unexamined presuppositions regarding biblical truth and interpretation: the action of the Holy Spirit in the writing, translating, and reading of scripture; authorial intent throughout scripture; the cultural significance of various words, phrases, and events, to name a few. They also frequently frame faith as intellectual assent to and certainty in a set of unequivocal belief statements abstracted from scripture. This kind of epistemic framing views any kind of doubt as anathema and cannot tolerate intellectual humility. Ideas that challenge certainty in belief statements are framed as tests of faith and reinforce a hostility toward “worldly wisdom” or the “word of man.”

Reeves points out that for many evangelicals, “one cannot say the Bible is true and trustworthy unless it is correct in its scientific details.” And further, “The problem with this view is that there are many places in scripture that assume an ancient view of the natural world, one that is incompatible with modern science.” He quotes John Walton, the ancient Israelites “... did not know the stars were suns; they did not know that earth was spherical and moving through space.... And God did not think it important to revise their thinking.... There is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture.” (p. 53)

In a middle chapter, “Against Common Sense,” Reeves points out the limits of “thinking for yourself” and that intellectual individualism is untenable in science, politics, and philosophy. In what I interpreted as an unexpected insertion of humor, Reeves says, “In the West, we celebrate intellectual autonomy, the right to decide for ourselves what is true and false. Often accompanying this right is the presumption of our *ability* to do so.” Reeves goes on to argue, “We cannot avoid relying on the beliefs of others...common sense is not a workable alternative to trusting the advice of specialists, especially because reliance on common sense is not how we actually gather knowledge about the world.” In this chapter, Reeves also highlights, of the assumptions most alienating to experts, that “what is often meant by ‘common sense’ is the idea that ordinary people know better than experts” and “one must be wary of corruption from...elite education.” (p. 96)

A Healthy Posture

The last section of the book moves on to the question of which experts Christians should trust and points toward important ideas related to epistemic spheres, structural accountability

within Christian intellectual communities, and constructive engagement between the Church and the modern world.

Overall, the book is very readable. It is well structured, cogently argued, richly referenced, and supported with understandable anecdotes and illustrations. Many of the proposals and arguments are framed so reasonably it almost makes one wonder at the fact that they need to be made.

The book promotes a healthy path forward for Christians individually and corporately. Reeves encourages a posture of intellectual vigilance and humility grounded in an acknowledgement of our dependence on others for any reasonable attempt to understand the world, scripture, or to think critically. He also promotes supporting Christian institutions that engage and participate in expert communities, rather than speaking around them directly into classrooms, pews, and the public square. Christian colleges should “engage outside scholarship (i.e. not keeping beliefs immune from criticism) while still holding on to their distinctive Christian identity” (p. 169) As he says, “Unless the Church can bring itself to trust in the best knowledge of the modern world, the modern world will have little reason to trust the church in return.” (p. 10)

I am hopeful that Christian education will increasingly value intellectual honesty and informed engagement over isolationism and blind confidence. I would like to believe that we would recognize the danger of building our faith on flawed arguments to make ourselves feel secure while alienating ourselves from experts. We should set aside a fear-based warfare mentality. Scientists aren't hostile alien priests whose main objective is to dismantle biblical principles. Scientists are uncovering and describing the order within our world, improving our capacity to make wise choices. Christian scientists should be adding to the rigor and scholarship of the field while encouraging a recognition of the beauty and wonder of a Creator God who upholds all things. I believe that our faith is robust enough to take all ideas seriously. We should be able to tolerate uncertainty and engage culture, specifically scientific endeavors, with curiosity and enthusiasm.

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK9846/>