

You only believe in science!

We all bring our values, hopes, and fears to the data that science provides—whether we're religious or not.

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There's a scene in the 2006 cult classic [Nacho Libre](#) where Nacho, a hapless monk who aspires to be a luchador, and Esqueleto, his emaciated unbaptized sidekick, are in conflict about life and religion and fame and fortune and why they're so terrible in the wrestling ring. At one point, Nacho [blurts out](#), "I'm not listening to you—you only believe in *science*. That's probably why we never win!"

The scene is funny because the characters are hilarious (it's especially amusing to watch Nacho's attempts to baptize his unsuspecting partner in the changing room before one of their matches). It's also funny because I think many of us have a sense that even in popular discourse, science and religion debates often fail to attain much loftier heights of nuance and sophistication than the banter between Nacho and Esqueleto. Science and religion function like two bumbling luchadors theatrically slugging it out in the ring before mostly ignorant throngs interested in little more than baying for blood. They are competitors for the same territory in our hearts and minds. One must win and one must lose.

Recently, while waiting for my son at the orthodontist, I picked up a recent issue of *Scientific American* and happened upon an article called "[The Administration's War on Facts Is a War on Democracy Itself](#)" by Jonathan Foley. It was a plea for facts and evidence and an appreciation for science in an American political climate where these things are increasingly under threat. It was a piece that I found myself in mostly enthusiastic agreement with. But one passage gave me pause:

Science shows us the magnificence of our world. Our oceans hold beautiful coral reefs, bursting with life, gleaming through azure waters. Tropical rain forests teem with creatures, sights and sounds. Here in California we have giant redwoods, reaching skyward, drenched in mist. And off our shores, there are colossal whales, drifting in rich waters, raising their young and singing their ethereal songs.

Through the lens of science, these wonders stir the mind. They awaken our hearts and souls. We instinctively want to share them with the people we love, and preserving them is the greatest gift we can give our children.

What I found fascinating about this passage was how the word *science* was being used. Science, strictly speaking, refers to a method, a discipline of observation and description and evaluation of evidence, and the testing and drawing of conclusions. Science is a mode of engaging with the world presented to sensory experience and one that assumes (or at least tries to assume) a value-free detachment from how the deliverances of all this description and analysis might be used. But that's not what's going on in this paragraph. Instead we are told that science shows us "magnificence" and "beauty" and "wonder" that "awakens our hearts and souls." Science shows us awe-inspiring things like redwoods and coral reefs and musical whales!

Of course it's undeniable—laudable, even!—that engaging in scientific inquiry of the natural world *can* lead to these kinds of responses in human beings. And science is of course to be praised for the depth and insight into the staggering complexity and beauty (and terror, it also must be said) of the world we inhabit. But science, in and of itself, is not up to the task of delivering the breathless superlatives that we see above. These are aesthetic and evaluative and *moral* responses that we get from somewhere else. Technically speaking, science ought to be mute on how human beings might evaluate its data or what they might do with its conclusions. We *could* decide the redwood forests are beautiful and ought to be protected. We could also come to the conclusion that they're an eyesore and clear-cut them to make paper. We *could* admire and seek to preserve our musical marine friends. We could also say, "meh, let's harvest them for meat." I should hasten to add that I prefer the former option in both cases above. But it wasn't science that led me to these conclusions. Science is no more capable of uncovering an objective value or a normative judgment than it is in saving a soul.

It's fascinating to observe how the way we use words influences the role these words come to play in our collective discourse. If science is uncritically assumed to be something like "the word we use to replace the stuff religion once (inadequately) did" it will gradually come to play precisely this role in our collective imaginations. Science will become something to "believe in" as an object of faith, often in place of God, just like in the case of Nacho and Esqueleto. And this is, of course, what we see today: science as metanarrative, science as the word into which we import all of our unscientific assumptions and values and hopes and fears and anxieties and authority issues. I'm not against importing unscientific assumptions into the data that science provides. Not by a long shot! I cheerfully do it every day. What I am against is refusing to acknowledge that we're *all* doing it, whether we're religious or not.

A scientific approach to the world we inhabit *might* lead to an awakening of human hearts and souls. But it also might not. And even if it does, this will only be because science has triggered something latent in human hearts and souls that are already primed to interpret the world of their experience through lenses like beauty and wonder and awe, and only because we retain a conviction that human hearts and souls need to be drawn toward better ways of being in the world (another assumption that science can't give us).

And we also might profitably dial back the hubris around our cultural moment just a touch. A quick glance at the Psalms, for example, might incline us to acknowledge that human hearts and souls were in awe of the world's staggering beauty long before modern science came along. They may not have known as much about the world as we do today, thanks to science, but it seems to me that they had some clearer ideas about who to thank both for its existence and for their capacity to be blown away by it.

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