



Is science all you need?

MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI ON A POSITION THAT MIGHT BE BEST FORGOTTEN

The Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions, by Alex Rosenberg
(W W Norton & Co) \$25.95/£17.99

“**S**cientism”, usually, is an insult. It is used in philosophy to connote an attitude of excessive infatuation with science, which leads one to discard other branches of knowledge or human experience and to care only about issues that are amenable to the scientific approach. As a former scientist and now philosopher, I have chastised some of my colleagues for their scientific attitude, only to be told that “scientism” is simply a label that one attaches to positions one does not like. Just like using “pseudoscience” to dismiss, say, the paranormal; or “crook” to shrug off a politician.

I am therefore glad that Alex Rosenberg has written an entire book to make the case for scientism – the idea, he says, that “the methods of science are the only reliable ways to secure knowledge of anything” – as the only rational ideology one could possibly hold in the face of what science tells us about the way

the world is. Thanks to him, I can no longer be accused of fighting a straw man. Rosenberg’s attempt is valiant and will give people much to think about. Except, of course, that according to Rosenberg we cannot really think such things because scientism “says” that chunks of matter cannot possibly produce thoughts about anything at all, on penalty of violating physicalism.

For Rosenberg there are simple, science-driven answers to all of life’s persistent questions, and he gives the short version right at the beginning of his book: Is there a God? No. What is the nature of reality? Whatever physics says it is. What is the meaning of life? Nope. Why am I here? Dumb luck. Is there free will? Not a chance. What is love? The solution to a strategic interaction problem. Does morality exist? No. And so on.

In some cases I agree with Rosenberg’s answers, though I think his reasoning relies far

too much on what after all are science's provisional findings (I mean, until 15 years ago we thought the universe was slowing down; turns out it's accelerating, maybe), while in other cases I think he is either wrong or at least does not come close to providing a satisfactory argument for his positions. Then again, that's the problem with scientism: it starts with a kernel of truth and inflates it into a cosmic nihilism (Rosenberg's word, which he uses proudly) of increasingly uncertain grounding.

Take Rosenberg's denial of the existence of conscious decision-making. Consciousness for him is an epiphenomenon of the brain's activity, but it doesn't actually do the kind of work we think (there we go, insisting that we actually think!) it does. His major piece of evidence? Benjamin Libet's experiments in cognitive science, which demonstrate convincingly that we make unconscious decisions (such as when exactly to push a button) ahead of becoming aware that we have made them. I doubt that anyone who has caught a falling object before realising what he was doing would be surprised, and I doubt anyone would seriously take that sort of experience as evidence that one's consciousness doesn't enter into one's deliberative decision making (neither did Libet himself, incidentally).

And why would consciousness itself exist if not for doing what we think it's doing? Well, we are informed, "[Consciousness] is probably too big a deal not to have been organized by natural selection to solve some design problem or other, perhaps several. Exactly what its functions are, what design problem it solves, neuroscience has not yet figured out." You may be excused if you have the distinct feeling that someone is engaging in some frantic hand waving here.

For Rosenberg there is no free will, morality, meaning, aboutness and so on because, you see, "the physical facts fix all the facts". We are never told exactly what this slogan (which recurs throughout the book) actually means. Well, I'm a big fan of physics, but last time I checked, it didn't, for instance, "fix" the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. And if it is that easy to find (infinite) exceptions to Rosenberg's dictum you begin to wonder what stock to put in it.

Rosenberg thinks that science, economics, the social sciences (not to mention literature, the arts, and his own field of philosophy) are all "stories" that may entertain us, but that should by no means be taken seriously. He doesn't seem to realise that science – not to mention his very book – also tells stories (some excellent and grounded in our best understanding of facts, others not so much), because that is the way human beings communicate knowledge and achieve understanding. Science is the right type of story if you want to know about cosmology, but not if you want to learn logic.

In the end, Rosenberg's scientific nihilism is analogous to radical scepticism about reality (you know, the sort that suggests the disturbing possibility that you may be a brain in a vat). It's thought provoking, there is no scientific evidence that can possibly rule in its favour or against it, and it is best promptly forgotten so that you can get back to thinking about the things that really matter to you.

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