

THE CONCERNS OF SCIENCE

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By Ernst Mayr

It has been said that the scientist searches for truth, but many people who are not scientists claim the same. The world and all that is in it are the sphere of interest not only of scientists but also of theologians, philosophers, poets, and politicians. How can one make a demarcation between their concerns and those of the scientist?

How Science Differs from Theology

The demarcation between science and theology is perhaps easiest, because scientists do not invoke the supernatural to explain how the natural world works, and they do not rely on divine revelation to understand it.

When early humans tried to give explanations for natural phenomena, particularly for disasters, invariably they invoked supernatural beings and forces, and even today divine revelation is as legitimate a source of truth for many pious Christians as is science. Virtually all scientists known to me personally have religion in the best sense of this word, but scientists do not invoke supernatural causation or divine revelation.

Another feature of science that distinguishes it from theology is its openness. Religions are characterized by their relative inviolability; in revealed religions, a difference in the interpretation of even a single word in the revealed founding document may lead to the origin of a new religion. This contrasts dramatically with the situation in any active field of science, where one finds different versions of almost any theory. New conjectures are made continuously, earlier ones are refuted, and at all times considerable intellectual diversity exists. Indeed, it is by a Darwinian process of variation and selection in the formation and testing of hypotheses that science advances.

Despite the openness of science to new facts and hypotheses, it must be said that virtually all scientists—somewhat like theologians—bring a set of what we might call “first principles” with them to the study of the natural world. One of these axiomatic assumptions is that there is a real world independent of human perceptions.

This might be called the principle of objectivity (as opposed to subjectivity) or common-sense realism. This principle does not mean that individual scientists are always “objective” or even that objectivity among human beings is possible in any absolute sense. What it does mean is that an objective world exists outside of

the influence of subjective human perception. Most scientists - though not all - believe in this axiom. Second, scientists assume that this world is not chaotic but is structured in some way, and that most, if not all, aspects of this structure will yield to the tools of scientific investigation. A primary tool used in all scientific activity is testing. Every new fact and every new explanation must be tested again and again, preferably by different investigators using different methods. Every confirmation strengthens the probability of the “truth” of a fact or explanation, and every falsification or refutation strengthens the probability that an opposing theory is correct.

One of the most characteristic features of science is this openness to challenge. The willingness to abandon a currently accepted belief when a new, better one is proposed is an important demarcation between science and religious dogma.

The method used to test for “truth” in science will vary depending on whether one is testing a fact or an explanation. The existence of a continent of Atlantis between Europe and America became doubtful when no such continent was discovered during the first few Atlantic crossings in the period of discoveries during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. After complete oceanographic surveys of the Atlantic Ocean were made and, even more convincingly, after photographs from satellites were taken in this century, the new evidence conclusively proved that no such continent exists. Often, in science, the absolute truth of a fact can be established. The absolute truth of an explanation or theory is much harder, and usually takes much longer, to gain acceptance. The “theory” of evolution through natural selection was not fully accepted as valid by scientists for over 100 years; and even today, in some religious sects, there are people who do not believe it.

Third, most scientists assume that there is historical and causal continuity among all phenomena in the material universe, and they include within the domain of legitimate scientific study everything known to exist or to happen in this universe. But they do not go beyond the material world. Theologians may also be interested in the physical world, but in addition they usually believe in a metaphysical or supernatural realm inhabited by souls, spirits, angels, or gods, and this heaven or nirvana is often believed to be the future resting place of all believers after death. Such supernatural constructions are beyond the scope of science.