

SEDUCTIVE PROPAGANDA: The rhetoric of triumphant scientism

Bryan Appleyard, from his book *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man* (Doubleday, 1993). This article was copied from the February/March 1992 issue of OMNI Magazine.

Science transports the entire issue of life on earth from the realm of the moral or the transcendent to the realm of the feasible. This child *can* be cured, this bomb *can* be dropped. 'Can' supersedes 'should'; 'ability' supersedes 'obligation'; 'No problem!' supersedes 'love.' *Bryan Appleyard*

Almost all popularizers of science—notably, in recent years, Jacob Bronowski and Carl Sagan—say the same kind of things. They say that science is a spectacle of majestic progression, that, in spite of its apparent obscurity, it is a natural and inevitable product of the human imagination, it has fundamental human significance and it is ultimately capable of answering every question.

God is often evoked. Sagan in his introduction to Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time* says: "This is also a book about God or perhaps about the absence of God. The word God fills these pages." Bringing God into the equations suggests both the importance and virtue of the scientific enterprise—this, we are told, is a continuation of the ancient religions quest to find Him and to do His will.

The message is that science is the human project. It is what we are intended to do. It is the only adventure. Bronowski, in particular, presents science as that which has always made us distinctively human. Science and technology accompany all human societies and distinguish us from the beasts. They are continuous throughout human history: relativity and microwave ovens are clearly the descendants of the first plough or the first wheel; they spring from the same impulse, the same inspiration. Most persuasive of all, ploughs and microwaves are unique in the known universe in that they are fashioned by reason.

This is propaganda, dangerously seductive propaganda. It is all misleading, even offensive, to the lives we actually lead. We are diminished by this rhetoric. It is the rhetoric of what is

called "scientism"—the belief that science is or can be the complete and only explanation. Whether we like it or not, science possesses an intrinsically domineering quality. This kind of triumphant scientism is built into all science.

The appearance of a Hawking, a Sagan or a Bronowski in the best seller lists or on television may be a huge media event, but it is quite rare. Every decade or so we seem to be ready for a new popularizing figure to bring us news from the further reaches of speculative and theoretical science or to encourage our faith in its virtue. In the intervening periods science blends innocuously into the background noise of our culture.

When the word "science" is used, it may dimly evoke images of school-rooms, laboratories or men in white coats, a rocket launch, a nuclear explosion or a chemical plant. We may see equations, computers, test-tubes, particle accelerators or colourful, toy-like models of molecules. Or the word may evoke technology: televisions, cars, manufacturing techniques, building methods, communications systems.

If pressed, we may bring ourselves to acknowledge that, in the developed world, we cannot dress, feed, travel, procreate or be entertained without the intervention of science. But we tend to think these are all different things. The electric kettle is not the same as an aircraft. They are both machines, certainly, but that is all. So our conception of science is diluted and its true identity concealed. For science is one thing and it is in both the kettle and the plane.

But, subliminally, our vague awareness of and gratitude for the ease and

ubiquity of technology prepares us to accept the larger claim of science that it alone can lead us to God. It has solved so many of our little problems, maybe it can solve the big one. After all, both flying and electrically boiling water are miraculous in their different ways and our ideas of God is usually accompanied by miracles.

This unarguable and spectacular effectiveness is the ace up science's sleeve. Whatever else we may think of it, we have to accept that science works. Penicillin cures disease, aircraft fly, crops grow more intensively because of fertilizers.

Science tells us that there are things called problems that have things called solutions and it tells us by showing us. So the effectiveness of science gives us more than hot water or the facility to hear good music, it gives us a sense that we can grasp everything, even things we cannot see. This effectiveness is absolute.

Science is not a neutral or innocent commodity which can be employed as a convenience by people wishing to partake only of the West's material power. Rather it is spiritually corrosive, burning away ancient authorities and traditions. It cannot really co-exist with anything. Scientists inevitably take in the mantle of the wizards, sorcerers and witch-doctors. Their miracle cures become our spells, their experiments our rituals.

So, as it burns away all competition, the question becomes: what kind of life is it that science offers to its people? How does it replace other wisdom, other meanings? These are the questions of the nature of the scientific life in the scientific society and they are the questions that will lead us inexorably back to Hawking's God. □