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Brush On Scientific Knowledge

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Memory, Meaning & Faith

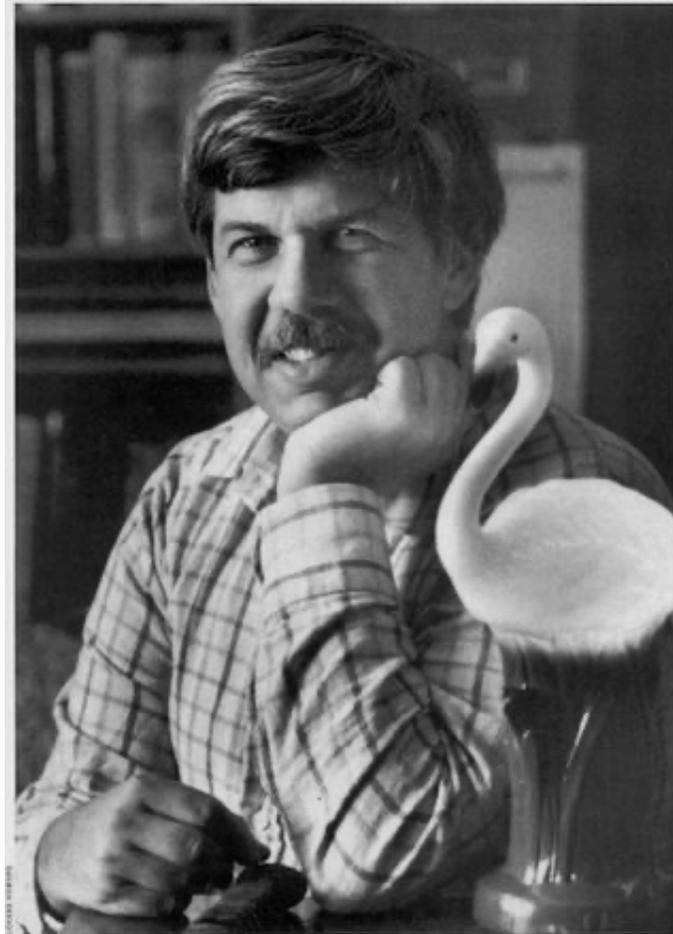
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August 25, 2010

Brush On Scientific Knowledge



Stephen Jay Gould

Many of the “scientific truths” that scientists believe today will be the “scientific mistakes” of tomorrow. Maintaining perspective is critical for a scientist to survive in this rapidly changing world of knowledge. . . . If . . . scientists can maintain perspective (and humility) and view their work as only part of an unfinished dance—but not the dance itself—as the assembling together of fragments of truth—rather than the absolute truth—then they can take satisfaction in their work, even through its results may be transitory. Stephen Jay Gould advocates such an approach to science in . . . *The Mismeasure of Man*:

I criticize the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise, done properly only when scientists can shuck the constraints of their culture and view the world as it really is. . . . Rather, I believe that science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gusty, human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information. I also present this view as an upbeat for science, not as a gloomy epitaph for a noble hope sacrificed on the altar of human limitations. (1981, 21)

. . . a scientist has “just got to know his limitations”—and the limitations of the scientific method. Otherwise, many scientists will spend their lives seeking that which the scientific method cannot deliver—absolute truth. They will build

their houses on a foundation of sand—knowledge that is constantly shifting—and will end up . . . worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. . . .

. . . . [Similarly,] a knowledge of the dispute between science and Christianity, which arose around the work of Copernicus and Galileo, should make Christians much more careful in their handling of biblical truth. The past is littered not only with failed scientific theories but also with failed theological interpretations. God's word is perfect and complete—but we are not. Many of the things we think are obvious in the Scriptures might not be so. We might be blind to the truth; we might be biased in our own feelings, cultural backgrounds, emotions, and sins; we might choose not to hear the message that God wants us to hear; we might not understand the Bible as well as we think we do. Therefore, Christians should exercise humility in their handling of the Word of God. Just because scientists are sometimes wrong does not mean that Christians are always right. (Nigel Brush, *The Limitations of Scientific Truth*, 261-262, 274)

Questions

- Does absolute truth exist? Is it possible for created beings to completely know absolute truth?
- Is science the only way to discover truth? Is theology the only way to discover truth?
- What are some of the limits of scientific truth? What are some of the limits of theological truth?

Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on August 25, 2010 in [Quotable](#), [Science and Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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In speaking of the metaphysics of naturalism, an author I recently read states that "methodological assumptions often mask metaphysical faiths." He develops the idea that while people vehemently argue over the logic of this theory (atheistic naturalism) or that theory (theism), the bottom issue is dispute over the facts.

In relation to the question of the limits of scientific and theological truth, I think Dilley's point speaks eloquently. What we want to know are the facts, but our ability to discern the facts is limited by our methodology (both by its limited capability and by the limitations which any methodology imposes by nature of excluding some other method). Our method determines our "facts." Insofar as we perceive anything we are interpreting it. I think, then, that the limits of both scientific and theological knowledge fall short of absolute knowledge of absolute truth (because we don't have absolute certainty of an absolute method).

But then again, I'm not absolutely sure!

Posted by: [Kessia Reyne Bennett](#) | [August 25, 2010 at 02:36 PM](#)

The questions of absolute truth, our ability to grasp it through science or theology are analogous to the Gospel. Absolute truth exists. Christians accept truth to be God. Scientists apprehend truth to be empirically perceived. Both means are limited by human perception and capacity. Being a Christian I believe God is truth but we as humans have inherited the choice of Adam and Eve to discern truth through our own means, to know good and evil and be like God. It is this sin that God uses the law to convict us of. Christ's life, death and resurrection reveals that when we surrender the sin that we are like God, knowing good and evil, and surrender our will to Him we, like Christ, become one with God. The result of our death to the fallen man of sin results in our resurrection as children of God. Our truth is no longer discerned by our means but by the Mind of Christ in us. Truth is no longer arrived by science, nor by theology but spiritually discerned, but not by our own works. The works of righteousness, of truth and the Gospel are of the Spirit of God. If we rely upon human axioms we will get only what we have . . . human limitation and futility.

So do we now use the truth from God to accomplish feats of power for our own benefit? If that were possible then we would not be surrendered to the will of God but have authority to subject His will to our own. God is not subject to man. Man finds life when He is surrendered to God. The Gospel is the discovery that we have life when the authority of man is sacrificed to the will of God, when the assumption of the knowledge of good and evil and the presumption to be like God is surrendered back to God. This Gospel lesson was the intent of God's decision to prevent man from eating of the Tree of Life. With it they would unleash the wickedness that their ego-centric natures would produce and make the Tree of Life the ultimate object and source of power. The Israelites were taught this lesson in the wilderness as they sought to subject God to their desires. It is the bitter pill the disciples swallowed as their messiah was crucified

and was the stumbling stone for those who could not perceive what Messiah ought to be. In the hands of man truth is a weapon, in the hands of God truth is life.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [August 28, 2010 at 09:33 PM](#)

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