

Materialist Science: The Negative Science

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It is commonly believed that physical phenomena can be understood in scientific terms. Science is presumed to produce knowledge that enables man to predict future events, control his environment or explain diverse phenomena. Regardless of the use to which scientific knowledge is put, the cognitive claim is there. The question is: Do scientific results constitute knowledge? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the logical structure of science. The problem is one of justification. Given that a conclusion is supported by scientific evidence, is the scientific concept of evidence a legitimate one? These questions about the foundation of scientific inference (i.e., the scientific method of justification) have great import.

The methods of inference taught in the Qur'an are distinct from and in conflict with those of science. Furthermore, we believe that the application of the Qur'anic methods will yield knowledge of God, which is the only true knowledge. However, the successes of science and its technological consequences have made many people, including believers in God, equate knowledge with scientific knowledge. There are many who still hold that religion is a matter of faith—the “dogmas” of religion are accepted on faith. The point is that the grounds for accepting a faith have nothing to do with cognitive claims. If a particular religion is fundamentally a matter of faith, then there is no basis for preferring it to other faiths.

In the face of this conflict between the method of the Qur'an and that of science, it is essential to assess the cognitive claims of religion. If our commitment to religion is to be more than an unjustified devotion, we must know that revelation is better suited to the attainment of knowledge than science. The problem is to ascertain whether there are sound logical reasons for supposing that the conclusions of revelation constitute more reliable, in fact the reliable knowledge, than conclusions established on the basis of the scientific method of inferences.

Why and How Questions: An Artificial Division

Science is based on causality, the cornerstone of materialism and the antithesis of God's Oneness (*tawhīd*). For this reason, if the scientific par-

adigm is claimed to produce knowledge, it must be at the expense of the Qur'anic paradigm. They cannot both be true at the same time. This being the fact, why do so many people adopt the scientific paradigm of knowledge while they are believers in God? Why do such believers not identify with the Qur'anic approach? One fundamental reason is the belief that science provides answers to how questions and religion answers to why questions. This way, science and religion are apparently reconciled; each is assigned to a different realm. But how is this possible, and what does it mean?

It is argued that although physical phenomena can be understood in scientific terms, it is only by an appeal to God that one can explain why there is a universe at all, why space, time, and the physical laws exist in the first place. This argument proceeds as follows: Every event, it is maintained, has a cause. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes, so there must be a first cause of everything: God. Let us examine the first step in the argument: Every event has a cause. Thus, every object that has come into existence has been produced by something already existing in the created world. However, it is illogical to accept that things produce and create each other, for that would involve the absurd and false idea of a vicious causal chain. Hence, the existence of a Creator whose like cannot exist and who cannot have the same nature as the beings created by Him is necessary.

As for the second part of the argument, "there cannot be an infinite chain of causes," this is purely arbitrary. It has been attacked even by the materialist philosophers. Why should an infinite chain of cause and effect need an explanation? This argument is based on the assumption that every thing owes its existence to the created causes which exist in its immediate vicinity. But when, for any reason, an event cannot be explained with causes, for example the creation of the universe, it has been attributed to God. Those who argue this way are satisfied with this conclusion because they believe that God is a necessary being and therefore does not need any further cause. Those who explain creation in terms of causality but do not believe in God reject this argument. They say there is no need to fill in such gaps with a god. Science will find the causes for all events and phenomena and there will be no need for a god to fill the gaps.

Once causality has been accepted at one point—one cause and effect—the chain must be followed forever. All causes and effects are of the same nature, and thus, there is no reason to stop at one point rather than another. This means there is no reason to stop at all, and thus there is no need for the existence of a first cause. If there is no first cause, there is no room for the Prime Mover. But a believer whose belief in God is neither sound nor based on knowledge is compelled to claim the necessity of a first cause in order to find a place for God. This first cause, however, even if one accepts its existence, would be of no greater import than any other cause. This blind belief in God is an unfounded prejudice.

The real belief in God is a confirmation of His existence in every event, in every cause and effect, now and then, not only where we cannot see the cause. When we see something unusual it may seem miraculous. We may not be able to explain it with causes known to us, so we attribute it to causes we know. We see no miracle there and therefore we do not feel the need for God. In fact, is not every created thing a miracle? Is there anything ordinary at all, or is it our familiarity that veils their miraculousness? To what cause can we attribute the beauty and art manifest in each being?

Blind belief attributes to the Creator the title of Prime Mover,¹ which in fact indicates the status of something created, not of a cause but of the *first* cause. It presents God as having created in the beginning the universe, the forces and the fundamental laws. In this way, the universe was set in motion and has continued to run ever since, like a machine governed by immutable laws. It allots His sovereignty to causes, forces, and laws, and thus opens the way to associating partners with Him.

Another argument is this: Science, which by definition deals with the physical world, might be successful in explaining one thing in terms of another (i.e., in terms of causality). But it cannot explain why the universe and the things in it are as they are, why there is a universe or anything at all. Everything in the physical universe must depend for its explanation on something that is outside the universe: God. Thus, the universe is the way it is because God has chosen it to be that way. To put it simply: When you ask "how things happen," materialist science (i.e., causality) gives the answer, but when you ask "why things happen" then the realm of religion (i.e., of God) starts. This line of reasoning is a vicious circle. It does not prove the necessity of the existence of God, for at best, it is only an attempt to point to His will, given that He exists. Indeed, since the justifiability of the necessity of the existence of God is the question at issue, it cannot legitimately be used for its own justification. It is for this reason that religion is believed to be, at bottom, a matter of faith.

These arguments accept, without question, that science explains "how" things come into being and leave for religion the honor of answering the "why" questions. However, this distinction between "how" and "why" questions is not natural—it is artificial, false. Since we are part of the cosmos, we can gather information and learn only by asking "how" questions, the answers to which are basically indicative inferences and have a knowledge-extending function. That is, given that the premises of such inferences are known, the inferences extend our knowledge to include the additional content of the conclusion. A "why" question, which cannot be reduced to a "how" question, is different. In order to answer a "why" question, we either have to be able to go outside the universe to investigate, which is impossible, or accept that God has so willed it thus, given that we know Him. A "why" question thus leads either to a tautology or, if the premises are known, to a deductive inference. In both cases, it cannot fulfill a knowledge-extending function.

Therefore, to entrust the resolution of “how” questions to science is simply to condemn religion to death and reduce God to a Prime Mover, a god that fills in the gaps. For if God is to be found and known, it must surely be through what we discover about His creation, not what we fail to explain.² Since both science and religion purport to be indicative and claim a knowledge-producing function, there are two possibilities: either science confirms revelation and is part of it, or science is in conflict with revelation. Therefore, one of them must be right and the other wrong. In order to decide which is right, let us examine the logical structure of the scientific method and compare it with the method of the Qur’an.

The So-Called Positive Sciences Are Really Negative

The scientific method is a process of investigation in which a problem is first identified and then observations, experiments, and other relevant data are used to construct or test hypotheses that purport to solve it. This is the way that scientific laws are established. The common view is that this procedure is inductive or, in other words, that it yields new knowledge. However, many philosophers of science have criticized inductivism as misrepresenting the actual procedure of scientists. A scientific theory, they contend, can never be accorded more than provisional acceptance, because, in principle, it is disprovable. It is believed because it has not been refuted. That is, falsification, and not verification, is the object of the observational and experimental procedures of science.

It is important to be clear from the outset that the problem raised here concerns the scientific method as a concept of evidence of justification. In order to understand the nature of the problem, let us take an example.

We all learned at school that “sunlight has an effect on the growth of plants.” This can be proven by an experiment. We take two plants. One is exposed to the sunlight, the other is covered with hard paper. Both plants are watered regularly. After a week, we see that the plant that did not receive sunlight has wilted. The conclusion, we are told, is this: This experiment proves that sunlight helps plants to grow normally and remain green. However, we only observed that in the absence of sunlight plants do not grow, which is certainly different from saying that sunlight causes plants to grow. The growth of plants depends on innumerable factors. However, the absence of only one of these factors is enough for a plant not to grow. Therefore, this experiment proves only that plants do not grow in the absence of sunlight. From this conclusion, it is logically impossible to deduce anything about the hypothesis that “sunlight has an effect on the growth of plants.” Further thought shows this method of justification to be illogical and fallacious.³

In order to test this hypothesis, we should approach the problem positively and ask such positive questions as “Can sunlight have an effect on

the growth of plants?” For this purpose, we should analyze sunlight and ask such questions as “What are its properties?” and “What qualities are needed for the growth of a plant?”

We see that the order within plants and the rules according to which they are formed differ from one plant to another. Also, sunlight enters or can enter all of them. It can act within them without error. If their order is not known to the sunlight, it cannot act, or, even if it could act, it would not act without error. In which case sunlight, which is performing its duty perfectly, either must know the structures, measures, and formations of all plants or else it must be acting under the command and will of one who does know. That is, sunlight is either acting within the knowledge and power and at the will of an omniscient and omnipotent being or must have omniscience and omnipotence itself for it acts, or can act, in an orderly manner in all plants and, indeed, in all animate beings. Sunlight, however, has none of these qualities. It has no knowledge, no will, and no power to give life to the plant. It is blind and unconscious. This indicates that it is acting with the permission and under the authority of an all-wise Maker, an all-knowing Creator.

The materialists, whose use of their intellects is limited to what is immediately apparent to them, take the conjunction of events for causality. In brief, if two events coexist, they think that one causes the other. And in their obstinate denial of the Creator, they have to accept the irrational and vicious idea of causality and claim that sunlight causes plants to grow. They never ask how sunlight knows what to do, how it does that, what qualities it has that enable it to do that, and so on. At the same time, they cannot prove their claim, for it is irrational. So they adopt a negative approach and call it the “scientific method.” When compared with the positive approach taught in the Qur’an, the negative scientific approach appears to be completely illogical and false:

The parable of those who take (beings or forces) other than God for their protectors is that of the spider which makes itself a house: for, behold, the frailest of all houses is the spider’s house. Could they understand this. (Qur’an 29:41)

The scientific method is like the spider’s house in the parable: The moment you question it, it falls apart, for at that moment it becomes clear that it is based on an illusion.

Conclusion

After examining the scientific method of justification, it appears to be logically fallacious. According to the materialist philosophers themselves, the so-called scientific paradigm of knowledge is based on falsification, not verification. They are aware that it is impossible to prove causality, but they rely on the fact that it cannot be falsified either.

However, when we follow the positive approach by asking such positive questions as “Can sunlight affect the growth of a plant?,” causality collapses. The scientific method cannot justify causality and, consequently, its cognitive claims cannot be legitimized. There is no rational basis for the belief in such scientifically established conclusions as “sunlight has an effect on the growth of plants.” From this, we conclude that the scientific, or rather the materialistic, paradigm of knowledge does not constitute true knowledge.

The Qur’anic paradigm, however, is based on a positive approach. It teaches us how to ask positive questions about things and events, shows how beings come into existence, explains their meanings, speaks of all things in order to make known their Creator with His attributes and names, and produces new knowledge: the knowledge of God. Indeed, it is as though a tiny particle says with its disposition: “Look! I am ignorant and impotent, but I perform infinite duties which require an all-encompassing knowledge and power. Can you not see that I am acting at the command of the possessor of such all-encompassing knowledge and power?”

Materialist philosophy and science look at beings for themselves. Scientists think that they describe what they observe directly. But their distorted and fallacious descriptions give no perfection of knowledge, apart from a terrible dread and fearful wonder, to the spirit. For instance, science describes the sun as a vast burning liquid mass that causes the planets to revolve around it. Its mass is such and such. It is this, it is that. It does not speak of it as Qur’an 71:16 does: “Do you not see how God has . . . set the sun as a lamp?” With the use of the word “lamp,” the world is depicted as a home making known the mercy and favor of the Creator.

The Qur’an asks us to look at the universe in order to know the Creator. Thus, true science works hand in hand with revelation, under its guidance. Science should not deny the Qur’an’s aim. It must serve this aim. Otherwise it cannot explain anything; it cannot produce any knowledge. It must accept, for example, that the sun has been set on purpose as a lamp for the world. It should then seek out the wisdom and mercy in this setting and show us how wise and merciful the Creator of the sun is. In this way, science will help humanity acquire a better understanding of itself, the world, and, therefore, its Creator.

Endnotes

1. It is important to notice that the concept of Prime Mover or First Cause is completely different from the Qur’anic concept of the Causer of all Causes, now and then (i.e., the Causer of all Causes in all of space and time).

2. Indeed, the Qur’an invites to look at “how” things come into existence, not “why.” For example: “And look at the bones [of animals and men] how We put them together and then clothe them with flesh” (2:259); “Go over all the earth and behold how He has created [man] in the first instance” (29:19); “Do, then, they [who deny the resurrection] never gaze at the clouds pregnant with water, [and observe] how they are created? And at the sky, how it is raised aloft? And at the mountains, how firmly they are reared? And at the earth, how it is spread out?” (88:17-20).

3. "Art thou not aware of that [king] who argued with Abraham about his Sustainer, [simply] because God had granted him kingship? Lo! Abraham said: 'My Sustainer is He who grants life and deals death.' [The king] replied: 'I [too] grant life and deal death.' Said Abraham: 'Verily, God causes the sun to rise in the east; cause it, then, to rise in the west.' Thereupon he who was bent on denying the truth remained dumb-founded" (2:258).

The king asked for two prisoners to be fetched. He ordered the death of one and spared the life of the second. This way, he thought he could grant life and deal death. His reasoning was: If I had had the second prisoner killed, he would not be alive. Therefore, I granted him life. This is similar to what the scientists say: If there were no sunlight, plants would fade and die. Therefore sunlight gives life to plants.

This way of reasoning is very common. We usually reason this way without realizing that it implies unbelief. This is how we claim ownership over what we do. For instance, we say "If I had not watered the flowers, they would have died. Therefore, I caused the flowers to grow." In fact, if I cannot see that God created me as well as my actions ("the while it is God who has created you and what you make [37:96]), I cannot see that He creates the universe as well as every single cause and every single effect in it. If I think that I am an effective cause, I am bound to see causes as effective. In other words, I am bound to believe in causality.

The king in the verse is, from one point of view, the representative of the self (*nafs*) that claims lordship (*rubūbiyah*). We should tell our self and the king-like scientists what Abraham told the king in the above verse. In effect: If you can do anything without obeying the Creator's laws, then change the laws.