Bill Nye is not the Philosophy Guy

Bishop Robert Barron

Reliable sources have informed me that for the millennial generation Bill Nye is a figure of great importance, due to his widely-watched program from the 1990s called “Bill Nye the Science Guy.” Evidently, he taught a large swath of American youth the fundamentals of experimental science and became for them a sort of paragon of reason. Well, I’ll take their word for it.

But judging from a recent video in which Bill Nye discussed the relation between science and philosophy, I can only tell you that he sure is not the “philosophy guy.”

In a rambling and largely incoherent response to an interlocutor who wondered whether philosophy is still relevant, Nye denigrated the discipline, stating that philosophy never deviates from common sense, that it doubts the reality of sense experience, and that it engages in speculation about whether we might be part of an intergalactic ping pong match! In regard to the first observation, I would say that, pretty much from Socrates on, philosophers have practically specialized in deviating from common sense. In regard to the second (which flatly contradicts his first assertion), I would say that some philosophers – Descartes most famously – speculated along these lines in order to perform a sort of epistemological experiment and certainly not to prove the non-existence of the physical world. In regard to the third, I can only say that this has more to do with someone on an LSD trip than any serious philosopher that I’m aware of.

I don’t want to spend any more time engaging Nye’s rather silly claims, but I do want to address an issue that undergirds everything he says and that is infecting the minds of many young people today, namely scientism. Not to put too fine a point on it, scientism is the reduction of all knowledge to the scientific form of knowledge. In other words, it is a strict identification of the rational with the deliverances of the scientific method developed in the late sixteenth century. That this method – empirical observation, followed by hypothesis, followed by experimentation, followed by confirmation through repeated experimentation – has indeed rendered abundant fruit is obvious to anyone. And that its accompanying technology has benefitted the world in countless ways is beyond dispute. But the very success of the sciences invites the distortion of scientism, an epistemological imperialism which consigns extra-scientific forms of rationality to the intellectual ash-heap. And what an impoverishment this produces!

At the very dawn of philosophy, Plato spoke to us of prisoners chained up inside a cave. All they can see are flickering shadows on the cave wall. One prisoner managed to free himself from the chains, escape from the cave, and find an upper

world of light and substance. He realized that the shadows that he had spent his life watching were but simulacra of what is truly real. Finally, he gazed up to the sun, whose brilliant light made all things visible.

This splendid fable is the metaphorical representation of the process by which one moves from knowledge of the evanescent world of nature to knowledge of the more permanent things and finally to the source of all knowledge and being. Plato's disciple Aristotle presented the same idea in a more prosaic manner, speaking of the transition from physics (the study of matter in motion) to mathematics (the study of numeric relations), and finally to metaphysics (the study of being as such). Neither philosopher despised what we would characterize today as science – in fact Aristotle can credibly claim the title as father of Western science – but they both recognized that there are things the sciences can't know, things that are, in point of fact, the most important, lasting, and fascinating.

The physical sciences can reveal the chemical composition of ink and paper, but they cannot, even in principle, tell us anything about the meaning of Moby Dick or The Wasteland. Biology might inform us regarding the process by which nerves stimulate muscles in order to produce human action, but it could never tell us anything about whether a human act is morally right or wrong. Optics might disclose how light and color are processed by the eye, but it cannot possibly tell us what makes the Sistine Chapel Ceiling beautiful. Speculative astrophysics might tell us truths about the unfolding of the universe from the singularity of the Big Bang, but it cannot say a word about why there is something rather than nothing or how contingent being relates to non-contingent being. How desperately sad if questions regarding truth, morality, beauty, and existence qua existence are dismissed as irrational or pre-scientific.

The scientism that I've been describing and criticizing is but a symptom of a more far-reaching problem, namely, the fading away of the humanities in our schools. If the study of literature, the arts, and philosophy is regarded as impractical and "soft" in comparison to the study of the sciences, we will produce a generation of, I'm sorry to say, prisoners chained inside of Plato's cave. They will know a great deal about the evanescent world of nature, but they won't know anything about how to live a decent life, how to differentiate between the sublime and the mundane, how to recognize God. So listen to Bill Nye as he leads you through an experiment, but please don't listen to him in regard to the higher questions and the more permanent things.

Bishop Robert Barron is an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries.

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