

Phlogiston

'Phlogiston'? Yes, it's a scientific theory that was dumped over 200 years ago, so it's not surprising if most people have never heard of it. Then there was the theory that the atom was the smallest particle of matter and that it could not be divided: that disappeared in my father's lifetime. As to astronomer Hoyle's theory about the continuous creation of the universe, and the seeding of life on Earth from outer space: that went out when I was teenager.

These three examples illustrate what science does. It is the process of forming theories, testing them against the evidence, and then modifying, or replacing them, with something that fits the evidence better. Sadly, and I would say dangerously, some popular views of science do not understand this. So when I hear those in positions of power and influence talk about 'the' science, I get very uneasy. The word 'the' implies something fixed and final. For example, if we read in a story the words 'The End', we wouldn't expect to turn over the page and find lots of other endings.

Science is like a story that does not have an end. Just when we think that we have 'the' theory; further experience and research leads on to something else. True science is not about certainty. It is about asking questions that result in theories evolving or being replaced. So when I'm told that science conflicts with Christian belief, I wonder which science is being talked about. Yesterday's science? Well, that's already dead. Today's? Well, that, like me, will dead sometime in the future.

Where has this idea of a conflict between science and Christianity come from? I believe it has two sources. The first is a mechanized view of Christianity that uses the Bible to date the creation of the world at 4004 BC. The second is a romantic view of science that believes that knowing the age of the universe gives us a superior sense of moral values from those who don't.

Meanwhile, human beings can show love, hatred, or moral indifference; and Nature can be beautiful, savage, or dull. Understanding why this is so, is what the first chapters of Genesis are really about. Oh, and while I write this, astronomers have just added a few million years to the theoretical age of the Universe.

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