

Gavin Newsom and the Limits of Science

There have been many responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in all spheres of life from [businesses](#), [educational institutions](#), [churches](#), and within [close intimate human relationships](#). Most of these responses have [arisen spontaneously](#) as people's duties to protect themselves and others, both individuals and communities, have become plain to them. Government at all levels has also acted, imposing a series of sometimes necessary but often [arbitrary and capricious restrictions](#) on economic and social life. Protests from citizens concerned with the economic and social impact of these restrictions have taken place from [Michigan](#) to [California](#). The concerns of protesters are varied and, as with any mass movement, some are more reasonable than others. [Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, D-Mich.](#), and [Gov. Gavin Newsom, D-Calif.](#), have both argued that the restrictions imposed are somehow beyond politics and matters of "science."

Politics and protests will not drive our decision making.

Science, data, and public health will drive our decision making. [#StayHomeSaveLives](#)

– *Gavin Newsom (@GavinNewsom) [April 28, 2020](#)*

The belief that matters of public policy should be decided by "science" betrays a profound misunderstanding of both science and politics.

Science is, as the economist Henry Hazlitt [once put it](#), "nothing more than an organized solution of a number of related problems." Politics itself is a science; hence, the

discipline of political science. By pitting politics and science against each other, both Whitmer and Newsom are making the argument that the natural sciences should be privileged over the social sciences. But can the natural sciences “guide us” in the way politicians seem to believe they can?

The late Nobel Prize-winning American theoretical physicist Richard Feynman gets to the bottom of what the natural sciences are, and what they can and cannot do, in his delightful lecture [“What is Science?”](#) Feynman begins with an examination of the standard textbook definitions of natural science and what they fail to appreciate:

“There is some kind of distorted distillation and watered-down and mixed-up words of Francis Bacon from some centuries ago, words which then were supposed to be the deep philosophy of science. But one of the greatest experimental scientists of the time who was really doing something, William Harvey, said that what Bacon said science was, was the science that a lord-chancellor would do. He [Bacon] spoke of making observations, but omitted the vital factor of judgment about what to observe and what to pay attention to.”

Natural science is not simply something “out there” that directs us but something that is *done* by involving human inquiry and judgment:

“And that is what science is: the result of the discovery that it is worthwhile rechecking by new direct experience, and not necessarily trusting the [human] race [’s] experience from the past. I see it that way. That is my best definition.”

The natural sciences employ a specific method of inquiry suited to providing solutions to a number of related problems. It is not an authority to be appealed to as a guide to action:

“Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.

When someone says, 'Science teaches such and such,' he is using the word incorrectly. Science doesn't teach anything; experience teaches it. If they say to you, 'Science has shown such and such,' you might ask, 'How does science show it? How did the scientists find out? How? What? Where?'

It should not be 'science has shown' but 'this experiment, this effect, has shown.'"

The natural sciences are not the only way we know things and not the only means we should employ, either to discover the truth about our world or to inform our actions. As Gordon Smith and Jill Pell [observed](#) in the *British Medical Journal*, "[T]he effectiveness of parachutes has not been subjected to rigorous evaluation by using randomised controlled trials." The coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is a novel virus which was only introduced to humans in 2019. We know [precious little about the virus](#), although scientists are endeavoring to discover more. In early March, U.S. health officials [advised](#) Americans not to wear facial masks and have now [reversed](#) that advice. No experiment was conducted, no effect shown. Policy was not changed because of the rigorous application of natural science but out of intuition and an abundance of caution.

Waiting for science is not an advisable course of action in the midst of this pandemic, during which we must act on imperfect information. Marshal Ferdinand Jean Marie Foch describes perfectly the analogous situation of war:

"The truth is, no study is possible on the battle-field; one does there simply what one can in order to apply what one knows. Therefore, in order to do even a little, one has already to know a great deal and to know it well."

What we know better than the natural science relevant to COVID-19 is the limits of what natural science can tell us. The temptation to outsource the difficult work of the social sciences, including politics, to the physical sciences—as

Govs. Whitmer and Newsom are misguidedly seeking to do—is an old one. The late Nobel laureate Friedrich von Hayek warned of this temptation in economics in his 1974 Nobel Prize lecture, [“The Pretense of Knowledge”](#):

“Unlike the position that exists in the physical sciences, in economics and other disciplines that deal with essentially complex phenomena, the aspects of the events to be accounted for about which we can get quantitative data are necessarily limited and may not include the important ones. While in the physical sciences it is generally assumed, probably with good reason, that any important factor which determines the observed events will itself be directly observable and measurable, in the study of such complex phenomena as the market, which depend on the actions of many individuals, all the circumstances which will determine the outcome of a process, for reasons which I shall explain later, will hardly ever be fully known or measurable.”

This is equally applicable to the complex phenomena of politics. Citizens cannot be devalued and dismissed by their government in the name of crude scientism. Their authority rests on the consent of the governed and not on what “science” is “telling them.” Prudential judgments must be made, sometimes in the face of protest and opposition from citizens, and the responsibility for those difficult decisions cannot be outsourced.

In attempting to farm out the responsibility for their prudential judgments to “science,” politicians endanger the work of true scientists and their invaluable work. Hayek explains:

“The conflict between what in its present mood the public expects science to achieve in satisfaction of popular hopes and what is really in its power is a serious matter because, even if the true scientists should all recognize

the limitations of what they can do in the field of human affairs, so long as the public expects more there will always be some who will pretend, and perhaps honestly believe, that they can do more to meet popular demands than is really in their power. It is often difficult enough for the expert, and certainly in many instances impossible for the layman, to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims advanced in the name of science.”

People in all vocations have made difficult changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I do not envy those in government who have the duty to make difficult decisions. Those decisions, however, are theirs to make in service to their constituents. They are the product of their prudential judgement and cannot be laid at the feet of science. All Americans, those in government and citizens, are subject and responsible to God from whom comes all power and wisdom:

“He changes times and seasons, deposing some kings and establishing others. He gives wisdom to the wise; he imparts knowledge to those with understanding ([Daniel 2:21](#)).”

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