In recent decades there have been consistent attacks, worldwide, on science and reason, most often seen as coming from conservative, primarily religious groups or from corporate interests out to make a buck. What is overlooked is that attacks on reason frequently originate from the “progressive left” as well. It appears that a significant fraction of the 21st century human race has lost “faith” in science and reason as a path to meaningful knowledge. Yet, as never before in human history, science matters, as we become increasingly vulnerable to forces set in motion by our ever-expanding numbers and consumption of resources.

How is the modern person to decide between conflicting claims for the answers to our current and future problems? How can one tell bunk from science?

In *Nonsense on Stilts* Massimo Pigliucci, a biochemist and professor of philosophy at the City University of New York, sets out to provide the non-scientist with a proverbial “baloney meter” – the means by which anyone can tell good science from bad (although Pigliucci scrupulously avoids the use of the words "good" and "bad" he does at one point let "wrong" creep into his discussion). The fact that the author fails to deliver on his promise is mitigated by a series of entertaining, if often free-wheeling, discussions on the nature and history of science and philosophy (several chapters on each). *Nonsense on Stilts* reads very much like a series of blogs – not too surprising since Dr. Pigliucci maintains his own blog at rationallyspeaking.org.

The book roams across so many topics that it isn’t easy to summarize it in a reasonable space. However, Pigliucci does focus quite a bit of the text on the climate change “debate”, so I will confine my comments to that discussion.

The author’s choice of advocates for the two sides - science and bunk - are questionable, at least in terms of providing good examples between a peddler of bunk and an advocate of science. On the climate-denialist (bunk) side Pigliucci places Bjorn Lomborg, a Dane, and admittedly a non-scientist. On the side of science he counters with Al Gore, most definitely not a scientist. The author's choice is only appropriate if the premise for their selection was to demonstrate how two non-scientists made proper and improper choices between science and bunk.

Lomborg is an affable character who has written a few books on environmental issues including global warming. His positions might be summarized by "How I learned to stop worrying and love global warming (or any other environmental threat you can name)." It’s hard to hate an optimist these days. However, Lomborg is not a true global-warming denialist in that he does not out rightly deny the science behind global warming or even the conclusion that humans are modifying global climate. His positions
usually hinge on economic arguments; namely, that responding to global warming or any other environmental threat is simply not cost effective, and that promoting global wealth development now will pay off later when the consequences of climate change are more obvious. Lomborg's arguments may be bunk, but, if the point of *Nonsense on Stilts* is to advocate that the average citizen should become more expert in scientific issues so that he can discern good from bad science, then picking Lomborg may not be the best example. Lomborg is a non-expert who obviously studied some problems and came out on the wrong side!

Al Gore may be the most visible symbol of global-warming advocacy, but his writing and media presentations are not, necessarily, the best way for the average non-scientist to learn why global warming is good science. Gore's politics and ego simply too often get in the way of presenting the science objectively even if it is admittedly wonderful dramatically.

The bottom line is that there is no such thing as Pigliucci's “baloney meter.” Just as it is with competing politicians or competing products on the shelf, every individual has to make his or her judgment, first, on whether acquiring the knowledge to make a decision is worth the effort, and then, what side of the issue is most likely to be of benefit to them.

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