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# The Sidney Awards, Part 1

By **DAVID BROOKS**

The highly prestigious Sidney Awards go out to some of the best magazine essays of the year. This year, many of these essays probed the intersection between science and the humanities. Links to all can be found on the online edition of this column.

For example, over the summer and fall, two intellectual heavyweights, Steven Pinker and Leon Wieseltier, went toe-to-toe in *The New Republic* over the proper role of science in modern thought. [Pinker took the expansive view](#), arguing that, despite what some blinkered humanities professors argue, science gives us insight into nearly everything. For example, Pinker argues that science has demonstrated that “the belief systems of all the world’s traditional religions and cultures — their theories of the origins of life, humans and societies — are factually mistaken.”

Instead, science has given us a different value system: “The facts of science, by exposing the absence of purpose in the laws governing the universe, force us to take responsibility for the welfare of ourselves, our species and our planet. For the same reason, they undercut any moral or political system based on mystical forces.”

[Wieseltier counters](#) that few believers take Scripture literally. They interpret. Meanwhile, science simply can’t explain many of the most important things. Imagine a scientific explanation of a beautiful painting, based, say, on a chemical analysis of the paint. “Such an analysis will explain everything except what most needs explaining: the quality of beauty that is the reason for our contemplation of the painting.” The scientists deny the differences between the realms of human existence and simplify reality by imposing their methods even where they can’t apply.

Caitrin Nicol had [an absorbing essay in \*The New Atlantis\*](#) called “Do Elephants Have Souls?” Nicol quotes testimony from those who study elephant behavior. Here’s one elephant greeting a 51-year-old newcomer to her sanctuary:

“Everyone watched in joy and amazement as Tarra and Shirley intertwined trunks and made ‘purring’ noises at each other. Shirley very deliberately showed Tarra each injury she had sustained at the circus, and Tarra then gently moved her trunk over each injured part.”

Nicol not only asks whether this behavior suggests that elephants do have souls, she also

illuminates what a soul is. The word is hard to define for many these days, but, Nicol notes, “when we talk about it, we all mean more or less the same thing: what it means for someone to bare it, for music to have it, for eyes to be the window to it, for it to be uplifted or depraved.”

Larissa MacFarquhar [had a brilliant profile](#) in The New Yorker of Aaron Swartz, the 26-year-old computer programmer and Internet activist who hanged himself early this year.

Swartz lived much of his life outside the normal structures. He was too brilliant for his high school, so his parents let him drop out and take college courses or study on his own. He thought the students at Stanford were shallow, so he didn’t go back after his freshman year.

He began writing big books or starting great projects, but he usually didn’t finish them. He had dreams of saving the world, but fuzzier notions of the specific avenues by which he might do it.

On the one hand, he seems to have been the victim of the formless freedom of the Internet life. On the other, he did have intellectual daring and a fierce independence. MacFarquhar tells the story as befits the subject, with email and text-message-type comments from Swartz and his friends propelling the piece along. “Even among my closest friends, I still feel like something of an imposition,” Swartz wrote, “and ... the slightest hint that I’m correct sends me scurrying back into my hole.”

Don Peck looked at how companies assess potential hires [in an essay](#) in The Atlantic called “They’re Watching You at Work.”

Peck demonstrates something that most of us already sense: that job interviews are a lousy way to evaluate potential hires. Interviewers at big banks, law firms and consultancies tend to prefer people with the same leisure interests — golf, squash, whatever. In one study at Xerox, previous work experience had no bearing on future productivity.

Now researchers are using data to try again to make a science out of hiring. They watch how potential hires play computer games to see who is good at task-switching, who possesses the magical combination: a strict work ethic but a loose capacity for “mind wandering.” Peck concludes that this greater reliance on cognitive patterns and game playing may have an egalitarian effect. It won’t matter if you went to Harvard or Yale. The new analytics sometimes lead to employees who didn’t even go to college. The question is do these analytics reliably predict behavior? Is the study of human behavior essentially like the study of nonhuman natural behavior — or is there a ghost in the machine?

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