In the last two decades of the twentieth century, our popular and scientific accounts of human suffering have been inching their way toward a new form of scientific reductionism: a knee-jerk biological determinism that I call “biobabble.” This is the widespread tendency to use terms (e.g. adaptation) that come from various aspects of the biological sciences to attempt to explain human actions and moods without even a reasonable understanding of the term, the science, the associated theory (or lack of it), and/or the target of explanation. Biobabble names biological, evolutionary, and physical processes as the primary causes for many human traits and behaviors from the undesirable (like alcoholism and schizophrenia) to the sublime (like altruism and happiness). In my view, biobabble confuses and harms us in our attempts to understand and alleviate human suffering, on both an individual and a communal level.

By the term “suffering” here, I mean specifically the Buddhist notion of dukkha, which is typically translated as “suffering” in English. Dukkha literally refers to a state of being off-center or out-of-balance, like a bone slightly out of its socket or a wheel riding off its axle. I will use the word “suffering” in this paper to mean a state of being in which we are out of kilter because of a subjective disturbance that may be as mild as a momentary frustration or as severe as a depressive or psychotic state.

Buddhist discourses on dukkha are wide-ranging and deal with both physical and mental suffering. For my purposes, I am referring to the mental anguish that we create through our perseverations, distortions, evaluations, and internal commentary. Much of this anguish is rooted in our conscious or unconscious
desires to have things go our own way, and the resultant feelings of humiliation and despair when they do not. This suffering is distinct from the pain and adversity that are inescapable and out of our control. Differentiating suffering from pain allows us to address the aspect of human adversity that is potentially under the control of an individual and can be ameliorated through a change in awareness or consciousness.

Such suffering arises from desires and intentions expressed through emotional habit-patterns that Western psychology calls “unconscious” conflicts, deficits, complexes, and defenses, as well as through impulsive actions, addictions, cravings and demands. The arguments laid down by psychodynamic theories, only about one hundred years old, are quite similar to ancient Buddhist accounts of suffering. But the importance given to unconscious conflicts, desires, and meanings in Western psychology has been rapidly shrinking, as biobabble has spread through media and popularized journalistic writing on science. The notion that people are responsible for their actions is disappearing from the popular imagination, along with the conviction that people can change their behavior by changing their minds.

Twentieth century scientific achievements have largely defeated the old metaphysics of Western Judeo-Christian religions. Widely regarded as a sign that humanity has grown up from a childhood in which human powers (agency, rationality, creativity etc.) were erroneously projected into an enchanted animistic world, enlightened secularism has had massive effects on our moral and ethical functioning. From a scientific perspective, we are now free to use the previously projected powers to understand ourselves and our accountability, responsibility, and limitations as agents in own lives and the world. And yet we can just as easily aggrandize ourselves and believe that we are now the gods and goddesses of the past, and should bring life and death under our own control. And/or we can avoid all accountability for our own actions and simply continue to project these vitalizing powers into things that are largely outside our responsibility and control (e.g. genetic predispositions).

Science offers its own metaphysics about the fundamental nature of reality, although it is a metaphysics that largely excludes human meaning. For example, matter and energy have replaced divinities as the ultimate principles of existence. Indeed, we educated Westerners put our faith in almost every “scientific” explanation whether or not we have any real knowledge of what is being explained or how it works. This in itself is not necessarily a problem; humans must employ a mythology, or bigger story, in order to know how to perceive “reality.” And yet, if we are to make use of our powers of rationality and science, we must examine the social and cultural consequences of our current beliefs.

Merely replacing the metaphysics of religion with the metaphysics of science does not bring us closer to truth or knowledge. And most people suspect that there are ethical consequences of our scientific metaphysics, which have torn the social fabric supporting communities and families.