Scientism is very popular today, both within and outside the academy. At its most basic, scientism is an attitude of science-worship: the view that science, and only science, can answer any question worth asking. It involves an uncritical faith in the methods of the modern sciences (especially the natural sciences, but often the empirical social sciences as well) and an uncritical acceptance of their assumptions and conclusions (at least until they are replaced by newer ones).

Scientism can be seen in politicians who advocate cutting humanities programs in universities to focus exclusively on the sciences; in public intellectuals who declare all religious belief to be indefensible in light of the discoveries of science, and thus a sign of weak-minded gullibility; in academic philosophers who dismiss the “softer” humanities disciplines and subfields, and take philosophy seriously only if it is somehow made “scientific”—for example, by incorporating formal and quantitative methods from the sciences, or limiting itself to interpreting their results.

But scientism is by no means a new attitude; it was just as prevalent in the latter half of the 19th century, when institutional academic science was becoming established and successful, and powerful new theories—evolution by natural selection, molecular thermodynamics, electromagnetism—were capturing the popular imagination. My dissertation explores and compares the critical responses of two late 19th-century philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and William James, to the scientism they encountered among their contemporaries. These two thinkers are seldom considered together, but I find remarkable similarities in their challenges to scientism on both epistemological and ethical grounds, despite their generally very different ethical outlooks and their different conclusions on whether traditional religious belief is still tenable in light of scientific discoveries. This analysis, I contend, is not only of historical interest: those who consider the scientistic outlook to be ill-founded and intellectually confining might well take some cues from our 19th-century predecessors’ strategies for combating it.

My dissertation consists of two main parts and one introductory chapter. Chapter 1 provides the contemporary motivation and historical background for the project. I explicate the attitude of scientism as a pair of linked propositions: (1) that the aims of science—namely, discovering truth and avoiding error—are the highest human aims (this is what Nietzsche called the unconditional will to truth); and (2) that no practice other than science can achieve these aims (I call this, again following Nietzsche, the hegemony of science). I illustrate the attitude with examples from both contemporary figures (e.g., Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker) and 19th-century thinkers whom Nietzsche and James explicitly or implicitly challenged. I then explain the historical reasons for connecting Nietzsche and James, even though neither influenced the other. They both admired Emerson; his influence might be seen in the importance of aesthetic values in their conception of the good, which shows up in their arguments for the limitations of scientific understanding. I argue that early neo-Kantians like Ernst Mach and F.A. Lange shaped the epistemological commitments of both philosophers. However, the most important factor explaining their similar concerns is their common cultural environment. By the 1870s and 1880s, when Nietzsche and James were both writing, institutional science had gained great prestige in Europe, Britain, and North America. The success of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, in particular, appeared to demonstrate that science could explain phenomena that had previously been in the domain of religion, and thus undermine religious narratives. Many believed that science could and should displace or even replace religion.
as the primary guide of individual and communal life. But both Nietzsche and James perceived science’s inability to satisfy the human need for meaning, and were deeply concerned about the vacuum of meaning that would be left in the lives of individuals and societies after science destroyed the foundations of their old ideals.

The remaining chapters present my analysis of Nietzsche’s and James’s philosophical attacks on scientism. In Part I, I explore their overlapping critiques of proposition (1), the unconditional will to truth, which question its internal coherence, its epistemological grounding, and its value for human life. The Introduction to Part I articulates the distinct senses in which the form of the will to truth they both oppose is unconditional: first, it regards truth and the pursuit of truth as having final and not merely instrumental value; and second, it takes the imperatives to pursue truth and avoid error to be overriding and their scope unrestricted by other values that might take priority.

Chapter 2 begins with Nietzsche’s challenges to the unconditional will to truth, focusing on his charge that this will, and the institution of science insofar as it is motivated by this will, is the latest incarnation of the “ascetic ideal”: the attitude that condemns the imperfect, changeable material world we live in in favor of another, vastly different world, changeless and eternal. I then show how the practice of “gay science,” which Nietzsche outlines in the book of the same title, is a mode of pursuing truth that steers a course between the asceticism of the unconditional will to truth and the negligent or willful disregard of truth. I argue that gay science constitutes a will to truth that is conditional in both of the senses distinguished above: it regards truth and its pursuit as merely instrumental to the higher “life-affirming” values that Nietzsche endorses, and it restricts the pursuit of truth to circumstances in which it promotes or at least does not threaten those higher values.

Chapter 3 surveys James’s arguments against what Nietzsche calls “the unconditional will to truth,” highlighting the ways in which his critique both harmonizes with and diverges from Nietzsche’s. I discuss James’s criticisms of W.K. Clifford in “The Will to Believe” (1896), including his challenge to the priority Clifford places on the imperative to avoid error over the imperative to believe truth. I examine James’s pragmatic conception of truth as presented in Pragmatism (1907), bringing out the respects in which James, like Nietzsche, condemns traditional conceptions of truth for their asceticism—their tendency to privilege transcendent ideals over the demands of human life—and intends for his alternative to be anti-ascetic, placing concrete human needs and experiences foremost. Moreover, James’s explication of truth as what it is beneficial, in the long run, for us to believe makes the value of truth by definition conditional, in the sense of being merely instrumental to the practical benefits in terms of which it is defined. But this conception also entails that the value of truth is unrestricted: on James’s view, unlike Nietzsche’s, it is impossible for there to be a truth that it is best for humankind not to know, or a falsehood that it is best for us to believe.

Part II treats the two philosophers’ critiques of proposition (2) of scientism: that only the methods of modern science can lead to the truth. Both point out that the scientific perspective is ill-suited to dealing with questions of meaning, value, and aspects of human experience that cannot be measured or quantified. Chapter 4 explores Nietzsche’s claim that science cannot “create values”: science discovers causal connections in the world, and can therefore help to determine how people can most efficiently achieve their aims, but it cannot tell them which particular aims they should be pursuing in the first place. Crucially, science cannot tell us whether or why its own goals of attaining truth and avoiding error are valuable. Science therefore must take its justification and its direction from something that can create values: namely, philosophy. According to Nietzsche’s preferred model, philosophers envision the ideals that human society should realize, and then delegate
scientists to investigate which moral systems and social arrangements were in place when these ideals were most fully realized in the past, or to test hypotheses as to what ways of life might realize them in the future.

**Chapter 5** addresses James’s arguments for the limitations of science, again drawing attention to their similarities and differences from Nietzsche’s. James agrees with Nietzsche that science can neither tell us what we should value, nor fully account for the value we in fact find in certain objects, activities, and experiences. He also points out that the theoretical beliefs of practicing scientists do not enjoy a special status that gives them an exclusive epistemic legitimacy unavailable to other kinds of beliefs, including moral and religious beliefs: they are formed just as any beliefs are formed, from similar combinations of evidence, assumption, affect, and desire. In fact, James argues in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the genuinely open-minded empiricism that should ideally characterize science would have to take seriously the evidence that leads religious people to their beliefs, rather than—as his scientistic opponents tend to do—dismissing it as delusion or superstition. Here is where one of the primary differences between my two subjects emerges: James believes that confining science to its proper place as only one possible perspective among many can leave room for some form of theistic belief. Nietzsche, on the other hand, does not take theism to be a “live option” (a term James uses in “The Will to Believe”) for the heirs of the European intellectual tradition, and looks instead for a new source of values to spur future generations on to great undertakings.

The similarities between Nietzsche’s and James’s concerns about scientism—both its epistemic justification and its corrosive effect on the spiritual health of individuals and societies—are especially interesting in light of the dramatically different conclusions they reach about what is truly valuable, and about whether traditional religion is still viable in the face of modern science’s discoveries. These surprising similarities tell us that principled opposition to scientism need not be associated with any particular moral or religious viewpoint: devoted Christians and staunch atheists, egalitarian altruists and elitist defenders of hierarchy can be allies in the cause of protecting the autonomy of art and philosophy from the encroachments of science.