

Scientistic Philosophy, No; Scientific Philosophy, Yes

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Introduction. When C. S. Peirce urges that philosophy become scientific, he means that it should (i) be undertaken with the scientific attitude, a genuine desire to discover the truth, and (ii) use the scientific method, i.e., rely on experience as well as reasoning—but not, like the sciences, on recondite experience, but on close attention to everyday experience. Today, many philosophers would say that philosophy now *is*, or is rapidly *becoming* scientific. Sadly, this is false; philosophy is becoming, not scientific in Peirce’s sense, but scientistic—a post-analytic adulation of science almost as disorienting as the anti-scientific disparagement popular a few decades ago.

But all scientific work rests on presuppositions about the world and ourselves that the sciences themselves can neither explain nor justify; and today’s scientistic philosophies leave the very scientific work on which they rely floating in mid-air with no rational support. This is *not* to say that it is the job of philosophy to provide the a priori foundation for science, *nor* to retreat to the analytic paradigm; it *is* to reject the false dichotomy of analytic philosophy vs. scientism, and develop instead a philosophy that, as Peirce urged, pays close attention to everyday experience.

1. Diagnosing a Disaster: The Hollow Core of Scientistic Philosophy. Logical positivism sought to make phil. “Queen of the Sciences”; Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized” was ambiguous between modestly naturalistic and scientistic claims. The latter prompted the bizarre scientistic philosophies of the 1980s (Goldman, Stich, Churchlands), which by now look like harbingers of a tidal wave of scientism.

- Evolutionary epistemology/metaphysics (Kornblith)—right about the questions needing answers, but wrong to equate “empirical knowledge” and “science”;
- “experimental philosophy” (Knobe, Nichols, etc., etc.; Stich again)—not really one enterprise, but several, all of which are flawed;
- “radically naturalized metaphysics” (Ladyman, Ross, et al.)—really a repackaged Positivism;
- “scientism” (Rosenberg)—a complete disaster; on the basis of the unargued but endlessly repeated mantra “physics fixes all the facts,” maintains a complete value nihilism, and claims that there is, in effect, no mind: “the brain does everything without thinking about anything at all.”

2. Coping with Complexity: The Path to Scientific Philosophy. My (Innocent Realist) metaphysical picture: there is one real world, inc. natural things, stuff, and events, but also myriad human artifacts, physical, social, imaginative, and theoretical. The serious philosophical work begins when we ask: What’s the difference between the real and the imaginary? How does natural reality differ from social reality? What are natural kinds and laws? What is inquiry, what makes it better or worse? What, if anything, is distinctive about the human mind? Etc. And it’s on the answers to such questions that the very possibility of scientific inquiry depends.

I focus here on philosophy of mind. I take human beings to be physical creatures in a physical world, subject to the same physical laws as everything else and, like all living things, the product of a long process of evolution. Our distinctive mental capacities (“mindedness”) result from a *combination* of characteristics that humans have *in significantly greater degree* than other creatures; and enable us to speak, write, read, make explicit plans, tell stories, crack jokes, etc.—and to devise scientific theories.

Everything is physical; but it's not all physics. The double meaning of “physical”: all the stuff there is, is physical. But, besides physical stuff and things, there are physical events, phenomena, laws, and relations—including semiotic relations; which is where my explanation of mindedness begins. For example, I explain a subject’s believing some proposition (roughly) as:

- he has complex multi-form dispositions to speak and behave in certain ways;
- these dispositions are physically realized in manifold connections in his brain between “receptors” and “activators”; AND
- the relevant words in his language are associated, in his linguistic community, with the things and events involved in those dispositions of his.

But even if I’m right, and belief, etc. is not reducible to a physical state of the believer but involves relations to the world and to others, couldn’t it all still, ultimately, be physics? No; not unless the world is completely determined, which it isn’t. As even Rosenberg implicitly admits, there are facts that physics *doesn’t* fix; and very small elements of randomness can have very large consequences.

3. Adjusting our Attitudes: The Problem of Perverse Incentives. Finally I turn to the other element in CSP’s idea of scientific philosophy: *a genuine desire to figure out the truth of your question(s)*. Sad to say, this is not the attitude of those experimental philosophers, Ladyman and Ross, or Rosenberg—who seem so assured of their intellectual superiority that they bring Peirce’s phrase “the vanity of cleverness” to mind.

This isn’t altogether surprising given the changes in the management of universities that have led to constant demands for productivity, originality, bringing in grants, etc. For these perverse incentives have eroded the very virtues needed to get good work done, and encouraged efforts to create the *appearance* of progress, real or not.

Two postscripts:

- How CSP’s approach avoids scientism.
- How it explains what’s peculiar about our discipline: the idea that philosophy can be conducted a priori is an *illusion* (because philosophy requires experience); but it is a *seductive* illusion (because the kind of experience philosophy requires we all have every day, we needn’t leave our armchair to conduct experiments, go on field trips, conduct surveys, etc.).