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Scientism and the ‘Soul of Philosophy’

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In his interesting recent contribution to *SERRC*, Moti Mizrahi (2019)—who’s done much recently to advance our understanding of the relations of science and philosophy—asks the question of what debates about scientism are *really* about. This is a good strategy, since many intellectual agreements are, below the surface, often being churned up by some other set of issues. Sometimes, those underlying currents are well-known, even if not often spoken of. Often, though, the deeper concerns are unknown, even as they shape our thinking. It’s a sort of philosophical naiveté to think that our disputes are only ever about arguments and ideas, especially concerning large-scale topics, like the place of the sciences in contemporary life. We therefore often need to resolve those issues at those deeper levels, rather than just tidy up the ideas on the surface.

Mizrahi’s Two Hypotheses

Consistent with this approach, Mizrahi offers two hypotheses, each of a rather pragmatic character. First, current debates about scientism are a ‘battle for the future of philosophy as a discipline’, in the sense of an area of academic activity that makes a core role for teaching and research. Scientism threatens that, by gradually narrowing the scope of meaningful intellectual work that can occupy philosophers (the neuroscientists take over philosophy of mind, the cognitive linguists take over philosophy of language, and so on). Second, Mizrahi argues that the scientism debate is ‘a battle for the soul or essence of philosophy’, which he defines in terms of ‘traditional methods of philosophical inquiry’, later further specified as ‘an *a priori* discipline.’ Scientism threatens the soul of philosophy, in this sense, by claiming that its methods and aims are better realised in or by the empirical sciences. The majority of his recent *SERRC* piece then presents and analyses a set of empirical data to support those hypotheses.

A first observation about the two hypotheses are that both contend to be fundamental. That might seem odd, since usually fundamentality is exclusive, and does not find itself sitting beside something else. I think the second hypothesis is actually the fundamental one: philosophical teaching and research is valuable, ultimately, since they are integral activities of an enterprise with a distinctive ‘soul’ or ‘essence’—ones that guarantees the value of those constituent activities. If philosophy were really pointless, no-one could reasonably worry if fewer students were studying it and fewer researchers devoting to it their energies. Academic philosophers worry about the future of philosophy as a subject taught in universities not simply because they value their jobs, but because they value their discipline—or, at least, certain parts of their discipline. (*Daily Nous* and other sources of professional news regularly report departments newly threatened with closure). So, the better candidate for a fundamental explanation of the deep sources of the scientism debate is the metaphilosophical one about the ‘soul’ or ‘essence’ of philosophy. On that point, I want to offer four comments.

Four Comments

To start with, some might argue that the hypothesis is too complex, since there are perfectly compelling explanations of assaults on the value of philosophy that don’t turn on anything

as complex as entrenched dogmas about the authority of the sciences relative to philosophy and other humanistic disciplines. Prime among these is surely the sort of crass instrumentalism of many university managers and higher education policy-makers, for whom all that matters is money, money, money. The sciences offer a good prospect of new, profitable materials, technologies, and techniques—so they ought to be taught and researched, then made profitable through spin-off companies. Another sort of instrumentalism is the conviction that academic activities are only valuable insofar as they serve ‘the national interest’—often a term murkily defined, but usually amounting to enhancement of the economy, national security, and the ideological priorities of the current government. Science is thought to do this, although actually philosophy can and has been put in the services of those ends, too. My own judgment is that there are a set of complexly interacting threats—an intruding scientism, instrumentalism, profit-driven neoliberalism, and the like. Mizrahi is right to target scientism, but it is only one of the threats to the integrity and future of philosophy—and perhaps not the most powerful.

A second comment follows in the same spirit. Arguably many philosophers have a much blunter reason for resisting scientism—namely, that it is wrong. More carefully, an obvious and well-documented set of problems arise when one examines many scientific claims (see de Ridder, Peels, and van Woudenberg 2017). Naturally, there are more and less sophisticated forms of scientism, and the arguments against them should not be accepted without scrutiny. Moreover, we should keep in mind the sorts of very sophisticated metaphilosophical concerns articulated by Mizrahi. Still, we should keep on the table a simpler explanation for the scientism dispute, namely, that many scientific claims are demonstrably wrongheaded and ought to be rejected for that reason. Perhaps the best statements of this forthright rejection of scientism are to be found in the work of the late Mary Midgley (1992, 2003), whom too few contemporary participants in the scientism debates seem to know (for a corrective, see Kidd 2015).

A third comment concerns the characterisation of the ‘soul’ or ‘essence’ of philosophy in terms of armchair methods and resistance to empirical methods. I find that a little puzzling, since philosophy is very methodologically pluralistic and has welcomed and, indeed, often introduced empirical methods. Some philosophers might rely almost exclusively on armchair methods, *a priori* reasoning, and the like, especially since that is often the sensible style of research for certain topics (topics in philosophical logic, say). Some other philosophers, however, are deeply committed to using empirical methods—a short list would include much contemporary work in philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, certain areas of metaphysics, and so on. So characterisations of philosophy in terms of very specific types of method are unhelpful, I think, since they inevitably run up against the plurality of methods available to trained philosophers. After all, there will be some philosophers who might never use empirical methods at all, yet who still worry about scientism.

A final comment concerns talk of the ‘soul’ or ‘essence’ of philosophy, language that some philosophers may find all a bit too much. I disagree, since critical reflection on the nature and aims of philosophy is essential to its reflective practice. Moreover, there are clear disagreements about the purposes of this enterprise, both over time and across cultures and within the contemporary academic philosophical community. Perhaps rather than speak in the singular of the ‘soul’ or ‘essence’ of philosophy, we should talk about a wide array of rivalling claims about or visions of philosophy. Across its many forms, philosophy has been

construed as an ethically transformative way of life, a means of release from the ‘wheel of suffering’, as the reflective dimension of religious practice, as the ‘underlabourer’ for the sciences, as a cure for ‘mental cramps’, as an engine of social change, as ‘conceptual geography’, ‘philosophical plumbing’ ... the list goes on. A sophisticated discussion of these rival visions, and their relation to one another, is offered by David E. Cooper (2009).

Threats to Philosophy?

Clearly, scientism is only a threat to philosophy on some of these visions on some of the forms—for instance, exaltation of the sciences won’t really help those for whom philosophy aims to enhance our relationship to God. On other forms and visions of philosophy, though, scientism would be not show up as a threat at all. For some philosophers, the eventual collapse of philosophy into the sciences is to be welcomed. This may have been Comte’s view, although he’s more sophisticated than the usual characterisations of him suggest, and is certainly the view advanced by James Ladyman and Don Ross (2007) in *Every Thing Must Go*. So let’s talk about the many visions of philosophy—characterisations of its ‘essence’ or ‘soul’—but do so in the plural. Our best guide to thinking critically about scientism with an eye to these ‘visions’ is actually going to be Mary Midgley. Throughout her work on scientism, there’s a clear-eyed appreciation of both the failings of specific, inflated claims made about the sciences in relation to other areas of thought and activity and also to what she called the wider background ‘myths’ and ‘imaginative visions’ that animate and lend salience to those local clashes.

Philosophy is many things and battles about its essence are not going to go away. The current disputes about scientism are the most recent stage in those disputes. To better deal with them, we need to look at the many claims made about the ‘essence’ of philosophy. On only some of them is scientism a threat to philosophy. On some of them, in fact, scientism represents the consummation and future of the subject. If that alarms us, then we need to go into deep metaphilosophical waters.

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