



**SERRC**  
Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>  
ISSN: 2471-9560

Regarding Scientism and the Soul of Philosophy

Catherine Wilson, City University of New York, [cww899@gmail.com](mailto:cww899@gmail.com)

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Wilson, Catherine. 2109. "Regarding Scientism and the Soul of Philosophy." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (11): 55-58. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4Fo>.

Moti Mizrahi's immediate problem is to understand the resistance to scientism that is evident in the many critical references and prophecies of doom that appear in philosophers' writings in this connection. Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume, as he notes, and I would add Locke, Leibniz, Kant, Nietzsche, and Mach, as well as Democritus, Epicurus, and Aristotle—took a direct interest in medicine, natural history, cosmology, evolutionary theory, anthropology, the visual system, and physics and drew philosophical inspiration from these fields. Moti argues that philosophers would do well to re-establish the old partnership between empirical enquiry and philosophical reflection. To better understand and so to dispel fear of scientism, he offers two hypotheses that might explain its causes, and he proposes to test them empirically.

Like Moti, I believe that philosophers can benefit from engaging with science, as they have done throughout history, either as investigators themselves or as consumers of scientific knowledge. When philosophy is concerned solely with mapping intuition-derived entailment relations between vernacular-derived concepts, it rarely produces knowledge, at least not knowledge in the form of 'news you (that is to say anyone) can use' for any purpose except contributing to philosophical debates in analytic philosophy. There are exceptions. Moti's own 2009 paper " 'Ought' does not imply 'Can' " is an example of clear and deft analytics with a practical punch.

Accordingly, I believe that *normative* philosophy, especially ethics and social and political philosophy, unlike pure 'descriptive metaphysics' in all its varieties, both requires conceptual clarification and presents hard-won knowledge. Therefore, a third and a fourth hypothesis for the roots of antiscientism require consideration. Hypothesis 3 is that the application of scientific research to moral and social issues has such a poor record that it is right to mistrust science-philosophy partnerships. Hypothesis 4 is that value-neutral stance of science is ruining nature and hurting people. Before saying more about these further hypotheses, I'll address Moti's argumentation and conclusions in his study.

### **Hypotheses Regarding Antiscientism**

The first hypothesis is that antiscientism reflects the defection of potential philosophy students into STEM subjects creating employment and resources anxiety in professional philosophers. They fear that their academic departments will shrink or be deprived of resources as students become persuaded that their employment prospects are better in science and technology than in philosophy.

The second hypothesis is that even if academic livelihoods are not directly threatened, the standing of philosophy as a pure *a priori* discipline, and so support for it in the academic and extra-academic culture for it, is indirectly threatened. Empirical influences, especially in ethics and philosophy of mind, the antiscientism faction fears, will relegate conceptual investigations to the sidelines without being able to answer the hard questions of pure philosophy, such as the 'hard problem' of consciousness, the existence of mind-independent

moral facts, free-will, etc. The hard questions to which many academics have devoted their careers will be designated pseudo-problems and trivialized or ridiculed.

Moti argues that the first hypothesis, that academics are alarmed by the flight to STEM on account of enrollments fails on empirical grounds. In absolute terms, more students than before are taking philosophy and religious studies courses, with alarmist sentiments rising more or less in parallel. Falling enrollments thus do not seem to explain scientism anxiety.

There are two problems with this argument. First, the absolute numbers of philosophy/religious studies students are not so telling. Many more people are going to college. We need to know whether there has been a negative change in the *proportion* of students studying philosophy/religion and a positive change in the *proportion* turning to STEM. As Moti says, one of the relevant figures is how many students choose philosophy over STEM in a given year and vice versa. But his table does not show this. And even if let's say 20% of all students formerly wanted to study philosophy and now only 10% do, this decline could not be a causal factor in the perceptions of philosophy faculty unless they knew of and experienced it.

So Hypothesis 1 could be better tested by actually asking philosophy faculty questions such as 'Do you think you are losing the best and brightest students to STEM subjects?' 'Do you think your institutions' funding priorities are neglecting humanities in favor of the sciences? Whether these things are or aren't happening, the belief that they are would be expected to generate fear of the 'scientization' of the academy and so antiscentism.

Where Hypothesis 2 is concerned, the methodology is more persuasive, and the correlation between the number of references to scientism and the number of publications in experimental philosophy reported is significant. (Fig 3 is missing in my printout, so I accept Moti's summary). The hypothesis could be bolstered by finding out through interview whether many traditionally-educated academics feel unpleasantly under pressure to be interdisciplinary, to follow an empirical literature, to understand philosophy talks that present data in tabular and graph form, and whether they feel their analytical methods addressed to the 'hard problems' are recognized and valued by their younger colleagues.

There is good reason to feel sympathy with philosophers who feel displaced. Understanding scientific results is more difficult today than it was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, or even in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when philosophy and empirical psychology were closely allied. Natural and social science today is less qualitative and introspective, more mathematized, and very hard to pick up without a formal education in measurement, statistics, or physics. The social sciences are easier to understand, but their methods and conclusions often do not meet philosophical standards of scientific rigor. So it is understandable that traditionally trained philosophers do not feel either the natural and the social sciences to be dependable and accessible sources of information or to offer useful perspectives and new topics for investigation. To the extent that the younger generation of philosophers is open to empirical approaches and possesses or seeks out the relevant training, this fountain of antiscentism will dry up for purely demographic reasons.

## The Possible Growth of Antiscientism

My Hypotheses 3 and 4 imply that antiscientism in a rejuvenated philosophical community will not disappear and will indeed strengthen. We are aware as never before of the dismal record of science-based normative philosophy. ‘Scientific racism,’ and ‘scientific sexism,’ based on results stemming from the scientific community of measurers and testers have plagued us for several centuries, with the superficialities and hasty deductions of evolutionary psychology only the latest additions to a degenerate interdisciplinarity. Science itself corrects its own record. We learn through science that homosexuality is not after all a perversion, that parental income is a better predictor of economic success than IQ, and that men are not more logical than women. But in the meantime, pernicious beliefs linger because ‘evidence’ of their own superiority and entitlement is very exciting for members of dominant social groups. Hypothesis 3 is that the dismal record of science is more salient than the enlightenment record and is testable.

Hypothesis 4 is that antiscientism arises from frustration with the blinkered view of many scientists that all knowledge of nature is intrinsically good and desirable—or at least that it is good and desirable to get there first, lest someone else get their first and perhaps take out the patent. Many investigators appear to believe that no form of enquiry or endeavor that is carried out in scientific laboratories, whether it is growing artificial brains, or designing new weapons to smash the ‘enemy’ or infect them, or drive them insane, or tweaking genes to extend the human lifespan to 180 years, or figuring out how to mine ores on Mars, or how to fill the sky with sunlight-reflecting plastic beads to combat global warming, ought to be prohibited or discouraged or simply voluntarily avoided. Their work is curiosity-driven, these researchers will say. They may cite potential benefits to humanity, but essentially, they will insist, their role is to discover how nature works. It is up to ‘society,’ they say, to decide whether and how any form of knowledge should be practically applied.

Unfortunately, the maxim ‘Apply all possible technology!’ is the social default wherever a humanistic perspective on ‘dangerous knowledge’ is absent. Here philosophy, because it is unapologetically normative and temperamentally reactionary, has an important and irreducible role to play.

Review committees sat on by philosophers with humanistic training are supposed to make sure nothing gets out of hand ethically where scientific research is concerned. In my experience, these committees only query, meekly and deferentially, the ethical appropriateness of the procedures used in the experiments by reference to a code prohibiting harm to experimental subjects. The committees do not query whether the knowledge is good to have and has no potential to be used for harm. Nor are they asked to consider whether the public funds and mental effort for this research could be used in a more genuinely helpful way. By the time the ethics committee sees a scientific proposal, it has already been decided that the knowledge sought will be good to have by the grant reviewers who judge on scientific merit and/or prospects for (inevitably commercial) application alone.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 are not based on the suspicion of a perceived threat to the livelihood of philosophers or our professional status, or the challenge of having to retool. Instead they are based on well-founded worries about the way in which scientific research is largely shielded from ethical review, while at the same time liable to be prematurely sensationalized whenever it purports to be telling us something profound about human nature or our prospects.

To conclude, Moti's investigation offers a starting point for thinking about the direction in which our subject is likely to evolve in the future as a younger generation of philosophers embraces contact with the natural and social sciences. It also offers a point of departure for reconsidering the role of the sciences and their practitioners in our culture from an ethical point of view.

### References

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