Scientism or Interdisciplinarity?

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Moti Mizrahi’s “The Scientism Debate: A Battle for the Soul of Philosophy?” frames the introduction of scientific methods into philosophy as scientism (specifically a kind of weak scientism). This contrasts with the view that scientific methods only have their place in the domain of scientific inquiry and are perceived as trespassing if they are applied in any other field of knowledge.

I believe that calling an introduction of scientific methodologies into philosophy “scientism” is highly misleading. It is interdisciplinarity. There is a whole field of study known as interdisciplinary studies.¹ A good working definition of interdisciplinary studies is “a cognitive process by which individuals or groups draw on disciplinary perspectives and integrate their insights and modes of thinking to advance their understanding of a complex problem with the goal of applying the understanding to a real-world problem,” where “The underlying premise ... is that the disciplines are themselves the necessary precondition for and foundation of the interdisciplinary enterprise.”² The introduction of scientific methods into philosophical inquiry is an example of interdisciplinarity, not scientism. Other examples of interdisciplinarity in philosophy are subdisciplines such as philosophy of physics and philosophy of chemistry.

**Learning from Interdisciplinary Studies**

Calling the introduction of survey and experimental methods from economics and psychology into philosophical investigations scientism not only is misleading. Given the freighted nature of the word ‘scientism,’ Mizrahi is concerned about the specter of the sciences “taking over” philosophical inquiry and replacing it with a different form of inquiry and hopes to mitigate this worry. To be clear, no such takeover is happening but all parties to the debate about how empirical methods might be brought to bear on philosophical questions do themselves a disservice framing their arguments in terms of scientism. The parties could learn something from interdisciplinary studies about how to think about and discuss the interrelating of different ways of knowing.

Moreover, such interdisciplinarity requires rigorous care. Mizrahi and others who advocate bringing empirical methods into philosophy may underestimate the problems introduced by this move if proper interdisciplinary care is not taken. An all too brief historical summary gets us to the point. The empirical methods developed by natural philosophers in the 16th and 17th centuries were designed to understand the mind-independent properties and processes of nature. This was the new experimental philosophy that led to what later would be called natural science inquiry. The first empirical social scientists began adopting and adapting these methods to social research. Eventually sociologists developed survey methods for empirical inquiry that economists and psychologists subsequently took up.

These survey methods were designed with the aim of maintaining the same kind of objectivity as natural science inquiry, presumably giving an objective measure of expressed

² Repko, 28.
beliefs or attitudes of respondents. However, the kind of methods and objectivity crafted for
understanding mind-independent features of material reality have a blind spot regarding the
study of human beings (whether it is sociology, economics or experimental philosophy)
related to objectification: a stance toward things that abstracts away from so-called subject-
related qualities. The latter are the meanings of and relationships among things that show up
within our ordinary experience, values, aims and concerns. The objectifying stance means
taking the world as it is independent of the meanings it has for humans and reducing the
world to a network of material objects and efficient causes. Construing philosophers’
convictions and attitudes towards the use of empirical methods as univocal, propositional
statements confirmable by public testing and observation, and thus as independent of the
knowing subject, is an example of objectification in action.

We should keep several points in mind about objectification as an approach to human
inquiry. First, this stance is only possible because of several cultural affordances that have
everything to do with shifts in human ways of conceptualizing the world. All forms of
inquiry aiming for objectification depend on such cultural background. Second, such inquiry
excises the values and meanings making up the everyday lifeworld of our experience. We
only engage in the kind of abstraction represented by objectification against substantial
background commitments and values, and for particular purposes (e.g., to answer specific
kinds of questions we think significant). Third, although objectification certainly has proved
its worth in natural science inquiry, in human inquiry objectification has proven problematic
to say the least. A key reason for objectification’s problematic nature when applied to
human inquiry is that it represents as much a moral as an epistemological ideal of
instrumental mastery and control. This moral ideal is as old as the Enlightenment and
represents an undefended commitment to a moral vision of the good life for human beings.
This vision gets passed through as “results” in much social science published research.

Objectification separates the knowing subject and object of inquiry, leaving a gulf between
knower and object-to-be-known. Although appropriate for understanding the mind-
independent properties of matter, when applied to human activities and our ways of
understanding our world, objectification distorts the very human phenomena we are trying
to understand by treating self-interpreting beings as if we are no different in kind from
electrons, molecules and volcanoes (an undefended value judgment). Physicists routinely
investigate and describe the physical properties of stars without implicitly or explicitly
judging whether it would be better if they formed in a different way or place. In contrast,
when investigating and describing human activity and beliefs, such judgments about what is

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4 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989; James Turner, Without God,
5 Richard Bernstein, The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,
1976, and Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis, Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 1983; Brent Slife and Richard Williams, What’s Behind the Research? Discovering Hidden
Assumptions in the Behavioral Sciences, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995; Frank C. Richardson,
Blaine J. Fowers, and Charles Guignon, Re-envisioning Psychology: Moral Dimensions of Theory and Practice, San
Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999; Bishop, The Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 2007; Robert L. Woolfolk,
6 Bishop, chapters 4-5.
7 Richardson et al.; Bishop.
good are unavoidable. For instance, Richard Bernstein shows how aiming for the natural science ideals of objectification in human inquiry, though purportedly fostering “value-neutral, objective claims subject only to the criteria of public testing,” turn out to harbor “disguised ideology.” These “proposed theories secrete values and reflect controversial ideological claims about what is right, good, and just,” reflecting a “total intellectual orientation” anchored in a package of high Enlightenment ideals such as individualism, skepticism, instrumentalism, and emancipation.

Cultural Values and Ideals

As a simple example, consider risk studies. Scientific methods can quantify risks, but they cannot decide for human stakeholders whether such risks are acceptable or by which values acceptability should be judged. To focus only on such quantification methods leaves the underlying values by which risks will be judged untouched.

Now consider a deeper example. Several different versions of the disguised ideology of liberal individualism pervasively shape much social science inquiry. This is a particular ethical vision of the nature of human action and the good life stressing “negative liberty”—what we are free from rather than what we are free for—and defending individual autonomy. This one-sided emphasis obscures our cultural embeddedness and downplays the value of lasting social ties. Furthermore, it advocates thoroughgoing neutrality towards and distancing from all values as a way of promoting particular basic and laudable values such as liberty, tolerance, individuality and human rights. At the same time, liberal individualism’s insistent characterization of human action and motivation as exclusively self-interested undermines our capacity to respect and cherish others, tending to erode our devotion to the admirable modern ideals of freedom and justice—the very ideals such liberalism seeks to promote.

Remarkably, such disguised ideology is part and parcel of the seemingly innocent commitment to objectification in the study of human beings.

How does this show up in Mizrahi’s treatment of scientism? He argues there is a significant positive correlation between the number of publications mentioning “experimental philosophy” and the number of publications mentioning “scientism.” And this is supposed to be confirming evidence for the hypothesis H2: “Many philosophers find scientism threatening because they see it as a threat to the soul or essence of philosophy as an a priori discipline.” But is this the case? From Mizrahi’s data we don’t know if the publications mentioning scientism are discussing it positively or negatively. Likewise, we don’t know if the publications mentioning experimental philosophy are actual experimental philosophy studies or are discussing/critiquing experimental philosophy positively or negatively. So, we do not actually know what this correlation means (this is in addition to the problem that

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8 See references in footnote 5.
9 Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, 31, 51. The point is not that these values and cultural ideals are bad; rather, the point is they are unavoidable and go undetected by natural science methods. Indeed, the application of the methods themselves to human inquiry represents an implementation of cultural ideals and values.
10 Richardson et al.; Bishop.
correlation does not imply causation). We need to know the attitudes expressed in the publications included in the statistics. Study of the publications would reveal whether there is any basis in philosophers’ discussions representing the meaning Mizrahi attributes to the correlation. But until then, we should withhold judgment as we only have trend data.

This illustrates some of the blindness of applying empirical methods to the meanings human beings have when they engage in actions (e.g., writing about scientism or experimental philosophy). Rigorous care is needed to ensure that in the application of such methods we do not pass hidden assumptions through to the results themselves. For example, key values for Mizrahi are rendering the mysterious explicable, instrumental manipulation and control, and novel predictions because this is what natural science excels at. But more than scientific purposes are involved when applying these values to all forms of inquiry—the Enlightenment emancipationist spirit of demystification and instrumental control looms large when one brings natural science methods into moral philosophy, for example. This ethical commitment remains unanalyzed in Mizrahi’s work on scientism.

Now suppose that an analysis of the publications in Mizrahi’s data set showed that we should interpret the correlation in the sense of H2: the rise of scientism threatens philosophers’ research commitments provoking a response. Is the study Mizrahi has done anything more than what Charles Taylor calls “wordy elaborations of the obvious”? We would not need the quantitative study to confirm that scientism and experimental philosophy spook philosophers if we have actually read the literature discussing these topics. What Mizrahi’s data set shows is that there has been a trend in the philosophy literature that warrants detailed investigation. However, the trend data demonstrates nothing beyond that while the methodology allows value commitments to pass through unanalyzed.

Interdisciplinarity, such as the incorporation of scientific methods into philosophical inquiry, requires genuine dialogue, meaning that practitioners of different ways of knowing have to honestly listen to and learn from each other about the powers and limits of the various ways of knowing being brought into conversation with each other. That is part of what makes interdisciplinary work so rigorous and so hard to carry out well. I am all in favor of bringing philosophical inquiry into genuine dialogue with scientific methods to explore a wide variety of questions as long as all participants are committed to rigorous interdisciplinary understanding of the powers and limits of those methods, an understanding that the term “scientism” largely sweeps under the rug. Scientism talk undercuts our ability to pursue interdisciplinarity in clear, rigorous ways that could benefit human knowledge.

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14 Repko, 2014.