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Some Demarcations and a Dilemma: Comments on Mizrahi

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Abstract

In “The Scientism Debate: A Battle for the Soul of Philosophy?” Moti Mizrahi sets out to explore what “the scientism debate in philosophy might *really* be about”. What leads him to such an investigation is a tension he diagnoses as regulating philosophy today, namely philosophy’s adherence to armchair reflection as well as its, both futile and fruitless, skepticism toward scientific methods. In the first part of this article I will investigate the tension in question, by examining a set of bipolarities that seem to permeate Mizrahi’s argumentation. In the second part, I will briefly discuss philosophy’s current response to the produce-or-perish dilemma.

In “The Scientism Debate: A Battle for the Soul of Philosophy?” Moti Mizrahi sets out to explore what “the scientism debate in philosophy might *really* be about”. What leads him to such an investigation is a tension he diagnoses as regulating philosophy today, namely philosophy’s adherence to armchair reflection as well as its, both futile and fruitless, skepticism towards scientific methods. In the first part of this article I will investigate the tension in question, by examining a set of bipolarities that seem to permeate Mizrahi’s argumentation. In the second part, I will briefly discuss philosophy’s current response to the produce-or-perish dilemma. So, why does a significant part of the philosophical community today decide to discuss the relation between philosophy and science?

Potentials Threats and Juxtapositions

Let us start by examining a couple of assumptions which, albeit not explicitly, seem to inform Mizrahi’s text. He writes that “many philosophers seem to think that scientism poses a threat to them as teachers” and also that “scientism is perceived as a threat to the sort of research that philosophers typically do” (Mizrahi 2019, 1); and, as all trained philosophers do, he chooses his words with great care. Therefore, it is quite striking that Mizrahi does not speak of science but of scientism, that is to say, he does not compare two (discrete or not) academic fields but rather an academic field with a particular theory—or, put in more technical terms, a kind of discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) with a specific set of beliefs. The boundaries between science and scientism get so fuzzy that the two terms are often used interchangeably. By contrasting philosophy in-general to scientism (and not, say, Wittgenstein’s philosophy to scientism), Mizrahi seems to be juxtaposing a set of questions with a set of answers, thereby checking the validity of the former not according to its compatibility but rather with its agreement with the positions of the latter.

What are the differences between science and scientism after all? According to Meriam Webster, science is “a department of [systematized](#) knowledge as an object of study” or “a system of knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws especially as obtained and tested through [scientific method](#)” (Merriam-Webster.com). On the other hand, scientism is defined as “methods and attitudes typical of or attributed to the natural scientist” but also as “an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural

science applied to all areas of investigation (as in philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities)” (Merriam-Webster.com). Thus, comparing science with philosophy would mean comparing two theories; however, comparing scientism with philosophy means comparing a meta-theory with a theory—that is comparing apples with oranges.

Unfortunately, this is not a one-off incident of blurring the boundaries occurring in “The Scientism Debate”. Similarly, in reference to methods used or worth using, scientific and empirical ones are treated as if they were indistinguishable. Mizrahi writes: “philosophers seek to defend their territory from invading scientists by justifying the traditional methods of philosophical inquiry and resisting attempts to introduce empirical methods of investigation into philosophy” (Mizrahi 2019, 2). But don’t empirical methods of investigation already belong to the philosophical tradition—or at least to some of its most prominent currents? Although the differences between the scientific and the empirical are indeed ambiguous, empirical methods tend to be more inclusive, that is, allow for a broader scope. While both scientific and empirical methods are derived from or guided by experience or experiment, empirical ones are not necessarily limited to physically measurable objects.

Hume’s *Treatise* and Blurred Boundaries

In support of his view, Mizrahi refers to Hume’s *A Treatise on Human Nature* as an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects. Hume even goes as far as to—famously—write that “If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion” (Hume 1988, 195). Hume aims at turning moral philosophy into a science by employing empirical methods of inquiry. Nowhere in his work, however, are we to find laboratory experiments nor statistics nor most of the rest of the methods that, according to Mizrahi, are empirical therefore scientific. And, in agreement with Mizrahi, I would not complain that Hume wasn’t doing philosophy or that he failed to deliver what he promised: a science.

Can Hume’s abstract reasoning get classified as armchair reflection? And does Hume’s experimental reasoning necessarily mean employing empirical methods as defined by Mizrahi? Most probably not. Hume’s empirical methods were scientific and experimental but not in a way that would satisfy Mizrahi’s criteria. If by “armchair reflection” we mean the method of cases, then Hume was an armchair philosopher, too, to the extent that he relied on the consideration of actual or hypothetical situations and used them as thought experiments. If we want to be precise, the method of cases does not necessarily involve *a priori* reasoning—that is, reasoning independent of experience. And these two notions—“armchair” and *a priori*—are another example of blurring the boundaries that we confront in Mizrahi’s text.

Another antithetical bipolarity that Mizrahi locates is that of inductive and deductive argumentation. In “Show Me the Argument: Empirically Testing the Armchair Philosophy Picture”, he suggests that armchair philosophy is mostly articulated through deductive

arguments while experimental philosophy makes use of induction (Ashton and Mizrahi, 2018). Needless to say, however, that this is definitely not the case with Hume's scientific philosophy, whose criticism against induction continues to inform philosophical thinking even until today.

We mention Hume's case not only because Mizrahi uses him as an example of a rather harmonious collaboration between philosophy and science. Mainly, his work enables us to realize that his notion of science as well as what constitutes a scientific or empirical method, has changed over the course of time. In other words, Hume's science does not necessarily coincide with the properties we attribute to science today. And such an acknowledgment brings us to another parameter that Mizrahi chooses to overlook. Although the present discussion concerning science or scientism and philosophy is astonishingly well informed when it comes to available bibliography, it seems to neglect a significant tradition that invites us to critically think that same relation that Mizrahi studies. Namely, it seems to disregard the views of alternative philosophies of science, especially those based on various theories of epistemological discontinuity, such as Foucault's, Kuhn's, Feyerabend's, Popper's and Lakatos', to name but a few. Despite their differences, had they been taken into account, such criticism on science and even more so on scientism, would have made us a bit more suspicious regarding the alleged objectivity of observable and quantifiable findings. Furthermore, it would have enabled us to place science and scientism in their appropriate environment, that is to say, particular societies and their particular histories.

If we do so, we will probably realize that a variety of theories of knowledge, alternative to scientism, have not only changed the way we conceive philosophy of science, but interact with hard science itself. When defining weak scientism, Mizrahi writes that "of all the knowledge we have, scientific knowledge is the *best* knowledge". And that "in other words, scientific knowledge 'is *simply the best; better than all the rest*'" (Ashton and Mizrahi 2018, 42). And he is very careful to restrict scientific knowledge's superiority so as to mean "research output and research impact" as well as "explanatory, instrumental, and predictive success" (Mizrahi 2018, 41). Mizrahi goes on to assume that "what makes scientific explanations good explanations are the good-making properties that are supposed to make *all* explanations (both scientific and non-scientific) good explanations, namely, unification, coherence, simplicity, and testability" (Mizrahi 2018, 46). However, it is worth mentioning that these "good-making properties"—derived from logical positivism and still motivated by a rather Cartesian spirit—are currently disputable not only by many philosophers of science (for example constructivist epistemology), but also by contemporary scientists themselves. (How would these properties apply in Gödel's or Heisenberg's case?)

What is Scientism Really About?

Nevertheless, inquiring what the scientism debate might *really* be about remains a valid imperative and Mizrahi's contribution to the relevant discussion is crucial. He insists that his "aim is not to antagonize philosophers" but "rather [...] *to reform* philosophy" (Mizrahi, 2018, 48). And although this aim concerns philosophy as a whole, he never tires of repeating that "weak scientism is a thesis about academic knowledge or research produced by

academic fields of study” (Mizrahi 2018, 47). I have tried to show that precision in terminology might prove helpful and that, as de Ridder underlines, “the empirical study of philosophy deserves better than mere ‘empirical-ish’ philosophy” (de Ridder 2019, 12). Even if we decide to reject science’s neutrality and acknowledge the fact that empirical as well as scientific results cannot be but theory-laden, Mizrahi’s findings do tell us something very significant about philosophy today.

If we consider the Foucauldian tradition, in which science appears as a kind of discourse among others, namely as placed within history and in constant interaction with other kinds of discourse, we might also come to realize knowledge’s relation to power. And this becomes even more crucial, if—following Mizrahi—we agree that scientific knowledge is the best of its kind. As Foucault has shown, knowledge is one of the loci of power. Power is embodied in knowledge and it regulates the “regimes of truth”. Namely, power determines our notions of “good-making properties” mentioned above. In this sense, power is also productive. “It produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1991, 194). Scientific methods are an excellent example of such a ritual of truth. In “Scientism and the ‘Soul of Philosophy’”, Ian James Kidd presents a variety of factors that could be held responsible for philosophy’s current disdain as well as explain the demand that philosophy become more “scientific”. Among those threatening factors, he names “an intruding scientism, instrumentalism, profit-driven neoliberalism” (Kidd 2019, 53).

How are we to understand Mizrahi’s aim to reform philosophy? For one thing, it could mean helping philosophy stay in the game. As long as “scientific knowledge is quantitatively better than non-scientific knowledge in terms of research output (i.e., more publications) and research impact (i.e., more citations)” (Mizrahi 2018, 45), then philosophy had better get more scientific—that is, more productive, therefore more competitive in the academic market. In his response to Wills (Mizrahi 2018, 46), Mizrahi, tongue-in-cheek, implies that, for example, armchair reflection such as Augustine’s, would not stand a chance of getting published or cited nowadays. And, joking aside, his comment is probably true.

Weak scientism can perhaps be better understood if thought about in parallel to a similar tendency shaping the relation between science and religion today. Despite the differences, both cases seem to be about complying with an imperative to either produce tangible, physically measurable and testable results that can be easily commodified, consumed and reproduced anew—or perish. Is philosophy to be reduced to a narrow epistemology, which—quite paradoxically—will be willing to sacrifice any real, namely social, impact in order to gain academic impact, namely citations? Exploring what the scientism debate might *really* be about is an important enterprise as long as it invites us to invent new ways of re-inscribing philosophy back in its original locus: the public sphere. Cross pollination between science and philosophy can enhance both, by rendering them more open and inclusive rather than limiting them to the realm of institutionalized expertise.

Mizrahi’s interest in reforming philosophy is genuine. And he surely is right when he insists that “philosophy would benefit from adopting not only the experimental methods of the cognitive and social sciences, as experimental philosophers have done, but also the methods

of data science, such as data mining and corpus analysis”. But, hopefully, he is mistaken when, in the same paragraph, he concludes that “Resistance is futile!” (Mizrahi 2018, 48). Instead of accepting the no-alternative catchphrase of our times, the challenge of philosophy today—empirical philosophy in particular—might have to be about its ability to come up with ways of becoming more fertile without being merely productive.

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