



**SERRC**

Social Epistemology  
Review & Reply Collective

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

How Van Woudenberg Got *How History Gets it Wrong* Wrong

Alex Rosenberg, Duke University, [alexrose@duke.edu](mailto:alexrose@duke.edu)

---

Rosenberg, Alex. 2020. "How Van Woudenberg Got *How History Gets it Wrong* Wrong." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (8): 41-46. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5i5>.

Imagine a philosopher steeped in scholasticism reacting to the Newtonian world picture:

Newton's *Principia Mathematica*, illustrates what can happen when one doesn't really reflect on the foundations of what one is thinking and claiming... Newton's book illustrates what can happen when one takes the natural science as the *sole* source of evidence for one's beliefs and opinions: one gets ensnarled in self-defeat.

The way out, to my mind, is to:

1. Read Newton's book as a long *reduction ad absurdum* of the very ideas that we are in motion and of the existence of a force acting instantaneously over infinite distances in a vacuum. (Just imagine, Newton says things can move and be at rest at the same time.)
2. Accept as plain common sense the theory that we are at rest in the center of the universe, and recognize that real motion is impossible anyway, since as Zeno showed two thousand years ago the very notion generates an irresolvable paradox.
3. Develop a metaphysics in which there is no real motion or action at a distance—i.e. gravitation.
4. Develop an epistemology that treats the experimental method as only one of a variety of defeasible sources of reliable belief about the nature of reality, in spite of the fact that it's the only one with any improvable predictive power or technological application.

How would natural philosophers, i.e. physicists react to this argument? Well, they would just ignore it, safe in the conviction that though clever philosophers can construct devastating arguments and arresting paradoxes, the scientist can't be distracted by these play-things from actually driving back the frontiers of their subjects. Their attitude isn't quite Dr Johnson's ("Thus I refute Berkeley" said as he kicked a stone), but close. We can be sure Newton was well acquainted with Zeno's paradox of motion. No one can reasonably criticize him for ignoring it, still less failing to refute it.

Compare the attack on Newton's *Principia* that I have construct above with the passage from which I have constructed it in Rene Van Woudenberg's critical notice of my book, *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of our Addiction to Stories*:

Rosenberg's book, then, illustrates what can happen when one doesn't really reflect on the foundations of what one is thinking and claiming. ...R's book illustrates what can happen when one takes the natural science as the *sole*

source of evidence for one's beliefs and opinions: one gets ensnarled in self-defeat ...

The way out, to my mind, is to:

1. Read Rs book as a long *reduction ad absurdum* of eliminativism.
2. Accept as plain common sense the Theory of Mind that Rosenberg says we are psychologically unable to throw of [sic].
3. Develop a metaphysics in which belief and desire contents can have a proper place;
4. Develop an epistemology that acknowledges multiple sources of belief... (91).

Now, I am not setting myself up as Newton. But I do plead guilty to inviting scientists to ignore cute philosophical paradoxes in their research, and to encouraging the rest of us to incorporate their findings in our view of reality, even before anyone has defanged the philosophers' conundrums. In *How History Gets Things Wrong*, I treated the findings of a quartet of Nobel Prize winners more seriously than the cute philosophical paradoxes that have been used for about 30 years to make fun of eliminativism about the propositional attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

Don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean I attach no interest to the pragmatic inconsistency arguments that conclude from the advocacy of eliminativism that "the eliminativist believes there are no beliefs and desires and desires others to come to hold this belief as well". As a philosopher I have long considered that these puzzles set up an agenda of conceptual revision that reaches into the most central metaphysical and epistemological concepts we philosophers wrestle with: truth, meaning, reference, symbol, representation, information.<sup>2</sup> But science can't stop till we have wrestled these concepts into shapes every philosopher can agree on.

---

<sup>1</sup> Though of course in the interests of full disclosure I mentioned these problems in *The Atheist's Guide to Reality*, p. 193, a work that Van Woudenberg is pretty well acquainted with. See, Peels, R., Ridder, J, and Van Woudenberg, (eds.), *Scientism: Prospects and Problems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, in which he kindly invited me to contribute a paper expounding the philosophical problems of scientism, including ones he treats in his review of *How History Gets Things Wrong*. This matter recurs below.

<sup>2</sup> Starting back in the early '90s I have been writing papers on this very subject: for example, "How is Eliminative Materialism Possible?" in Radu Bogdan, *Mind and Common Sense* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 124-144], "Naturalistic Epistemology for Eliminative Materialists," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (2): 335-358 (1999). Long before that I was already dealing with the anomalousness of intentionality in a physical world: "Intention and Action Among the Macromolecules", in Nicholas Rescher, (ed.) *Current Issues in Teleology*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986, "Intentional Psychology and Evolutionary Biology, Part I, The Uneasy Analogy," and "Part II, The Crucial Disanalogy," *Behaviorism*, 14, 1986: 15-28, 125-138.

So, the answer to Van Woudenberg's initial question, "what genre this book is" (85) should be pretty clear. It's not a book written for philosophers. It's a book written to inform intelligent consumers of science, especially cognitive social psychology, evolutionary anthropology, child psychiatry and neuroscience, about the state of play in those disciplines and what implications they have for the scientific understanding of ourselves. I claim further that the findings of these disciplines shake the complacency of everyone who thinks that we can secure reliable knowledge from stories with plots, narratives about human action and conflict, histories that identify the motives and objectives of the agents who figure in them.

As it is a report from the research frontiers of the brain sciences, there is no more reason to expect *How History Gets Things Wrong* to advert to philosophical eliminativism's pragmatic inconsistency problem than there was to expect Brian Greene or Sean Carroll to address Zeno's still unsolved paradox of motion in their magisterial treatments of contemporary physics.

As to Van Woudenberg's demand that a treatment of the implications of neuroscience for the folk psychology of desire and belief should mention panpsychism, idealism, and emergentism. I think it is nothing short of preposterous. That our profession has taken to treating panpsychism as more than a plaything strikes me as a matter of public embarrassment. I know I have a lot of trouble explaining why smart people like Strawson and Chalmers take it seriously. As for idealism, well, we are still smarting over Dr Johnson's sophisticated refutation of Berkeley. Van Woudenberg is correct that I do dismiss dualism, even as I identify it as the doctrine required by those who deny the relevance of neuroscience.

Van Woudenberg makes a scrupulous, sustained and quite successful effort to avoid discussing any of the science reported in *How History Gets Things Wrong*. He doesn't even deign to argue that it fails to have the implications for our common sense desire/belief psychological theory I claim it does. But under the heading *Rosenberg's Self-Defeat* (86) he does ask himself the question why does the book fail to address the pragmatic inconsistency argument. He claims that three hypotheses about why I didn't do so suggest themselves to him (86-87):

1. The paradoxes escape my notice;
2. They haven't escaped my notice but I am intellectually lazy and didn't want to deal with them.
3. The paradoxes have not escaped my notice but I don't care to explain why I think so.

He charitably dismisses the first two hypotheses. "So, we are stuck with option 3, the paradoxes are not a problem for him, although he doesn't care to reveal why he thinks so" (87). Now, try as hard as I might to be charitable about this attribution, I can't. Van Woudenberg knows better. Besides the papers mentioned in footnote 2, there's the

document he solicited from me and published in *Scientism: Prospects and Problems: "Philosophical Challenges to Scientism, and How to Meet Them,"* in which I write:

Scientism as a philosophy faces two great challenges: First, how to accommodate mathematics. If numbers are abstract objects with which we can have no causal relations, it is difficult to see how we acquired any mathematical knowledge. But no satisfactory nominalism has yet been provided to enable scientism to deal with this problem. Second, and relatedly, scientism is eliminativist about intentionality—derived in language and original in thought. This obliges it to provide an account of how it can even express the denial of original intentionality without inconsistently committing itself to derived intentionality in the expression of its denial (84).

That article went on to both expound the pragmatic inconsistency problem:

So, what is the problem...? Well, no original intentionality, no derived intentionality. No derived intentionality, no meaning, in particular no linguistic meaning, no semantic values, no truth or falsity. It turns out that scientism's problem of mathematical truth is the tip of the iceberg, or small beer, just a fly in the ointment, a mere technicality compared to the more serious problem that scientism cannot even express itself as a set of claims about anything—us, reality, ethics, etc. That's because there is no such thing as about. Scientism refutes itself out of its own mouth in a sort of pragmatic contradiction, something like "I believe that there are no beliefs" (101).

The paper sketches some approaches to dealing with it that eliminativists should explore.

So, a more reasonable hypotheses therefore than the three Van Woudenberg entertains might have been 4. The paradoxes have not escaped me, but I didn't think that the book under review is the place to treat them. Here's a charitable hypothesis: Van Woudenberg suffers from amnesia. He has quite forgotten that he listened to me present the paper quoted above at a conference, that he wrote comments on the draft that I submitted, and that he published the paper in a book he co-edited.

What is clear to eliminativists is how much work we have to do to reconcile philosophy to the revelations of neuroscience that there is no intentional content at any level of organization in the brain. At a minimum we need an account of or a substitute for the semantic evaluability that derived or original intentionality imposes on speech and thought. This is for us eliminativists as imposing a challenge as that facing every other naturalistic philosophy of mind. In the search for one we can make common cause with promising approaches such as teleosemantics (something I explore briefly in *How History Gets Things Wrong*), we can explore the attractions of disquotational, redundancy theories of truth, we may even be tempted to try on versions of Platonism that allow for the intentional content

of abstracta (though we would then have an epistemic problem: how do physical minds have access to non-physical propositions).<sup>3</sup>

Eliminativists do need to worry about whether they can employ the word ‘true’ in light of the fact that they deny the existence of (original) intentional content. But, *pace* Van Woudenberg, this doesn’t threaten the integrity of Darwinian theory or for that matter science. The unarguable fact that Darwinian processes select for fitness of cognitive states—whether intentional or not, and not for their truth or warrant is no barrier to these states being true or warranted or whatever non-semantic evaluation eliminativists come up with to substitute for truth or warrant. Darwinian natural selection can do more than one thing at a time! It can select for fitness and carry along truth as a Darwinian “by-product.” No one ever supposed that our ability to do multivariable calculus was selected for.<sup>4</sup> Science doesn’t need to be protected from eliminativism.

I think the most philosophically egregious misrepresentation of my views in Van Woudenberg’s treatment arrives in the section *Give up and not Give Up the Theory of Mind* [sic]. He can’t seem to make out the difference between treating a theory as entirely false and recognizing that it may have limited predictive usefulness. In chapter 10 of *How History Gets Things Wrong* I spent a lot of time laying out the details of Ptolemaic theory, along with a bit of Phlogiston theory, showing how a theory can be quite false and yet useful and used for a thousand years—Ptolemaic theory, or quite wrong and widely held on to for centuries in spite of its predictive weakness—phlogiston theory. The point was to show that theory of mind could be entirely false, and predictively weak outside a narrow range, notwithstanding natural selection has practically written it into our hereditary inheritance, for reasons expounded in chapters 4 through 7 of *How History Gets Things Wrong*, the heart of the book (on which Van Woudenberg is entirely silent).

Instead of treating this argument he writes:

It is left entirely unmotivated why the Theory of Mind *cannot* be applied in narrative history, but can be applied in everyday affairs...The arbitrariness and inconsistency stares him [Rosenberg] right in the face. Yet he doesn’t do anything to resolve the tension they create (89).

Is this blindness laziness? That is, again, uncharitable.

---

<sup>3</sup> I treat some of these matters in Rosenberg, A., “The Genealogy of Content or the Future of an Illusion,” *Philosophia*, 43: pp. 537–547 (2015) and in unpublished papers that have circulated on line, including “Eliminativism without Tears,” available on request from the author.

<sup>4</sup> If eliminativism is right, Plantinga’s argument lauded by Van Woudenberg for this conclusion can’t even get off the ground, a point widely noted in discussions of his argument that Darwinism is incompatible with naturalism. See Post’s review of Beilby, James (ed.), *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2002, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/naturalism-defeated-essays-on-plantinga-s-evolutionary-argument-against-naturalism/>.

Anyone reading *How History Gets Things Wrong*, including Van Woudenberg, sees plainly how it can be that narrative history is false because, like phlogiston chemistry, its causal variables don't exist, and yet how people might continue to employ it in everyday life, because like Ptolemaic astronomy, it's good enough to meet immediate survival needs: in the case of Ptolemaic astronomy, figuring out when to plant and sow, in the case of theory of mind, figuring out friend from foe. It could not have been laziness that led Van Woudenberg to treat the two claims I actually made as logically inconsistent. It would be uncharitable to suggest willful misrepresentation.

Van Woudenberg grandiloquently and patronizingly concludes, "Rosenberg's book then, illustrates what can happen when one doesn't really reflect on the foundations of what one is thinking and claiming." I grandiloquently and patronizingly conclude, Van Woudenberg's review then, illustrates what can happen when one sets out to do a hatchet job instead of a book review.