

“The Future of Philosophy, the Seduction of Scientism”

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Science is certainly a good thing. But, of course, it's not a *perfectly* good thing, much less the *only* good thing, or even the only legitimate form of inquiry. It's a human enterprise and, like all human enterprises, fallible, imperfect, and incomplete; moreover, there are many legitimate questions beyond its scope. The sciences have achieved remarkable things; but we shouldn't allow respect for those remarkable achievements to transmute into uncritical deference to anything and everything bearing the label, “scientific.” That is scientism.

Of late, the scientism that now seems ubiquitous in our culture has come to threaten philosophy too. Self-styled “evolutionary philosophers” and “neuro-philosophers” try to colonize ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind; self-styled “experimental philosophers” try to squeeze substantial philosophical results out of psychological surveys; “radically naturalistic” metaphysicians urge that the sciences hold exclusive authority on all legitimate empirical questions; and evangelical atheists claim that physics fixes all the facts, so that values—ethical, political, legal, aesthetic, epistemological, etc.—can be nothing but illusion.

But scientific philosophy is badly flawed: at best, it ducks or flubs key philosophical questions; at worst, it undermines the very science on which it relies, by denying the legitimacy of standards of better and worse evidence or the reality of the human capacities necessary for the scientific enterprise to be even possible. Why, then, has it proven so attractive to so many?

A key part of the explanation seems to be an inchoate sense that something's badly amiss with our discipline, that we can't just go on with philosophical business-as-usual. And, indeed, something *is* rotten in the state of philosophy: the discipline becomes every day more specialized, more fragmented into cliques, niches, cartels, and fiefdoms, and more determinedly forgetful of its own history.

More and more journals are crammed with more and more unread — and all too often, unreadable — articles about what X said about Y's interpretation of Z's response to W. Anyone with enough frequent-flyer miles to upgrade to publication-by-invitation is relieved to bypass a relentlessly conventional peer-review process often crippled by tunnel-vision, cronyism, and self-promotion. I won't even *mention* the decades of over-production of Ph.D.s, or the disastrous effects of that horrible, and horribly corrupting, “ranking” of philosophy graduate programs.

Combine this with the fact that the neo-analytic philosophical establishment, though institutionally still pretty firmly entrenched, seems close to intellectual exhaustion, and it's certainly no wonder that many are bored and restive, casting around for something new; and no wonder, either, that we're beset by passing fads and fashions — prominent among them these scientific fads and fashions. Unfortunately, far from solving the problems of our profession, this hydra-headed scientism makes things, not better, but worse; it *seems* to offer quick and easy solutions to long-standing, knotty problems, but in the end, it is nothing but a confession of philosophical failure.

None of this is very surprising. For, these days, almost everything about the way universities are organized conspires against the spirit of serious inquiry. The professional administrators who now “manage” universities stress productivity, the need for everyone to be research-active, and above all, anything and everything that could possibly be described as “prestigious.” It’s bad enough that professors are constantly distracted by conference calls, requests for referee’s reports on the ever-growing flood of submissions, pointless meetings, and time-consuming electronic noise; but the demands for abstracts of the paper or the lecture you haven’t yet written and for proposals spelling out the important discoveries you will make in the next few years, and the tyranny of the annual review demanding lists of the honors, the prestigious publications, and the coups in landing grant money you have pulled off over the last twelve months (!) are much *more* corrupting. For these erode the very virtues needed to get good work done: they positively discourage patience and painstaking and encourage, instead, self-promotion, self-deception, effort to create the *appearance* of progress, genuine or not.

These perverse incentives threaten the health of the sciences themselves, encouraging salami publishing, misleading multiple attributions of authorship, the corruption and manipulation of the peer review process, the bureaucracy, the endless hours spent writing (and reading) grant applications, etc. But it’s no wonder that their consequences for the humanities in general, and for philosophy in particular — where the pressure to accommodate hard facts is looser and more indirect — have been even worse; nor that they have helped make scientific philosophy so irresistibly seductive to so many.

More than a century ago, the great American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce wrote movingly of his hopes for the future:

We must expect arduous labours [*sic*] yet to be performed before philosophy can work its way out of the jungle and emerge on the high road of science. But the prospect is no longer so desperately gloomy, if philosophers will only resign themselves to the toilsome procedure of science, and recognize that a single generation can make little headway, but yet may faithfully clear away a few obstacles, and lying down to die, resign the axe to their successors.

Philosophy, he argued, should be conducted in the same spirit—“drawing the bow upon truth, with intentness in the eye, with energy in the arm”—that enabled those heroes of the history of science to make their discoveries. But when our attention is systematically distracted, and our energy regularly sapped, the jungle grows thicker every day.

Above is excerpted and adapted from Susan Haack, *Scientism and Its Discontents* (2017), downloadable free at:

<https://roundedglobe.com/books/038f7053-e376-4fc3-87c5-096de820966d/Scientism%20and%20its%20Discontents/>

A substantial collection of Susan Haack’s papers and book flyers can be found at <https://miami.academia.edu/SusanHaack>.

See especially:

- Susan Haack, "The Real Question: Can Philosophy be Saved?" *Free Inquiry* 37, no.6 (2017): 40-43.
- Susan Haack, "The Fragmentation of Philosophy, the Road to Reintegration," in Julia Göhner and Eva-Maria Jung, eds., *Susan Haack: Reintegrating Philosophy* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 3-33.
- Susan Haack, "Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment," in Susan Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and Its Place in Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, second ed., 2013), 251-68 (text) and 315-17 (notes).
- Susan Haack, "Six Signs of Scientism" (2010), in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 105-120 (text) and 278-83 (notes).
- Susan Haack, "The Integrity of Science: What It Means, Why It Matters" (2006) in Haack, *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 121-40 (text) and 283-93 (notes).
- Susan Haack, *Defending Science—within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003), especially chapter 11, on the value, and the values, of science.
- Susan Haack, "Preposterism and Its Consequences" (1996), in Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 188-208.

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