THREE CHEERS FOR SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY!

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Reflections on Hawking's *The Grand Design*

Stephen Hawking recently caused controversy by suggesting that philosophy had become obsolete in the face of the advance of modern science. Hawking's *The Grand Design* is only the latest in a long series of premature notifications of the obsolescence of philosophy.[1] A wide range of writers, including but not limited to scientists and philosophers, have suggested that philosophy, in part or in whole, has been superseded by the sciences in a way that, all things considered, justifies its abandonment. Some forty years ago, E.O. Wilson suggested that the province of ethics should be turned over to biology, forty years before that the logical positivists had drawn up plans for the formation of a 'scientific philosophy', and before that, in the nineteenth century, Comte had identified philosophy as the mere precursor to a modern, 'positive' stage of human culture. The list of examples could be extended, a fact which prompts the point that, if philosophy is dying, then it is putting up quite a fight.

Lurking behind many of these statements is, one suspects, the idea that turning over large areas of philosophical inquiry to the sciences would simply involve putting certain intellectual questions in the hands of disciplines better able to answer them. Ethical questions about human altruism, say, could be left to ethicists, but they would be better answered by evolutionary biologists. Metaphysical questions, for instance about the structure of reality, could similarly be reassigned to the physical sciences. Indeed, many of the more overtly scientistic writers express a

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frustration with the fact that matters of immense importance – like human freedom, or consciousness – are still being treated by philosophers. These frustrations often manifest in the disciplinary reductionism prompted by figures like Daniel Dennett and Steven Pinker, who urge philosophers of mind to dump Descartes in favour of contemporary neuroscience, or to simply shut up shop. Indeed, some of the more extreme scientistic writers suggest that philosophy – and theology and other 'artsy' subjects – could be abandoned entirely without any real loss to human intellectual activities. Two contemporary philosophers of science recently confessed their 'frank scientism' and declared that any discipline which fails to conform to naturalism therefore 'fails to qualify as part of the enlightened pursuit of truth' and should be 'discontinued'.[2]

Such remarks on the obsolescence and future, if any, of philosophy are not simply academic spats. If they remained within the pages of monographs and journals, perhaps they would not be so problematic. However, there are two reasons why philosophers should be very wary of them. The first is that the issues being discussed – such as the relationship between science and philosophy – are political as well as philosophical. Ontological debates about the nature of the mind may translate into questions about the priority of neuroscience over philosophy. If one cannot see what philosophers actually add to such debates, then one will soon start to wonder why they are debating them at all, or, more pragmatically, just why we pay and employ philosophers at all. Scientism raises a host of epistemological and metaphysical issues, but in certain hands it can become a powerful political and disciplinary weapon. A vice-chancellor or Secretary of State for Education who has absorbed scientistic attitudes might well look at the budget sheets for the arts and humanities and wonder if all that time and money could not be better spent elsewhere. Such questions are familiar, of course, to any philosopher who has ever been forced to defend the legitimacy of their discipline to those whose conception of meaningful intellectual

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activity extends to the physical sciences and no further.[3] Scientism, whether in academia, popular science literature, or government policy, poses a tangible threat to the disciplinary integrity of philosophy – and this is a threat which will tend to assume greater force in times, like those now, when harsh economic conditions encourage talk of 'tightening belts' and fostering economic growth.

The second reason why philosophers should be wary of scientism is that it is, at heart, a philosophical issue. When Hawking writes that philosophy ought to be abandoned now that science has reached a sufficient level of sophistication, his point is a philosophical one, not a scientific one. The issues that he broaches are not scientific ones, that is, ones amenable to experimental demonstration, or which emerge from reflection on empirical data. When one makes statements about the value and nature of science and philosophy, one is engaging in philosophy, and not in science. Questions of value, of the meaning and place of such activities within human life, require one to have certain ideas about what makes for a meaningful life, of what a human being is, and so on. Those ideas may be informed by scientific knowledge, but they are at heart philosophical and will depend upon certain conceptions of what matters, and why. The philosopher of science Philip Kitcher has suggested that one difficulty facing our attempts to critically reflect on the 'role of the sciences within society' is the lack of 'any clear conception of what the wider task of inquiry might be'.[4] The provision of such a conception is an obvious task for philosophy because it must include some tenable account of the place of scientific inquiries within a well-lived human life. Scientists are of course very good at answering 'How' questions, but generally prefer to leave 'Why' questions to others, either to individual conscience, or else to philosophers, theologians, and others whose intellectual province they fall into. Hawking's views on the value and primacy of science do not reflect his scientific knowledge, but rather emanate from his philosophical ideas; for instance, when

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he writes that curiosity is a defining feature of human beings, and one that must be satisfied if we are to fulfil our potential, he is clearly echoing Aristotle. So, when writers like Hawking and Dawkins tell us that philosophy is 'dead' and that we should put all of our questions to science, they are, ironically, invoking the very subject whose death they announce. This is either intellectual necromancy – communing with 'dead' subjects – or else a disturbing confusion about the nature of their own attitudes and ideas.

Scientism, like all things, has a history and its popularity and influence waxes and wanes. At the moment, it seems to be on the ascendant, and philosophy may well suffer for it – and, even if my worries about its political implications are exaggerated, the fact remains that philosophers, and other academics, must endure the taunts, criticisms, and, in some cases, threats of scientistically inclined writers, whether they be public figures like Philip Pullman, leading scientists like Hawking, or philosophers and schools who share their bloated enthusiasm for the sciences. Philosophy is fair game for easy satire, since its stereotypes – old, toga-clad Greeks, pipe-puffing dons – are too easy to send up; but one deeper reason why the value of philosophy often goes unnoticed and unappreciated is, perhaps, that its critics often fail to realise that their criticisms are themselves philosophical. Philosophy, like grammar, is too often invisible by virtue of its ubiquity in thought and in life. The spirit of criticism animates philosophy, and one should of course take nothing for granted; however, this includes a refusal to take for granted the value of science, or a refusal to grant it immunity from scrutiny. So, against the obituaries offered by Hawking, Dawkins, and the rest, one should remember that questions of the value of science and philosophy are at heart philosophical questions. Scientism is neither good science nor good philosophy and is more of a danger to the scope and vitality of human intellectual inquiries than the heirs to those old, dead Greeks that it excoriates.

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Notes

[1] Steven Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (Bantam Press, 2010).

[2] James Ladyman and Don Ross, *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalised* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 61, vi.

[3] An excellent book on the various forms of scientism is Mikael Stenmark, *Scientism: Science, Ethics, and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

[4] Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 116.

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