

Flirting with Natural Philosophy

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One of the worst developments in Western history came about when natural philosophy got divorced, and we were left with the natural and the philosophical. In many ways it was an inevitable separation. Theology had moved out in order to pursue its political career in earnest, and both partners had begun fooling around with that information glut which was just around the corner. No amount of counselling could help these imperious partners, for they were already hyper-specialists themselves, helleslly bent on imposing their own view of the world upon everyone else.

On the one side there were the prominent scientists – often physicists, it would seem – complaining about how philosophy adds little to nothing of value to our understanding of the universe. Ironically, in doing so, these researchers were guilty of drawing an unwarranted inductive generalization, which, as everyone knows, is simply bad scientific practice. Just because *their own* philosophy (of philosophy) added little to nothing of value to our understanding of the universe did not and does not entail that therefore all philosophy is worthless. Mercifully, no one else took such naively self-defeating claims very seriously.

But we can hardly blame the scientists for pummeling the presumptuous philosophical pronouncements, made by many of those on the other side, about what, in principle, the universe simply *must* be like. (We are all looking at you Descartes. You too, Hegel.) Nor can we blame the naturalists for laying bare their frustration with philosophers' attempts to stipulate now, timelessly, and in advance, what are supposed to be the bounds of all that science will ever be able to make us conscious of. If anything was ever an

empirical matter, surely the open question of what science will ever be able to accomplish is the paragon.

Worst of all, however, are the ceaselessly complaining critics, the nosy neighbours nipping away at the faults of both scientists and philosophers without risking any positive claims of their own in return. More often than not, what these oblivious folks have to say is simply not worth...

There is hope, though. The divorce was never clean cut. At first, there was the occasional rendezvous, embodied by the free spirits who made love for both philosophy and science their only guiding ethos. As time went on, we began to see collaborations in the press. There began to be formally trained philosophers embedded in labs, as well as scientists being welcomed to philosophy conferences. To be sure, there were still hold outs on both sides who remained suspicious, but the information glut comes for us all eventually. Even in a single discipline it soon became necessary, especially in the sciences, to work in teams. For none of us knows all of the relevant literature. None of us can say in advance, and with certainty, which obscure paper in which forgotten journal might one day prove seminal.

Call me a romantic, but I remain hopeful that one day soon natural philosophy will become unified once again. God knows we need to work together if we are ever going to redirect the presently unchecked societal aspirations of that messy queen which is fundamentalist theology! There will be no more talk about twin earths or their climates if ours' continues on down the path it is headed.