**Conceptions of philosophy and the challenges of scientism**

Moti Mizrahi (ed.) *Scientism: For and Against*

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**Two Hypotheses**

The recent surge of interest in scientism is a good opportunity to ask what is really at stake in debates about the nature and challenges of scientism in relation to philosophy. Moti Mizrahi has raised the question of the deeper metaphilosophical commitments and attitudes at work when people defend or resist scientistic attitudes and doctrines (Mizrahi (2019). One obvious feature of many of those debates is a peculiarly charged and often intemperate tone among their participants – accusations of the arrogance and dogmatism between the participants to the debates and the charges of obsolescence or hubris towards the attitudes and claims (Kidd 2018). Some intemperateness should be expected, of course, since philosophers can be prone to overly hot-heated behaviour. Still, deep chords are being struck, provoking strong reactions of a sort usually reserved for contentious moral and political topics.

Mizrahi is therefore right to invite us to pause and take stock of the state and the aims of philosophical debate. Stocktaking anyway makes sense, given all the new material added to philosophical study of scientism lately, including two edited collections (de Ridder, Peels, and van Woudenberg 2018; Williams and Robinson 2016). There are also new studies of the antiscientism of historical figures, notably Ludwig Wittgenstein (Beale and Kidd 2017). Moreover, periodic stocktaking helps us keep track of developing debates. A common feature of philosophising is that definitions of problems change, something not always noticed by participants. Entrants to a debate often have different assumptions and motivations and only realise this once they are already embroiled in the back and forth.

A more specific reason to ask about the deep drivers of scientism debates is that they include attitudes and convictions of a metaphilosophical character that are both charged and contestable. Mizrahi nicely articulates this in terms of competing conceptions on the ‘soul of philosophy’, by which he means, roughly, different ways of understanding the nature, values, and aims of philosophy. I think this is a good strategy. Many intellectual disagreements seem to be animated by deeper sensibilities and convictions that are at work just below the surface. Staying at the surface isn’t always a bad thing – one can do a lot of work at the surface, and it is not always necessary to dive into the depths. Sometimes, though, the things we are trying to locate and explore are in the depths. If Mizrahi is right, making certain kinds of progress in the scientism debate will require grappling with deeper metaphilosophical issues.

A call to attend to the metaphilosophical issues driving debates about scientism was consistently made by the late Mary Midgley. An important critic of scientism, she is neglected in the current literature on scientism, to the loss of contemporary philosophical anti-scientism (Kidd 2015). Over some forty years, Midgley challenged many manifestations of scientism and urged us to attend to what she calls ‘myths’ – not in the sense of false stories, but ‘imaginative visions’ or background worldviews that shape ways of understanding the world and human life (see Midgley 1992, 2003). Sensitivity to ‘myths’ requires critical self-reflectiveness and humility about the ways our attention and reflection can be affected by conditioning factors – psychological, intellectual, cultural. Such factors should be investigated and then appraised, especially if they are – as many scientistic myths tend to be – ‘troublesome’, ‘inconvenient’, even ‘monstrous’ (Midgley 2003: 132). In many cases, such appraisals will turn on motivating convictions about philosophy – to issues concerning the ‘soul of philosophy’.

Mizrahi offers two hypotheses about what scientism debates are really about. The first is that the scientism debate is a ‘battle for the future of philosophy as a discipline’ (Mizrahi 2019: 1). By this he means something like organised forms of collective intellectual activity whose primary functions are teaching and research, manifested institutionally in departments, professional associations, journals, systems of training, and so on. Scientism, argues Mizrahi, threatens the integrity of philosophy as a discipline in various ways, not least by challenging or even denying its epistemic legitimacy. Unless kept in check, scientistic tendencies will gradually narrow the scope of legitimate work available to philosophers to zero. Certainly, champions of scientism urged this sort of dramatic aspiration to termination – from E.O. Wilson’s famous call for the ‘biologisation of ethics’ to more recent claims that neuroscience has resolved, once and for all, an array of issues in aesthetics and theology (see, for a critique, Tallis 2011).

Mizrahi’s second hypothesis is that the scientism debate is, fundamentally, ‘a battle for the soul or essence of philosophy’. Here we are in metaphilosophical territory. The soul or essence of philosophy is characterised in terms of what Mizrahi calls ‘traditional methods of philosophical inquiry … an *a priori* discipline’ (Mizrahi 2019: 2). Scientism threatens the soul of philosophy by claiming that its methods and aims are better realised in or by the empirical sciences. A new, better form of disciplined enquiry is now fully realised – the sciences. Since retaining obsolete tools is wasteful, if not a danger to current workers, the better response is to cease philosophical activity.

An odd feature of Mizrahi’s presentation of his two hypotheses is that both are offered as fundamental. Odd, since fundamentality is usually exclusive, yet we have two hypotheses. Presumably only one of them is actually fundamental and I think it is the metaphilosophical hypothesis about the ‘soul of philosophy’. The reason is that the concern about the existence of the discipline of philosophy must presuppose an underlying set of claims about the nature and value of philosophy. Ultimately, philosophical teaching and research are valuable because they are the constitutive activities of an enterprise of the human spirit that *matters* in its own unique ways. Philosophy can matter in those ways because it has a distinctive ‘essence’, one not shared with other intellectual endeavours, such as history or the natural sciences.

I suspect many philosophers feel the deep reason the topic of scientism matters is that it wrongly questions or impugns the integrity and significance of the discipline of philosophy. Often, debates proceed at two levels. At the surface, there are tussles about explanations of consciousness or the prospects for physicalism or the place for humanistic enquiries in a good life. At a deeper level, though, there are disputes about very fundamental issues about what it means to practice philosophy – of, for instance, the ambitions and values appropriate to an exercise of disciplined reflection and understanding which deserves to be called philosophical. Such metaphilosophical concerns may not always be at the forefront during debates about scientism. I think philosophising about scientism is often at its best when engaging with more specific targets – maybe a dubious ‘neurotheological’ claim, perhaps, or some ‘demolition’ of free will running on some mangled form of physicalist reductionism. Sometimes, though, we should engage much broader metaphilosophical issues directly.

**Crudity and Challenges**

Calls to engage in metaphilosophical reflection are not always met with approval. Doubtless there are many philosophers in the scientism debate who will want to resist them. Granted, much excellent philosophical work on scientism does not engage directly metaphilosophical issues and is none the worse for it. My claim is only that those issues are usually there in the background and that sometimes we do well to engage with them. To that end, consider two general points to bear in mind when getting metaphilosophical about scientism.

To start with, there are many different reasons – cultural, sociological, ideological – for contemporary attacks on the value and integrity of philosophy. Only some of these turn on anything as complex as entrenched dogmas about the authority of the sciences relative to philosophy and other humanistic disciplines. In many cases, modern foes of philosophy are motivated by far more quotidian considerations. Other attacks on philosophy come from those who only value academic subjects they regard as economically valuable, those ideologically hostile to culturally élite disciplines, or those who misconceive philosophy as an aimless discipline incapable of making any tangible difference to the world. Some of these foes sometimes appeal to scientism: a whole genre of books now exists of critical studies of academia and higher education, whose *bête noires* often include intruding forms of scientism. An ominously titled book, *The University in Ruins*, envisions a future academia in which the natural sciences are regarded as purveyors of ‘real knowledge and large toys’, while reducing the humanities to ‘cultural manicure’ (Readings 1996: 172).

It is obvious that the threats to philosophy are both numerous and deeply entangled, due to the contingencies of history and the dialectics of culture, politics, and history. I think we do best to remain alert to the various threatening ‘isms’ – including scientism, philistine instrumentalism, profit-driven neoliberalism, and more besides. Mizrahi is right to target scientism, but it is only one of the threats to the integrity and future of philosophy. Scientism might not even be the most powerful in many of the countries in which philosophy and other humanistic disciplines are under threat. What’s really needed, here, are careful histories of scientism, a rare example of which is Richard Olson’s study of European scientisms from Revolutionary France, Romantic Germany, and Victorian England (Olson 2008). Indeed, some champions of scientism regard themselves as engaged in a *defence* of the integrity of philosophy against what they see as its corruption at the hands of invidious developments—a point I return to shortly.

A second comment about engaging the metaphilosophical dimensions of debates about scientism is that they may sometimes afford the topic a depth of thinking it does not deserve. A fairly blunt response to scientism is that it is – quite simply – *wrong* and too obviously so to merit serious attention. Certainly, some forms of scientism are so crude that challenging them is too easy and some claims made by self-affirmed champions of scientism are simply false—for instance, Steven Hawking once castigated philosophers (all of them, apparently) for having not kept up to date with modern physics, a claim that doubtless came as a shock to many philosophers of physics (Kidd 2011).

I sympathise with those who urge us not to waste time on cruder forms of scientism. Unfortunately, the cruder forms attract attention and often find their way into the public sphere: recall the spats between some physicists and philosophers in several American and British newspapers a few years back, provoked by some critical reviews of a self-describedly scientistic book by the physicist Lawrence Krauss (Corneliussen 2012). Recall, too, that many of the various popular physicists who engage in science communication apparently find it difficult to resist the temptations of scientism. Hawking is only one of a gaggle of scientistic physicists with a high public profile.

A further problem with the advice not to engage with crude scientistic claims is that there are often trickier questions about what counts as the cruder and more sophisticated forms of scientism. Clearly, some forms of scientism are more sophisticated than others, by very general intellectual standards of argumentative ability, scholarly rigour, and coherence. Indeed, there are sophisticated forms of philosophical scientism, developed by distinguished philosophers of science that deserve to be taken seriously, such as James Ladyman and Don Ross’s self-declaredly polemical manifesto, *Every Thing Must Go*. They are good examples of avowedly scientistic philosophers acting, as they see it, in the best interests of the discipline of philosophy, especially analytic metaphysics, the main quarry. In their book, they defend a ‘radically naturalistic metaphysics … motivated exclusively by attempts to unify hypotheses and theories that are taken seriously by contemporary science’ (Ladyman and Ross 2007: 1). As well as being philosophically serious and sophisticated, they are sincere in their concern to help contemporary theorists navigate safely the ‘widespread unscientific and even anti-scientific intellectual waters’ in which we now swim (Ladyman and Ross 2007: 310). Their characterisation of their project makes clear the metaphilosophical dimensions of the topic of scientism. In the opening lines, Ladyman and Ross lay out their claim that ‘contemporary analytic metaphysics … fails to qualify as part of the enlightened pursuit of objective truth, and should be discontinued’:

We think it is impossible to argue for a point like this without provoking some anger […] Let us therefore stress that we wrote this book not in a spirit of hostility towards philosophy or our fellow philosophers, but rather the opposite. We care a great deal about philosophy, and are therefore distressed when we see its reputation harmed by its engagement with projects and styles of reasoning we believe bring it into disrepute, especially among scientists. (Ladyman and Ross 2007: vii)

Here we find a clear statement of the metaphilosophical dimensions of scientism of a sort that cannot be dismissed as intellectually crude. It’s also a scientistic doctrine that is clearly entangled with other threats to philosophy, not least given the talk of ‘discontinuing’ whole research programmes that fall outside a naturalistic orthodoxy.

The upshot is that there are sometimes sophisticated forms of scientism that should be taken seriously and engaged with critically by philosophers concerned enough to engage them. Sometimes their concerns will be very specific ones pertaining to particular doctrines or debates – in metaphysics or philosophy of mind, say. Sometimes, though, such specific concerns are bound up with much more general issues about the methodology and goals of philosophy. At this point, one is getting caught up in the deeper metaphilosophical currents and swept towards the sorts of fundamental issues which Mizrahi articulates in terms of the ‘soul’ or ‘essence’ of philosophy—something he is keen to protect.

**The ‘Essence of Philosophy’**

Talk of the ‘essence’ of philosophy invites instant problems. An obvious one is that there are many different styles of philosophising and a similarly large array of topics and at least three major world traditions – the Western, Indian, and Chinese, each evincing enormous internal diversity. Some law of comparative philosophy ensures that counterexamples will abound to any reasoned efforts to postulate some common or universal feature, even one moderated by assurances about family-resemblance concepts. I think it wiser to speak in terms of a very broad array of *visions* of philosophy – some complementary, others conflicting – which have been realised in various forms across different cultures and traditions. A list of some general examples shows the varieties: philosophy as ‘spiritual practice’, as a means of release from the ‘wheel of suffering’, as ‘underlabourer’ for the sciences, as a cure for ‘mental cramps’, as an engine of progressive social change, as ‘conceptual geography’, as a diverting cognitive game played for its own sake – and many others of similar sorts (see Cooper 2009). Some of these, like that of philosophy as a spiritual practice, go well beyond what Rik Peels calls ‘academic scientism’, which is the concern of Ladyman and Ross. We can usefully explain the difference by appealing to Cooper’s grouping of conceptions of philosophy into two main types. First, those for which philosophy is ‘an essentially theoretical, speculative enterprise’, oriented ‘necessarily and primarily towards Truth’, whether about reality [or] the conceptual schemes we employ for describing reality. Second, those for which philosophy is ‘a practical, vital enterprise’, morally and spiritually charged, oriented ‘towards the Good, towards Life as it should be’ (Cooper 2009: 1-2). Ladyman and Ross operate with a specifically naturalist conception of philosophy oriented towards Truth, according to which our best source of knowledge about reality are the natural sciences. According to that naturalistic conception, certain of our vital, practical needs will be either unintelligible – soteriological ones, say – or better served through other sorts of activities. ‘Philosophy as a way of life’ will simply seem too highfalutin, since the guidance one needs for the proper conduct of life need not come from anything as ambitious as philosophical ways of life of the sort exemplified by Buddhism or Epicureanism and other ancient schools.

It should be clear that scientism will only appear as a threat to philosophy on some of these conceptions. Granted, much will depend on how ‘scientism’ is characterised. There are many options, some offered in important earlier work on scientism by Tom Sorell (1991) and Mikael Stenmark (2001). Mizrahi’s account of weak scientism entails the commitment is to the epistemological thesis that ‘the scientific way of knowing is the best way of knowing’, in the sense that, ‘of all the knowledge we have, scientific knowledge is the best knowledge’ (Mizrahi 2017). Such weak scientism, he argues, is necessary to ensure that philosophy must honour the authoritative epistemic achievements of the sciences if it is to remain a serious discipline. Mizrahi’s definition was criticised for being too narrow by Christopher Brown (2017), a worry compounded by Rik Peels’s account of at least three other extant forms of epistemic scientism (Peels 2018: 34). Broader conceptions of scientism are also available, culminating in forms of what Stenmark calls *comprehensive scientism* which includes epistemological, metaphysical, axiological, and existential theses and so ‘contains probably all other forms of Scientism that we have identified’ (Stenmark 2001: 15). If defined very narrowly, scientism may not arouse any particular worries—if, say, its constituent theses pertain only to very narrow domains or if the contents of those theses are too circumscribed to be contentious. Yet as the claims grow broader, so, too, does the potential for alarm.

A similar point can be made about the scope and content of whatever conceptions of philosophy are in play when we debate scientism. At the absolute broadest, there is Wilfred Sellar’s famous line that the aim of philosophy is ‘to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term’ (Sellars 1962: 37). At the other end, there are much more defined conceptions of philosophy as the analysis of ordinary language or – crossing the Channel – an articulation of the conditions of experience under the ‘disenchanted’ conditions of late modernity. Looking to other cultures, philosophy also appears as the effort to liberate human beings from the cycle of karma and rebirth or the reflective commitment to achieve a state of harmonious ‘consummate ease’.

The sheer abundance of conceptions of philosophy could feed a worry that the task is too large to attempt, at least if we proceed piecemeal. Fortunately, we can make our life easier by introducing a few categories, the most important being conceptions of philosophy that are intrinsically scientistic – like that of Ladyman and Ross’s – and, relatedly, those that are intrinsically antiscientistic. A good candidate is existential phenomenology as practised by Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, he argues that cognition ‘presupposes [human] existence’, the shared forms of experience and activity, characteristic of creatures like us, which are themselves grounded in the ‘primordial’ forms of experience and embodied engagement with the world. Our ‘being-in-the-world’ has a thoroughly ‘intentional’ form, since we can only experience things in terms of their significance they enjoy by virtue of their relations to our values interests, and projects (Heidegger 1962: 15-16). Consequently,

the natural sciences, though important for certain purposes, have an epistemologically derivative status: they cannot at all reveal how the world is independently of our experience and engagement, since they can only get to work on objects and processes already revealed within those primordial forms of engaged experience. (For a clear statement of this general form of antiscientism running through the existential phenomenological tradition, see Ratcliffe 2013).

Into their respective later periods, Heidegger and Edmund Husserl extend their own epistemological criticisms of scientism into a much broader set of cultural and existential concerns. Heidegger’s influential later essays, *The Question Concerning Technology*, argue that our exaggerated estimations of the powers of the natural sciences are part and parcel of the accelerating entrenchment of a baleful ‘technological’ stance on the world driving the destruction of the natural world, the erosion of a vital sense of mystery, and the alienation of human beings from themselves, other persons, and the world (Heidegger 1977: 27ff and 118ff; see Cooper 2005). Whatever one thinks to such expansive criticisms of scientism, it’s clear that hostility to scientism was an abiding, evolving theme in Heidegger’s writings and that combating it was among his central concerns—for what is really ‘messing up’ modern thought and culture, he declared, is ‘the dominance and primacy of the *theoretical*’, which is most fully expressed in the entrenchment of scientism (Heidegger 1987: 87). Here, then, we have a good example of an intrinsically antiscientistic conception of philosophy, one whose dominant *mood* or *sensibility* – as well as its doctrines and theses – are characterised by an enduring hostility to scientism, albeit not to science itself (cf. Peels 2018: 29).

I think that the category of intrinsically antiscientistic conceptions of philosophy can be useful for organising our thinking about the metaphilosophical issues in debates about scientism. It suggests, of course, that some conceptions are only *contingently* antiscientistic. Consider the criticisms of evolutionary psychology developed in the work of John Dupré: the targets are evolutionary psychology and rational choice theory in the forms they had taken during the 1990s, ensnared and corrupted by the ‘lure of the simplistic’ (Dupré 2001, 2002). Had those disciplines developed in other ways, there would be no need to develop doctrines of epistemic pluralism specifically intended to challenge forms of imperialist scientism – that being an explicit metaphilosophical concern driving Dupré.

I suggested that talk of the ‘essence’ of philosophy may become more tractable if we speak instead of a rainbow variety of conceptions of philosophy, which could be intrinsically or contingently scientistic or antiscientistic. Ladyman and Ross offer an intrinsically scientistic conception of philosophy as naturalised metaphysics in deference to the deliverances of the contemporary physical sciences that excludes other styles and projects of enquiry from ‘the great epistemic enterprise of modern civilization’. By contrast, Heidegger and the existential phenomenologists offer an intrinsically anti-scientistic conceptions of philosophy whose aim is careful description of the fundamental structures of sensibility constitutive of our ways of experiencing and engaging with the world – a main obstacle to which is the conceit that the sciences can provide direct accounts of the world independent of those ways of ‘being-in-the-world’. Between those two complex examples, one finds a whole variety of other ways of conceiving of the nature and significance of science in relation to the aims and purposes of philosophy.

**Going Forwards**

I started by endorsing Mizrahi’s suggestion that those interested in scientism should look at the underlying metaphilosophical dimensions – deeper convictions about the nature, aims, and significance of philosophy. Without prescinding from other ideological and cultural worries, claims and counter-claims about scientism do often turn on rivalling visions of philosophy. It is important that those visions are described and presented upfront, rather than left lurking in the background without proper critical scrutiny. One natural difficulty of this sort of work is the variety of forms of scientism and the similar variety of conceptions of philosophy. This can help to explain the peculiarly charged character of debates about scientism – what is at stake is the integrity of the intellectual and cultural enterprise which has a definitive role in the self-identity of many practicing philosophers. While some will be sanguine in accepting their role as ontological bookkeepers for the sciences, others regard such deflated roles as a wilful abandonment of the core purposes of the philosophical enterprise – a wilfulness that for some borders on gross recklessness. Some philosophers will doubtless roll their eyes at such apocalyptic claims and scoff at Edmund Husserl’s ruminations on ‘barbarian hatred of spirit’ and its connection to the ‘crisis of the European sciences’ (Husserl 1970: 299ff). But a scoff is worth much less than a thought. A better response to unfamiliar and expansive ways of conceptualising the relations of philosophy to science and human life is to sit down to do the work of understanding them—to try and draw out what Midgley called the ‘imaginative visions’ that serve to make them intelligible and compelling.

The upshot is that many philosophical debates about scientism are often the surface-level expressions of much deeper conflicts of a metaphilosophical character. Not always, for sure, since a lot of anti-scientism is driven by epistemological and practical issues rooted in the special authority of scientific knowledge and institutions in human life. Dupré, Tallis, and other critics of scientism often engage perfectly tractable worries about abuses of science in economics, healthcare, the arts, and so on. In other cases, though, really engaging with the issues means engaging with the operative claims about the nature and aims of philosophy. It matters that while for some scientism is a fundamental threat to the integrity of philosophy, to others it appears as a necessary step to its enhancement or final consummation. Wesley Buckwalter and John Turri, for instance, argue that experimental philosophy has enhanced, among other disciplines, ethics, epistemology, and philosophy of action (Buckwalter

Turri 2018).

A useful way forward in debates about scientism is to attend directly to these deeper claims about the ‘essence’ or ‘soul’ of philosophy and thereby establish just what is really at stake. We can take as our guide Mary Midgley’s own reflections on the ‘myths’ and ‘visions’ which organise and animate our ways of understanding science, philosophy, and human life (see, eg, Midgley 1993, 2003). A key theme of her work is insistence on proper appreciation of the respective powers and limits of science, philosophy, and other disciplines. We should, she argues, strive to maximise our epistemic resources through judicious employment of the many disciplines, traditions, and ways of thinking at our disposal. Some questions are best left to the sciences, others to philosophy, while others – perhaps most – require the careful use of resources of many different sorts. What Midgley urges is a careful, discerning, and pragmatic attitude toward philosophy and the sciences—accepting Buckwaler and Turri’s claim that the sciences, used properly, can enhance philosophy, while avoiding those more radical proposals to ‘discontinue’ whole areas of philosophy.

I endorse Midgley’s cautious, particularist approach to science and philosophy, which is exemplified in her own work. Perhaps her most famous book, *Beast and Man*, was closely informed by ethology and evolutionary biology, a pattern of engagement with the sciences that continued into such later works as *Animals and Why They Matter*. ‘We do not need to esteem science less’, she writes, ‘What we need is to esteem it in the right way’ (Midgley 1992: 37). The same is true of philosophy, of course, which is only equipped to deal with certain sorts of problems: there are risks in inflating the scope and power of philosophy just as much as in doing the same for the sciences. Midgley’s insistence on balancing proper respect for the contributions of the science with similar respect for philosophy and other disciplines is made clear in a remark from her final book. Speaking of the sorts of sensible, judicious ways of thinking she admires, she says:

Their aim is always to help us through the present difficulty. They do not compete with the sciences, which at present supply our most dominant visions of reality. Instead, philosophy tries to work out the ways of thinking that will best connect these various visions – including the scientific ones – with each other and with the rest of life (Midgley 2018: 6)

Our goal should be a conception of philosophy which preserves its distinctive functions and significance, but which also does the same for the sciences – to respect the essence of both, not just to avoid epistemological tangles, but also as a means of doing them both justice.

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