



Science

Our philosophical science correspondent
Massimo Pigliucci compares the value of

The Old and The New

Open any issue of *Philosophy Now* and you will see articles devoted to one or more of the Old Masters of philosophy. Just in the latest issue I received in the mail there were discussions of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Rousseau, Spinoza, Lucretius and Malebranche. By contrast, open an issue of, say, *Scientific American*, and you will hardly find a reference to anything older than a few months. Philosophers are obsessed with the past of their discipline, while scientists generally could not care less about their intellectual ancestors, focused as they are on the latest and hottest findings.

In part, this contrast is rooted in the fundamentally different outlook of the two areas of inquiry. Scientists are after discoveries about the world, philosophers are interested in ideas about the world, and new discoveries come about much faster than new ideas. Nonetheless, I want to argue that philosophers should back away a little from so much reverence to the usual parade of dead philosophers (largely white male), while scientists could use a bit more reflection on their own intellectual pedigree.

Let's start with philosophy. Yes, it's grand to be able to read Kant in the original German, or even better, Plato in Greek. But today, the idea that one can make an academic career entirely out of discussing the minutia of what the greats of the past wrote centuries or (gasp!) millennia ago, endlessly re-interpreting what is after all a finite text and an even more limited set of ideas, seems, frankly, like a waste of intellectual prowess (and in many cases, of tax-payers' money). Far more important, one could reasonably argue, is to *build on* the ideas proposed by past thinkers, without fear of abandoning them

if they have become obsolete – boldly moving the discussion forward with a bit less reverence for what the Old Ones had to say.

Contrary to popular belief, philosophy does make progress, as ideas are discussed, explored, and modified. No modern philosopher would get away with re-inventing notions which have been fatally criticized in the past, like logical positivism, for instance (and, hopefully soon, postmodernism). But try to imagine an undergraduate or graduate course in philosophy that does not pass through the great books of ancient times – regardless of how obscure in meaning or irrelevant in content they have become in the meantime. By contrast, last year I taught an introductory philosophy course based on 'twenty big questions' rather than, say, 'twenty famous thinkers'.

Most of the readings were from contemporary philosophers, with just a peppering of Plato and Kant. It was one of the most exciting courses I've ever taught.

By contrast, no science major is required to read Newton, Galileo or Darwin, let alone Ptolemy. Science students quickly learn about these major figures in a few pages of their introductory texts, and then move on to the core modern findings in physics, astronomy or biology. This extremely anti-historical model has its own drawbacks, as I find that many of my science colleagues and graduate students do not seem able to articulate why certain questions are considered important in science, or why they are being investigated in a particular way. They have little historical context, and consequently no appreciation for the development of ideas even in their own field. Among other things, this leads to a lack of realization that certain questions, and even some tentative answers,

have been probed before, and perhaps that they have been abandoned prematurely.

For example, when I was a graduate student in biology, an established member of another institution told me that the field I was interested in, gene-environment interactions, had been and would continue to be in and out of fashion, with no resolution of its major questions ever forthcoming. Fortunately for me, it turned out that he was spectacularly wrong, as the field blossomed during the following two decades. His narrow conception of it came, I think, from a lack of familiarity with what had already been tried, and why it had failed. My senior colleague moved to a different field instead, and missed out on one of the most thrilling series of empirical and conceptual developments in evolutionary biology during the past century. Oh well.

I think philosophy can learn from the sciences as much as science can learn from the humanities. Let's require a bit less classical reading from philosophy students, and a bit more discussion of current ideas in philosophy. The emphasis would be on the new and stimulating as opposed to the old and stuffy. By the other side of the coin, however, our budding scientists should at least read some of their classics. (Really, being an evolutionary biologist without having read *The Origin of Species* is a crime against the intellect.) Scientists should also spend a bit more time thinking about why they are doing a particular type of research. My old philosophy department at the University of Tennessee had a wonderful T-shirt, which said "Don't just do it. Stop and think about it!" Great advice for the scientists – although philosophers might benefit from some more doing and a bit less (old) thinking.

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