

Our philosophical science correspondent shows us his

Footnotes From The Borderlands

I am a scientist by original training, but my interests have eventually led me to an academic pursuit of philosophy. I am, therefore, one of those strange life-forms who populate the dangerous borderlands between science and philosophy. It has been some time since C.P. Snow wrote about the 'two cultures' and the need to overcome the divide [1959] – so much time, in fact, that I naively thought both my science and philosophy colleagues would be happy to see a living and breathing example of someone wishing to dedicate the rest of his career to straddling the divide. Friends, was I mistaken!

My hope was (all right, still is, since I'm an incurable optimist) that scientists would welcome a credentialed colleague who values philosophical inquiry, because they would get to at least occasionally peek above the narrow confines imposed by the strict mandates of perennial grant hunting. They would rejoice at the chance to go beyond the necessity to produce 'least publishable units' (scientific papers reporting on very limited sets of results) – the logical consequence of the "publish or perish" dictum of modern academia.

Philosophers, I reckoned, would in turn be glad to see a scientist who wasn't out to get them, and reduce all human knowledge to equations and laboratory experiments. They would eagerly interact – I thought – with a scientist who speaks their language and is genuinely interested in their way of looking at the world.

By and large, neither prediction turned out to be correct, or even in the ballpark. Yes, colleagues and university administrators have been ready to pay lip service to the necessity of interdisciplinary teaching and scholarship. But rather than offer incentives to the building of such cross-campus intellectual bridges, they immediately raised all sorts of practical and bureaucratic obstacles, which often turned out to be based on petty calculations concerning allocations of teaching loads and departmental sources of salaries.

However the problems with exploring the borderlands between science and philosophy have deeper roots than just administrative bean counting. At the risk



of simplifying a bit (but only a bit), the picture that has emerged from my experience so far is still the one that concerned Snow so much. On the one hand, many scientists are contemptuous of the humanities in general and philosophy in particular, because they don't appear to achieve tangible results. After all, how can one compare idle armchair speculation to the marvels of modern science and technology, including the laptop on which I'm writing this article? Never mind, of course, that most scientists spend their entire careers trying to figure out largely irrelevant minutiae about the natural world, with no pertinence whatsoever not only to human welfare but to knowledge broadly understood as the pursuit of the 'big questions'.

On the other hand, philosophers tend to be fearful of science, paranoid about the rampant reductionism and cultural imperialism that allegedly drives scientists the world over, and which – if not checked – will result in the end of civilization as they know it. The fact that the few scientists who actually have attempted to embark on such ambitious projects (biologist E.O. Wilson and his 1998 book, *Consilience: the Unity of Knowledge* comes to mind) are often ridiculed in the hallways of science departments for engaging in harmless after-retirement pursuits, seems to escape the attention of the frightened philosopher.



To add insult to injury, there is indeed an area where many of both my science and philosophy colleagues see eye to eye: writing for the general public is a complete waste of time that could otherwise be directed toward the production of another grant proposal or least publishable unit (again, general lip service and the occasional genuine exception aside). Ironically, then, this very article is something popularist that can bridge the gap between the two cultures, if only in a critical sense.

Of course the situation is not as grim as it may appear. I occasionally spot a science colleague attending a philosophy meeting (or even presenting at one!), though when they recognize me they usually look like someone caught with their hands in the cookie jar. Similarly, it is becoming more common to see philosophers writing in science journals, and even philosophical books being (rather positively) reviewed in such temples of high science as *Nature* and *Science* magazines.

The goal of the cultural borderland explorer is neither to turn science into philosophy nor *vice versa*. It is not a matter of establishing cultural primacy or relative worth. The issue is to understand to what extent science may inform (as opposed to solve) philosophical questions, as well as when and within what limits philosophers can help scientists better comprehend what they are doing and how to do it. For both tasks we need members of the two camps who are genuinely willing to challenge their own entrenched academic cultures and build conceptual bridges in the spirit of a broader human pursuit of knowledge. But be warned: it's a jungle out there!

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