Misappreciation between Philosophy and Science

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In this paper, I will argue that the relationship between science and philosophy in the twentieth century has been characterized by misappreciation, ranging from indifference to hostility: both disciplines have misunderstood and misinterpreted each other while in addition nurturing false expectations.

Then I claim there were many advantages for both disciplines in a period (roughly between 1845 and 1930)~~,~~ that saw the closest interaction between philosophy and science and which I call the “golden symbiosis”. This period has brought enormous fruitful achievements for both disciplines.

The attitudes of philosophers and scientists towards each other today are mixed and include considerable indifference and some hostility. These misunderstandings have even seemed to grow worse in recent debates. Many scientists think that philosophers’ accounts of science are often wrong, seriously misdescribing what is actually going on in the scientific community. Given the enormous complexity and opacity of scientific practice, this should not be surprising. Perhaps every available philosophical account of science has serious weakness but philosophers’ work has provided partial, genuine and illumination of certain aspects of science.

Physicists like Richard Feynman (1918-1988), Steven Weinberg (b. 1933), Alan Sokal (b. 1955), and recently Stephen Hawking (b. 1942) and Leonard Mlodivow (b. 1954) are the best examples of indifference and sometimes hostility towards philosophy. Examples include Hawking when he states that p~~,~~hilosophy is a waste of time and philosophers are a waste of space, andWeinberg when he states that~~,~~ the insights of philosophers have occasionally benefitted physicists, but generally in a negative fashion, ~~-~~by protecting them from the preconceptions of other philosophers~~.~~

How should philosophers react to this challenge? For sure, some aspects of philosophy are in fact both correct and salutary for a practicing scientist to know. An uncompromising response would be that philosophy is not supposed to be useful.

Furthermore, perhaps it may be good for philosophers to remind scientists how their most productive thinking very often involves a complex interplay of empirical data, theories, working hypothesis, and testable conjectures. I mean science has always included a large philosophical component. Moreover, scientists can accept that science is such an important part of our lives that it seems worthwhile to try to understand a little better how it works, for the sake of understanding itself rather than for any more utilitarian end.

Finally, I close by considering the best period of the relation between science and philosophy, the golden symbiosis. I argue that we can bring enormous achievements for both disciplines by fostering a positive interaction between them.

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