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Critical Notice

TOM SORELL, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science.* London: Routledge 1991. Pp. 206 + xi.

Tom Sorell's principal aim is to combat what he takes to be the menace of scientism in philosophy. While acknowledging that infatuation with science is not confined to philosophers, he believes that the effects of science on them are especially pernicious. In fact, he somewhat surprisingly holds that outside philosophy scientistic thinking may serve the useful function of bolstering respect for science and of reducing the influence of antiscientific and pseudoscientific ideas (2 and 177). What needs debunking, he declares, is the philosopher's penchant for construing philosophy as a branch of science rather than as a discipline with its own special agenda and method. In his view there is no one fundamental branch of learning: science is important for understanding and improving our lives but so also is philosophy (and the other humanities).

Sorell traces the roots of scientistic thinking in philosophy to the writings of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and other seventeenth-century natural philosophers. In opposition to Richard Rorty, who takes their main legacy to be the idea of the mind as mirroring nature (see 25-34), Sorell argues that they were primarily responsible for the idea that 'scientific reasoning is a master key to all sorts of intellectual and practical problems' (40). It is their conception of science as preeminent that he takes to pervade many areas of contemporary philosophy with such unfortunate consequences. In his view it is not only important to acknowledge the profound influence of seventeenth-century scientific philosophy on logical positivism and other forms of 'scientific empiricism,' it is also essential that we appreciate just how deeply it informs the naturalistic conceptions of epistemology, philosophy of mind, and 'the moral sciences' that are now all the rage.

There is much to be said both for Sorell's view that contemporary philosophers owe an enormous debt to their seventeenth-century predecessors and for his view that the concerns, questions, and doctrines of

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these early thinkers recapitulated the concerns, questions, and doctrines of the new science. As a result of recent work in the history of philosophy (including Sorell's own historical investigations) we now have a much better appreciation of the common roots of modern philosophy and modern science. And Sorell is surely right to insist that twentieth-century philosophers have largely proceeded, as their seventeenth-century predecessors proceeded, on the assumption that the scientific approach is the best, perhaps even the only, intellectually respectable approach. What is much less clear, however, is whether Sorell is right to regard the scientific conception of philosophy as invariably scientistic.

Sorell seems to be of the opinion that the pursuit of philosophy (or any of the other humanities) in a scientific spirit is in and of itself scientistic. As he puts the point in connection with scientific empiricism, what 'captures the scientism' in such philosophy is 'the thought ... that it is highly desirable for the concepts and methodology of established sciences to be spread, and unsatisfactory for, for example, ethics or history to be left in their prescientific state' (9). But the reason that scientific philosophy is scientistic — assuming it is — is presumably not that its proponents value science highly but rather that they are wrong to value it as highly as they do. A charge of scientism cannot rest on whether this or that philosopher appropriates the methods of the natural sciences. Scientistic thinking involves the promiscuous promotion of these methods, not merely the advocacy of their use in other areas.

Remarkably, Sorell's criticism of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, logical positivism, and contemporary naturalistic philosophy can be readily answered by noting that philosophers may embrace the scientific approach without opening themselves to the charge of scientism. It is misleading to accuse Bacon, Descartes, Carnap, Neurath, Quine, and others of scientism if all one means by this is that they believe that the concepts and methods of science should be deployed in philosophy (and in the other humanities), scientism so construed being the very thing that these philosophers are most keen to promote. What Sorell needs to show is not that they do what they claim to be doing — modelling philosophy on science — but that they are wrong to do it and that their preference for the concepts and methods of science is inappropriate or unreasonable.

A further difficulty with Sorell's arguments is that he discusses the scientific conception of philosophy as though it were all of a piece. While it is true that many philosophers who champion this conception recommend extending the methods and concepts of science to history, ethics, and other intellectual endeavors, many of them would regard this as a mistake. In fact, leading exponents of what Sorell calls scientific empiricism — such as Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath — advocated a restrictive view of science and were highly critical of attempts to encourage the use

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of its techniques outside a very limited area. Rather than urging that scientific concepts and methods be applied across the board, these thinkers were at pains to rein in their use, not least in philosophy itself.

Ironically, if antiscientism is taken to have as its target the fraudulent extension of scientific methods, the scientific empiricist movement, for all its faults, may (at least in one of its more important forms) actually have been among the most antiscientistic of philosophies. To contend, as many of the positivists did, that nothing unverifiable counts as cognitively meaningful is tantamount to placing beyond the reach of science much of what is commonly thought to fall well within it. In arguing that the bounds of sense coincide with the bounds of the verifiable (and hence that science is in this limited sense exceptional), Schlick, Carnap, and Neurath were not arguing that everything can be understood scientifically. As they themselves fully appreciated, their views about meaning committed them to holding that many subjects traditionally treated by philosophers should be left to artists and others engaged in nonscientific pursuits.

Better still, consider Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which by Sorell's standards is as clear an example of scientific philosophy as we are ever likely to find. Wittgenstein did indeed claim that 'the totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science,' but it would be wrong, as Sorell himself acknowledges, to maintain that Wittgenstein was 'motivated by a desire to contribute to scientific advance' (7). To the contrary, Wittgenstein was — we put it mildly — disinclined to regard science as all-important, his view being that practically everything of importance lies outside science. What he and the logical positivists whom he influenced advocated was not that philosophical problems be solved scientifically, but that they be recognized for what they are: pseudoproblems to be exposed and criticized. Actually, much of Wittgenstein's writing (early as well as late) may be read as a sustained attack on scientistic thinking in philosophy in all its various guises.

This is not to deny that many proponents of the scientific conception of philosophy espouse views that are unquestionably scientistic, only to draw attention to the fact that some of them are implacably opposed to offering scientific solutions to nonscientific problems. Richard von Mises was doubtless wrong to portray metaphysics, poetry, and the visual arts as continuous with science, to say nothing of his view of the humanities as having as its goal the development of 'general statements about repeatable individual events' (22). But it is unhelpful to focus on so unrepresentative a member of the movement. Certainly Schlick and Carnap, to say nothing of Wittgenstein, would have opposed his view, which Sorell treats as typical, that 'every painting, every artistic creation is a theory of a specific section of reality' (18).

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We might also note here that Sorell pays insufficient attention to the fact that many logical positivists were, like him, concerned with personal well-being and the improvement of society. He quotes Carnap's remark that 'all of us in the Circle were strongly interested in social and political progress' (14) but he is mostly content to rehearse the tired charge that the positivists were anti-human, that they were committed to defending Brave New Worlds, that they were unable or unwilling to contribute to the alleviation of suffering because of their devotion to instrumental reason. He forgets, as do all too many critics of positivism, that the study of language (and the logic of science) can be regarded — and was regarded — as contributing to the enlightenment project of eliminating superstition.

In general, then, we are unpersuaded by Sorell's view of the scientific conception of philosophy as intrinsically scientistic. Despite sympathizing with his conclusion, we are disinclined to accept his argument if only because it lacks a crucial premise. Instead of showing why scientific empiricists and other philosophers are wrong to value science highly and to advocate that its methods be applied everywhere, Sorell simply assumes that philosophy pursued in the scientific spirit cannot but be scientistic. More specifically, it is difficult to shake the suspicion that he conflates believing that science should be valued highly, overvaluing it, and regarding it as the only authentic branch of learning. While allowing that the question of whether science is the key to resolving all our difficulties is debatable — compare p. 41 — he never seriously considers the possibility that scientifically oriented philosophy may be promoted on the basis of what seem to those who advocate it to be excellent reasons. The impression one is left with is that he surreptitiously conflates 'scientism' understood prescriptively (as a thesis about what philosophers ought not to believe) with 'scientism' understood descriptively (as a thesis about what they rightly or wrongly happen to believe).

But what of Sorell's positive views? In opposition to those who defend the scientific conception of philosophy — and who privilege the methods of science and advocate their use in all areas of learning — he holds that science and philosophy (along with the other humanities) should be regarded as equally important, that they should, as he puts it, be 'understood to be complementary means of human improvement' (98). Taking it to be as much a mistake to underestimate the success and social value of science as it is to overvalue its achievement and utility, he would have us adopt a Kantian perspective and refrain from promoting either branch of learning at the expense of the other. We do not, he insists, have to go to the extreme of disparaging science to avoid the scientism of scientific philosophy since, as Kant has shown, it is possible to upgrade the

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humanities while continuing to regard the sciences highly in their own limited area.

Central to Sorell's Kantian approach is his defense of noninstrumental (moral) reasoning as complementary to instrumental (scientific) reasoning. In his view 'scientistic' philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes understand the relation between these two sorts of reasoning in a lopsided fashion and are ill-disposed to the noncognitive faculties associated with aesthetic experience and creativity because they mistakenly believe there to be only one legitimate form of reasoning. What Kant appreciates and scientific philosophers overlook, says Sorell, is that 'moral laws promote the overriding aim of making us worthy to be happy ... just as pragmatic laws are supposed to contribute to making us happy simply' (47). As he sees the matter, both happiness and worthiness to be happy can flourish only in cultures the members of which reason practically (i.e. morally) as well as theoretically (i.e. scientifically).

To bolster this conclusion Sorell takes up the suggestion that 'far from working co-operatively towards a common end, the arts and the sciences sometimes stake their own, more or less exclusive, claims to be morally improving' (98). In defense of his position he criticizes C.P. Snow's conception of scientists as having 'a more wholesome and positive *moral* outlook than members of the literary culture' (105) and F.R. Leavis's contrary conception of 'the culture of the human world' as superior to 'external civilization' (104). Taking both views to succumb to the error of 'one-sidedness' (104-6), Sorell suggests that the Snows and Leavises of the world should stop squabbling and turn their attention to the task of showing what the arts and the sciences each have to offer. To this end, he declares that philosophers have the special responsibility of explaining 'what method the sciences — inaccessible and accessible alike — might have in common, and how their subject matters might be related to one another and to the humanities' (112).

Sorell's suggestion that the sciences and the humanities be brought together is undoubtedly laudable, but what does it amount to in practice? Perhaps the problem of the inaccessibility of science can be lessened, as Sorell optimistically suggests, by popularizing it in the manner of Steven Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes* and Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (112). But why suppose that philosophy can perform the service of an 'honest broker between the common culture and the parts of learning that are least accessible to the common culture, or between the arts and sciences in cases where mutual misunderstanding prevails' (113)? As Sorell concedes, scientists are generally reluctant to admit that they need the philosopher's (or anyone else's) mediation (see p. 112) and badgering them about the virtues of the humanities is unlikely to change their minds. In fact, the picture of philosophers as mediators and honest brokers seems to be little more than wishful

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thinking. The value of the diversity of intellectual work is something that has to be earned: no amount of banging the drum of peaceful coexistence will by itself achieve very much. Also it is hard to imagine a group less well-equipped by training and temperament than philosophers to create 'tolerance ... in the face of the mutual suspicion of those who undertake different kinds of work in the arts and sciences' (127).

Nor are we convinced by Sorell's discussion of the objection that he fails to recognize that the arts and the sciences are themselves morally deleterious. Sorell is surely right to point out that the arts need not indulge the idle rich, pander to base appetites, encourage imitation of virtue, or be pretentious, degrading, divisive, or trivial (90). And he would seem to be on firm ground in noting that the sciences need not encourage pride, result in insensitivity, be used to promote evil ends, lead to decadence, or undermine the meaningfulness of life (75-90). The important question, however, is not whether the arts and the sciences inevitably have such consequences, but whether they do as a matter of fact have them, a question that no amount of philosophical speculation can possibly settle.

More importantly, when we step back and examine Sorell's general argument, it is not at all clear why we must embrace Kantianism to circumvent the snare of scientistic thinking in philosophy. It is one thing to hold that one need not denigrate the sciences to avoid scientism, quite another to hold that we should adopt a Kantian conception of the relation between the sciences and the arts (including philosophy). While Kant's views may certainly be interpreted in a way consistent with Sorell's intuition that we need to make room for both kinds of endeavor, this scarcely shows that we should become modern-day Kantians. Unlike Kant, who provides an elaborate — some would say overelaborate — defense of his division of fields of learning, Sorell seems to think that all he needs to do is show that the Kantian conception accords with his own basic convictions.

Indeed, it is a major shortcoming of Sorell's discussion that he rarely provides arguments for the views he espouses, but simply notes that certain — often not particularly plausible — alternative views are untenable. Thus in defense of his view that we have no 'good reason for supposing that there is something wrong with morality' he takes it to be sufficient to observe that Nietzsche fails to show that conventional morality 'slander[s] life' (97 and 96). And in defense of his view that the sciences and the arts differ, he is mainly content to criticize Paul Feyerabend's view that the sciences are essentially no different from the arts and Richard Rorty's view that the dichotomy between the arts and the sciences should be dismantled (117-26). Here and elsewhere Sorell's preferred mode of argument is 'I hold X but N holds Y; however, N is wrong to hold Y; so I can continue to hold X.' The question of the merits

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of X itself rarely commands his attention and we are left to figure them out for ourselves.

Much the same difficulty occurs in the chapters of the book on 'The New Scientism in Philosophy' and 'Naturalism in the Moral Sciences.' In the former, Sorell attempts to shore up his view that 'philosophy itself is a distinct subject' (128) by attacking Quine's defense of naturalized epistemology and Patricia Churchland's defense of 'neurophilosophy,' while in the latter he attempts to bolster his contention that ethics and social theory cannot be assimilated to the natural sciences by attacking the views of Harman, Mackie, Ruse, and Baskar. These discussions are not without interest, but few scientific philosophers are likely to find them troubling, still fewer to see them as establishing the bankruptcy of their conception of philosophy. What we need are not reasons why this or that view is problematic but reasons for thinking that philosophy is a distinct subject and for thinking that ethical and social theory cannot be pursued scientifically. Even better, Sorell might have attempted to explain — *Scientism* is after all a book on scientism — exactly what it is about naturalism that makes it scientistic.

Underlying much of Sorell's argument is the assumption that the only alternative to the scientific conception is 'traditional philosophy' taken to incorporate not only normative ethics and the theory of knowledge in the full-blooded non-naturalist sense but also old-fashioned metaphysics. His argument seems to be that since scientific philosophy is untenable, traditional philosophy is unavoidable. For example, we find him juxtaposing his own acknowledgement of the 'perennial' metaphysical questions with von Mises's search for a scientific account of poetry and painting (19). And he takes Quinean philosophy to be radically at variance with his own conception of it as 'a distinct subject' that 'adds to wisdom — wisdom as opposed to science' (128). He never entertains the possibility that we can renounce both traditional philosophy and the sort of philosophy favored by von Mises and Quine, that we can defend a conception of philosophy as a critical endeavor aimed at exorcising incoherence, illusion, fantasy, mythology, and superstition.

This connects with a point about Sorell's understanding of Kant as a traditional philosopher. Sorell reads Kant as engaged in a metaphysical project aimed at providing an overarching theory of the world and its contents, both human and physical, and he attempts to defend Kant (rather unconvincingly, it must be said) against the objection that some of his views — notably his conception of morals 'in its doctrinal aspect' (61) — are themselves scientistic. In arguing this point Sorell would seem to be creating unnecessary difficulties for himself. For while Kant's relationship to traditional metaphysics is notoriously ambiguous, he was without doubt concerned to put the brakes on metaphysical inquiry of the very sort that Sorell favors. Those wishing to capitalize on Kant's

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philosophy would, one would think, be better advised to embrace Kant's critique of metaphysical thinking than to defend him for occasionally succumbing to its charms.

To put the point another way, one wonders why Sorell cannot accept Kant's point that 'the critical path is alone still open' (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A856). Contrary to what Sorell suggests, there is much to be said for the Kantian view that 'the primary role of philosophy in regard to sciences' is one of 'legitimizing ... and producing critiques of them'; understood in a suitably modest fashion, this suggestion surely cannot be dismissed out of hand as 'implausible' (113). At any rate, it is hard to see why someone as sympathetic to Kant as Sorell fails to explore his suggestion that 'the true purpose' of philosophy is 'to expose the illusions of a reason that forgets its limits, and by sufficiently clarifying our concepts to recall it from its presumptuous speculative pursuits' (A735).

Like Sorell, we deplore the tendency of some philosophers to wrap themselves in the mantle of science and to present their a priori speculations as scientific facts. Where we differ from him is not so much over his characterization of what ails philosophy but over his analysis of the ailment and the cure he suggests, our view being that the scientific conception of philosophy deserves a more serious hearing than he gives it and that he is wrong to think that it should be combated by touting the merits of traditional philosophy. On the one hand, we would argue that there is no alternative to a step-by-step demonstration that the views of 'scientistic' philosophers are nonsensical, unsupportable, vacuous, or otherwise disreputable. On the other hand, we would argue that traditional alternatives to modern scientific philosophy are just as pretentious and — albeit in different ways — just as scientistic. It is incumbent on those of us who are inclined to censure philosophers for unjustifiably mimicking the sciences to make good on our criticisms and to ensure that we do not end up falling into the very same trap.

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