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INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

I have been of a philosophical turn of mind since my youth, and following an extended period of work in science, I have been a student of philosophy for a number of years. I have looked to both philosophy and science for fundamental knowledge and understanding of the world and ourselves, and for an understanding of how the various areas of knowledge are established and cohere.

Certainly science obtains fundamental knowledge; and it is reasonably clear how it does so and that scientific knowledge coheres, as its reference to an empirical base and its continuous striving for theoretical unity are inherent in scientific practice. Science itself does not have much to say about its practice though, perhaps because, as Einstein said, “The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.”

It is only the behavioural sciences and philosophy that have much to say about scientific practice. Turning to philosophy, what does it contribute to our understanding of the world and ourselves? Here I am thinking of the basic philosophical areas of metaphysics and epistemology rather than special areas such as moral philosophy. This is a question that has been a puzzle for me to answer and has thus become the subject of this investigation. Initially I was inclined to the view that philosophy has made a positive contribution to the development of our understanding and knowledge of the world and ourselves, at the very least as an arena of speculative skirmishing preparatory to the entry of science.

However, as the investigation proceeded evidence has accumulated that has inclined me to a more critical view of philosophy.

 Wilfrid Sellars says that

The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.

However, Sellars is making an assumption here that can legitimately be doubted, namely that there is a way in which things hang together beyond that which can be discovered by science. Many, especially those with scientific experience, doubt this. One who doubts it is Ronald Giere, a one-time physicist turned naturalistic philosopher of science. He writes:

1 Albert Einstein, “Physics and Reality”, p. 59

NOTE ABOUT REFERENCES: Page numbers in a footnote refer to the source from which the quoted material is taken, as indicated in the list of references at the end, unless otherwise indicated.

2 I do not need to rely on my memory for this, as I have early drafts of this essay stating that view.

3 Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man”, p. 1
I now believe there are no special philosophical foundations to any science. There is only deep theory, which, however, is part of science itself. And there are no special philosophical methods for plumbing the theoretical depths of any science. There are only the methods of the sciences themselves. Moreover, the people best equipped to engage in such pursuits are not those trained as philosophers, but those totally immersed in the scientific subject matter—namely scientists.

The philosophical goal, in short, has been to provide some extrascientific foundation for scientific claims. This project now seems to me merely a modern, secular version of the medieval project of providing philosophical proofs of the existence of God.\(^4\)

This is the view that is maintained in this essay: to attempt to go beyond the empirically based reality obtained through everyday experience and thinking and its scientific refinement and extension to a metaphysical reality which is independent of the human mind is destined to fail. It is destined to fail because belief in the existence of such a reality, going beyond empirical evidence as it does, can only be an act of faith which, like belief in the existence of God, acts as an impediment to productive thought: that is, it leaves us with the illusion of an understanding that we do not possess.

A good example of the tendency of philosophers to by-pass empirical facts is shown in their struggle with the phenomenon of pain, which they have attempted without success to fit into one or another idealized philosophical stereotype. Here is a scientist’s summary of these attempts.

Indeed, a little digging into the philosophical literature uncovers just about every conceivable position regarding what pain is. Some philosophers and neurophysiologists argue that pain is completely objective; it is either intrinsic to the injured body part, a functional state, a set of behavioral reactions, or a type of perception. Some philosophers and psychologists argue that pain is completely subjective; it is either essentially private and completely mysterious, or it does not correlate with any biological markers but is completely non-mysterious. A few philosophers disagree with both conceptions and hold that pain is not a state at all; it either does not exist as we commonly conceive of it or it is an attitudinal relation. Furthermore, each of these positions has become grist for someone’s mill in arguing either that pain is a paradigm instance of a simple conscious state or that pain is a special case and should not be included in any general theory of the mind.\(^5\)

And here is a philosopher’s account of the value his discipline typically places on scientific facts.

Very few today still believe that philosophy is a disease of language and that its deliverances, due to disturbances of the grammatical unconscious, are neither true nor false but nonsense. But the fact remains that, very often, philosophical theory stands to positive knowledge roughly in the relation-

\(^4\) Ronald N. Giere, *Explaining Science; A Cognitive Approach*, pp. xvi-xvii

\(^5\) Valerie Hardcastle, “The Nature of Pain”, p. 295
ship in which hysteria is said to stand to anatomical truth. Freud said, famously, that hysteria appears to have no knowledge of physiology, for its paralyses and tics, its incapacities and pains, are located by the sufferer where there is no objective possibility of their occurring. Philosophers erase entities in defiance of common sense and postulate entities of which there is not the slightest possibility of scientific confirmation. Parsimonious with one hand and profligate with the other, philosophers behave not only as though they had no knowledge of scientific truth but as if philosophy had its own authority, and not only did not need but could not use information from science.6

Evidence of philosophy’s failure is clear to everyone: philosophy has hardly progressed toward a resolution of the issues central to it in two and a half thousand years. Most philosophers acknowledge this, but view the failure as a virtue in disguise; or at least two virtues:

Virtue I: Philosophy has a function of stimulating speculative inquiry which often develops into science; or putting it another way, successful philosophy is renamed science; and
Virtue II: There are fundamental philosophical problems that are not addressable by scientific method, namely problems concerning the mind–world relationship.

These two supposed virtues in justification of philosophy are examined in this essay in Parts I and II respectively.

Consider Virtue I, which is almost universally subscribed to. Let us look, for example, to two of the philosophers already quoted. Sellars writes:

Philosophy in an important sense has no special subject-matter which stands to it as other subject-matters stand to other special disciplines. If philosophers did have such a special subject-matter, they could turn it over to a new group of specialists as they have turned other special subject-matters to non-philosophers over the past 2500 years, first with mathematics, more recently psychology and sociology, and, currently, certain aspects of theoretical linguistics.7

Giere also subscribes to this idea:

There is another philosophical tradition of equal antiquity. This tradition views philosophy simply as the search for a general understanding of the world—including the activities of human beings. It is this tradition that over the centuries gave birth to the special sciences that now dominate the intellectual world.8

In Part I the idea that philosophy stimulates science is investigated historically

6 Arthur C. Danto, foreword to C.L. Hardin, Color for Philosophers, p. ix
7 Sellars, op. cit., p. 2
8 Giere, op. cit., p. xvii
(neglecting historiographic considerations, which would not contribute to the investigation), and the conclusion reached is that the idea is a philosophical myth. Science is stimulated by certain socio-political conditions, principally freedom of the individual from religious and undue political domination, a reasonable level of economic well-being, the stimulus of intercultural contact, and the development of technology as an accepted means to economic advancement. These conditions, apart from the last, were approached temporarily in ancient Greece, especially in the pre-Socratic period, though not closely enough for a sustained development of science; they were realized briefly in Renaissance Italy prior to the sentencing of Galileo by the Inquisition, and then to a sufficient extent in post-Reformation north-western Europe and Great Britain to bring about the sustained development of science that we have witnessed since that time. Rather than philosophy stimulating science, it was science, both incipient and developed, as well as the conditions that lead to it, that acted as the stimulus for philosophy, while whatever influence philosophy has had on science has in most cases acted as an impediment to its creative spirit. Science is not mature philosophy, but is a quite distinctive development.

Now consider Virtue II, that there are special philosophical problems concerning the mind–world relationship that are not addressable by science. Are there such problems? We note certain facts relevant to their purported existence.

(a) There is no agreed observational or suppositional base for these problems. Philosophers often say that philosophy is hard. It is certainly not hard in the way that theoretical physics is hard: physics is hard to invent, but it is relatively easy to express because it is clear what it is about; philosophy is easy to invent, but is hard to express because it is not clear what it is about, or that it is about anything. It is not clear what philosophy is about because, unlike physics, it has no agreed observational or suppositional base—the base itself is often considered a philosophical issue. It is also not clear what it is about because much of it is based upon aspects of introspectively acquired notions that are not objectively communicable. Lack of an agreed observational base, or absence of one, assuredly removes a problem from scientific consideration. And, one might add, it removes it from any systematic consideration—what is the philosophical problem of consciousness?

(b) Philosophy appears to attempt little more than a speculative ordering of our common experience, which is the limit of its observational base, thus reflecting the idiosyncrasies of our animal constitution and our local environment, natural, cultural and scientific. This is in sharp contrast to science, which develops the ordering of experience by extending experience itself beyond the constraints of our natural endowment and environment. Thus phi-
losophy seeks to interpret the world in terms of the human mental constitution and human interests; or, as such interpretation must be communicated in everyday language, philosophy is concerned with how to talk about things, not with examining things themselves in the scientific way. Granted that seeking interpretations of our experience in everyday language is what philosophy is concerned with, it is easily seen how any philosophical proposal to this end cannot be amenable to scientific practice and is destined to fail: common, or common philosophical, language is not the medium in which such interpretations are expressible, because such a language does not possess the references that are required for effective interpretation, namely the scientific references from which fundamental knowledge derives. This aspect of philosophy also shows how its influence can act as an impediment to the creative spirit of science, for scientific creation requires the development through empirical reference of concepts with which philosophy is unfamiliar and is in consequence inclined to oppose.

(c) It is maintained that some philosophical problems are inherently insoluble, not for the reasons given in (a) and (b), but because of inherent limitations in our capacities, or as McGinn terms it, because such problems are “cognitively closed” to us. An example is the current philosophical interest in the philosophical “hard problem” of consciousness, which has been stimulated by the comparatively recent general acceptance of the fact that we are purely physical structures, rather than dualities of mind and matter: how could the conscious awareness that we experience arise from our purely physical structure? As the problem in the form presented arises purely on the basis of introspection—for none of us can ever know another’s consciousness in the sense of the hard problem of consciousness—there is no objective observational base to which the problem may be referred. A cognitively closed problem is not so much philosophically insoluble as philosophically unformulated.

In none of cases (a), (b) or (c) can there be found a philosophical problem that is not addressable by science.

In Part II of this essay an attempt is made to show that all philosophical problems concerning the mind–world relationship are either amenable to scientific investigation and analysis or are not substantial problems at all. This is done by setting out a minimal description of the facts that both accommodates the scientific perspective and enables philosophical concerns with the mind–world relationship to be dissolved. This addresses (a) by providing an observation base that, consonant as it is with known facts, cannot be denied, and that gives an essential role to subjective experience, and it addresses (b) by recognizing aspects of the mind–world relationship that lie beyond familiar

9 Colin McGinn, The Problem of Consciousness, p. 3
experience. A by-product of this procedure is the dissolution of the problems relating to subjective experience, namely the problem of qualia and the hard problem of consciousness.

As a result of the analysis of Part II, it is maintained that there are no essentially philosophical problems.

*If this thesis seems unduly clear to a philosopher (clearly wrong?), then he must have misunderstood what it says.*

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10 With acknowledgement to Alan Greenspan, as reported in *The Economist*, March 27th, 2004, p. 18