Some Objections to Moti Mizrahi’s “What’s So Bad About Scientism?”

Christopher M. Brown, University of Tennessee at Martin


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-37n
In these critical remarks, I raise a number of objections to the arguments Moti Mizrahi (2017) employs in his attempt to defend (the usefulness of) a position he calls *Weak Scientism*.

**Is *Weak Scientism* Really *Scientism***?

According to Moti Mizrahi, we can distinguish *Strong Scientism*—“Of all the knowledge we have, scientific knowledge is the only ‘real knowledge’ (2017, 353)—from *Weak Scientism*—“Of all the knowledge we have, scientific knowledge is the best knowledge” (2017, 354). Mizrahi goes on to argue *Weak Scientism* is both the position traditional advocates of scientism *should* adopt and the position those who want to defend philosophy against charges of uselessness should attack (2017, 354).¹ Many contemporary philosophers, specifically, and academics, generally, accept *Weak Scientism* (or at least a position that closely resembles it).

If only for the reason that it focuses our attention upon an influential contemporary philosophical perspective, Mizrahi’s paper is a very useful one. That being said, *Weak Scientism* is not really strong enough to warrant the appellation, ‘scientism.’ For one could accept *Weak Scientism* and not only agree that philosophical knowledge exists (as Mizrahi notes), but also think philosophical knowledge is extremely valuable, indeed, nearly as valuable as scientific knowledge itself. For that matter, one could accept *Weak Scientism* and think that religious knowledge is nearly as valuable as scientific knowledge.

In fact, if Mizrahi’s *Weak Scientism* is really only a claim about the relative value of different academic forms of knowledge, as Mizrahi seems to admit in a couple of places (see, e.g., 2017, 354; 356), then one could accept *Weak Scientism* and think that personal knowledge, moral knowledge, and religious knowledge are more valuable than scientific knowledge. One might suppose, therefore, that neither traditional advocates of scientism, such as Alex Rosenberg (see, e.g., 2011), nor those who think philosophy is useless, such as, Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow (see, e.g., 2010) and Stephen Weinberg (see, e.g., 1994), will find Mizrahi’s *Weak Scientism* to be a position that is quite strong enough to communicate their own (negative) attitudes toward philosophy or philosophical knowledge or non-scientific forms of knowledge more generally.

**How is *Weak Scientism* by Itself Relevant Where the Philosophy-is-Useless-Objection is Concerned?**

Mizrahi says: “I propose . . . *Weak Scientism* is the definition of scientism those philosophers who seek to defend philosophy against accusations of uselessness . . . should attack if they want to do philosophy a real service” (2017, 354). But why think that? For it is hard to see how the philosophy-is-useless charge gets off the ground just given *Weak Scientism*. For example, in order to get the uselessness charge from *Weak Scientism* we might argue as follows:

---

¹ Mizrahi is not the first to consider the possibility of a position such as Weak Scientism as a candidate for scientism; see, e.g., Sorell (1991, 1) and Brown (2011, 196-7).
1. If scientific knowledge is better than philosophical knowledge, then philosophy is useless.
2. Scientific knowledge is better than philosophical knowledge.
3. Therefore, philosophy is useless [from (1) and (2), MP].

Even if one grants (2), why accept (1)? For, clearly, the consequent of (1) does not follow from its antecedent. Indeed, it wouldn’t follow even if the value of philosophical knowledge were quite a bit lower than scientific knowledge.

To make good on the philosophy-is-useless claim from a scientistic stance we need something much stronger than *Weak Scientism*, for example:

4. Only cognitions that rise to the perfection of knowledge are useful.
5. If scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge, then philosophy is useless [from (4)].
6. Scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge.
7. Therefore, philosophy is useless [from (5) and (6), MP].

But we don’t have anything like the argument above in Mizrahi’s paper. Therefore, Mizrahi’s attempt to mediate the discussion between defenders of philosophy, on the one hand, and defenders of the philosophy-is-useless claim, on the other, by way of *Weak Scientism* is a non-starter.

**Problems for Mizrahi’s Argument for Weak Scientism, Given the Number and Kind of Philosophical Assumptions at Play in the Argument**

Mizrahi argues that *Weak Scientism* is defensible, namely, it can be defended against objections (2017, 354). One objection to *Weak Scientism* he fields is

(O1) It is epistemically impossible to offer scientific evidence for *Weak Scientism*.

Mizrahi does not say why (O1) should be thought to be an objection to *Weak Scientism* other than noting the objection is inspired by the self-reference problem for the verifiability criterion of meaning (2017, 355). At any rate, Mizrahi thinks (O1) is false and defends the falsity of (O1) by offering what he takes to be a scientific argument for *Weak Scientism*. Here follows a schema of that argument:

7. One kind of knowledge is better than another quantitatively or qualitatively.
8. Scientific knowledge is quantitatively better than non-scientific knowledge (including philosophical knowledge) in terms of the number of journal articles published and the number of journal articles cited.
9. Scientific knowledge is qualitatively better than non-scientific knowledge (including philosophical knowledge) insofar as scientific theories are more successful than non-scientific theories (including philosophical theories) where the success of a theory is understood in terms of its explanatory, instrumental, and predictive success.
10. Therefore, scientific knowledge is better than non-scientific forms of knowledge (including philosophical knowledge) both quantitatively and qualitatively [from (8) and (9)].

11. Therefore, scientific forms of knowledge are better than non-scientific forms of knowledge (including philosophical knowledge) [from (7) and (10)].

In his defenses of (8) and (9), Mizrahi makes quite a few controversial philosophical assumptions. This section lists some of these controversial philosophical assumptions, discusses the significance of their functioning as background assumptions for Mizrahi’s argument for (8) and (9), and, at the end of the section, develops four general problems for Mizrahi’s argument for *Weak Scientism*, given the central role these controversial philosophical assumptions play within that argument.

**First Assumption**

The first controversial philosophical assumption at play in Mizrahi’s defense of (8) is his decision to think about knowledge teleologically or operationally. He states that for the purposes of his argument: “‘knowledge’ is meant to refer to the aim or goal of inquiry or the final product of inquiry” (2017, 353). In another place, citing the work of Francis Sparshott, Mizrahi states, “[f]or the purposes of this paper, I have operationalized ‘philosophy’ as simply ‘what [professional] philosophers do’ (Sparshott 1998, 20)” (2012, 356). Mizrahi’s reasons for thinking about academic knowledge pragmatically are themselves pragmatic: not only are the natures of philosophy and science matters of great debate (2017, 356), but, if Mizrahi does not think about knowledge teleologically or operationally, it won’t be possible for him to measure the quantity of knowledge in scientific and non-scientific disciplines, something Mizrahi needs to do in order to make his argument for (8).

**Second Assumption**

Mizrahi’s pragmatic approach to thinking about knowledge is itself, of course, philosophically controversial. But, in addition, Mizrahi’s defining knowledge as a goal of inquiry is a way of thinking about knowledge that seems to entail many forms of non-academic cognitions can’t count as forms of knowledge. Indeed, much human knowledge is obtained without any sort of explicit inquiry on our part, as Mizrahi himself concedes, e.g., the knowledge of the heavens that comes by way of lazily gazing up at the night sky (2017, 354). So, we have a second controversial philosophical assumption as a background assumption for Mizrahi’s argumentation: knowledge is the goal of inquiry.

In order to justify his focusing on academic forms of knowledge for the purposes of his defense of *Weak Scientism*, Mizrahi notes that scientists such as Hawking, Mlodinow, and Weinberg have academic philosophy in particular in mind when they criticize philosophy, and Mizrahi thinks that philosophers who criticize scientism are comparing academic philosophy with science when they do so (2017, 356). In arguing for this latter claim, Mizrahi cites Sorell (2013, x) as a representative example. Mizrahi writes:
... when he defines scientism as ‘a matter of putting too high a value on science’ Sorell (2013) compares science to ‘other branches of learning or culture’ (emphasis added). Accordingly, it is clear that the debate between scientists who are critical of philosophy and philosophers who charge critics of philosophy with ‘scientism’ is about academic knowledge produced by academic disciplines, as opposed to more basic sources of knowledge, such as perception, introspection, and the like (2017, 356).

There are a couple of things to note about this passage. First, Mizrahi apparently feels justified in equating Sorell’s expression, branches of learning and culture with academic knowledge. That’s puzzling. Does Mizrahi really think (Sorell thinks) that all learning and culture is confined to what happens within the walls of the academy? Second, we might ask about basic—or non-basic—sources of knowledge such as knowledge of persons, moral knowledge, and religious knowledge. Does Weak Scientism say scientific knowledge is better than those forms of knowledge? At any rate, Mizrahi seems to imply in a couple of places (see, e.g., Mizrahi 2017, 354; 356) he is really defending a position weaker than Weak Scientism in his paper, one we might call, Very Weak Scientism.

(Very Weak Scientism) When it comes to the kinds of knowledge produced within the academy, scientific knowledge is the best.

Third Assumption

A third controversial philosophical assumption at play in Mizrahi’s argument for (8) is the view that the quantity of knowledge of each academic discipline—in terms of both its output and impact—can be measured. Mizrahi recognizes that the position that knowledge can be quantitatively measured is a philosophical assumption, but he does not see this as a problem, since an argument’s making philosophical assumptions is not a sufficient condition for it counting as a philosophical rather than a scientific argument (2017, 356). Grant Mizrahi’s claim that an argument’s making philosophical assumptions is not a sufficient condition for it counting as a philosophical rather than a scientific argument. But the point here is that the view that academic knowledge can be quantifiably measured is a philosophically contentious one, to say the least.

To see why that is so, consider again that in order to measure the amount of scientific and non-scientific, academic knowledge—as Mizrahi needs to do in order to make his argument for premise (8)—he needs to define knowledge teleologically—as the goal or aim of an academic discipline—or operationally—as what academics produce. But thinking about the nature of (academic) knowledge in that pragmatic way is philosophically controversial. Therefore, thinking we can measure quantitatively the amount of knowledge across academic disciplines is itself philosophically controversial, since the latter assumption only makes sense on a pragmatic account of knowledge, which is itself a controversial philosophical assumption.

Fourth Assumption

The fourth controversial philosophical assumption Mizrahi makes use of in his argument for (8) is the assumption that the quantity of knowledge of each academic discipline—in terms
of both output and impact—can be accurately measured by looking at the publications of participants within that discipline. Let us assume, if only for the sake of argument, that the quantity of academic knowledge produced by academic disciplines can be accurately measured. Compared to the quantity of knowledge produced by academic publications, some academics believe that just as much, if not more, knowledge is acquired or disseminated within a discipline by way of the good teaching that goes on within that discipline.

To measure the quantity of knowledge within a discipline merely by examining the academic publications within that discipline shows a decided bias in favor of the philosophy of education currently dominating contemporary universities, one which places the highest value on making new discoveries (whether about starfish or about some text from the past), a philosophy of education which is itself rooted in an empirical scientific way of thinking. So, not only is this fourth philosophical assumption contentious, it is also a question-begging assumption: for we would expect the output and impact of scientific knowledge to fare better than non-scientific academic knowledge in an environment where knowledge is primarily understood in terms of publishing new discoveries.

To put the point another way, sampling just the publications produced within academic disciplines will not present us with a representative sample of knowledge produced within all academic disciplines. According to a traditional liberal arts understanding of education, teaching as a means of passing on knowledge from one generation to another is just as important, if not more so, than the making of new discoveries, and that context, we might think, is more fecund for the output (teaching) and impact (learning) of knowledge in liberal arts such as literature and philosophy. To put the point here still another way, it looks as though Mizrahi is actually defending the following thesis in his paper:

**(Very, Very Weak Scientism)** When it comes to the knowledge that is produced by academic publications, scientific publications are the best.

**Fifth Assumption**

In arguing that scientific knowledge is better than non-scientific knowledge in terms of quantity of knowledge, Mizrahi makes a fifth controversial philosophical assumption: the quantity of knowledge—in terms of output and impact—of each academic discipline can be successfully measured by looking simply at the journal articles published (output) and cited (impact) within that discipline.

There is no doubt that the journal publications within a field give one a good sense of what subjects are receiving attention within that discipline at a particular time. And this includes new discoveries and new arguments within a discipline. But to reduce academic knowledge to the number of journal articles produced and cited within these disciplines neglects to take into account important differences between disciplines concerning the relevance of the history of those academic disciplines for knowledge produced in those disciplines now. For

---

2 Or, as often is the case, new ‘discoveries.’
example, the history of science is less relevant for the practice of science today than is the history of philosophy for the practice of contemporary philosophy.

Although historians sometimes study philosophical texts from the past merely as historical artifacts, many contemporary philosophers treat important philosophical texts from the past as extremely—even indispensably—relevant for the practice of philosophy today. To count only journal articles when quantifying over impact of the knowledge of a discipline is, again, to adopt a scientific, discovery-oriented, approach to thinking about the nature of knowledge. For how often do the works of Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Shakespeare, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Dostoevsky, just for starters, continue to have research impact on the work of historians, social scientists, theologians, literature professors, not to mention, philosophers? So Mizrahi’s argument either begs the question against non-scientist academics for another reason—it neglects to count citations of great thinkers from the past—or, by focusing only on the citation of journal articles, the sample Mizrahi uses to make his inductive generalization is simply not a representative one. Or, perhaps Mizrahi is actually defending a weaker thesis yet in his paper:

(Very, Very, Very Weak Scientism): When it comes to the knowledge that is produced by academic journals, knowledge that comes from scientific academic journals is the best.

Sixth Assumption

There is a sixth controversial philosophical assumption that Mizrahi makes in arguing for (8), namely, each piece of knowledge acquired in a discipline should be treated equally where measuring its quantity is concerned. As we’ve seen, Mizrahi thinks scientific knowledge is quantitatively better than non-scientific knowledge because scientists publish more journal articles than non-scientists and the journal articles published by scientists are cited more often—and so have a greater “research impact”—than do the journal articles published by non-scientists (2017, 355-58).

Consider an explanation alternative to the one Mizrahi offers for why there are fewer non-scientific academic papers produced and cited than is the case with scientific papers, and consider just the discipline of philosophy. We might think scientific journal articles get cited more often than do philosophy journal articles simply because, at any given time, there is more consensus among scientists than among philosophers. And, as David Papineau (2017) has recently suggested, perhaps the higher amount of disagreement among philosophers compared to scientists is due to the fact that philosophy is harder than science. If Papineau is correct, then perhaps there is also less output of philosophical knowledge when compared to science, not because science is in some sense better than philosophy, but because it is simply harder to arrive at philosophical knowledge than scientific knowledge.3

3 In addition, the greater output of science surely also has something to do with the fact that today there are more working scientists than there are working philosophers, which is itself rooted more in cultural conditions that have something to do with an implicit acceptance of scientism by the majority of business owners, university administrators, professors, journalists, and politicians than it does the relative objective value of philosophy and science.
Consider also Aristotle’s famous claim that a little knowledge about the noblest things is more desirable than a lot of knowledge about less noble things. Mizrahi’s argument assumes Aristotle is wrong. That too is a controversial philosophical assumption. For it is an honest question to ask how we should compare, in terms of relative value, a smaller amount of knowledge about a more important topic—say philosophical topics such as, the nature of God, the nature of the human person, or the best form of government—to a greater amount of knowledge about a less important topic—say topics studied within scientific disciplines, such as stars and starfish.

**Seventh Assumption**

In his attempt to defend the thesis that scientific knowledge is *qualitatively* better than non-scientific knowledge, Mizrahi assumes that a theory A is qualitatively better than a theory B if A is more successful than B (2017, 358). He thus thinks about a theory’s qualitative value in pragmatic terms. So we have a *seventh* controversial philosophical assumption in the background of Mizrahi’s argument for *Weak Scientism*.

**Eighth Assumption**

An *eighth* controversial philosophical assumption Mizrahi employs—also in his argument for (9)—is the notion that a theory A is more successful than a theory B if A is more *explanatorily* successful than B, more *instrumentally* successful than B, and more *predictively* successful than B. Mizrahi defends this philosophical account of the successfulness of a theory by way of citing the work of some contemporary philosophers of science concerning the criteria for a successful *scientific* theory, which philosophers of science speak of a theory’s success in terms of its explanatory power, its instrumental success, and its predictive success (2017, 358). Apparently, Mizrahi thinks these criteria for a successful *scientific* theory can be rightfully applied as the measure of success for a theory, *simpliciter*.

But why think a good *philosophical* theory should enjoy *predictive* success, i.e., the power to “make novel predictions that are borne out by observation or experimentation” (Mizrahi 2017, 358) or meet ‘the criterion of testability,’ i.e., “As a general rule of thumb, choose the explanation that yields independently testable predictions” (2017, 360)? To think that a theory T is successful only if—or to the extent that—it enjoys predictive success or testability is to beg the question against non-scientific ways of knowing, ways of knowing that do not, by their very nature, employ controlled experiments and empirical tests as an aspect of their methodologies. As Edward Feser has noted (2014, 23), to compare the epistemic values of science and philosophy and fault philosophy for not being good at making predictions is like comparing metal detectors and gardening tools and concluding gardening tools are not as good as metal detectors because gardening tools do not allow us to successfully detect for metal.

---

4 See, e.g., *On the Parts of Animals*, Book I, chapter 5 [644b32-645a1]. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, book one, ch. 5, 5 and *Summa theologiae* Ia. q. 1, a. 5, ad1.
Are good philosophical theories *instrumentally* successful, i.e., “theories [that] allow us to intervene in nature and causally manipulate entities, events, and processes” (Mizrahi 2017, 358)? It depends on what one means by ‘theories that allow us to intervene in nature and causally manipulate entities, events, and processes.’ If, by that expression, one means “thinking that leads to curing diseases or building bridges and other pieces of technology,” then philosophical theories will, we might think, not compare favorably with scientific ones. But, again, philosophy by definition isn’t in that sort of business.

So to say science is qualitatively better than philosophy because science leads to technological innovations is like saying instrumental jazz is qualitatively better than Gregorian chant because jazz makes use of musical instruments. On the other hand, if by ‘intervene in nature,’ etc. one means “doing that which conduces to human happiness,” then it certainly will not be obvious that scientific theories are qualitatively better than philosophical ones, unless Mizrahi also assumes that human beings are better off with modern technology than without it. If so, we will need to add another controversial philosophical assumption to the (growing) list of controversial philosophical assumptions at play in Mizrahi’s argument in defense of *Weak Scientism*.

On the other hand, Mizrahi is correct that good philosophical theories *explain* things. But Mizrahi is skeptical about whether philosophical theses such as *external world realism* or *scientific realism* explain more than do competing anti-realist theories, so he concludes that philosophical theories do not compare favorably with good scientific theories in terms of their explanatory power. Whether Mizrahi is correct in that judgment depends upon just what a philosophical theory needs to explain, e.g., does it, all things being equal, need to make sense of common-sense intuitions about reality? In addition, we might wonder whether philosophical theories that count as responses to skeptical theories really represent the explanatory power of the best philosophical theories. For it is notoriously difficult to overcome skepticism on the skeptic’s own terms. But what about the explanatory success of Aristotle’s hylemorphic dualism as a theory of substantial change, or a natural-law/virtueethical theory as a theory for why human flourishing requires noble human conduct, or theism as an explanation for the rationality of believing in the reliability of cognitive faculties that have arisen by way of an evolutionary process, to pick just a few examples of philosophical theories that have great explanatory power?

Of course, none of the theories just mentioned are believed by even a majority of contemporary philosophers. But that not all—or that even a majority of—contemporary philosophers agree about the relative explanatory value of a philosophical theory A is no good argument that A does not actually explain what it sets out to explain—and better than do other theories. To think that a philosophical theory A is successful only if all, or a majority of, philosophers accept A is, we might think, to misconstrue the nature of the philosophical enterprise and the kinds of questions philosophy treats. It is again to beg the question against distinctively philosophical methodologies, which differ in kind from the consensus-inviting methodologies of empirical science.

---

5 Although it seems one can plausibly argue that modern science has the history of Western philosophy as a necessary or *de facto* cause of its existence, and so the instrumental successes of modern science also belong to Western philosophy by transference.
Ninth Assumption

A ninth controversial philosophical assumption at work in Mizrahi’s argument for *Weak Scientism* is the assumption that each piece of knowledge acquired in a discipline should be treated equally where measuring its *quality* is concerned. Assume, if only for the sake of argument, that we should use the same criteria to evaluate the relative success of a scientific theory and a non-scientific theory. And assume also the following Aristotelian epistemological axiom: less certain knowledge (or less explanatorily successful knowledge or less instrumentally successful knowledge or less testable knowledge) about a nobler subject, e.g., God or human persons, is, all other things being equal, more valuable than more certain knowledge (or more explanatorily successful knowledge or more instrumentally successful knowledge or more testable knowledge) about a less noble subject, e.g., stars or starfish.

Consider, then, a piece of philosophical knowledge P and a piece of scientific knowledge S, where P constitutes knowledge of a nobler subject than S. If S enjoys greater explanatory power and more instrumental success and greater testability when compared to P, it won’t follow that S is *qualitatively* better than P. In other words, contrary to what Mizrahi wants to assume, we might think philosophers and some other non-scientific academicians treat subjects of greater existential/axiological import than the subjects treated by scientists. Admitting as much, of course, does not mean thinking scientific knowledge has no value. Just as the advocate of *Weak Scientism* might think philosophical knowledge has great value, so the critic of *Weak Scientism* might think scientific knowledge has great value.

Four General Points

Having noted (at least) nine controversial philosophical assumptions Mizrahi makes in arguing for *Weak Scientism*, one can make four general points.

First, it seems reasonable to reject some—even all—of the controversial philosophical assumptions that function as background assumptions in Mizrahi’s argument for *Weak Scientism*. Indeed, we’ve examined some reasons for rejecting some of these assumptions. Therefore, a number of serious philosophical objections remain for the argumentative strategy Mizrahi employs to defend *Weak Scientism*.

Second, as we’ve seen, many, if not all, of the nine contestable philosophical assumptions Mizrahi employs in his argument for *Weak Scientism* one would accept only if one already accepted *Weak Scientism* or *Strong Scientism* or some position closely allied with one of those positions. One might be excused for thinking, then, that Mizrahi’s argument for *Weak Scientism* is question-begging.

Third, Mizrahi is at pains to maintain that his argument for *Weak Scientism* is a scientific and not a philosophical argument, and this because a significant part of his argument for *Weak Scientism* not only draws on scientific evidence, but employs “the structure of inductive generalization from samples, which are inferences commonly made by practicing scientists” (2017, 356). Grant that inductive generalization from samples is a *central* feature of Mizrahi’s argument, since he argues from samples of scientific and non-scientific work (number of
journal articles published and number of times those articles are cited in a given time period) in order to generalize about the quantity and quality of scientific knowledge and non-scientific knowledge, respectively. Even so, Mizrahi can’t reasonably maintain his argument is thereby a scientific one, given the number of controversial philosophical assumptions employed as background assumptions in his argument. Mizrahi’s argument rather looks like a philosophical argument that defends one of its key premises—premise (8) in my formulation of his argument—by way of drawing upon some contemporary work in information science.⁶

The point here is not that Mizrahi’s argument in defense of Weak Scientism makes philosophical assumptions. We might admit that all science proceeds on the basis of some philosophical assumptions among its background assumptions. But the background assumptions of scientific arguments are largely non-controversial for the community to which those arguments are addressed, namely, the community of practicing scientists. We might think, therefore, that in order for Mizrahi’s argument for Weak Scientism to count as science, the background philosophical assumptions he employs need to be largely uncontroversial for the community of thinkers to which his argument is addressed. Of course, the community of thinkers to which Mizrahi is addressing his argument for Weak Scientism includes not only scientists, but also philosophers, literature professors, indeed, all kinds of thinkers. Now, all nine of the philosophical assumptions at play in Mizrahi’s argument for Weak Scientism highlighted here are highly controversial within the community of thinkers to which his argument is addressed. Mizrahi’s argument for Weak Scientism is therefore not a scientific one.

Fourth, Mizrahi offers Weak Scientism as the position traditional advocates of scientism should adopt (2017, 354; 364). Why should they adopt it according to Mizrahi? They should adopt it “if they want to have a defensible definition of scientism” (2017, 354). And by “defensible definition,” Mizrahi means, one that “can be successfully defended against objections” (2017, 354). As we’ve seen, Mizrahi’s defense against objection O1 is his argument for Weak Scientism. Now, as Mizrahi notes, traditional advocates of scientism believe philosophy is useless or of little epistemic value (2017, 351-54; 356).

Once traditional advocates of scientism therefore become aware of the number of controversial philosophical claims that function as background assumptions in Mizrahi’s argument, they will (absent a serious intellectual conversion) consider Mizrahi’s argument to be an argument that is useless or of little epistemic value. Therefore, as far as the traditional advocate of scientism is concerned, Mizrahi has not successfully defended against objection O1, and so, he has given traditional advocates of scientism neither a good reason to think Weak Scientism is a defensible definition of scientism nor a good reason why they should adopt that view. If Mizrahi’s argument is going to be at all convincing for the traditional advocates of scientism, they need to be convinced first that philosophy is useful and has high epistemic value, which is not something Mizrahi attempts to do in his paper.

⁶ At least in this respect, if not in others, Mizrahi’s argument for Weak Scientism resembles William Lane Craig’s Kalam cosmological argument for the existence of God such that most of that argument’s premises are contestable philosophical assumptions, but one premise, i.e., that the universe has a beginning, Craig defends (not only by philosophical argument but by way of drawing on scientific arguments (see, e.g., Craig 2008, 111-156).
An Objection to Mizrahi’s Defense Against the Circularity Charge

In defending *Weak Scientism*, Mizrahi also attempts to defeat the following objection to *Weak Scientism*:

\[(O2) \text{ It is viciously circular to support } Weak \text{ Scientism with scientific evidence.}\]

Mizrahi’s attempted defeater of (O2) relies on the following claim:

12. Deductive inference is only defensible by way of deductive inference (2017, 362).

But why think (12) is true? Consider propositions such as ‘1+1=2’ and ‘a whole is greater than one of its (improper) parts.’ We can’t defend the truth of these sorts of propositions by way of deductive inference or prove they are true. But we don’t need to. Rather, we know such propositions are true by way of some non-inferential mode of knowing. It seems reasonable to say we come to know the validity of deductive rules of inference such as modus ponens in a similar sort of manner (see, e.g., Feldman 2003, 3-4).

Mizrahi goes on to claim,

13. “... if it is viciously circular to support claims about science using scientific evidence, then it is viciously circular to prove the soundness of inference rules using logic” (2017, 363).

According to Mizrahi, the consequent of (13) is false and so he also denies its antecedent. But perhaps we should rather affirm the truth of both the antecedent and the consequent of (13). Since there are ways other than deductive inference to know the rules of deductive inference—by some sort of non-inferential mode of knowing—there is no inconsistency in affirming both a scientific argument for *Weak Scientism* is a circular argument and we have knowledge of the rules of deductive inference.

An Objection to Mizrahi’s Claim that Philosophers Should Not Use Persuasive Definitions of Scientism.

Mizrahi argues that one who uses a definition of *scientism* that suggests *those who endorse the scientistic stance have an improper attitude towards science* (call such definitions persuasive definitions of *scientism* for the sake of simplicity here) “begs the question” (2017, 351; 352) against the scientistic stance, or otherwise errs by not “show[ing] precisely what is wrong with scientism” (352). Mizrahi draws an analogy between offering persuasive definitions of *scientism* and defining *abortion* as murder (352). Interestingly, this analogy actually allows for a more charitable interpretation of what authors might be doing when they offer persuasive definitions (or descriptions) of *scientism*, namely, such persuasive definitions or descriptions of scientism are actually conclusions of deductive arguments. To see this, consider first the following argument for the claim, *abortion is murder.*
14. Abortion is the direct killing of a human fetus.
15. The human fetus is an innocent person.
16. Therefore, abortion is the direct killing of an innocent person [from (14) and (15)].
17. The direct killing of an innocent person is murder.
18. Therefore, abortion is murder [from (16) and (17)].

In the argument above, (18) is a persuasive definition or description of abortion insofar as it communicates disapproval of abortion. Say Jane uses the argument above to communicate to John why she thinks abortion is murder. Whatever else John might think of Jane’s argument, John would be wrong to say Jane begs the question here in thinking abortion is murder or Jane has not shown precisely what (she thinks) is wrong with abortion.

Consider the possibility, then, that someone who offers a persuasive definition or description of scientism has also given an argument for defining scientism in that fashion. For example, consider an argument that has the following form:

19. Scientism is the view that science is the only, or best, kind of knowledge.
20. Therefore, if scientific knowledge is not the only, or best, kind of knowledge, then scientism is a view that commits its advocates to putting too high a value on—or having an exaggerated confidence in—science [from (19)].
21. If p, then scientific knowledge is not the only, or best, kind of knowledge.
22. p.
23. Therefore, scientific knowledge is not the only, or best, kind of knowledge [from (21) and (22), MP].
24. Therefore, scientism is a view that commits its advocates to putting too high a value on—or having an exaggerated confidence in—science [from (20) and (23), MP].

Now, if Jane offers an argument for (24) that has the logical form of the argument above, then when she describes scientism in such a way that communicates disapproval of scientism, in doing so she neither begs the question against the scientistic stance, nor fails to show precisely what (she thinks) is wrong with scientism. One strongly suspects that authors such as Susan Haack (2007) and Tom Sorell (1991; 2013) can be read charitably, but also plausibly, as doing something similar when they sometimes offer persuasive definitions of scientism.

Contact details: chrisb@utm.edu

References


---

*I’m grateful to Merry Brown for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.*


