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On the Limits of Any Scientism

Bernard Wills, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador

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Mizrahi is, alas, still confused though that perhaps is my fault. I *did not* attribute to him the view that non-scientific disciplines do not produce knowledge.¹ I am sorry if a cursory glance at my article created that impression but what I *thought* I had said was that this was the position known as strong scientism. Indeed, looking over my paper it seems that I made it quite clear that this position was ‘strong scientism’ and that Mizrahi defended something called ‘weak scientism’. According to this latter view the humane disciplines do indeed produce knowledge only of a qualitatively and quantitatively inferior kind. If *this* is not what weak scientism says I confess I don’t know what it says.

Thus, the opening salvo of his response, where he answers at some length a charge I did not make, has sailed clean over its intended target. (Mizrahi, 41-42) In my paper I distinguished weak scientism from strong scientism precisely on these grounds and then argued that the weaknesses of the former still dogged the latter: Mizrahi does not address this in his response. Here is a place where Mizrahi could have learned from humanities scholars and their practices of close reading and attended to the *rhetorical and argumentative structure* of my essay.

I began by critiquing ‘strong scientism’ which I said was *not* Mizrahi’s view and I did this by way of setting up my *actual* argument which was that Mizrahi’s proposed replacement ‘weak scientism’ suffered from the same basic flaws. I ask Mizrahi to read my response again and ask himself honestly if I accused him of being a proponent of ‘strong scientism’ rather than of ‘weak scientism’. To help him let me include the following citation from my piece:

I will focus, then, on the qualitative question and particularly on the claim that science produces knowledge and all the other things we tend to call knowledge are in fact not knowledge at all but something else. I will then consider Mr. Mizrahi’s peculiar version of this claim ‘weak scientism’ which is that while there may be knowledge of some sort outside of the sciences (it is hard, he thinks, to show otherwise) this knowledge is of a qualitatively lesser kind. (Wills, 18)

Asking Why Quantity of Production Matters

Mizrahi is still on about quantity. (Mizrahi, 42) I really have no idea why he is obsessed with this point. However, as he regards it as essential to ‘weak scientism’ I will quote what I said in a footnote to my essay: “Does Mizrahi mean to say that if a particular sub-discipline of English produces more articles in a given year than a small subfield of science then that discipline of English is superior to that subfield of science? I’m sure he does not mean to say this but it seems to follow from his words.” This point is surely not lost on him.

I have no firm opinion at all as to whether the totality of the sciences have produced more ‘stuff’ than the totality of the humanities between 1997 and 2017 and the reason is that I simply don’t care. I don’t accept quantity as a valid measure here unless it is backed up by qualitative considerations and if Mizrahi can’t make the case on qualitative grounds then

¹ Though, as I point out in my response (Wills, 22), he clearly vacillates on this point.

quantity is simply irrelevant for the reason I gave: there are more commercials than there are artistic masterpieces. However, if Mizrahi still wants to fuss over quantitative metrics he faces the problem I raised.

While science in a global sense may indeed produce more sheer bulk of material than English, say, if there are subfields of science that do not produce more knowledge than subfields of English by this measure these must be inferior. Plus, what if it *were* true that Shakespeare scholars produced more papers than physicists? Would that cause Mizrahi to lower his estimate of physics? He would be an odd man if he did.

At any rate, there are all kinds of *extrinsic* reasons why scientific papers are so numerous that include the interests of corporations, governments, militaries and so on. The fact that there is so much science does not by itself indicate that there is anything intrinsically better about science and if science *is* intrinsically better that fact stands no matter how much of it there happens to be.

On the Power of Recursivity

To my argument that recursive processes can produce an infinite amount of knowledge he replies with an ineffectual jibe: “good luck publishing that!” (46) Well I am happy to inform him that I have indeed published ‘that’. I have published a number of papers on ancient and early modern philosophy that touch on the question of reflexivity and its attendant paradoxes as Mizrahi can find out by googling my name. Since he is so concerned about purely extrinsic measures of scholarly worth he will have to admit that there are in fact journals happy to ‘publish that’ and to that extent my point stands by his own chosen metric.

At any rate, in a further answer to this charge we get the following sophism: Besides, just as “recursive processes can extend our knowledge indefinitely in the field of mathematics,” they can also extend our knowledge in other fields as well, including scientific fields. That is, one “can produce a potential infinity of knowledge simply by reflecting recursively on the” (Wills 2018, 23) (sic) Standard Model in physics or any other scientific theory and/or finding. For this reason, Wills’ objection does nothing at all to undermine Weak Scientism.” (46)

Of course we can extend our knowledge indefinitely by reflecting on the standard model in physics just as Augustine says. But this has *nothing whatsoever* to do with whether a proposition is scientific or not. It can be done with any proposition at all. Nor is recursive doubling a scientific procedure in the terms described by Mizrahi. This is why *quantitative* claims about the superiority of science can never succeed unless, as I have said many times, they are backed up with qualitative considerations which would render a quantitative argument unnecessary.

On the Intentionality of the Ism

Mizrahi makes the standard response to the concerns I raised about sexism and colonialism. He denies he is a racist and indeed, *Fox News* style, turns the charge back on me. (44-45) He should understand, however, that my concern here is not personal but *systemic* racism. The version of scientific ideology he proposes has a history and that history is not innocent. It is

a definition of knowledge and as such it has a social and political dimension. Part of this has been the exclusion of various others such as women or indigenous peoples from the socially sanctioned circle of knowers. This is the ‘privilege’ I refer to in my paper.

Mizrahi, as a participant in a certain tradition or practice of knowledge that claims and can often assert hegemony over other discourses, benefits from that privilege. That is not rocket science. Nor is the fact that, rightly or wrongly, Mizrahi is making hegemonic claims for science from which *he himself* stands to benefit. It is nothing to the point for Mizrahi to proclaim his innocence of any such intention or to use the ‘you are the real racist for calling me a racist’ ploy. As anyone familiar with the discourse about racism and colonialism can tell him, *intention* is not the salient feature of this sort of analysis but overall effect.

Also he has not distinguished an ideological critique from an *ad hominem* attack. I am not attacking him as a person but simply pointing that the position he takes on scientism has social, political and monetary implications that make his defense of weak-scientism ideologically loaded. And let me emphasize *again* that this has *nothing whatsoever* to do with Mizrahi’s intentions or personal feelings: I am happy to consider him a perfect gentleman. Perhaps a consideration of Marx would help him see this point a bit better and I can assure Mizrahi that Marx’s impact rating is stellar.

So Who Is Correct?

Of course, as Mizrahi says, all this is forgivable if his overall thesis is correct. (45) Apparently, I truly did not understand that “Even if it is true that “craft knowledge has roughly 3 million-year head start,” it is irrelevant to whether Weak Scientism is true or false. This is because Weak Scientism is a thesis about academic knowledge or research produced by academic fields of study (Mizrahi 2017a, 356; Mizrahi 2017b, 11; Mizrahi 2018a, 12). (46) I admit this point did escape me.²

This means that if I find knowledge produced outside the academy with qualities comparable to scientific knowledge that is irrelevant to the argument. Well, by all means then, let me limit my consideration to the academy since Mizrahi has defined that as his sole battleground. I gave many examples of knowledge in my paper that come from an academic context. Let us consider these with respect to Mizrahi’s chosen criteria for “good explanations, namely, unification, coherence, simplicity, and testability (Mizrahi 2017a, 360-362; Mizrahi 2017b, 19-20; Mizrahi 2018a, 17).” (47) (46)

Mizrahi seems to think this applies to a statement I made about Joyce scholars. (47) Let me take them as my ‘academic’ example. I take it as a given that a masterful exposition of *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* will show the unity, coherence and simplicity of the work’s design to the extent that these are artistically desired features. What about testability? How does a

² It is an odd kind of scientism that holds science is superior within the academy while leaving open the question of whether non-scientific knowledge *outside the academy* may be superior to science. However, if that is Mizrahi’s position I will not quibble.

Joyce scholar test what he says? As I said he tests it against the text. He does this in two ways.

First on the level of direct observation he establishes what Stephen Daedalus, say, does on page 46. This is, as far as I can see, a perfectly reputable kind of knowledge and if we can answer the question about page 46 directly we do not need to resort to any more complex explanatory processes. The fact that such a procedure is perfectly adequate to establish the truth means that scientific procedures of a more complex kind are *unnecessary*. The use of scientific method, while it may mean better knowledge in many cases, does not mean better knowledge *here* so Mizrahi's complaint on this score is beside the point. (47)

What Can Improve Knowledge?

Of course, the Joyce scholar will also have an interpretation of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. This is where he answers broader questions about the work's meaning, structure, unity and so on. This also entails the test of looking at the text not at any particular point but as a whole. What in this hermeneutic process would be improved by 'scientific method' as Mizrahi describes it? Where does the Joyce scholar *need* to draw testable consequences from a novel hypothesis and test it with an experiment? What would that even mean in this context?

His test is close reading as this is practiced in the discipline of English literature and he has peers who judge if he has done this well or badly. What is amiss with this process that it could be improved by procedures that have nothing to do with determining the meaning and significance of books? How on this question could science even begin to show its supposed 'superiority'? It seems to me the only option for Mizrahi here is to deny that the Joyce scholar knows anything (beyond bare factual information) and this means, alas, that his position once again collapses into strong scientism.

I think, however, that I see where Mizrahi's confusion lies. He seems to think I am saying the following: Joyce scholars look at a book to determine a fact just as scientists look at the world to determine a fact *ergo* Joyce scholars are scientists. (47) Let me reassure him I am not so jejune. Of course, field notes and other forms of direct observation *are* part of the arsenal of science. Plus, scientific statements are, at the end of the day, brought into relationship with observation either directly or indirectly. Still, Joyce scholars do not just look at page numbers or what characters are wearing in Chapter 2. They formulate interpretations of Joyce.

In this way too scientists not only observe things but formulate and test hypotheses, construct theories and so on. In some ways these may be comparable processes but they are *not* identical. Hermeneutics is *not* just an application of hypothetico-deductive method to a book. Conclusions about Joyce are *not* products of experimental testing and I can conceive of no way in which they could be strengthened by them except in a purely ancillary sense (ie. we *might* learn something indirect about *Ulysses* by exhuming Joyce's bones).

Thus, Mizrahi's argument that scientific explanations have more 'good-making properties' overall (47) is, whether true or not, irrelevant to the myriad of cases in which scientific

explanations are either A. unnecessary or B. inapplicable. Once again we teeter on the brink of strong scientism (which Mizrahi rejects) for we are now forced to say that if a scientific explanation of a phenomenon is not to be had then there can be no other form of explanation.

There Are Radical Differences in How Knowledge Is Produced

Let me go back to my daughter who was not out in a field or cave somewhere but in a *university classroom* when she presented her analysis of Scriabin's Prometheus chord. This, I hope, satisfies Mizrahi's demand that I confine myself to an 'academic' context. Both her instructor and her classmates agreed that her analysis was sound. Why? Because it was the clearest, simplest explanation that answered the question of how Scriabin created this chord. It was an abduction that the community of knowers of which she was a part found adequate and that was the end of the story.

The reason, let me emphasize again since Mizrahi has such trouble with the point, is that *this was all the question required*. Kristin *did not* deduce a "...consequence that follows from a hypothesis plus auxiliary hypothesis" (47) to be made subject of a testable prediction. Why? Because *that is not how knowledge is produced in her domain* and such a procedure would add no value to her conclusion which concerned not facts about the natural world but Scriabin's thought processes and aesthetic intentions.

Again it seems that either Mizrahi must concede this point OR adopt the strong scientist position that Kristin only *seems* to know something about Scriabin while actually there is *nothing* to be known about Scriabin outside the experimental sciences. So, to make his case he must *still* explain why science can produce better results in music theory, which IS an academic subject, than explanatory procedures currently used in that domain. Otherwise the superiority of science is only contextual which is a trivial thesis denied by no one.

Thus, Mizrahi is still bedeviled by the same problem. How is science supposed to show its superiority in domains where its explanatory procedures are simply not necessary and would add no value to existing explanations? I do not think Mizrahi has established the point that: "...if distinct fields of study have the same aim (i.e., to explain), then their products (i.e., explanations) can be evaluated with respect to similar criteria, such as unification, coherence, simplicity, and testability (Mizrahi 2017a, 360-362; Mizrahi 2017b, 19-20; Mizrahi 2018a, 17). Mizrahi says 'similar' but his argument actually depends on these criteria being 'identical' such that we can judge all explanations by one pre-set standard: in this case hypothetico-deductive method.

But this is nonsense. All disciplines use abduction, true, but they do not all arrive at the 'best explanation' by the same procedures. Their procedures are analogical not univocal. Failure to see this distinction seems to be at the root of Mizrahi's errors. Differing explanatory processes can be compared but not identified as can be seen if we imagine a classicist taking his copy of the *Iliad* down to the chemistry lab to be analyzed for its meaning. The Chemistry lab here is the classicist's brain! To use a less flippant example though there are

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sciences such as paleontology that make liberal use of narrative reconstruction (i.e. how those hominid bones got in that tiny cave) which is a form of abduction that does *not* correspond simply to the standard H/D model. Still, the story the paleontologist reconstructs, if it is a good one, has unity, simplicity and coherence *regardless* of the fact that it has not achieved this by a robotic application of H/D but rather by another, less formalized, form of inference.

Thus, I think Mizrahi's reforming zeal (48) has got the better of him. He does not help his case by issuing the Borg-like boast that 'resistance is futile'. If I recall my *Trek* lore correctly, the boast that 'resistance is futile' ended in ignominious defeat. One final point. One should never proofread one's own papers, I did indeed misspell Mizrahi for which I heartily apologize.

Contact details: bwills@grenfell.mun.ca

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