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Weak Scientism: The Prosecution Rests

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On a lazy afternoon there is nothing like another defense of Weak Scientism to get the juices flowing. This one “Why Scientific Knowledge is Still the Best” is quite the specimen. It includes, among other delights, an attempt to humble my perceived pride based on a comparison between myself and my wonderful colleague Dr. Svetlana Barkanova. (Mizrahi, 2018c, 20)

Here I must concede defeat. I don’t hold a candle to the esteemed Dr. Barkanova and would never claim to be her equal. Plus, I need no metrics to convince me of this. I am well aware of her overall excellence as she is an acquaintance of mine. However, this petty display overshoots its mark. All I said was that journals have, in fact, published things (by me) Mizrahi explicitly claimed no journal would publish (2018b, 46) and, frankly, I think I have established that point with any objective reader. I am certainly not bragging or claiming I have some rock star status as a scholar. Let’s proceed then to address the specific arguments he offers in his essay.

Material Causes Behind Intellectual Appearances

I will begin with quantity. This is a point he claims I overemphasize though *at the same time* he claims it is a crucial component of his own argument. (2018c,19) At any rate, he goes on yet another tangent about the superior quantity and impact of scientific research. To this I respond again, so what? It is no doubt true that more research and more ‘impactful’ research is produced in the sciences but why is this so?

To quote Bill Clinton, “It’s the economy stupid”. Science serves the interests of corporations and the military in ways that the humanities do not and so more money gets directed to the sciences. Since this is the case more scientific research is produced overall.

Now one could make an argument that this speaks to an overall greater utility for the sciences as opposed to other domains, but this is not the argument Mizrahi makes. Rather he asserts raw quantity itself as a feature that makes for the superiority of science. In both my replies I explained the problem with this and in neither of his replies has Mizrahi rebutted my points.

I pointed out a. that commercials are not superior to great artworks even though their number and impact is greater and b. Shakespeare scholarship would not be superior to physics if it simply happened that there were more of it. Mizrahi’s response to this is to complain about the word ‘odd’ (Mizrahi, 19) as if I intended it as a gratuitous personal insult. Actually though, I intended only to imply that his *position* seemed odd. It still seems odd to me to claim that if Shakespeare scholars suddenly put out a tremendous burst of articles (and pulled into the lead in the great race to produce more and more research) then that would somehow throw particle physics in the shade.

But, if Mizrahi wants to accept that conclusion then he is certainly welcome to it. If he wants to say that weak scientism is only contingently true and that it is only contingently the case

that the sciences *happen currently* to produce more impactful research (for whatever reason), then he has done only what he all too often does; won a debating point by reducing his own thesis to a truism, here, that more =more. (Mizrahi, 19) At any rate, the frustrating thing here is that while Mizrahi asserts again and again the quantitative superiority of science he never condescends to explain why quantity is a valid metric in the first place, he asserts the fact without explaining why I or anyone else should regard that fact as significant.¹

An Unanswered Question: Recursivity and Science

And, since Mizrahi is obviously sensitive on the point, let me say that calling an argument a sophism is merely an objective description not a personal insult as Mizrahi seems to think. (Mizrahi, 21) Mizrahi still does not recognize the fallacy, perhaps a kinder, better word than sophism (*mea culpa*), he committed in his reply to my point concerning recursive knowledge. Let me try again. My point was simple. Any argument founded on the claimed quantitative superiority of science founders on the fact that recursive processes, any recursive processes, can produce an infinity of true propositions.

In response to this Mizrahi said that this is not a problem for scientism for we can reflect recursively on scientific propositions in the same manner. To this I responded by saying that this was true but irrelevant as this had nothing whatsoever to do with whether a proposition was scientific or not. Nor does his account of scientific explanation include reflexivity as a source of knowledge. *Reflecting recursively on a scientific proposition is not the same as thinking scientifically.* His response is fallacious because it conflates *two distinct processes*.

This is why it does not matter in the least whether two people, a scientist or non-scientist, can produce an equal amount of knowledge by performing recursive acts in parallel. *Neither are doing science.* This perfectly obvious point is something Mizrahi claims he addresses in his replies to Brown (Mizrahi, 21) yet my examination of the passages he cites leaves me baffled for nothing in them touches remotely on the question of recursivity or explains how reflecting recursively on a scientific proposition is equivalent to uttering a scientific proposition *as* a scientist.

Since Mizrahi does not intend to reply any further I suppose I will just have to scratch my head on this one and bewail my own lack of native wit. Plus, as Mizrahi seems to set great store by citations and references even in informal spaces like a review and reply collective it is a little jarring to see HIS not quite panning out (more on this below however).²

¹ Mizrahi is not going to like this but some have questioned whether impact ratings and other quantitative metrics have the significance sometimes claimed for them. See [Callaway](#), as well as [Van Wesel, Wyatt, ten Haaff](#), and [Bohanon](#). Indeed, Mizrahi seems to have internalized the standards of the university's corporate masters (with their spurious emphasis on external metrics) to an uncritical and disturbing degree.

² Is Mizrahi claiming in these passages that 'scientific knowledge' is any knowledge that happens to be produced by a scientist as 'practitioner' in a field (Mizrahi 21) whether accidental to her practice or not? If so, he has yet again defended his thesis at the cost of making it trivial.

Systems and Ideologies

Why does Dr. Mizrahi still think I am calling him a racist when I intended to speak only in terms of systemic and not personal racism (Mizrahi, 21-22)? In a systemic and so intersectional context, non-white identity does not mean one cannot occupy a place of privilege. He still does not see the difference between an *ad hominem* attack and an ideological critique of scientism. (Mizrahi, 23) Lorraine Code and Helen Longino, among others, have explained how standard accounts of scientific method have (WITTINGLY OR NOT!!) excluded women as knowers and Mizrahi can consult their works if he is interested.³ He may also consult Edward Said on how pretensions to scientific ‘objectivity’ underwrite colonialism.

I, however, will use a different example, one closer to my own interests and experience. In the institution in which I teach a significant portion of the students are of indigenous Miq'maw heritage. They are, by and large, NOT interested in hearing that their elders convey a secondary and qualitatively inferior kind of knowledge when compared to western scientists. Now, you could say that this is simple perversity on their part; they should ‘man up’ and accept the gospel of weak scientism! Things are not however so simple.

It is idle to claim that the experience of colonial oppression is irrelevant because science is universal, objective and politically neutral. It is idle to claim that the elevation of scientific procedures to qualitative superiority has no social and political ramifications for those whose knowledge forms are thereby granted second class status. This is because the question of scientism is bound up with the question of authority.

The fact that Indigenous knowledge traditions are grounded in local knowledge, in traditional lore and in story means that on questions of importance to them indigenous peoples cannot speak. It means they have to listen to others who ‘know better’ because the propositions they utter have the form of science.⁴

Thus, whether *intended or not*, the elevation of scientific knowledge to superior status over indigenous knowledge elevates white settlers to authority over indigenous people and justifies the theft of their land and even of their children. Worse, indigenous people can see for themselves (because they are not blind) that this privileging of settler knowledge over their own is *not* benign. It is viciously exploitative and intended to keep indigenous peoples

³ He may begin with the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) if he likes.

⁴ See D. Simmonds on this point (addressing an anti-indigenous activist notorious in Canada): “My particular interest here is the way in which science has been reified by Widdowson and Howard and used to legitimate state decision-making on behalf of oppressed peoples. Science is counterposed to indigenous traditional knowledge, which by way of a children’s parable (The Emperor’s New Clothes) is denounced as mere superstition in the service of a corrupt “aboriginal industry.” The state is called upon to harness scientific rationalism in the old colonial interest of “civilizing the savages.” In the words of [Widdowson and Howard](#), “It is not clear how the remnants of Neolithic culture that are inhibiting this development can be addressed without intensive government planning and intervention” (252).

in a place of dependence and inferiority. Thus, Mizrahi's facile assumption that scientism is ideologically innocent will not stand even cursory examination.

Partiality of Knowledge and the Limits of Learning

When I say that Mizrahi's position is self-interested I am again simply pointing out a fact. If I were to write a paper arguing that the humanities are qualitatively superior to the sciences, deserved more funding than the sciences and that the hermeneutical practices of the humanities should be adopted by the sciences would Mizrahi not wonder if I was, in fact, being a little bit partial? Of course he would.

I, though, am not making that kind of argument, he is. I am not suggesting anyone is inferior to anyone; he is and as such I think it is perfectly legitimate to ask whether his position is tainted with bias. This is so especially as he has no much to say about the lack of 'good faith' in others.

On now to our unexpectedly long-lived example of Joyce scholars. Here I must thank Mizrahi for proving my point for me. Unaware that he is shooting his own argument in the foot he takes great pains to distinguish simplicity in scientific explanation from simplicity as an aesthetic quality.⁵ He also distinguishes 'accommodation' (which the Joyce scholar seeks) from 'novel prediction' (which the scientist seeks). (Mizrahi, 25) It is indeed the case, as I myself asserted, that explanation in the humanities and in the sciences are related analogically not univocally. Terms from one domain do not immediately transfer directly to the other.

This is a perfect illustration of why scientific explanation is not the same as literary explanation. Simplicity is a desideratum for both forms of explanation but there is no answer to the question of whether general relativity is simpler than reader response theory for the obvious reason that different disciplines will parse the notion of simplicity differently.

But if this is so I ask again what makes a scientific theory qualitatively better than a critical reading of Joyce when they do not employ commensurate standards and have such fundamentally different aims? I ask again, what could 'better' possibly mean in this context? In what sense is a scientific theory simpler than a Joyce commentary if on Mizrahi's *own admission* we are not dealing with univocal standards or senses of simplicity? In what sense is a scientific theory more coherent if we are not using 'coherence' in the same way in both domains?

Further I asked and ask again why the Joyce scholar even needs to make a novel prediction? Why is it a problem for his discipline if he does not use things he does not need? Further,

⁵ Simplicity as I use it here does not refer to 'simple language' but to the economy of a work's design. I admit though that I should have distinguished between two kinds of simplicity here. The simplicity of the work itself and the simplicity of the critic's exposition of the work which of course formally differ. It is the latter case that more closely resembles the simplicity of a scientific theory though if Mizrahi wants to deny they are identical that is entirely to my own purpose for I deny this as well.

Mizrahi resorts *yet again* to the canard that I am accusing him of saying the Joyce scholar does not produce knowledge as if this was even an answer to my question. (Mizrahi, 26)

Next, Scriabin. I think the best description of what my daughter did with the Prometheus chord is that she *reverse engineered* it. She worked *backward* from it to tell a story about how it came to be. Obviously this did not require any novel prediction about future Prometheus chords by future Scriabins. There is one Prometheus chord and it already exists. Further, the process by which it was created occurred once in the past.

Thus we are constructing an explanatory story about the past concerning a singular object not formulating a general law or making a testable prediction. This kind of story is used in all kinds of contexts. It is used here in music theory. It is used in those sciences concerned with past events. It is used by law enforcement to reconstruct a crime. Now, even if by some feat of prestidigitation one could contort such explanatory stories into the form of testable predictions this would be an after the fact rationalization not description of how actual people reason.

A World of Citations

Thus, let me emphasize *once again* that testability does not make science superior to non-science for the simple reason that non-science does not typically *need* tests such as Mizrahi describes. Or, to put it another way testing is not employed in the same way in science and non-science so that if one says that, in some sense, the Joyce scholar ‘tests’ his ideas against the text one is speaking *analogically* not *univocally* as I attempted to point out in my previous reply. (Wills, 2018b, 38) Thus, Mizrahi’s claim about testability (Mizrahi, 28) is, yet again, beside the point.⁶

Now I turn to the minor objections. Dr. Mizrahi is upset that I have not cited the extensive literature on scientism. (Mizrahi, 18) Well Mizrahi has professed to show that science is superior to things like historiography and literary criticism even though he himself does not cite *anything* from those fields and shows no familiarity with what goes on in them.

Two can play at the rhetoric of citation and it is Mizrahi who claims that scientific procedures are better than non-scientific ones without making any direct comparison with

⁶ This speaks to the overall banality of Mizrahi’s thesis. He tells us that the best explanation is one “explains the most, leaves out the least, is consistent with background knowledge, is the least complicated, and yields independently testable predictions.” (Mizrahi, 28) He then adds “Wills seems to grant that “unity, simplicity and coherence are good making properties of explanations, but not testability. But why not testability?” (Mizrahi, 28) Well I have said *many* times why not. Testability as Mizrahi defines it is not relevant to all inquiries. It is not even relevant to all scientific inquiries. ‘Testing’ can take different forms that resemble each other analogically not univocally. I don’t know how many different ways I can say this: the test of a thesis on metaphysics is *elenchic*. The test of a thesis about Joyce is a close examination of his texts. The test of an archeological claim is the examination of artefacts. Mizrahi’s entire argument boils down to the claim that science beats non-science 4 to 3! Yet clearly Mizrahi has tilted the field by asking non-science to conform to a standard external to it and applied arbitrarily. Unity, coherence, testability and so on are *resemblance terms* that cash out differently in different inquiries.

the latter except for his cherished bugbear 'armchair philosophy'. To return to the question of privilege, Mizrahi seems to assume that he is owed a deference he does not need to grant to others. As Latour says, citation is not accidental but essential to the rhetoric of an academic paper. (Latour; 1987, 30-62) Mizrahi's use of the rhetoric of citation conveys the message that that his side has an epistemic privilege the other side does not: they are obliged to engage his literature but he is not obliged to engage theirs.

Again, Mizrahi accuses me of Eurocentric bias in citing Augustine and Aristotle (Mizrahi, 23) yet a glance at his own references does not reveal ANY citations from Shankara, Ashvaghosa, al Ghazzali, al Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Lao Tzu, Kung Fu Tzu, or any other thinker outside the western tradition. Mizrahi's own citation list betrays the very story he is trying to tell about mine! Finally, in a somewhat involved passage he responds to the charge that he vacillates between Weak and Strong Scientism by citing the full text of a passage from one of his replies to Brown. (Mizrahi, 24) I don't why he does this because his words say the exact same thing even when put in this larger context.

He reports that certain philosophers and scientists think of knowledge as "the scholarly work or research produced in scientific fields of study studies, as opposed to non-scientific study." He then states, *directly*, that he follows this view. (Mizrahi, 24) This does indeed look like vacillation between weak and strong scientism.

However, I will not hammer him on one passage for what might, after all, be an unintentional slip or loose phrasing. If he says his position is weak scientism and weak scientism only then I take him at his word.

Conclusion

I will reiterate again the one basic reason why I think weak scientism is unconvincing and that is that it seems to be an exercise in bare arithmetic. Is there more scientific research than non-scientific? Well, more is better! Does science have 4 of the features of good explanation and history only 3? Science wins! This purely arithmetic procedure completely ignores the contexts in which different scholars work and how they reach their conclusions. I conclude by saying what I said in my first reply: that Mizrahi's Weak Scientism is the mountain that gave birth to the proverbial mouse.

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