

Being scientific about our selves

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'Science', Old and New

Philosophers are well known to like talking about ambiguous words. But I shall not apologise for drawing attention here to two words, two ideas which are causing so much trouble at present that they are surely worrying most of us already. The first one is scientific, the second is self-knowledge.

To start with scientific - This word now has two distinct meanings contrasting it with two distinct sets of opposites. On the one hand it can be a quite general word of praise, meaning simply thorough and methodical as opposed to casual, vague or amateurish. In that sense historians or linguists or logicians can be called scientific - or unscientific - just as properly as astronomers. On the other hand, the word can also be a strictly factual one meaning concerned with the natural sciences' as opposed to other studies. In this sense (but not in the other) we can talk about bad science. In this sense, even a bad and casual book about astronomy counts as a scientific book, but a good and thorough book about history is not scientific. This, of course, is the familiar principle on which bookshops and libraries organise their shelving.

This is not a trivial ambiguity. It is part of a general confusion about the kind of praise that is conveyed by the notion of science. When the two meanings get mixed, it can seem that the methods of the natural sciences are not just the best methods but the only respectable ones, and can therefore rightly be described as omniscient. Thus Peter Atkins;

Although poets may aspire to understanding, their talents are more akin to entertaining self-deception. They may be able to emphasise delights in the world, but they are deluded if they and their admirers believe that their identification of the delights and their use of poignant language are enough for comprehension. Philosophers too, I am afraid, have contributed to the understanding of the universe little more than poets.... They have not contributed much that is novel until after novelty has been discovered by scientists.... While poetry titillates and theology obfuscates, science liberates.[1]

This idea that the methods of physical science are quite simply the only good methods and should therefore be extended to cover every subject-matter, including our understanding of ourselves, was put forward early in the nineteenth century by Auguste Comte and others. It is still a faith preached by many people today. So far as it is true at all, it depends entirely on what you mean by scientific'. Before considering this, however, I want to say a word first about the target area, the site to which it is now proposed to extend this empire - about my other troublesome concept, self-knowledge.

Knowing Ourselves

Self-knowledge is a notion that is not always fully examined when academics talk about 'the self' because that academic self is often taken to be pretty abstract, and so far as it is specified the discussion can often be treated as being about other people's selves rather than one's own. But in everyday life self knowledge is rather an important topic, one that crops up often in our personal affairs and has a strong moral bearing. Like other reflexive words such as self-deception and self-control, self-knowledge raises puzzles (which do interest academics) about how subjects can somehow become their own objects - who is

doing the knowing or controlling and who is being known or controlled? Such words make it clear how terribly complex the human subject is, how many questions are involved in trying to understand it.

This complexity is something that we all know by hard experience because we often find it very hard to understand both other people's behaviour and our own. But in everyday life we usually accept that we still have to attempt this difficult kind of understanding. Self-knowledge isn't an optional subject like Russian or trigonometry which we can drop if we find it hard. Failure to know ourselves can be a serious moral fault. It blocks our understanding of other people. The sort of basic sympathy and empathy that we need in order to understand others does not work unless we attend to our own motives and reactions too. Unless we understand how we are behaving to them, we can't hope to understand how they are behaving to us. So, surprisingly enough, in the enterprise of understanding other people, cognitive success depends on moral attitude. To get far in this study, you need fairness, honesty, maturity and indeed generosity. There are (therefore) facts which we cannot reach unless we first get the values right. From the view of facts and values that has been widely accepted for much of this century, that is rather surprising.

This surprising fact also applies, however, to more general views about ourselves, views about the kind of entity that we and all other human beings are. What methods do we need for this study? I'd like to quote here a poem by the seventeenth-century poet Sir John Davies because I find the way he uses the word 'know' in it particularly interesting;

*I know my soul hath power to know all things,
Yet she is blind and ignorant in all.
I know I'm one of nature's little kings
Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall
I know my life's a pain and but a span,
I know my sense is mocked in everything,
And, to conclude, I know myself a man
Which is proud and yet a wretched thing.*

The Importance of Importance

Should we be get sceptical about Davies's claim to knowledge and ask for further research? Ought we to say but this is only folk-psychology; more work has to be done about the cell-biology and the neurones?' This would surely not be very sensible. The facts that Davies mentions are tacit knowledge. The issue he raises does not concern the details of the facts but how we should respond to them. He asks how we should respond to this curious self,. He points out that there is good ground, not just for believing that human life is mixed and confusing in this way, but for taking a realistic, non-evasive attitude to its mixedness as a step to dealing with it better.

This involves a moral judgement about how to proceed, a judgement about what is important, what we should attend to. Such judgements are always to be found at the root of metaphysics, including the apparently sceptical kinds of metaphysics (like materialism and determinism) which are sometimes inclined to deny that they are metaphysical at all. Value-judgements about what matters and what does not are not needed for selection. Without them, we could not decide which of a thousand patterns to pick out and study from the welter of experience..

These judgements determine, among other things, what limits we set to the self itself, how far we think it extends and how sharply we separate it from what is around it. A self is not a given distinct object like an egg. For instance, the extreme individualistic model of selfhood - the social atomism which underlies Social Contract thinking - treats each self as independent, radically split off from its fellows. But it does not do this on factual grounds. It is not a scientific discovery that selves are in fact separate and egg-shaped. It arises chiefly out of moral indignation at the oppression which has often resulted from a more organic, hierarchical view of people's relations. Social atomism flows from deciding that the bad consequences of hierarchical systems are so important that the conceptual scheme underlying them must be ditched and replaced by a more separatist one.

At the other extreme, the Buddhist view that all separateness is an illusion - that individual selves are more or less arbitrary divisions across the continuum of life - also arises, not out of factual observation, but out of a sense of the harm we do by our tendency to split ourselves off from one another. The different value-judgements that underlie these metaphysical systems are essential to each of them, and besides deciding what counts as part of ourselves, these judgements also decide how we conceive the rest of the surrounding world. The independent self of the social contract lives in a world modelled on that of seventeenth-century cosmology. It is a solitary atom gyrating in a social void, a rational entity moving among a crowd of others with whom it has no real connection. This world does not easily find room for non-rational humans such as babies and can scarcely accommodate non-human nature at all. The Buddhist self, by contrast, lives in a world without frontiers and must recognise a great range of others, human and otherwise, as literally continuous with itself.

These general ways of conceiving the world obviously make an enormous difference both to our notions about how we ought to act and to our views about which facts we ought to attend to. They alter our factual view of the world as well as our moral view about how we must deal with it. But neither of them is more scientific than the other, in the sense in which scientific is a term of praise. We cannot use the idea of science as a criterion for judging between them.

What Kind of Objectivity?

That is why it is not possible to apply to these topics the kind of objectivity which we associate with physical science. That objectivity requires that all observers should abstract from their individual differences. But this kind of abstraction simply cannot be used when we are talking about human affairs. There is no way in which we can collect facts about any significant aspect of human life without looking at them from some particular angle. We have to guide our selection by means of judgements about what matters in it and what does not. When these judgements raise difficulties, they need to be justified by explaining our position, not by ignoring it.

Social and psychological theorists who claim to be operating in a value-free vacuum outside morality are notoriously deceiving themselves, not noticing their own biases. This was surely the situation of the behaviourist psychologists who were so influential during much of the last century. Watson and Skinner claimed that, in order to be scientific, psychologists should study people objectively in the sense of viewing them solely as physical objects, that is, by flatly ignoring their subjective point of view.

This was not just a proposal for a new scientific method but a demand for a new and very peculiar moral attitude to human life. In his last book *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, B. F. Skinner eventually made that moral attitude explicit, disclaiming all esteem for the active, creative aspect of human nature and openly asserting the right of psychological experts to engineer it as they thought best. The exposure of these views probably played a large part in the discrediting of his methods. Until then, however, the idea that a 'scientific' approach demanded this quite impossible abstraction from all views on what mattered in human life was widely accepted. Besides allowing psychologists to consider themselves scientists, it exempted them, as professionals, from the painful efforts at sympathy and self-knowledge which - as I'm suggesting - normally form a crucial part of our attempts to understand other people. It allowed them to make a positive merit of not knowing how the people whom they studied felt.

This strange affectation of detachment and ignorance about human experience went far beyond what Comte and other nineteenth-century pioneers intended when they founded the 'social sciences'. They assumed that experimental and statistical methods drawn from physical science could be added to existing useful ways of thought. The term scientific meant for them (as for all the early enlightenment thinkers) 'thinking out problems afresh for oneself rather than relying on authority or tradition'. They never envisaged throwing out all existing historical and philosophical methods and replacing them by ones drawn from physical science. Thus the new social sciences started life as sciences in that old general sense - methodical forms of thought, parallel to history or logic, which would use whatever kinds of reasoning seemed helpful in handling their subject-matter. Comte himself was not (in the modern sense) a scientist but a philosopher, though not a very good one. Similarly, people today who still echo Comte's philosophical manifestos, as Peter Atkins does, are not doing physical science but are themselves philosophising, even if not very well.

Popper's Guillotine and the Destiny of Ideologies

This hospitable, inclusive idea of 'science' seems, in the end, to have been broken up by the growing prestige of the physical sciences themselves. Ideologists jumped on the bandwagon, claiming that their world-views were scientific - not just in the old sense of being methodical but in the new one of being founded in some way on physical science itself. Herbert Spencer claimed scientific backing for Social Darwinism. Marx, and still more Engels, thought of Marxism as science-based. Ideological psychologists, including both Freud and Skinner, relied heavily on claiming scientific status. This proliferation of rival 'scientific' world-views was bound to bring its nemesis and eventually the guillotine came down. Karl Popper pointed out that Marxist and Freudian ideologies were not actually constructed by the methods of the physical sciences and could not therefore be described in modern terms as scientific.

What is unlucky is that, at this point, there did not follow any proper investigation of what world-views like this were if they were not branches of science and what other standards they ought to be judged by. Marxism and Freudianism were clearly not primarily scientific theories. They were comprehensive attitudes to life with a strong moral component. It should have been clear that discussion of such rival attitudes to life is not a vice nor a waste of time but an intellectual necessity, particularly in times of violent change. Popper's work, however, seemed to outlaw all such argument from the province of thought, ruling that, since it was not science, it was metaphysics - a word which he used vaguely and which many of his audience took to mean simply nonsense.

There followed a wave of fairly mindless scientism, of which Atkins's remarks, quoted above, are an example. This crude view is not, of course, often defended explicitly today. Many scientists hate it. Yet as a myth, an imaginative pattern underlying more moderate thought, it still haunts us. Irrelevant notions about how to make thought 'hard' and scientific by imitating physical science still continue to distort medicine and the social sciences. It is time that these ghosts were laid.

1. 'The Limitless Power of Science' in *Nature's Imagination*, ed. John Cornwell, Oxford University Press 1995, pp 123-4 and 129.

(A longer version of this article appeared in the [Journal of Consciousness Studies](#) (Vol.6) for April 1999).ey is a former senior lecturer in philosophy in the University of Newcastle.