

Critical Point Philosophy rules

You might not understand what philosophers do for a living, but that does not mean their work is meaningless. **Robert P Crease** tires of hearing physicists trying to kill his profession

“Philosophy is dead.” So say the venerable physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow on the first page of their recent bestselling book, *The Grand Design*.

Physicists declaring philosophy to be lifeless is nothing new. In his 2010 book *In Praise of Science: Curiosity, Understanding, and Progress*, Sander Bias likened philosophers’ discussions of science to doctors who diagnose patients before considering symptoms. In a 2004 *New Scientist* article, Simon Singh said that scientists do not need philosophers any more than birds need ornithologists. Steven Weinberg’s chapter “Against philosophy”, in his classic 1992 book *Dreams of a Final Theory*, needs no explanation.

Why do physicists so often, and confidently, condemn a field that is not their own? Where are their instincts to be inquisitive, resist overstepping what they know, withhold judgment until certain and accompany claims with error bars?

The evidence that Hawking (using his name as shorthand) cites is essentially the following. Questions such as, “How can we understand the world in which we find ourselves?” and “How does the universe behave?” are traditionally considered to be philosophical. But because philosophers have not kept up with scientists in their answers, therefore “Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.”

No. Philosophers (including myself) approach such questions *differently*.

What philosophy does

For philosophers, the world includes more than physical matter. As the Harvard University philosopher Steven Shapin writes in his book, *Never Pure*, “Plants photosynthesize, plant biochemists are experts in knowing how plants photosynthesize, [while] reflective and informed students of science are experts in knowing how plant biochemists know how plants photosynthesize.” In other words, the world studied by science researchers includes not just objects, but also connections between scientists and objects.

Human beings, after all, engage with the world in different ways. They seek wealth, fame, pleasure, companionship, happiness and other “good” things. They do this as chil-



Alive and kicking Philosophy has moved on and remained current since the time of Plato’s Academy in Athens, despite physicists’ assertions to the contrary.

dren, adolescents, parents, merchants, athletes, teachers and administrators. All these methods arise through modifications of a matrix of ways by which human beings practically connect to the world that precedes any cognitive understanding. The technical term philosophers use for this matrix is the “lifeworld”. But scientists are not like plants whose product is knowledge. Plants do not plan to follow laws of nature and do not interpret themselves. Human beings, however, do interpret both the world and themselves. The technical term philosophers use for human self-interpretation is “hermeneutics”.

Understanding photosynthesis, for instance, is only one – rare – way for human beings to interact with plants. Hawking’s theoretical stance as an observer of fundamental structures, too, is only one way for humans to engage with the world, and not the default setting either. Humans are not automatic information absorbers; they must be trained to approach the world as he does. They have to pay a special kind of attention, pursue a special kind of inquiry and find that inquiry valuable.

The lifeworld is the domain to which philosophers bring their torch of discovery. They study similarities and differences between various modes of being in the world – their group structures, if you will – and how each arises out of the lifeworld. To study this is not to undermine or critique these activities, but to understand and help cultivate them.

But the lifeworld – a kind of horizon structured by powerful metaphors, images and deeply embedded habits of thought – has its own character that changes over time. Philosophers – and here they differ from

other students of science – do not and cannot adopt a “view from nowhere”, in a phrase popularized by New York University philosopher Thomas Nagel, but seek to be reflective. When philosophers think about science, they struggle to be self-aware of that horizon and how it affects human self-interpretation. This is why the humanities matter, for they study and help reshape the lifeworld. Without ornithologists, wrote one astute respondent to Singh’s *New Scientist* article, many bird species, in these ecologically troubled times, are heading for extinction.

Why it’s misunderstood

It is easy to misunderstand what philosophy does, for several reasons.

First, like much of physics, philosophy often has a narrow focus and is concerned with special topics or technical issues, whose place in the big picture may not be easy for an outsider to see. Much philosophy of science is thin or even anorexic and does not flesh out all of the ways in which science is embodied in the world.

Second, the lifeworld – like any horizon – tends to drop out of view. It is overlooked in favour of the objects, plans and goals that appear in and thanks to that horizon. That is perfectly understandable; detecting the horizon and its impact on our lives is the philosopher’s special task.

Finally, the particular character of the modern world is that the very successes of science lead us to think that only the measurable is worthwhile. The messy, often inchoate lifeworld is bound to seem not only less distinct and valuable, but also less tangible and real, than the grandeur of the designs uncovered by Hawking and others.

The critical point

On the first page of his book *Subtle is the Lord...*, the physicist Abraham Pais reports a discussion with Einstein in which the latter asked Pais if he “really believed that the Moon exists only if I look at it”. One could hardly think of a deeper, more challenging question about the concept “to exist”. Yet Pais smoothly characterizes the conversation as “not particularly metaphysical”. Discussing the meaning of reality is okay, evidently, so long as it is done in an amateur way.

So is philosophy dead? No; it will live as long as science does. When will physicists stop misunderstanding it? Probably never. But those who are ignorant of philosophy are destined to commit a bad version of it.

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