On Anti-Metaphysical Empiricism

1. In 2018, Jordan B. Peterson (P) and Matt Dilahunty (D), both well-known internet personalities associated with the 'intellectual dark web', participated in a debate[1]. P, a Christian in action, "I act as if God exists", the metaphysical existence of God irrelevant. And D, the popular atheist, bluntness his virtue. As I am to indulge in analysis that touches broad, implicit, cultural senses, a popular conversation is a suitable beginning.

Titled as a debate on God, as mentioned P is unconcerned about the existence of a God, therefore attempts to show that in adhering to principles of western thought, one implicitly subscribes to certain metaphysical values that makes it possible. Following this categorical point, particular examples are explored, among them an exchange on the impossibility of God-less artists. However, what catched my attention was the given example of Morality.

Both P and D are moralists, albeit differently. The former has explicitly confessed to a christian moral sense, but the latter is to be elaborated. In the spirit of brevity, I will approach a pair of question-answers, using which the moral thought of D can be understood.

First, P asks for the basis of moral thought (of D). Response takes the form of a variant of selfish altruism. As a critique of this is another topic, I'll resort to a condensed note. Any variant of selfish altruism, even those "objectively" justified through game theory, fails when encountered with the asymmetric circumstances of social systems and agents. Thus, the optimal selfish strategy for agents is a spectrum of altruism, none to maximal. A rational strategy for a billionaire isn't maximal altruism, merely maintaining that image, exactly what happens in actuality.

Now, the second question - Why wouldn't D throw a person, take Sam Harris, off the stage? D answers in the same lineage of thought - altruistic egoism. For he himself wouldn't want to be thrown off the stage. Here, P follows up - Why is your life implicitly valuable? However, silly, opposing "common-sense", this

question might seem, I will give Peterson his flowers. This is a brilliant and necessary question.

Obviously, D is flabbergasted, along with the crowd. And the answer is given, the reasoning condensed as follows -

1. There are laws of nature, belonging to science, that determine the best action for us. (Implicit atmosphere of the answer)
2. In this case, those laws are of evolutionary psychology.
3. Therefore, as evolutionary psychology determines, we inherently value life, making it in our best interest to not get thrown off anything.

Unfortunately for D, P is correct. More accurately, both are wrong in the same sense - the former implicity, the latter explicitly. Once again brevity demands condensation, the surface problems of Dillahunty position given below -

1. 'Best' itself is a qualitative-prescriptive proposition, not a descriptive one. As science, by its structure, only deals with descriptive problems, this line of thought is incorrect. An overlooking of the is-ought problem.
2. Case of evolutionary psychology, that has been critiqued over and over again. That the exact 'unnatural' events that separate humans from animals, don't adhere to evolutionary psychology. These include - construction of dangerously large buildings, organized fighting events, rock climbing, self-destructive experiments done by the pioneers of science.

At times it is a curse, to be beyond, that numerous common claims have to be hopped across. For that one needs tall and loft legs. This essay will proceed to explore the thought of normative anti-metaphysical empiricism, and its larger claims, including universal propositions, 'laws' of science and so on.

2. Kuhn proves to be an extensive ground for the historical perspective. Take the aftermath of Descartes, as documented in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.*

> After about 1630, for example, and particularly after the appearance of Descartes's immensely influential scientific writings, most physical scientists assumed that the universe was composed of microscopic

> corpuscles and that all natural phenomena could be explained in terms of corpuscular shape, size, motion, and interaction
>
> As metaphysical, it told scientists what sorts of entities the universe did and did not contain: there was only shaped matter in motion. As methodological, it told them what ultimate laws and fundamental explanations must be like: laws must specify corpuscular motion and interaction, and explanation must reduce any given natural phenomenon to corpuscular action under these laws.[2]

Inevitably, the theory determined problems and the general direction of scientific research of that era. Historically, researchers have based their inquiries on non-scientific ideas, especially metaphysical ones. Not a comment on the rightness-naturalness of such an approach, rather an unveiling of historical reality. As to enable the conspicuously hidden to be visible, that which, at least in possibility, has contaminated our pursuit of knowledge.

To expound the thesis, the historically repetitive structure of normal and revolutionary paradigms can be recapped. Kuhn analyzes the narrative of science as follows:

$$\text{Pre-paradigm} \rightarrow \circlearrowright (\text{Normal Paradigm} \rightarrow \text{Revolutionary Paradigm})$$

Once a dominant, normatively accepted, scientific theory emerges, it is practiced until inception of a new, revolutionary one. It is accepted, on the count that anomalies, edge-cases, that the dominant theory can only explain ad-hoc is explained by the new one. And the fact that external circumstances cause the anomalies to be more important, relative to its past, creating an atmosphere of crisis in the field. Anywhere from political, cultural, the individual circumstances of the (revolutionary) paradigm creator, the causative culprits.

> Yet the case for cumulative development of science's problems and standards is even harder to make than the case for cumulation of theories. The attempt to explain gravity, though fruitfully abandoned by most eighteenth-century scientists, was not directed to an intrinsically illegitimate problem;
> [...]

> What occurred was neither a decline nor a raising of standards, but simply a change demanded by the adoption of a new paradigm
> [...]
> In the twentieth century Einstein succeeded in explaining gravitational attractions, and that explanation has returned science to a set of canons and problems that are, in this particular respect, more like those of Newton's predecessors than of his successors.[3]

It is impossible to ignore the hostile rejection of the scientific orthodoxy, composed of the normal scientists, of the new and radical. Competition between the theories are resolved, once again, by appeal to non-scientific bases, those belonging to the external circumstances. Thus, a universal progress becomes impossible to establish, precisely by nature of this incommensurable transition.

> What differentiated these various schools was not one or another failure of method— they were all "scientific"—but what we shall come to call their incommensurable ways of seeing the world and of practicing science in it.[4]

3. As the competent historical analysis has been borrowed, I will proceed at a structural argument, aiming at the dogma of science-as-cumulation, as advancement. A characterization of the change in scientific research as advancement requires a qualitative standard to measure this "improvement", i.e.

$$(\text{Current Paradigm}) > (\text{Previous Paradigm}),$$

where > refers to the standard of advancement that allows comparison.

As initially stated, the essay is targeted at the anti-metaphysical empiricists, which comprises respected scientists and science-popularizers. To look at a few "provocative" quotes -

> Philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics.
>
> - Stephen Hawking

> Philosophy of science is about as useful to scientists as ornithology is to birds
>
> - Richard Feynman

(What Mr.Feyman forgets is that birds are not so intelligent.)

Note that this is not a critique of metaphysicians, that is scientists who openly subscribe to metaphysics, for instance the religious ones. That would resort to a critique of metaphysics, already done, and a different subject. Returning to the position of the anti-metaphysical empiricist, the case of progression in science. The > operator is assumed for the progression to be implied. However, what is the > operator? Historically, as Kuhn demonstrates, a lack of evidence exists for a progression, thus the operator. Progression, as described in scientific and common consciousness, the history of which normal-science routinely rewrites, is founded in error, historico-contextual urgency and anomalous individual circumstances. Even the 'progressed' theory, as it is later crowned, was dismissed by normal science at its onset.

Structurally, science deals with the descriptive, not the prescriptive. Therefore, to assume a universal qualitative standard, a prescriptive, one must go outside of science, which is rejected by the dogmatists. At times, a mistaken answer to that standard is provided for in the 'objective' systems of logic, reason and mathematics. Logic-reason faces the same problem, much like science, that it offers no way of qualitative comparison. Given a qualitative comparison, the initial evaluative assumptions, it makes adherence to those valuation possible. That is assuming a simplistic idea of logic, however, the critique is enough here.

Thus, no grounds are left as proof for such a standard, the > operator.

However, the dogma of the > operator is a problem for a pursuit for knowledge. Scientific fields are in search for a universal ideal, as has been historically repeated, by resolving the anomalies of their current paradigms. In physics, it is the stagnant search for a unified field theory. Although there are no dominantly accepted standards for the social sciences, relative to the 'hard' sciences, concepts like human rights, democracy and others connected to them are analogues. As revealed in variants of the statements - Democracy is the best system we have now. Comparable to science, the standard of 'best' (until-now) is left unanalyzed, taken for granted.

Mathematics is an interesting case. Science-philosophy popularizers, applied scientists, religious apologists alike utilize a rhetoric of objectivity regarding mathematics. Statements, and variants, of the form - 2+2 = 4, holds true in any universe. But any individual, competent in the undergraduate curriculum of pure mathematics, discernes the sheer inaccuracy of the statement(s). 2+2 can be 1, if need be - as much is clear after a course of introductory group theory.

> Define a group $(G, +)$
> where $G = \{0, 1, 2\}$ and $+$ is addition modulo 3.
> In this group, $2 + 2 \equiv 1 \mod 3$.

Aha, the passionate cries will be raised, the supposed irrelevance of the above to the 'real' world. Take Ramanujan Summation, a technique to assign value to a divergent series. An popular, incomplete, account would be the internet videos that "Prove the sum of all natural numbers, $\sum n = -\frac{1}{12}$". Despite the "unnatural", "non-real", critiques that can be applied here, the technique is employed in applied physics - an example, the Casimir Effect.

Pure mathematicians, including religious ones, have an unexpected answer to the question: Why do you pursue math? Answers are located in the ballpark of intentions like - a pursuit of beauty, solving challenging puzzles and so on. As such pure mathematicians are honest about their motivations, and correct. Mathematics resembles prose art rather than the popular idea of a technician crunching numbers. Unlike the science researchers, dogmatically asserting their grasp of "Truth".

4. Those anti-metaphysical empiricists, vaunting in their non-religiosity, term them Categorical Theologians. Ghosts of theologians, hiding themselves from themselves, individual symptoms of the Shadows of God.

That following the implications of the implicit assumptions forming their positions, an abandonment of the anti-metaphysical attitude is necessary. In attempting a separation from the metaphysicians, their salvation requires a metaphysical project, a variant of the Heideggerian-Whiteheadian one. Not a reference to the particular technicalities of either, rather the motivations of the projects. A crucial factor behind the motivations in the reinterpretation of

metaphysics was an observation of incoherence, a ‘crack’ in the foundations of science.

> Mathematics, which is seemingly the most rigorous and most firmly constructed of the sciences, has reached a crisis in its 'foundations'.
> [...]
> The relativity theory of physics arises from the tendency to exhibit the interconnectedness of Nature as it is 'in itself'.
> [...]
> Basic concepts determine the way in which we get an understanding beforehand of the area of subject-matter underlying all the objects a science takes as its theme, and all positive investigation is guided by this understanding.
> [...]
> Such research must run ahead of the positive sciences, and it can.

- Being and Time, Martin Heidegger[5]

> For subsequent empiricists the pleasure of the dogma has overcome the metaphysical rule of evidence: that we must bow to those presumptions, which, in despite of criticism, we still employ for the regulation of our lives.
> [...]
> Rationalism is the search for the coherence of such presumptions.[6]
> [...]
> This demand for an intellectual justification of brute experience has also been the motive power in the advance of European science. In this sense scientific interest is only a variant form of religious interest. Any survey of the scientific devotion to 'truth,' as an ideal, will confirm this statement.[7]

- Process and Reality, Alfred Whitehead

While I share the sentiment, that the sciences themselves implicitly adhere to the metaphysical principles they reject - the conclusion, the implication of the event (the observation), diverge. Not the defence of presumptions, but a dangerous questioning - is a universalist science possible at all?

5. In *Difference and Repetition*, before the reinvention of the image of thought, Deleuze writes on the nature of generalities and repetition. Then, the ideas are examined in the particular spheres of practice, including science -

> For generality only represents and presupposes a hypothetical repetition: 'given the same circumstances, then .. .'. This formula says that in similar situations one will always be able to select and retain the same factors, which represent the being-equal of the phenomena.[8]

And the line of thought continues. However, this specific passage offers hints at the structure of scientific theories. Historically, theory has been a perspectival, constrained affair. Given the perspectival direction - what to examine - the assumptions, a model is theorized that offers conclusions. A pursuit of unified theories, as explicitly aimed by the contemporary scientific community, and implicitly agreed upon in the social sciences, even philosophical issues on morality, poses structural problems.

First, in using methods that are structurally perspectival, a self-defeating game is played. To invoke a phenomenological analogy, purely expositional, the structure of eyesight enables seeing one side of a sphere - an act of viewing from the totality of perspectives is impossible. Second, the question of the existence of universals. At the moment, that partially occupies my philosophical project, an approach from linguistic structure to the non-existence of universals.[9]

6. Now, I assert humility, that my project is unfinished, exploratory, no conclusive answers in sight. For instance, the comment on the structures of scientific theories call for investigation. It seems that a progression of essays themselves compose the work of knowledge. On the whole, I think the goal of this essay has succeeded, to constitute a break in the context.

It would almost appear that humanity was to move on the theoretical incompleteness of its prominent fields of study. To resolve contradictions, to take upon another Heideggerian-Whitheadian metaphysical project.

Alas, I was born.

Citations

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6. Whitehead. (1929). p. 151
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