

Title: Religion and Science: Why the Contradictions Have Not Materialized

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A key insight advanced by modern philosophy of science is that on a theoretical level we can hardly ever know that we have approached truth. In order to test theories, we would need to have access to empirically raw, theoretically unencumbered facts and to confront them with theoretically diverse or contradictory accounts of how to make sense of them. In the nature of the case, we are not able to penetrate to such a pure point of origin for things. The words that we use to describe them are already suffused with biases and distortions that limit what we can say about them. Our relationship to phenomena inside us and to things outside us always subsists in a symbolically mediated, indirect medium. Our efforts to be either before or after this state of symbolic mediation generally land us in a state of deepened awareness of the extent of the prolongation of the middle. The conceptualized entity is for all intents and purposes the entity we relate to in all areas of scientific investigation. A conceptualized entity is all we ever relate to in our scientific work. There is no such thing as a “de-conceptualized entity.”

Thomas Kuhn had argued that theories are under-determined by facts and words by things -- that Einstein and Newton, for example, make sense of what on one level appear to be the same sets of facts in very divergent ways – and we can always sustain whatever approach we take as long as we make corresponding adjustments in the whole field of statements that we take to be true. The extent and depth of ignorance in the sciences is also attested by the fact that as we shift, expand, and re-draw scientific categories and modes of conceptualization – as we re-imagine the nature of specific scientific data – new problem areas open before us that are occasioned by the new vocabularies and the priorities that they encapsulate. In science, it is most often the case of exchanging one set of puzzles and perplexities for another – and not of moving to a stage where everything adds up. Contemporary philosophers of science would also emphasize that facts themselves are so heavily theoretically freighted as to call into question the application of the epithet “science” to an enterprise that seems so markedly circular in character.

Our conceptual interventions are a key factor creating the reality that we then study. Nominalism persistently thwarts our empiricist aspirations and pretensions. What we take to be incontrovertibly in the world has this status only through previous (and sometimes long forgotten) conceptual demarcations and delimitations. What an empiricist program of knowledge is able to corroborate by simply taking them for granted includes these layers of previous nominalistic acts of naming, which is to say that empiricism also works only within an ambit of circularity. Only after objects have

been conceptually rigged in certain ways can we prove their existence. Kuhn highlights the circularity present in theoretical science – and Popper highlights the circularity present in experimental science. He classifies a whole series of successful experimental confirmations of a theory as only conferring the status of “conjecture” upon the theory because of the effects of Hume’s Riddle of Induction. It is neither logically required nor can it be considered empirically a foregone conclusion that the future will resemble the past. It is merely an assumption operative in the past that is projected unto the future. The whole role of experimentalism in the sciences is built upon this circular foundation.

Since we are never able to pierce through the circular character of knowledge, what we glean when we study science (either new theoretical formulations or new areas of ignorance which their vocabularies help to disclose) is always in the end conceptual knowledge – how human minds have reacted to what they seek to know more about and to more fully comprehend.

As Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin emphasize, understanding, in contrast to knowledge, is predicated upon the disenchantment of the prospect of exit. It is only in the thick of our not-knowing that we are able to conjure-up the unending flow of possibilities out of which we continually fashion and re-fashion self and world. Knowledge constitutes an illusory release from our ongoing project of self-and-world-making. This would be equally true of our knowledge of science and our comprehension of Judaism. “Wissenschaft” and “des Judentums” coexist on the same metaphysical track of continuing irresolvability.