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PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

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A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 1

What is science?

What is science? This question may seem easy to answer: everybody knows that subjects such as physics, chemistry, and biology constitute science, while subjects such as art, music, and theology do not. But when as philosophers we ask what science is, that is not the sort of answer we want. We are not asking for a mere list of the activities that are usually called 'science'. Rather, we are asking what common feature all the things on that list share, i.e. what it is that *makes* something a science. Understood this way, our question is not so trivial.

But you may still think the question is relatively straightforward. Surely science is just the attempt to understand, explain, and predict the world we live in? This is certainly a reasonable answer. But is it the whole story? After all, the various religions also attempt to understand and explain the world, but religion is not usually regarded as a branch of science. Similarly, astrology and fortune-telling are attempts to predict the future, but most people would not describe these activities as science. Or consider history. Historians try to understand and explain what happened in the past, but history is usually classified as an arts subject not a science subject. As with many philosophical questions, the question 'what is science?' turns out to be trickier than it looks at first sight.

Many people believe that the distinguishing features of science lie in

the particular methods scientists use to investigate the world. This suggestion is quite plausible. For many sciences do employ distinctive methods of enquiry that are not found in non-scientific disciplines. An obvious example is the use of experiments, which historically marks a turning-point in the development of modern science. Not all the sciences are experimental though – astronomers obviously cannot do experiments on the heavens, but have to content themselves with careful observation instead. The same is true of many social sciences. Another important feature of science is the construction of theories. Scientists do not simply record the results of experiment and observation in a log book – they usually want to explain those results in terms of a general theory. This is not always easy to do, but there have been some striking successes. One of the key problems in philosophy of science is to understand how techniques such as experimentation, observation, and theory-construction have enabled scientists to unravel so many of nature's secrets.

The origins of modern science

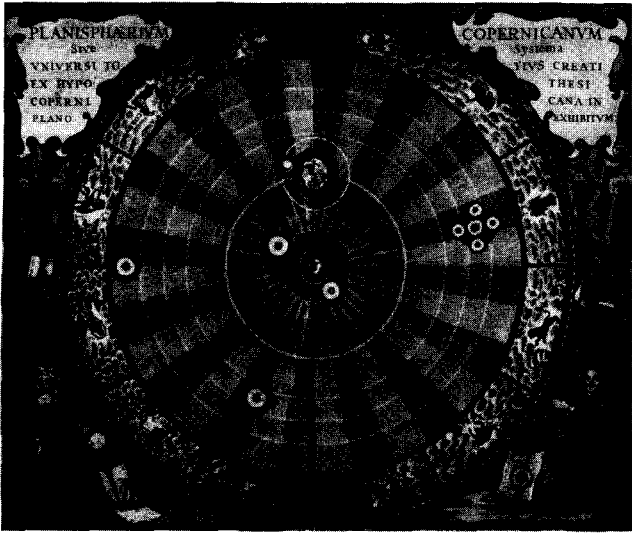
In today's schools and universities, science is taught in a largely ahistorical way. Textbooks present the key ideas of a scientific discipline in as convenient a form as possible, with little mention of the lengthy and often tortuous historical process that led to their discovery. As a pedagogical strategy, this makes good sense. But some appreciation of the history of scientific ideas is helpful for understanding the issues that interest philosophers of science. Indeed as we shall see in Chapter 5, it has been argued that close attention to the history of science is indispensable for doing good philosophy of science.

The origins of modern science lie in a period of rapid scientific development that occurred in Europe between the years 1500 and 1750, which we now refer to as the scientific revolution. Of course scientific investigations were pursued in ancient and medieval

times too – the scientific revolution did not come from nowhere. In these earlier periods the dominant world-view was Aristotelianism, named after the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who put forward detailed theories in physics, biology, astronomy, and cosmology. But Aristotle's ideas would seem very strange to a modern scientist, as would his methods of enquiry. To pick just one example, he believed that all earthly bodies are composed of just four elements: earth, fire, air, and water. This view is obviously at odds with what modern chemistry tells us.

The first crucial step in the development of the modern scientific world-view was the Copernican revolution. In 1542 the Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus (1473–1543) published a book attacking the geocentric model of the universe, which placed the stationary earth at the centre of the universe with the planets and the sun in orbit around it. Geocentric astronomy, also known as Ptolemaic astronomy after the ancient Greek astronomer Ptolemy, lay at the heart of the Aristotelian world-view, and had gone largely unchallenged for 1,800 years. But Copernicus suggested an alternative: the *sun* was the fixed centre of the universe, and the planets, including the earth, were in orbit around the sun (Figure 1). On this heliocentric model the earth is regarded as just another planet, and so loses the unique status that tradition had accorded it. Copernicus' theory initially met with much resistance, not least from the Catholic Church who regarded it as contravening the Scriptures and in 1616 banned books advocating the earth's motion. But within 100 years Copernicanism had become established scientific orthodoxy.

Copernicus' innovation did not merely lead to a better astronomy. Indirectly, it led to the development of modern physics, through the work of Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Kepler discovered that the planets do not move in circular orbits around the sun, as Copernicus thought, but rather in ellipses. This was his crucial 'first law' of planetary motion; his second and third laws specify the speeds at which the planets orbit the sun.



1. Copernicus' heliocentric model of the universe, showing the planets, including the earth, orbiting the sun.

Taken together, Kepler's laws provided a far superior planetary theory than had ever been advanced before, solving problems that had confounded astronomers for centuries. Galileo was a life-long supporter of Copernicanism, and one of the early pioneers of the telescope. When he pointed his telescope at the heavens, he made a wealth of amazing discoveries, including mountains on the moon, a vast array of stars, sun-spots, and Jupiter's moons. All of these conflicted thoroughly with Aristotelian cosmology, and played a pivotal role in converting the scientific community to Copernicanism.

Galileo's most enduring contribution, however, lay not in astronomy but in mechanics, where he refuted the Aristotelian theory that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter ones. In place of this theory, Galileo made the counter-intuitive suggestion that all

freely falling bodies will fall towards the earth at the same rate, irrespective of their weight (Figure 2). (Of course in practice, if you drop a feather and a cannon-ball from the same height the cannon-ball will land first, but Galileo argued that this is simply due to air resistance – in a vacuum, they would land together.) Furthermore, he argued that freely falling bodies accelerate uniformly, i.e. gain equal increments of speed in equal times; this is known as Galileo's law of free-fall. Galileo provided persuasive though not totally conclusive evidence for this law, which formed the centrepiece of his theory of mechanics.

Galileo is generally regarded as the first truly modern physicist. He was the first to show that the language of mathematics could be used to describe the behaviour of actual objects in the material world, such as falling bodies, projectiles, etc. To us this seems obvious – today's scientific theories are routinely formulated in mathematical language, not only in the physical sciences but also in biology and economics. But in Galileo's day it was not obvious: mathematics was widely regarded as dealing with purely abstract entities, and hence inapplicable to physical reality. Another innovative aspect of Galileo's work was his emphasis on the importance of testing hypotheses experimentally. To the modern scientist, this may again seem obvious. But at the time that Galileo was working, experimentation was not generally regarded as a reliable means of gaining knowledge. Galileo's emphasis on experimental testing marks the beginning of an empirical approach to studying nature that continues to this day.

The period following Galileo's death saw the scientific revolution rapidly gain in momentum. The French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist René Descartes (1596–1650) developed a radical new 'mechanical philosophy', according to which the physical world consists simply of inert particles of matter interacting and colliding with one another. The laws governing the motion of these particles or 'corpuscles' held the key to understanding the structure of the Copernican universe, Descartes



2. Sketch of Galileo's mythical experiment on the velocity of objects dropped from the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

believed. The mechanical philosophy promised to explain all observable phenomena in terms of the motion of these inert, insensible corpuscles, and quickly became the dominant scientific vision of the second half of the 17th century; to some extent it is still with us today. Versions of the mechanical philosophy were espoused by figures such as Huygens, Gassendi, Hooke, Boyle, and others; its widespread acceptance marked the final downfall of the Aristotelian world-view.

The scientific revolution culminated in the work of Isaac Newton (1643–1727), whose achievements stand unparalleled in the history of science. Newton's masterpiece was his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, published in 1687. Newton agreed with the mechanical philosophers that the universe consists simply of particles in motion, but sought to improve on Descartes' laws of motion and rules of collision. The result was a dynamical and mechanical theory of great power, based around Newton's three laws of motion and his famous principle of universal gravitation. According to this principle, every body in the universe exerts a gravitational attraction on every other body; the strength of the attraction between two bodies depends on the product of their masses, and on the distance between them squared. The laws of motion then specify how this gravitational force affects the bodies' motions. Newton elaborated his theory with great mathematical precision and rigour, inventing the mathematical technique we now call 'calculus'. Strikingly, Newton was able to show that Kepler's laws of planetary motion and Galileo's law of free-fall (both with certain minor modifications) were logical consequences of his laws of motion and gravitation. In other words, the very same laws would explain the motions of bodies in both terrestrial and celestial domains, and were formulated by Newton in a precise quantitative form.

Newtonian physics provided the framework for science for the next 200 years or so, quickly replacing Cartesian physics. Scientific confidence grew rapidly in this period, due largely to the success of

Newton's theory, which was widely believed to have revealed the true workings of nature, and to be capable of explaining everything, in principle at least. Detailed attempts were made to extend the Newtonian mode of explanation to more and more phenomena. The 18th and 19th centuries both saw notable scientific advances, particularly in the study of chemistry, optics, energy, thermodynamics, and electromagnetism. But for the most part, these developments were regarded as falling within a broadly Newtonian conception of the universe. Scientists accepted Newton's conception as essentially correct; all that remained to be done was to fill in the details.

Confidence in the Newtonian picture was shattered in the early years of the 20th century, thanks to two revolutionary new developments in physics: relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Relativity theory, discovered by Einstein, showed that Newtonian mechanics does not give the right results when applied to very massive objects, or objects moving at very high velocities. Quantum mechanics, conversely, shows that the Newtonian theory does not work when applied on a very small scale, to subatomic particles. Both relativity theory and quantum mechanics, especially the latter, are very strange and radical theories, making claims about the nature of reality that many people find hard to accept or even understand. Their emergence caused considerable conceptual upheaval in physics, which continues to this day.

So far our brief account of the history of science has focused mainly on physics. This is no accident, as physics is both historically very important and in a sense the most fundamental of all scientific disciplines. For the objects that other sciences study are themselves made up of physical entities. Consider botany, for example. Botanists study plants, which are ultimately composed of molecules and atoms, which are physical particles. So botany is obviously less fundamental than physics – though that is not to say it is any less important. This is a point we shall return to in Chapter 3. But even

a brief description of modern science's origins would be incomplete if it omitted all mention of the non-physical sciences.

In biology, the event that stands out is Charles Darwin's discovery of the theory of evolution by natural selection, published in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Until then it was widely believed that the different species had been separately created by God, as the Book of Genesis teaches. But Darwin argued that contemporary species have actually evolved from ancestral ones, through a process known as natural selection. Natural selection occurs when some organisms leave more offspring than others, depending on their physical characteristics; if these characteristics are then inherited by their offspring, over time the population will become better and better adapted to the environment. Simple though this process is, over a large number of generations it can cause one species to evolve into a wholly new one, Darwin argued. So persuasive was the evidence Darwin adduced for his theory that by the start of the 20th century it was accepted as scientific orthodoxy, despite considerable theological opposition (Figure 3). Subsequent work has provided striking confirmation of Darwin's theory, which forms the centrepiece of the modern biological world-view.

What is science?

The 20th century witnessed another revolution in biology that is not yet complete: the emergence of molecular biology, in particular molecular genetics. In 1953 Watson and Crick discovered the structure of DNA, the hereditary material that makes up the genes in the cells of living creatures (Figure 4). Watson and Crick's discovery explained how genetic information can be copied from one cell to another, and thus passed down from parent to offspring, thereby explaining why offspring tend to resemble their parents. Their discovery opened up an exciting new area of biological research. In the 50 years since Watson and Crick's work, molecular biology has grown fast, transforming our understanding of heredity and of how genes build organisms. The recent attempt to provide a molecular-level description of the complete set of genes in a human



MR. BERGH TO THE RESCUE.

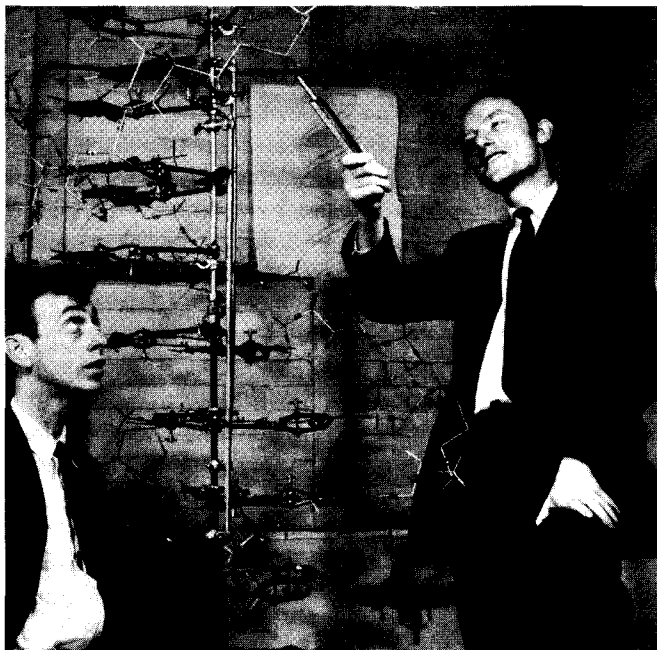
THE DEFRAUDED GORILLA. "That *Man* wants to claim my Pedigree. He says he is one of my Descendants."

MR. BERGH. "Now, Mr. DARWIN, how could you insult him so?"

3. Darwin's suggestion that humans and apes have descended from common ancestors caused consternation in Victorian England.

being, known as the Human Genome Project, is an indication of how far molecular biology has come. The 21st century will see further exciting developments in this field.

More resources have been devoted to scientific research in the last hundred years than ever before. One result has been an explosion of new scientific disciplines, such as computer science, artificial intelligence, linguistics, and neuroscience. Possibly the most significant event of the last 30 years is the rise of cognitive science,



4. James Watson and Francis Crick with the famous 'double helix' – their molecular model of the structure of DNA, discovered in 1953.

which studies various aspects of human cognition such as perception, memory, learning, and reasoning, and has transformed traditional psychology. Much of the impetus for cognitive science comes from the idea that the human mind is in some respects similar to a computer, and thus that human mental processes can be understood by comparing them to the operations computers carry out. Cognitive science is still in its infancy, but promises to reveal much about the workings of the mind. The social sciences, especially economics and sociology, have also flourished in the 20th century, though many people believe they still lag behind the natural sciences in terms of sophistication and rigour. This is an issue we shall return to in Chapter 7.