

Committee I
Unity of the Sciences
#6

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Discussion Paper

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on

Peter Munz's

THE UNITY OF SCIENCE AND THE DUBIOUS CREDENTIALS OF POSITIVISM

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Comments on Professor Munz's "The Unity of Science and the Dubious Credentials of Positivism"

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Positivism, as the ~~received~~ ^{received} view of science, has been under attack on many accounts from many quarters in recent years. Mr. Munz offers a very interesting thesis in explanation of the long reign of positivism as the main philosophical support for the whole enterprise of scientific knowledge. According to Mr. Munz, positivism, being poor philosophy that could not have gained much of a hearing by itself, is clearly unqualified for such a role. In a true historian's manner, which tends to see the rise and fall of dynasties in terms of rivalries and alliances among royal houses, Mr. Munz locates the primary ^{CAUSE} ~~cause~~ for the two centuries long dominance of positivism in its "unholy" alliance with historicism. Historicism, too, by itself, was not much of a philosophy, being "poverty-stricken". Once joined in an alliance, however, these two philosophies with "dubious credentials" became a powerful philosophical hybrid that went practically unchallenged for more than two centuries.

A number of questions arise regarding this interesting thesis. The chief among them: Do two weak philosophies become a powerful one when they join in an alliance? Despite enormous erudition that Mr. Munz brings to bear on his thesis, the answer he gives is not convincing. Given the relative brevity of life span of philosophical doctrines in general, the long reign of positivism is a phenomenon that requires more than an alliance with historicism. The reasons for the resilience of positivism must be found elsewhere. With its insistence that science is the only valid knowledge and that all valid must be included in science, positivism was merely reflecting the general confidence in the increasing universality of causal-mechanistic explanations and giving expression to the enthusiasm generated by the success of the indus-

trial revolution. To be sure, positivism in its initial uncritical exultation of science and technology failed to give a proper account of the limits and conditions of scientific knowledge. I'm not at all convinced that positivism is as weak as Mr. Munz makes it out to be. But whatever weakness it may have had philosophically was more than amply compensated by the unquestioned successes of science and technology. Far from being two "dubious philosophies" leaning against each other, positivism was piggy-back riding on the powerful shoulders of science and technology. Even in the recent "post-positivistic" philosophies of science, the critical attitude toward the positivistic demand that all scientific knowledge be reducible to a series of direct reports of sense perception is tempered by the awareness of the necessity to go back to our experience of the world at some crucial point in the construction of the systematic knowledge of the world. For Popper, for example, it is basic statements which are used to falsify a hypothesis or a theory, and, in this privileged role, they would have to be immune from falsification. Quine, for another, admits that some statements on the periphery of knowledge, may have their truth-value determined by "recalcitrant" experience. So, if positivism made a mistake in its conception of human knowledge, it lay not in its basic intuition according to which our experience of the world must constitute the rock bottom in our system of knowledge, but rather in the totalization claim made for it by some of its more sanguine spokesmen.

According to Mr. Munz, Locke is a crypto-historicist, because his advocacy of positivism or phenomenalism was based, not on any inherent plausibility of his philosophical reasoning, but simply because it was "the last and most modern method for getting knowledge." Every other method--belief in revelation, in tradition, reliance on authority, on innate ideas, etc.--had been tried and had been found wanting. So by virtue of eliminative process, the causal theory of perception was the right method. Even if we grant Mr. Munz that it was through this eliminative reasoning that Locke

~~XXXXXXXX~~ had arrived at his position, I fail to see how that makes him a historicist, even a crypto-historicist. The attraction of "the last and most modern" has been a persistent and pervasive factor in the psychology of men. Many have succumbed to it, without thereby becoming a historicist. Even in philosophy, Locke was not the first, and certainly not the last, to fall victim to fads and fashions. ~~XX~~ "Three pieces of explicit evidence" which Mr. Munz puts forward are designed to show Locke something of a historicist. I must confess that I fail to see the relevance of these three pieces to the point at issue.

Mr. Munz makes a tantalizing suggestion that Popper's "negativism" may be the alternative to positivism. Popper's fallibilism, according to Munz, "points the way to a philosophy of knowledge which is not based on the causal theory of perception and on induction and yet avoids a retreat to frameworks and to the relativity of paradigms." I said tantalizing, because the suggestion made here is merely suggestion of an outline of a philosophical program. How fallibilism enables us to overcome both the causal theory of perception and relativism is not at all clear. Fallibilism is a method of ascertaining whether one theory is more accurate than another in describing certain aspects of reality. Popper was able to retain the idea of objectivity of knowledge by introducing the notion of objective truth, via Tarski, as a regulative principle. Through a process of falsification, we come nearer to the objective knowledge. However, if fallibilism means that all knowledge of the world is fallible and open to criticism, then the basic observation statements would have to be an exception. They are used to falsify and in this privileged role they would have to be immune from falsification. Either fallibilism is severely restricted in scope, or falsification could not work.

Popper's notion of the objectivity of scientific knowledge is based on the public character of scientific activity, with the procedural rules that constitute the scientific method upon which the objectivity of scientific knowledge is founded. Scientific objectivity, according to Popper, is "the intersubjectivity of scientific method." In this intersubjective of scientific method, the basic statements are those testable experimental statements whose truth or falsity is agreed upon by a community of scientists at some time. But it is this very public character of science which has led Kuhn, for instance, to deny the possibility of objective knowledge, since scientists within a given paradigm share certain assumptions that are not empirically testable and these assumptions vary within different paradigms and under differing social-historical conditions.