

Is Science the Only Way to Truth?

Since the early twentieth century, disciplines such as English, history, and philosophy have suffered from enemies both within and without.

It's time to fight back.

In [a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal*](#), Paula Marantz Cohen, an English professor at Drexel University, responds to those in the scientific community who downplay the importance of English and the Humanities—and takes a few well-placed shots at those in her own discipline who want the humanities to be more like science when they grow up.

The enemies from without are those in the sciences who think that empirical science is the only avenue to truth. The first problem with this view is that it doesn't meet its own criterion: The statement: "Science is the only avenue to truth" cannot be proved scientifically. It is a metaphysical statement, and can be proved (if it can be proved at all) only by a philosopher.

In fact, many of the things scientists believe and say are not within the province of science at all. David Hume, an eighteenth century philosopher took a wrecking ball to the kind of scientific pretensions we so often hear articulated today. He showed, for example, that causation, a touchstone of empirical science, was entirely non-empirical. You can see the cause and you can see the effect, but you can't see the cause and effect between them. That is entirely metaphysical.

Scientists also frequently weigh in on the question of what constitutes science and what does not—the "demarcation" debate. But that question itself not a *scientific* question; it is a *philosophical* question. It is best answered not by an

expert in science, but by an expert in the total scheme things, which is a philosopher.

In fact, there is a whole field that studies such questions, and it's not a scientific field: It's called the "philosophy of science."

But Cohen is most concerned with the enemies of the humanities within: those who, in order to stay relevant, try to ape the sciences. This science envy "fuels the drive to render the humanities scientific... through the use of technical jargon, general theories about social texts, and quantitative tools to analyze word choice, sentence structure and other aspects of literature. There are even efforts to measure the imagination using functional magnetic resonance imaging."

All this, of course, completely misses the point. "We do not submit a sonnet to a mathematician," said Chesterton, "or a song to a calculating boy."

Science can tell us *how* to do things, but only philosophy can tell us whether we *should* do them. Science can tell us what will probably happen when we take some action, but history tells us what happened the last time we took it.

Scientists are always talking about moving ahead, but there are some areas in which they will always be behind. "The world," said Harold Goddard, "is forever catching up with Shakespeare—only to fall behind him again."

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