

Portrait of the Philosopher as an Envious Soul

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Here is a conversational trope so worn out that it would no longer suffice even to revive a moribund chat by the coffee machine: philosophers suffer from *science envy*, just as little girls, so Freud claimed, experience a form of *penis envy* (*Penisneid*).¹ It was not always so: there was once a happy time when philosophers were content quite simply to *desire* science (then almost synonymous with “knowledge” or “wisdom”) as their natural and legitimate goal, one they were no doubt best placed to reach. The trouble began, it is sometimes said, with Locke, when philosophers realized that they were now distinct from scientists, and that the latter, with Newton at their head, had for their part made quite striking—and enviable—progress. All this only intensified with Hume, Kant, Comte, and others, so that in 2017 philosophers’ envy of science is the most banal of commonplaces.

To ask a philosopher what science is for them is thus always, in a way, to ask the following question: how do you, for your part, deal with your own *science envy*? There is no shortage of options here.

First strategy, simple, direct, effective in its own way: denial. Act as though science did not exist; superbly ignore its lessons and constraints. By dint of no longer thinking about science, the envy it inspires dwindles and then vanishes altogether, and one can speculate metaphysically with as clear a conscience as our happy pre-Newtonian ancestors. A classic, slightly more sophisticated variant: denial by demarcation. Convince oneself that science and philosophy have such radically different objects (for instance, things and facts on one side; subjects, norms, morality, etc., on the other) that the philosopher has absolutely nothing to learn from scientists and can perfectly well forget their existence, along with everything vexing about it.

Second strategy, nastier: belittle science as much as possible. If one manages to show that it is fragmentary, fallible, biased, illusory, dishonest, mendacious, or malevolent; in short that, whether because it fails epistemically or because it sins morally, it is after all *not all that enviable*, then it should

¹ The author of these lines shares most of the feminist suspicion towards the Freudian concept of *Penisneid*.

be possible to ease our jealous suffering somewhat. Let someone step forward to criticize science, and one will feel a good third of the philosophical community quiver with delight.

Third strategy, more honest: failing to *have* science the way scientists *have* it, possess it in a roundabout way, by *knowing* it. Take science itself as an object of study and acquire a knowledge of its methods, its history, or its structures that almost replaces first-order possession of it—and that, for certain arrogant philosophers of science, of a species now all but extinct, surpasses it in dignity. Complementary strategy: accept that one does not possess science, but make up for this sad state of affairs as far as possible by keeping close company with those who have it. By frequenting laboratories and scientific conferences, the philosopher of science finds some consolation for not quite *being one of them*—while secretly dreaming that science might be passed on as easily as chickenpox.

Fourth strategy, fruitful but dangerous: imitation. Borrow from science and strive, to some extent, to resemble it. In the best case, one will take from science some of its methods, concepts, or contents, and from these borrowings first-rate philosophical innovations may spring. In the worst case, one will borrow superficial traits that turn into ugly tics: bureaucratic evaluation, productivism in publishing, technicality pursued for its own sake, flatness of style conceived as a hygienic obligation.

Fifth strategy, heroic: metamorphosis. Have we not sometimes seen, over the centuries, this or that branch of philosophy gain in solidity, settle into a relative consensus about methods and concepts, and, like a butterfly leaving its chrysalis, rise to the rank of a science? Between the last philosopher and the first scientist of a given domain of objects, there sometimes seems to be only a step, and some claim, now and then, to have made the leap. History will judge them.

The foregoing, it will rightly be said, is nothing but a simplistic typology, coupled with a rather facile (masochistic) sarcasm; there is nothing in it that answers the question “*what is science for you?*” To formulate such an answer, I would have to say, for instance, which of these strategies I have chosen to pursue first and foremost. As a philosopher who is still young,² almost a beginner, I would find it somewhat rash to make a clear-cut choice, and even more so to proclaim it.

If I absolutely had to provide a personal answer, however, I suppose I would propose a composite and rather unoriginal strategy, one that borrows, to varying degrees, from almost all the options mentioned above. I manage my *envy* of science by trying to reformulate my thoughts and my affect in a way that keeps this term from remaining unanalyzed; behind science, I try to see *the sciences*, and behind the sciences, the whole set of questions, lines of reasoning, words and gestures, institutions and structures, desires, hopes, hesitations, and stammerings that determine and constitute what scientists *actually do*. Thus broken down, their work no longer seems to me to differ from mine through the

² In the *academic* sense of youth; a young philosopher, as everyone knows, would make an old footballer.

possession of some hypothetical substantial and primitive essence of scientificity, but through a multitude of varied *modes*—modes that I then wish to understand, to reflect upon, and why not, when it seems possible and useful to me, to reproduce. A first phase of respectful belittling, or rather of demystification, of science can thus be followed by a phase of study, then by a partial and tentative movement of imitation, tempered by demarcation—without claiming, personally, to go as far as metamorphosis. The answer, as one can see, is not very satisfying, and it is by no means definitive. The reason is that the science envy from which the philosopher suffers is not, it seems to me, an acute illness that one cures; it is a chronic illness that one never quite stops treating, short of, perhaps, quite giving up the practice of philosophy.