

Beyond Matter

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Why Science Needs Metaphysics

Roger Trigg



Templeton Press

Templeton Press
300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 500
West Conshohocken, PA 19428
www.templetonpress.org

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Designed and typeset by Gopa & Tedz, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Trigg, Roger.

Beyond matter : why science needs metaphysics / Roger Trigg.

— First [edition].

pages cm

ISBN 978-1-59947-495-3 (alk. paper)

1. Philosophy and science. 2. Metaphysics. 3. Science—
Philosophy. I. Title.

B67.T754 2015

110--dc23

2015030490

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Anna, Nicholas, Lydia, and Clara

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Preface

CAN SCIENCE EXPLAIN everything? If so, the practice of science would need no justification. There could then be no other ways of reasoning validly, and everything would have to conform to scientific standards of evidence and proof. So-called “metaphysics,” by definition beyond the remit of science, would have to be discarded as pointless, if not strictly meaningless, speculation. These problems are the starting point for this book. They have intrigued me ever since, as a young student doing undergraduate and then doctoral work in philosophy in Oxford, I regularly attended classes given by Professor A. J. Ayer, one of the great apostles of the science-based philosophy called “logical positivism.” This philosophy derived from the pre–Second World War Vienna Circle that Ayer had visited himself. It held that everything that could not be verified scientifically was to be ruled out as meaningless. Metaphysics was to be regarded as nonsense. The cultural influence of such positivism was immense over the rest of the twentieth century.

Ayer’s classes, held weekly in my college—New College—

where he was based, were labeled “Informal Instruction.” They were enormously stimulating, and I learned a lot. Many of those attending became well-known philosophers in the English-speaking world. Even so, I felt that much of what I heard was plain wrong, even from the standpoint of contemporary science. Swathes of human reasoning and experience were arbitrarily dismissed. Ethics, aesthetics, and religion were all considered to be beyond the pale of proper reasoning about truth. Only science, it seemed, could provide the answers. Whether that was contemporary science, as it was some fifty years ago, or some ideal, or possible, science was one of the unresolved problems.

As a result, I have had a continuing interest in the philosophy of science and the place of science in the wider context of human rationality. While resisting claims by those who believe science has a monopoly on human reasoning, I have always also resisted attempts to undermine the authority of science through appeals to various forms of relativism that suggest that science can claim no universal truth. My first attack on relativism in science and elsewhere came in my book *Reason and Commitment* (1973). In one of my later books, *Rationality and Science* (1993), I looked at the rational basis of science. In other books, I have examined the philosophical assumptions of particular sciences, such as sociobiology (or evolutionary psychology), and social science as a whole. I have been continually concerned with the relation of science to reality.

During this time, attacks on the place of reason within science and as a support for it have become ever more virulent. They have come from opposite directions, from a science-

based materialism to a “postmodern” repudiation of grand narratives. The former sees everything in strictly scientific terms. In the last resort that means physics and the reduction of reason to something else. The latter sees the old idea of reason, championed and even idolized by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, splinter into myriad parts. Whatever seems rational to a group or community, however defined, is rational for them. Materialism, or physicalism, in their various forms preside over narrowing the scope of human reason and, in the end, threaten its existence as a reliable search for truth. Postmodernism has done much the same by attacking the universal applicability of rationality and tying it to context. I shall be investigating the implications of all this.

This book is particularly concerned with the relation of science and reason. I want to uphold the practice of science and uphold its right to claim a truth that applies to everyone. I am, however, suspicious of attempts arbitrarily to restrict all reasoning to the capabilities and reach of science. They have to be self-defeating. Because science is a human practice and needs justification, it must depend on a wider understanding of a reason that can provide a rational basis for some confidence in science as a means to truth. That is where metaphysics enters.

All of this matters because it concerns the place of science in our society. While some illegitimately sideline metaphysics, a strong cultural current gives scientific reasoning a monopoly on so-called “public reason.” A typical instance is the manner in which “faith,” usually in the context of religion, is made the province of a subjective, “private” attitude, as opposed to what can be allowed into debate in the public sphere. Many think

faith has to be restricted to what is admissible according to universally accessible standards of thought. Our beliefs must then be answerable to canons of public evidence and reason, as these are understood in science. The result is a deliberate exclusion from public debate of religious, ethical, and similar matters. It is thought that such beliefs are private and cannot—and should not—be brought into the public square.

It is not fanciful to see a direct link between such public issues of some political consequence and the philosophical stance of logical positivists who championed science to the exclusion of all else, even our ability to justify our faith in science. While, therefore, the topic of this book is important for those engaged in science, it carries with it wider cultural messages that pose questions about how far a totally science-based society is possible or desirable. An excessive stress on the methods of science as a route to settled and agreed forms of knowledge can result in the dismissal of philosophy itself.

Metaphysics, reasoning about what lies beyond science, can come under attack precisely because it does not seem to have any agreed method or settled procedures for settling disputes. Hankering after a fixed method may be understandable, but it is the death of human creative reasoning. That may be dangerous within science, but it can also undermine all other human reasoning. We must use the rationality common to us all to weigh the difference between good and bad arguments and to enable us to uncover and question our prejudices and presuppositions. The scientific enterprise is itself an expression of such rationality. To deny the power of reason is in the end to undermine the possibility of the practice of science itself.

As always, I must thank those—too many to mention—with whom I have discussed the topics of this book over the decades. In particular, I owe a debt of gratitude to the Ian Ramsey Centre, in the University of Oxford, for providing me with a congenial and stimulating base, first as interim director and then as senior research fellow. I must also give my thanks to St. Cross College, Oxford, with which I have had a happy association for some thirty years.

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