

Science in the Looking Glass

What Do Scientists Really Know?



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Preface

Almost every month some book or television programme describes exciting developments in cosmology or fundamental physics. Many tell us that we are on the verge of finding the explanation for the Big Bang or the ultimate Theory of Everything. These will explain all physics in one fundamental set of mathematical equations. It is easy to be swept along by the obvious enthusiasm of the participants, particularly when they are making real progress in pushing back the boundaries of knowledge. Unfortunately, most of their brilliant new ideas are doomed to be forgotten, if only because they cannot all be right.

Consider the currently fashionable idea that our universe is just one of many unobservable, parallel universes, all equally real. How can one hope to describe the inner structures of such universes, each with its own values of the ‘fundamental’ constants? Many may be dull and featureless, but others are presumably as fascinating and complex as our own. However much some physicists declare the reality of these other universes, in practice their main function is to support the mathematical models of the day, or to ‘explain’ certain properties of our own universe.

My goal in this book is not to adjudicate on the correctness of such new and speculative theories. We will instead consider the development of science in a historical context, in order to find out how such questions have been resolved in the past, and to explain why many long established ‘facts’ have turned out not to be so certain. My conclusion is surprising, particularly coming from a mathematician. In spite of the fact that highly mathematical theories often provide very accurate predictions, we should not, on that account, think that such theories are true or that Nature is governed by mathematics. In fact the scientific theories most likely to be around in a thousand years’ time are those which are the *least* mathematical—for example evolution, plate tectonics, and the existence of atoms.

The entire book is effectively an extended defence of the above statements. In the course of the discussion I risk the displeasure of many of my colleagues by explaining the feebleness of mathematical Platonism as a philosophy. I also provide psychological and historical support for the claim that mathematics is a human creation. Its success in explaining nature is a result of the fact that we developed much of it for precisely that purpose. Even the numbers which we use in counting become no more than formal symbols, invented by us, as soon

as they are as big as 10^{1000} (1 followed by a thousand zeros). Pretending that we can count from 1 up to such a number ‘in principle’ is a fantasy, and will always remain so. Moreover, it is not necessary to believe this in order to be interested in pure mathematics.

Whatever some over-enthusiastic physicists might claim, there is much which is beyond our grasp, and which will probably remain so. Subjective (first person) consciousness is one such issue. Understanding the true nature of quantum particles is another, in spite of the proven success of the mathematical aspects of quantum theory. Contingency, or historical accident, has obviously had a major influence on geology and biology, but some physicists think that it is even involved in the form of the laws of physics. Whether or not this is true, scientists are right to believe that, with enough effort, they can push the boundaries of their subjects far beyond their present limits.

An unusual feature of the book is that I try to explain why philosophical issues are important in science by means of simple examples. This is not the style followed by academic philosophers, but it makes the issues easier to understand, particularly in a popular context. In addition, discussions about the status of money, zombies, or rainbows are more fun than dry logical arguments about ontology.

I am painfully aware that the scope of the book is far wider than anybody’s expertise could span in this age of specialists. The attempt is worth making, because arguments informed by only one branch of science are inevitably distorted by that fact. I do not claim to have found the final answer to all of the deep questions in the philosophy of science, but hope that readers who have not previously thought much about these will see why they are important.

People vary enormously in their liking of mathematics. Many switch off as soon as they see it, and editors of popular books advise their authors to reduce it to the absolute minimum. I have gone as far as I can in this direction, and reassure the allergic reader that any difficult passages can be skimmed over. They are present to ensure that interested readers do not feel cheated by being told conclusions without any evidence in their support.

I wish to acknowledge invaluable advice, or sometimes just stimulation, which I have received from many friends and colleagues, in particular Martin Berry, Alan Cook, Richard Davies, Donald Gillies, Nicholas Green, Andreas Hinz, Hubert Kalf, Mike Lambrou, Peter Palmer, Roger Penrose, David Robinson, Peter Saunders, Ray Streater, John Taylor and Phil Whitfield. I do not, however, burden them with the responsibility of agreeing with anything I say here. I also thank my family for providing an atmosphere in which a task such as this could be contemplated; I know that the time which I have devoted to it has put me in great debt to them.

Contents

1	Perception and Language	1
1.1	Preamble	1
1.2	Light and Vision	3
	Introduction	3
	The Perception of Colour	4
	Interpretation and Illusion	6
	Disorders of the Brain	13
	The World of a Bat	15
	What Do We See?	16
1.3	Language	18
	Physiological Aspects of Language	18
	Social Aspects of Language	22
	Objects, Concepts, and Existence	24
	Numbers as Social Constructs	27
	Notes and References	31
2	Theories of the Mind	33
2.1	Preamble	33
2.2	Mind-Body Dualism	34
	Plato	34
	Mathematical Platonism	37
	The Rotation of Triangles	41
	Descartes and Dualism	43
	Dualism in Society	46
2.3	Varieties of Consciousness	49
	Can Computers Be Conscious?	50
	Gödel and Penrose	52
	Discussion	54
	Notes and References	59
3	Arithmetic	61
	Introduction	61
	Whole Numbers	62

Small Numbers	62
Medium Numbers	64
Large Numbers	65
What Do Large Numbers Represent?	66
Addition	67
Multiplication	68
Inaccessible and Huge Numbers	71
Peano's Postulates	75
Infinity	78
Discussion	80
Notes and References	83
4 How Hard can Problems Get?	85
Introduction	85
The Four Colour Problem	87
Goldbach's Conjecture	88
Fermat's Last Theorem	89
Finite Simple Groups	90
A Practically Insoluble Problem	91
Algorithms	93
How to Handle Hard Problems	96
Notes and References	97
5 Pure Mathematics	99
5.1 Introduction	99
5.2 Origins	100
Greek Mathematics	100
The Invention of Algebra	103
The Axiomatic Revolution	103
Projective Geometry	107
5.3 The Search for Foundations	109
5.4 Against Foundations	113
Empiricism in Mathematics	116
From Babbage to Turing	117
Finite Computing Machines	123
Passage to the Infinite	125
Are Humans Logical?	127
5.5 The Real Number System	130
A Brief History	131
What is Equality?	134
Constructive Analysis	135
Non-standard Analysis	137

5.6	The Computer Revolution	138
	Discussion	139
	Notes and References	140
6	Mechanics and Astronomy	143
6.1	Seventeenth Century Astronomy	143
	Galileo	146
	Kepler	151
	Newton	153
	The Law of Universal Gravitation	154
6.2	Laplace and Determinism	157
	Chaos in the Solar System	158
	Hyperion	160
	Molecular Chaos	161
	A Trip to Infinity	163
	The Theory of Relativity	164
6.3	Discussion	166
	Notes and References	170
7	Probability and Quantum Theory	171
7.1	The Theory of Probability	171
	Kolmogorov's Axioms	172
	Disaster Planning	174
	The Paradox of the Children	175
	The Letter Paradox	175
	The Three Door Paradox	176
	The National Lottery	177
	Probabilistic Proofs	178
	What is a Random Number?	179
	Bubbles and Foams	181
	Kolmogorov Complexity	182
7.2	Quantum Theory	183
	History of Atomic Theory	184
	The Key Enigma	186
	Quantum Probability	188
	Quantum Particles	190
	The Three Aspects of Quantum Theory	192
	Quantum Modelling	193
	Measuring Atomic Energy Levels	195
	The EPR Paradox	196
	Reflections	198
	Schrödinger's Cat	199
	Notes and References	202

8 Is Evolution a Theory?	203
Introduction	203
The Public Perception	204
The Geological Record	205
Dating Techniques	209
The Mechanisms of Inheritance	213
Theories of Evolution	217
Some Common Objections	225
Discussion	230
Notes and References	232
9 Against Reductionism	235
Introduction	235
Biochemistry and Cell Physiology	238
Prediction or Explanation	240
Money	242
Information and Complexity	243
Subjective Consciousness	245
The Chinese Room	246
Zombies and Related Issues	248
A Physicalist View	250
Notes and References	251
10 Some Final Thoughts	253
Order and Chaos	253
Anthropic Principles	256
From Hume to Popper	259
Empiricism versus Realism	266
The Sociology of Science	270
Science and Technology	274
Conclusions	276
Notes and References	279
Bibliography	281
Index	289