
QED: science and philosophy

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Science turns to philosophy in search for truth, writes Robert Matthews

According to Wittgenstein, the purpose of philosophy is to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. For those reluctant to regard themselves as flies, still less ones trapped in bottles, Wittgenstein's aphorism gives all the excuse needed for lobbing philosophy into a mental box marked "Not Needed on Voyage".

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at least agree on the shape and size of the bottle in which both sides should buzz.

Insights from epistemology - the philosophy of knowledge - inveigled their way into many of the discussions at Seville, as did a notorious quote from Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary.

The mathematician Dr Lenny Smith of the LSE and Oxford University pointed out that while Mr Rumsfeld was widely ridiculed for distinguishing between "known knowns", "known unknowns" and "unknown unknowns", scientists and policy makers would do well to follow his example.

While science is often seen as a repository of known knowns, the discovery in the 1960s of phenomena such as chaos revealed the existence of "known unknowns": measurable but ineluctable limits to the accuracy of, say, weather forecasts. Yet scientists and policy-makers alike have still to come to terms with the equally unavoidable "unknown unknowns" that necessarily dog any attempt to model reality.

According to Dr Smith, the consequences can be seen in the climate change debate, where scientists are routinely forced to deal with policy questions that simply cannot be answered with any real confidence.

Whether we can look forward to European directives being based on the works of Hume rather than the demands of French farmers remains to be seen. I do know that by the end of the meeting I had been compelled to rethink my view of philosophers as the incomprehensible in pursuit of the ineffable.

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