

Views on Life, the Universe, and Everything

What is the Proper Study of Mankind: Man or Books?

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Received 30.05.2013, published 30.12.2013

Science supposedly seeks true knowledge or, simply, truth. Much has been written regarding the scientific method. But what about the sources of science? In the history of science, both the textual and the empirical have been favorites. This article poses the question which is the proper, superior or even supreme source for the study of mankind. An integrative solution is proposed: poetic science.

Science is the poetry of reality^[1]

1 Introduction

As so often, the fundamental question makes its appearance only after more applied questions have already been addressed. This looks like putting the cart before the horse. Apparently, in “normal science” this is not only very well possible, but it even seems to be required.

The most fundamental question is about the starting point of science^[2] or, if you will, the source of the study of mankind.^[3]

2 Question

In his *An Essay on Man* Alexander Pope stated: “The proper study of Mankind is Man.”^[4] Almost two hundred years later, Aldous Huxley teasingly rephrased Pope’s pronouncement: “The proper study of mankind is books.”^[5] The question that we will have to confront, thus, reads: What is the Proper Study of Mankind? Man or Books? In other words: Should the student of mankind observe or read?

This question does not ask which science or academic discipline is the *via regia* to truth about mankind. It is rather about the more elementary problem: Which source of science is the royal road to truth?

Is it empirical – concerning observation – evidence that we should trust most? Or should we rather trust textual – concerning reading – evidence? In other words, is empirical or textual evidence worthier of our credence?

The idea that textual evidence should be regarded as supe-

rior to empirical evidence may to contemporary scientists appear a little odd and outdated. Even if it seems outdated, it is not manifestly crazy. In fact, textual evidence was regarded superior during the greater part of history.^[6] The Bible, the Church Fathers and the ancients, e.g., Plato and Aristotle, Hippocrates and Galen, were considered primary sources of truth. Only relatively recently, only gradually, and only locally, confined to certain provinces of human endeavor, empirical evidence has taken precedence over textual evidence.

Nowadays, as a matter of course, observation holds priority over reading. Therefore, we must ask whether there is a good reason for the contemporary favorite status of the empirical? Let us now then systematically weigh the arguments for the empirical and for the textual, for Man and for Books.^[7]

3 The Case for the Empirical

For clarity’s sake, while running the risk of appearing flip-pant, I will adopt once more a simplified position.

A famous and often misunderstood classical maxim maintains: “Art imitates Nature” or “Art imitates Life”.^[8] This is called the mimetic viewpoint. In response, Oscar Wilde proposed the reverse idea: “Life imitates Art”.^[9] Wilde’s anti-mimetic stance, is taken a stage further in the popular saying “Life is stranger than Fiction” or “Truth is stranger than Fiction”. This counter-intuitive idea becomes the more credible when we realize that “Truth is stranger than Fiction [...] because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibili-

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ties; Truth isn't."^[10] Put slightly differently: "Truth must of necessity be stranger than fiction, [...] for fiction is the creation of the human mind, and therefore is congenial to it."^[11] In short: "Human imagination is immensely poorer than reality."^[12] One instance will, in the spirit of naïve verificationism, suffice to confirm the rule that Life is stranger than Fiction.

In March 2012 a baby rabbit was born without ears. This is rare. When the bunny was being filmed by a news team, a cameraman accidentally stepped on the unfortunate animal. The accident was fatal. The bunny didn't suffer, said the distraught director of the zoo in Limbach-Oberfrohna, Saxony, who had hoped to turn this rare rabbit into a media

star.^[13] Possibly, the bunny had not heard the cameraman coming. Is this "bitter irony" as one German newspaper put it?^[14] I think it is even more than that; it is the perfect illustration of the idea that "Life is stranger than Fiction". Even though we do not bat an eyelid when we read that Gregor Samsa had transformed overnight into a big uncanny bug if an author of fiction had included the improbable incident of the "Rabbit Without Ears" in a novel or a short story, we would consider it an attempt to overstretch our credulity. And so this case forcefully suggests that we should be wary of Life. In other words, we should be skeptical of observation and the empirical.



Figure 1: The "Bunny Without Ears" before the tragic mishap.

4 The Case for the Textual

Not everyone will agree that "The world was made in order to result in a beautiful book." However, books, those children of the brain, can actually be both beautiful and true. Many will agree that a book, beautiful or otherwise, can make the world, in the sense that we may see the world radically differently after reading that book. Books are ideally the condensed experience and wisdom of writers. Or as one author put it "[...] personal experience comes often at a high price and it is always late; it is therefore useful to profit by the experience of others. It is in books that one finds this knowledge."^[15] If the empirical has the fatal shortcoming that it is often stranger than fiction, the textual has none of this drawback. Instead, reading offers a safe and fast track to knowledge and wisdom, while enabling us to avoid negative experiences.^[16] Hence, if we agree that we may prefer books to life that we may favor the textual over the empirical, then the next question arises. What kind of books should we use to arrive at the truth? Should we read Non-Fiction or would we profit more by reading Fiction?

5 The Case for Non-Fiction

Non-Fiction is the form of any narrative, account, or other communicative work whose assertions and descriptions are understood to be factual, as Wikipedia succinctly if somewhat priggishly puts it.

In exactly this spirit, Mr. Drystubble stated:

I am not accustomed to write novels or works of that kind. [...] Not only that I never wrote anything that resembled a novel, but I even do not like to read such things because I am a man of business. For many years I have asked myself what is the use of such works, and I am astonished at the impudence with which many a poet or novelist dares to tell you stories which never happened and often never could have happened at all. [...] Therefore, I take good care not to write any novels, nor to advance any false statements.^[17]

If we substitute "man of business" by "scientist", we get the idea what Ben Goldacre must have meant when he tweeted: "just never read any story books (or 'novels'. whatever the technical term is)".^[18]

If he reads at all, Drystubble only reads one type of book: Non-Fiction. Drystubble is, in a sense, a homo unius libri. Needless to say that one should beware of such a man.

Francis Bacon summarized the case for Nature and implicitly for Non-Fiction as follows:

Books must follow sciences, and not sciences books.^[19]

This declaration on behalf of the empirical seems more a dogma than a reasoned argument.

Still, some even want to go one step further: not only must books follow sciences, but sciences must furthermore change people, change society, change the world:

Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.^[20]

It is clear that with this last step, we find ourselves on the brink of an altogether different genre: Horror. All science is quite useless. And if it is not, it should be called technics or if it concerns society, politics. Regrettably, this insight has been all but lost in contemporary universities.

6 The Case for Fiction

Fiction is the form of any narrative or informative work that deals, in part or in whole, with information or events that are not factual, but rather, imaginary – that is, invented by the author. Thus wrote Wikipedia. Fiction is therefore essentially the opposite of Non-Fiction.^[21]

Why should fiction be the more reliable source for the study of mankind? Let us hear four voices that argued this point. Confined to the realm of depth-psychological insights, J. M. Coetzee claimed:

Artists have told us as much about our inner life as psychologists ever have.^[22]

Even further than that went Noam Chomsky:

It is quite possible – overwhelmingly probable, one might guess – that we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology.^[23]

And Doris Lessing asserted confidently:

There is no doubt that fiction makes a better job of the truth.^[24]

Finally, Julian Barnes recently wrote:

Novels tell us the most truth about life: what it is, how we live it, what it might be for, how we enjoy and value it, how it goes wrong, and how we lose it. Novels speak to and from the mind, the heart, the eye, the genitals, the skin; the conscious and the subconscious. What it is to be an individual, what it means to be part of a society. What it means to be alone. [...] The best fiction rarely provides answers; but it does formulate the questions exceptionally well.^[25]

Coetzee, Chomsky, Lessing, and Barnes express here a thought that has a long and respectable history. If not the very first to state it, then at least as one of the most authoritative voices, Aristotle asserted:

Poetry [...] is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.^[26]

In other words, fiction is truer than non-fiction – “truer because of its power to condense and represent the multifarious in the typical.”^[27]

Within fiction, “realism [is] a corruption of reality”. However, “fantastic realism”, as Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky called it, improves on “realism” and may even be superior to “reality”.

This is an opinion repeated and amplified by many writers and artists:

Art is not a study of positive reality, it is the seeking for ideal truth.^[28]

And with that last step, art and literature become the embodiment of the ideal: art and literature become idealistic. Is that a good thing? Isn't that overdoing it a bit?

7 Impasse

The empirical or the textual? Man or Books? There are good arguments for studying Man, and there are equally good arguments for studying Books. In truth, much may be said on both sides of this question.^[29] So, what if the study of books is nothing but the study of men?^[30] What, however, if you are deep vers'd in books, and shallow in yourself?^[31] What if a multitude of books distracts the mind?^[32] And what if it is really true that it is more necessary to study men than books?^[33] Thus, we find ourselves lost in the middle of a dark forest and the straight path is nowhere to be found. Where have we departed from the right way? What Is To Be Done?

8 Resolution

When by now, we are utterly confused, we may begin to grasp that the dichotomy of Man and Books is pointless and even false. Still, we may not easily see the solution to our quandary. What we now need is a coup of cunning and guile. As so often, the easiest solution is there for the taking. Let's go back to the original problem. Alexander Pope wrote:

The proper study of Mankind is Man.^[3]

A sensible thing and in itself the perfect illustration of the value of books for the study of man because Pope had found this wisdom in another man's book:

The true science and study of man is man.^[34]

The author of this sentence, the sixteenth century French theologian and philosopher Pierre Charron, in his turn had borrowed it from yet other authors, classical and contemporary.^[35]

In general, the interest of science lies in the art of making science. What comes first art or science? If science tries to make order out of perceived chaos, then art should make chaos out of assumed order. Perhaps science is indeed the poetry of reality? Or is poetry the science of reality? All these matters are now even more open than before. So, one last time, let us consider what the question is: Books or Man? The answer can only be an unscrupulously practical one: He does wisest who takes most and

best of both.^[36] Therefore, I propose, a methodological triangulation: study both fictional books and empirical man and take the most and the best of both. For this pragmatic-opportunistic solution, I then propose for lack of a better term: poetic science.^[37]

9 Afterthought

In the course of dealing with this question, we turned over many books together. I hope that you will not hold it against me that I multiplied words without knowledge. Of course, I quoted others only in order the better to express myself: One must never miss an opportunity of quoting things by others which are always more interesting than those one thinks up oneself. This exposition was made to show that scientists can benefit greatly from reading novels, poems and plays. In truth, the reading scientist will notice that wherever he goes, he will find that a poet has been there before him. And, I confess, it was also to show that it takes many old texts to make a new one.

References and Notes

[1] Dawkins, R. “Slaves to Superstition”, Part 1 of The Enemies of Reason, Channel 4, 13 August 2007, timecode 00:38:16. Couldn’t we, in the same vein as Marx turned Proudhon’s title around, equally say: “Poetry is the science of reality”? Are there any more meaningful permutations?.

[2] The English noun “science” is understood here as the broader German word “Wissenschaft”.

[3] Let us understand “man”, “mankind”, “nature”, “life”, and “world” as interchangeable. At first sight, this may appear methodologically reckless. Perhaps it is a trifle reckless but it has “the virtue of dramatizing the issue”. Moreover, it turns out to be justified when we consider that all these words stand for “sense experiences other than reading”.

[4] Pope, A. “An Essay on Man” (1733–34), Epistle II, line 1. In the first edition it still reads “The only science of Mankind is Man.”.

[5] Huxley, A. *Crome Yellow*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1949 [1921], p. 304.

[6] Of course, sometimes the world itself was regarded as a text to be deciphered and interpreted: “The Book of Nature”. This was not done primarily as a homage to Nature but rather as a homage to the Book, i.e. the Bible. Also every particular natural object could be understood as a text or book: “Das Gräslein ist ein Buch, suchst du es aufzuschliessen / Du kannst die Schöpfung draus und alle Weisheit wissen.” Czepko von Reigersfeld, D. “Sexcenta Monodistica Sapientum” (III, 10), in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. I, part 2. Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1989 [1655], p. 591.

[7] Whatever the outcome of our evaluation, for practical reasons, when searching for the truth, we always either read texts or observe nature. When we read texts we may study nature indirectly as, or so we prefer to think, texts are written by authors who base their texts on empirical observation. On the other hand, everybody must rely on the spoken or written word. In practice, the written word, especially as a scientific publication, is deemed authority: a tenacious illusion and sometimes a very foolish one (*Nullius in verba*).

[8] Aristotle, *Meteorologica* IV. 3 and *Physica* II. 2; Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* LXV. 3; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XI. 9.

[9] Or actually: “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (Wilde, O. “The Decay of Lying – An Observation [1891]” in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, (ed. Robert Ross), Vol. 8, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 33). Wilde’s wisdom may – in true form – have been derived from another writer’s book. «J’ai lu plus de trente romans, j’ai vu plus de vingt pièce de théâtre, [. . .]; et, croyez-moi, la vie ressemble plus souvent à un roman qu’un roman ne ressemble à la vie.» George Sand, *Métella* [1834], in *Œuvres de George Sand – Mauprat-Métella*, Paris: Hetzel, 1852, p. 369.

[10] Twain, M. “Following the Equator”, in *Following the Equator and Anti-imperialist Essays*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1897], p. 156 (*Pudd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar*).

[11] Chesterton, G. K. *The Club of Queer Trades*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [1905], p. 66.

[12] Pavese, C. *Il mestiere di vivere*: 1935–1950. Torino: Einaudi, 2000 [1952], p. 127 (25 ottobre 1938): “La fantasia umana è immensamente piú povera della realtà.”.

[13] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,821389,00.html> The hope of turning this bunny into a media star was justified as it was a true “Keinohrhasen” or “Rabbit Without Ears”, which was the title of a recent popular German film: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keinohrhasen>.

[14] <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/kameramann-zertritt-kaninchen-kurzlebiger-keinohrhasen-1.1311135>.

[15] Choderlos de Laclos, P. A. F. “Des femmes et de leur éducation”, III (Troisième essai), in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1979, p. 434: «[...] l’expérience personnelle est souvent chère et toujours tardive; il est donc utile de profiter de celle des auteurs. C’est dans les livres que celle-là se trouve.».

[16] “People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.” Smith, L. P. “Myself”, in *Afterthoughts*. London: Constable, 1931, p. 71.

[17] Multatuli [Eduard Douwes Dekker], *Max Havelaar*. Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1868 [1860], pp. 1–2.

[18] Goldacre, B. Tweet, 27 October 2010: <http://twitter.com/#!/bengoldacre/statuses/28888167582>.

[19] Bacon, F. “A Proposition etc: Touching the Compiling and Amendment of the Laws of England [1657]”, in *The Works of Francis Bacon* (eds. J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, D. D. Heath), Vol. 13, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 67. Compare: “From the earliest days of the experimental pioneers, man’s stipulation that psychology be adequate to science outweighed his commitment that it be adequate to man.” (Koch, S. ‘Epilogue’, in *Psychology, A Study of a Science*, Vol. 3, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959, p. 784).

[20] Lewin, K. “Action Research and Minority Problems”, in *Resolving Social Conflicts; Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, (ed. G.W. Lewin), New York: Harper & Row, 1948, p. 203. See also: “The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Marx, K. “Theses on Feuerbach” [1845], Thesis 11, *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 5, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975, p. 5. Needless to say that it always ends in tears and necessarily always must end in tears.

[21] I am cutting another corner. For the opposite view are also good arguments: “[. . .] this puts in question the distinction between fiction and nonfiction [. . .].” Coetzee, J. M. *Stranger Shores – Literary Essays* 1986–1999. New York: Viking, 2001, p. 145.

[22] Coetzee, J. M. *Stranger Shores – Literary Essays* 1986–1999.

- New York: Viking, 2001, p. 37.
- [23] Chomsky, N. *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*. Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1988, p. 159.
- [24] Lessing, D. *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography*. London: Flamingo, 1995 [1994], p. 314.
- [25] Barnes, J. *Through the Window - Seventeen Essays (and one Short Story)*. London: Vintage Books, 2012, Preface.
- [26] Aristotle, *Poetica* IX.
- [27] Coetzee, J. M. *Inner Workings – Literary Essays 2000-2005*. New York: Viking, 2008 [2007], p. 232.
- [28] Sand, G. *La Mare au Diable*. Bruxelles: Meline, Cans et Compagnie, 1846, p. 9: «L’art n’est pas une étude de la réalité positive; c’est une recherche de la vérité idéale, [...]».
- [29] Fielding, H. *The Covent Garden Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 1997 [1732], Vol. 9, p. 182 (Act I, Scene viii).
- [30] Sand, G. *Valvèdre* [1861], in *Œuvres de George Sand – Valvèdre*, Paris: Jules Claye, 1864, p. 11: «L’étude des lettres, qui n’est autre que l’étude des hommes, [...]».
- [31] Milton, J. *Paradise Regained*, Line 322.
- [32] Seneca, *Epistolae Morales ad Lucilium*, II. 3: “Distringit librorum multitudo”.
- [33] de la Rochefoucauld, F. “Maximes posthumes (No. 550)”, in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), 1964, p. 481.
- [34] Charron, P. *De la sagesse*, Book 1, Chapter 1 (Bordeaux, 1601): «[...] la vraie science et le vrai estude de l’homme c’est l’homme».
- [35] Lessing, G. E. “Nachträgliche Anmerkung zum Art. Char-ron, Th. XIV, S. 141” in *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s Sämtliche Schriften*, Vol. 15, Berlin: Göschen, 1826, pp. 295–296.
- [36] Fielding, H. *The Covent Garden Tragedy*. London: Routledge, 1997 [1732], Vol. 9, p. 183 (Act I, Scene viii): “he does wisest who takes most of both.”
- [37] Poetic in the sense of A. *adj.* 6. in the OED (second edition, vol. XI, 1989, p. 1119). This is in acknowledgment of Richard Dawkins, whose words I used as motto, and Ada Lovelace, whose term – poetical science – I shortened one syllable. Also it is, of course, a term that automatically reminds us of its opposite: Bruno Latour’s prosaic science.