

SCIENCE'S COMPASS

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References and Notes

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Social vs. Natural Science?

I LARGELY AGREE WITH CLIFFORD GEERTZ (*Science's Compass*, Books *et al.*, 6 Jul., p. 53) and the main point of the work he discusses, *Making Social Science Matter* (1)—that social research can make good use of a “phronetic” approach, that is, qualitative and judgmental, as distinct from mere imitation of the “hard” sciences. This argument has been a major theme of European philosophy for the better part of the last century, its most powerful modern exponent being H. G. Gadamer (2). I have, however, one objection: the pervasive use of the phrase “view from

nowhere” in characterizing natural science. To advance or correct the social sciences, we need not diminish or distort, even subtly, the approach of the natural sciences, and that is what this catchy phrase often does. But when Thomas Nagel introduced it in his thoughtful book of that title, he was speaking mainly about objectivity and subjectivity in philosophy, and the phrase was intended as purely descriptive (3).

Yet it seems to me that, in science, even as description the phrase is surely misleading. If catchy phrases we must have, then I suggest an alternative: let it be the “view from everywhere,” reflecting more nearly what the natural sciences do. There is a big difference between “no reference frame” and “invariance” under specified transformations of reference frames or standpoints. I am pointing here not only to the well-known invariances of physics under coordinate transformations but, far more generally, to “transformations” or interchanges of investigators, cultures, and experimental equipment, and to the practice of acquiring many “profiles” of the same phenomenon. David Bohm, among others, has expounded this idea, including the role of dialectics or hermeneutics in it (4). And I have tried to

apply it in some detail to the history of solar neutrino research (5).

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2. H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Crossroads, New York, 1984).
3. T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1986).
4. D. Bohm, *The Special Theory of Relativity, Appendix* (W. A. Benjamin, New York, 1965).
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UNSCEAR on the Health Effects from Chornobyl

IN THE NEWS FOCUS ARTICLE “LIVING IN THE shadow of Chornobyl” (20 Apr., p. 420), in which Richard Stone examines the effects on human health of the nuclear accident at Chornobyl 15 years ago, the latest report from the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation (UNSCEAR) (1) is not mentioned.

The report, published last year, assessed the radiological situation in the highly contaminated regions of Belarus, Russia, and



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