

High School Essay:**Why Do We Still Need Philosophy?***Yağız Kaygı / Samsun İbrahim Tanrıverdi Sosyal Bilimler Lisesi (SSBL)*

Philosophy is dead. Philosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science. Scientists have become the bearers of the torch of discovery in our quest for knowledge.

Stephen Hawking

As science progressed, thoughts began to rise that philosophy lost its value or even went bankrupt. One of the reasons for this thought is that metaphysics, which is considered to be the main focus of philosophy, is considered to be undermined by science¹. But even if we admit that this is true, philosophy is not just metaphysics. And it doesn't seem to die so easily, whether we like it or not. Whereas even the proposition "The only legitimate way to access knowledge is the natural sciences" has philosophical assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the legitimate methods that can be used to achieve it. In this article, I will argue that we still need philosophy by showing the benefits of it, especially in the context of relationship between neurology and philosophy of mind. Of course, much of what I said can be applied to other natural sciences and philosophical areas too.

Most likely, we will not experience a technological breakthrough that will make our lives easier, caused only by philosophers in the future. But on the many issues that will accompany this breakthrough, we will appeal to philosophy inevitably. This may relate, for example, to deciding how to interpret and evaluate the empirical data that neuroscience presents to us. In addition, in the development process of neuroscience, the use of philosophy is inevitable in how we will do this or specifically where we will direct our focus.

Since neuroscience is a natural science, it presents us with facts; however, it does not answer what we should do with these facts². Philosophy helps us complement the knowledge we have gained from neuroscience and decide how to use it.

¹ Those who accept this in this way generally claim that philosophy cannot keep up with science and that science can answer questions about the universe without the need for philosophy. In this context, it is inevitable to think that philosophy is unnecessary.

² Even though Moral Naturalism tries to deduce moral facts from natural facts, this position is a philosophical view and not science itself. Even if such moral obligations are to emerge from science, the way to this will still pass through philosophy.

For example, neuroscience tells us it is possible to use brain plasticity to build applications on human hardware. Here, the issue is not just about regulating what exists in our body, the same feature in the brain also allows for the interpretation of new inputs. And this means we can expand our sensory inventory or increase human physical and cognitive abilities (such as provide real-time data flow in the human body and feel the Twitter data through vibrations).

Science offers us such facts and possibilities. But as it can be seen, it only shows us what the situation is and what it is possible to change and how. It cannot tell us what should be done. When it comes to what should be done, some philosophical approaches such as transhumanism come into play. Transhumanism is not a phenomenon in itself, it is more likely a worldview. It is a cultural movement advocating the need to increase human capabilities by combining the methods of neuroscience and technology. In this respect, it is not a scientific fact that can be agreed upon, but a philosophical controversy open to interpretation from various aspects. It is possible to present various opposing stances against this approach, taking into account reasons such as socio-economic risks or existential problems. The existence of such discussions is still useful, even if it is inconclusive, because it allows us to better understand our current situation and to take firmer steps for future actions. What we can do with science is very broad, perhaps limitless. It is almost impossible to solve the problem of what we will do first from this range of options with a scientific activity independent of philosophy. It is the job of philosophy to decide which of the potential steps within this spectrum should not be taken (the production of the atomic bomb is a potential step forward for science, but its production is controversial).

In addition, the conceptual debates of philosophy can cause ethical debates that have some practical uses in neuroscience. For example, neuroscience helps us to understand whether a fetus has neural activity, while philosophy considers what will constitute the personality of the fetus. There is no way science can say anything about when the fetus is a “person” with rights. Being able to observe neuronal activity does not mean we can predict more than physical functions (yet). Therefore, although the data presented by science can be taken as a basis on subjects such as abortion, science alone cannot reach a conclusion about them. Philosophical analysis of scientific data is required. In this way, philosophy helps us make wiser decisions about social issues like abortion.

Apart from its practical benefits, philosophy also provides guidance on many theoretical issues that neuroscience alone cannot illuminate. The current framework of neuroscience includes research such as relating behavioural phenomena to specific areas and activities in the brain. However, there are many phenomena that

neuroscience has not yet explained, as these studies must be based entirely on empirical data. Philosophy, on the other hand, puts the basic concepts into discussion at the points where science cannot yet give 100% definitive answers. Thus, while science investigates only measurable and observable phenomena, such as which neurological phenomena are related to certain mental events, philosophy seeks answers to questions such as “What is the nature of consciousness”, “Is consciousness a fundamental feature of the universe.” While neuroscience has the potential to answer these questions, that day does not seem imminent for now. Until that day comes, discussing these issues with philosophy is very valuable in terms of laying the groundwork for future research and guiding future research. We can find the roots of today’s neuroscience in the history of philosophy (Hippocrates’ brain hypothesis, concept of ‘psuche’ etc.) Considering the ever-advancing nature of neuroscience, we cannot say that these questions are unimportant or meaningless. In other words, philosophy still performs an important function in areas that science has not yet encompassed, and it makes preliminary preparations for science.

When we look at all of this, we can see that philosophy is not dead, on the contrary, we need it more than in the past. In an age where neuroscience and neurotechnology are on the verge of a breakthrough, the uncertainties that these developments will bring inflame the philosophical debates about where science should be directed. The debates created by these innovations in terms of morality, society and philosophy of mind do not seem to be resolved by science itself.