For quite some time, freedom of thought has been under siege within the medical profession. More often than not, the war against new ideas is justified in the name of science. When a discipline like science becomes so certain of itself that it believes it can manage without periodic reexamination of its basic principles, it starts to resemble a doctrine. The more doctrinaire it is, the less receptive to outside input it becomes, and the more it balks at challenges to its authority. In the final analysis, medical science justifies its assertions simply by virtue of the claim that it is science. As a consequence, medicine has become intolerant of freethinking and is quickly falling behind the curve of new paradigm medical theory and practice.

We romanticize science as man’s search for truth when, in actuality, it often serves as defender of the status quo. Rather than a tool for exploration, science has become a means to stifle inquiry and free speech. Science easily becomes an ideology when a civilization neglects its philosophical heritage, spiritual development, and moral responsibilities. The only answer to scientific overreach is a return to freethinking. Just like freedom of religion, we need freedom of medical choice, and the freedom to debate basic scientific and medical principles. To do otherwise runs contrary to the spirit of science itself.

The modern myth of scientific progress posits that science inevitably evolves toward greater precision, certainty, and understanding. We take it for granted that contemporary science provides a more accurate representation of reality than does the science of bygone eras. But this is a highly debatable point that philosophers of science have wrangled over for decades. It is true only in the sense that it applies in a specific and limited way to the material dimension of existence. Science focuses its attention on matter but says nothing about the immaterial— that
aspect of our lives that involves purpose, meaning, spirit, and soul. It treats emotion, intuition, imagination, and even psychology as ancillary topics. As far as neuroscience is concerned, consciousness exists only as a byproduct of brain anatomy and function.

Modern science has become increasingly imperialistic, overstepping its bounds and staking claim to basic truths that historically have been the exclusive province of religion, theology, and metaphysics. The message is clear: The only reality is the hard, cold reality of material existence. All else is unscientific, insignificant, and of little relevance to human health.

Modern life is defined largely by the tangible, quantifiable reality that science has mapped out for our convenience, drained of all its symbolic, synchronistic, and spiritual meaning. Our form of medicine is also a reflection of that same influence. Human illness has become a strictly physical event. There is no purpose to suffering; it is merely an inconvenience, a glitch in the biological program that needs to be overridden. By severing consciousness from disease, science believes that it has purged the program of superstition.

When we open our eyes to compare our personal healthrelated experiences with what medicine teaches us, we begin to realize that something is amiss. Physical medicine is incapable of adequately addressing the deeper causes of illness and the needs of the psyche. We collectively buy into the legitimacy of the external authority of science and medicine, no longer believing our own personal experiences. Medical science is quick to point out that subjective experience cannot be trusted. The rational theories of medicine take precedence over the experiential truths of patients.

I believe that this conflict between scientific knowledge and personal experience is the crisis of our time. The purported unreliability of subjective experience is one of the primary tenets of the scientific method. Science has been waging war against subjective experience for a very long time, and it has taken its toll on Western culture. In the same way that organized religion makes us hesitant to trust personal spiritual truths, medical science has undermined our confidence to make healthcare choices that are in our own best interests.

Personal experience should not need validation from science to justify itself, although it is certainly nice when the two agree. Medical science, on the other hand, does need to be verified by personal experience. If a medical theory or therapy does not bear itself out in the practical experiences of patients, then one must wonder about its reliability. Restoring trust in experiential knowledge will be the first step in rectifying this imbalance.
Modern science has no ground to stand on when it comes to the larger truths of human existence. It fails to realize that its discoveries have distinct limits—they apply only to the material universe. Because science has deliberately divorced itself from right-brain input, it is incapable of achieving a truly holistic understanding of the universe and of medicine and healing.

Western culture has become dangerously alienated from its own spiritual roots. Into this vacuum steps science, functioning as a substitute for religion for many, providing a sense of hope and meaning in an otherwise impersonal and materially impermanent universe. When science fulfills this need, however, it is in danger of becoming just another competing dogma. When science becomes an ideology, it is no longer science; it is scientism.

Whereas religious fanaticism once led to the persecution of heretics who dared to question, it is now conceivable that we are not far off from scientistic persecution of those who challenge the dogmas of science. There is no greater evidence of this than in the medical arena, where ideas proposed by holistic practitioners are routinely rejected without fair deliberation, regardless of their merit. They are branded pseudoscience the minute they deviate from conventional theory. In short, they constitute a heretical threat to medical dogma.

Conventional science's lack of awareness of its own metaphysical presuppositions is the very thing that predisposes it to scientistic influence. The solution is to educate ourselves regarding the differences between science as it was originally conceived, science as it is construed by mainstream medicine today, the particularly disturbing modern trend called scientism, and a more authentic and inclusive form of future medical science that will no longer ignore the lessons learned and knowledge gained from subjective experience.

Most philosophy of medicine is limited to unadventurous discussions of bioethical dilemmas posed by orthodox medical practice. Basic metaphysical assumptions are never questioned. True philosophy of medicine that examines medicine's philosophical roots has no real voice. It is important for patient and practitioner alike to become cognizant of the beliefs that underpin Western medical principles. Without this, it will be difficult to institute any kind of meaningful change.

Medicine allows its unconscious philosophy to guide its practices. Putting the cart before the horse, medicine looks for evidence to confirm its predetermined beliefs regarding the nature of illness and cure. It puts theory before practice. When patient outcomes do not corroborate its
Scientism: The Impact of Neglecting Medical Philosophy

Written by Larry Malerba, D.O.
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Theories, it persists, forcing the issue in the hope of making reality conform to theory. A simple example of this is the failure of antibiotics to keep up with increasing microbial resistance. Reluctant to revisit the basic principles of germ theory, medicine continues to assume that the only viable approach to infectious disease is to kill bacteria and viruses. This leaves no other option but to continue doing more of the same.

Dysfunctional medical practices and poor patient outcomes begin with false beliefs regarding the nature of health and illness. This makes it nearly impossible for conventional medicine to develop a coherent theory of disease development and treatment. Without a conscious philosophical framework to guide it, medicine has deteriorated into a haphazard collection of treatments and procedures that are subject to change at a moment’s notice. The latest study contradicts a previous study, which invalidates the original study. This is not, as we are led to believe, the trial-and-error of science at work. It is medical science navigating without awareness or understanding of its own guiding principles.

I am concerned about modern science’s pervasive disregard for experiential authority, its increasing disrespect for the sacred, and its general encroachment into territory where it does not belong. The same applies to medicine as a whole—it makes light of patient input by calling it anecdotal, focuses almost exclusively on the physical, and downplays the role of consciousness in health and healing. It is the trend in popular culture to refer to those who critique science or medicine as “science deniers.” Many fall for this trap, arguing that science should not be open to criticism. A healthy scientific culture should welcome criticism and review.

A common debate within philosophy of science is whether science can reveal the true nature of reality or whether it is a tool used to achieve practical ends. I am more concerned with whether medical science can serve its original mission of healing the sick. However, it is important to understand what reality means from a holistic perspective. Holistic reality encompasses all phenomena, including consciousness and subjective experience, not just the objective, material aspect of human health that medicine deems reality. Healing is a holistic phenomenon that involves much more than just targeted symptomatic relief, temporary palliation, or forcible suppression. It implies that the overall health of a person is moving in a positive direction over the course of time.

Contemporary medical theory is increasingly out of step with the leading currents of our time. What is needed is a renaissance in the field of medical philosophy. In concurring with medicine’s materialistic approach to healing, academic medical philosophy abdicates its responsibility, thereby losing an opportunity to make significant contributions to the advancement of medical science. We need a practical medical philosophy that addresses the
real needs of patients and practitioners. It is time to bridge the gap, so that philosophy becomes indispensable once again to the art and science of healing.

Adapted from Metaphysics & Medicine: Restoring Freedom of Thought to the Art and Science of Healing.