TOWARD A NEW ERA OF COMPLEXITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

THE INTERACTIONIST TURN

ABSTRACT

Recently a debate occurred between cognitive scientist Steven Pinker and the New Republic’s literary editor Leon Wieseltier on the relative place of science and the humanities. It serves as a petri dish for what divides today’s science and humanities and, equally important, for the unquestioned assumptions they share. Dividing them is the humanities wish for détente with science premised on the claim for “non-overlapping magisteria”: the humanities’ (culture) vis a vis science (nature). On the other side, science wishes to foster consilience, but one that ultimately absorbs culture, the humanities, within the laws of nature, science. Uniting these two magisteria, science and the humanities, is a culture-nature dualism to which, in different ways, each subscribes: if nature impacts culture, the relation is not symmetric: culture does not causally impact nature. Conversely, culture-nature interactionism asserts that increasingly the natural world is a joint product of cultural and natural forces: not only are we observers of nature, more and more we become agents of its change. This shift transforms the received meanings of both science and humanities, ushering in a new era of complexity. As culture evolves, it discovers ways of leveraging its scientific knowledge of the forces of nature to its ends, at first locally, then less locally.

Laurence Foss