

PHILOSOPHY

50 YEAR ANNIVERSARY: MORE IS DIFFERENT

4.08.2022

"Intensive research goes for fundamental laws ... there is always much less intensive research going on".

4 August 1972, Volume 177, Number 4047

SCIENCE

More Is Different

Broken symmetry and the nature of the hierarchical structure of science.

P. W. Anderson

The reductionist hypothesis may still be a topic for controversy among philosophers, but among the great majority of active scientists I think it is accepted without question. The workings of our minds and bodies, and of all the animate or inanimate matter of which we have any detailed knowledge, are assumed to be controlled by the same set of fundamental laws, which except under certain extreme conditions we feel we know pretty well.

Explanation of phenomena in terms of known fundamental laws. As always, distinctions of this kind are not unambiguous, but they are clear in most cases. Solid state physics, plasma physics, and perhaps also biology are extensive. High energy physics and a good part of nuclear physics are intensive. There is always much less intensive research going on than extensive. Once new fundamental laws are discovered, a large and ever increasing activity begins in order to apply the discoveries to hitherto unexplained phenomena. Thus, there are two dimensions to basic research. The frontier of science extends all

less relevance they seem to have to the very real problems of the rest of science, much less to those of society.

The constructionist hypothesis breaks down when confronted with the twin difficulties of scale and complexity. The behavior of large and complex aggregates of elementary particles, it turns out, is not to be understood in terms of a simple extrapolation of the properties of a few particles. Instead, at each level of complexity entirely new properties appear, and the understanding of the new behaviors requires research which I think is as fundamental in its nature as any other. That is, it seems to me that one may array the sciences roughly linearly in a hierarchy, according to the idea: The elementary entities of science X obey the laws of science Y.

X	Y
solid state or	elementary particle
many-body physics	physics
chemistry	many-body physics
molecular biology	chemistry
cell biology	molecular biology
•	•
•	•
•	•

<https://www.science.org/doi/pdf/10.1126/science.177.4047.393>

hinted by [@spornslab](https://twitter.com/spornslab)

