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## SCIENCE AS A POWERFUL PRACTICE

NANCEY MURPHY

Geoffrey Cantor's paper, "Quakers and Science: An Overview," is a valuable study of the complications involved in forming a judgment about the participation of Quakers in science, relative to that of others. He points in particular to the difficulty of knowing the attitudes of those who have not addressed the subject in writing. What I found most interesting in the paper was his attention to the question of why Quakers tended to choose to study biology rather than physics, and in particular his thesis that observational sciences were preferred to mathematical ones due, on the one hand, to the high value placed on observation of nature for its own sake, and on the other to suspicion of the pride involved in speculative reason.

Grace Jantzen's paper scarcely mentions science, dealing instead with the role of Quakers in providing technological resources for the industrial revolution. It does have the value of raising the question of how to relate to morally ambiguous societal structures and powers. She asks whether the industrial revolution and the capitalist system with which it is associated was, on the whole, a good thing to which to contribute, and also points to the difficulties for pacifists in defining what does and does not constitute participation in warfare.

The message I take from these two papers together is recognition of the complexity of judging social practices (such as science) and the difficulties of avoiding practices judged to be evil (e.g., warfare). So what I hope to do here is to provide some conceptual resources for thinking about the morality of science as a social practice. My chief resource is the ethical work of Alasdair MacIntyre. I shall correct and amplify his contribution using the works of Radical-Reformation theologians James McClendon and John Howard Yoder.

In his highly acclaimed *After Virtue* MacIntyre set out to revive and repair the tradition of moral reasoning that focuses on the virtues.<sup>1</sup> The central problem for the virtue tradition is the fact that there are competing catalogues of virtues. For example, Quaker humility would have been counted a vice in many contexts in Ancient Greece, while for Aristotle, the exercise of theoretical reason was

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humankind's highest calling. So how are we to know which qualities truly deserve the designation of "virtue"?

MacIntyre's move to answer this question begins with a technical definition of a practice:

By a "practice" I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>2</sup>

Virtues can then be defined in a preliminary way as acquired human characteristics that are necessary for the achievement of goods internal to practices. Science is a practice in this sense. The chief internal good at which it aims is, of course, knowledge. (Internal goods are distinguished from external goods, those not intrinsic to the practice itself, such as financial rewards.) Qualities necessary for the achievement of science's internal goods include, as the Quakers realized, appreciative observation of nature and honesty. These are therefore virtues for the scientist.

MacIntyre's account cannot end here because of the simple fact that one cannot participate in all social practices—one has to choose among them and balance one's participation in those one does choose. In order to make such decisions, individuals need to ask how a given practice fits into the whole of their own life stories. For example, should science be avoided if the passion it requires interferes with one's religious duties? Should missionary work be avoided at this stage of life if it interferes with one's domestic responsibilities?

MacIntyre further claims that these life stories themselves need to be evaluated in light of some concept of the *telos*—the goal or purpose—of human life as such. But to know what the purpose of human life is requires an account of ultimate reality, such as is provided by large-scale philosophical or religious traditions. Such an account allows us to decide, for instance, whether religious observance takes precedence over the acquisition of knowledge of nature, or whether evangelism is more important than marital duties. Thus, MacIntyre argues against the grain of modern moral theories that sought to free moral reasoning from religious tradition.

So far I hope to have shown that MacIntyre provides excellent resources for ordering the questions that need to be asked regarding the morality of participation in science; namely, what are the virtues required for achieving the goods internal to science, and how might one go about fitting the practice of science into a good life, directed toward the intrinsic goals of humankind as perceived by one's tradition? However, MacIntyre has been criticized for an overly optimistic account of social practices. He has *defined* them as aiming at the achievement of goods. While institutions can deform practices, he believes, practices themselves are inherently good. What then are we to make of criticisms such as the claim that science is aimed at domination of nature. And what are we to say of military activity—are there not military “practices” as well?

A more helpful understanding of social practices is found in the writings of James McClendon and other theologians in the Radical-Reformation tradition. These theologians have benefited from New Testament scholars' recovery of the Apostle Paul's doctrine of the principalities and powers. These powers include governmental, religious, and social institutions. According to Paul, they are God's creatures, designed for ordering human life, yet they are “fallen” in the sense that they tend to pursue their own ends rather than serving God's purposes. McClendon forges a concept of “powerful practices” by considering social practices in light of the moral ambiguity Paul attributed to institutions of power.

McClendon says that wherever Christ's victory is proclaimed, the corrupted reign of the powers is challenged, and yet they remain in being—in the time between the resurrection and the final coming of Christ, they remain in an ambiguous state. They delimit and define the social morality of Jesus' followers; to them the disciple must witness concerning the reversal of power achieved in Christ's resurrection. There is a hint in the New Testament that the final destiny of all these powers—civil, military, economic, traditional, cultural, social, *and religious*—will be not their abolition but their full restoration (Eph. 1:10; 3:10). “So the task of Christians confronting a world of *powerful practices*...requires almost infinite adjustments, distinction, and gradations.”<sup>3</sup>

What McClendon's analysis shows is that we should not expect to be able to make distinctions between practices that are thoroughly evil and those that are thoroughly good—we should expect to find varying mixtures of divine providence and self-serving corruption.

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Christians need constant discernment regarding when and how to participate or withdraw.

A second conclusion, and this is confirmed by Jantzen's analysis, is that the adjustments and distinctions that Christians make in confronting powerful practices such as science or industry will depend on eschatology—that is, on the doctrine of last things. Jantzen has called attention to the difference made by expectations that the end is far or near. Early Quakers' enthusiasm for radical social change waned when they lost confidence in the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. Jantzen is critical of Quakers' accommodation to the *saeculum*, and so the question for all of us who do not expect the end of this world to come soon is how to live in the interim.

McClendon's analysis points to an equally important question: will the end involve restoration or destruction of the present order? There are two extreme views regarding the Kingdom of God. One is exemplified in the nineteenth-century liberal Protestant view that equated the Kingdom with inevitable human progress. The opposite view is prevalent among American fundamentalists; namely, that the Kingdom begins only after the end of the present aeon. The former view promotes indiscriminate participation in societal practices, but leaves one open to disillusionment when it becomes empirically obvious that the world is not the Kingdom. The latter encourages withdrawal.

McClendon and Yoder both take a middle position. Yoder claims that the New Testament sees our present age, from Pentecost to the *parousia*, as a period of the overlapping of two aeons. These are not distinct periods of time, for they now exist simultaneously. They differ in nature or direction. One points backwards to human history before or outside of Christ; the other points forward to the fullness of the Kingdom of God, of which it is a foretaste.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while there will be a radical transformation, we must expect continuity as well as discontinuity.

I am not able to present Yoder's arguments for his position here, but I do want to suggest that this appears to be an eschatology better suited than its rivals for sustaining Christians in the difficult task of discerning when and how to participate in morally ambiguous social practices. I have provided no recipe for determining proper Christian attitudes toward warfare, science, industry, capitalism, but I hope to have accomplished two things: One is to have presented a

rationale for expecting that there will be no simple, clear-cut answers. The other is to have offered a catalogue of the questions that need to be considered in forming such judgments.

NOTES

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
2. *After Virtue*, 187.
3. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 176.
4. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), 55.