Is Ethics Also Among the Sciences? An Evaluation of Nancey Murphy and George Ellis's Theological Proposals

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For a long time it has been a common assumption that ethics and science belong to entirely different categories of knowledge. In the modern scientific conception of the world everything happened according to physically determined laws, and thus it became increasingly difficult to anchor morality to an objective order in the universe. Consequently, it has been customary to hold that moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference (values) that cannot be derived from statements of "facts." Even when morality was defended as a rational enterprise, it was seen as another kind of rationality than the one used to explain "facts" within the natural sciences. Otherwise, the dominance of determined laws would make impossible a realm of human freedom and responsibility.[1] If this is the true picture, then moral disputes can hardly be *rationally* settled within a scientific discourse.

There is today a growing dissatisfaction with such a moral vacuum. Important ethical questions are raised within natural, political, and economic sciences, and therefore an increasing number of scientists find it unacceptable to leave this decisive aspect out of scientific discourse. For many, it is just such a refusal of public and scientific evaluation of morality which bears partial responsibility for the (post)modern crises of fragmentation and relativism. Thus, some would argue, it is necessary to overcome the modern bifurcation between fact and value in favor of a more integrative and unified understanding of knowledge and ethics.

This article seeks to examine whether an ethical presence among the sciences is only an occasional rupture of normality – as a king Saul among the prophets – or whether it is indeed possible to overcome current bifurcations.

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From the tradition of the Radical Reformation, a connection between ethics and science is not unproblematic. Such a position has often implied trust in a generally accessible morality, a standpoint which in practice has only served to justify dominant moral views as "natural." Is not science the imperialistic power which subjugates everything that is other? And is not morality (to change the metaphor) rather to be pursued at a prophetic distance from the empire, as a transgression and a rupture of "scientific normality?"

Nancey Murphy and George F. R. Ellis in their recent book *On the Moral Nature of the Universe*[2] make a brave attempt to pursue the scientific nature of ethics from within an Anabaptist (or Radical reformation) heritage, especially as it has been formulated by John H. Yoder. Murphy is a philosopher and an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren in the US, and Ellis is professor of Mathematics and Astronomy and a Quaker activist from South Africa. Such an attempt is a promising point of departure for an evaluation of the possibilities and limitations of the claim that ethics is among the sciences. Is it possible to argue for the rationality of ethics, without subjugating the Anabaptist heritage to the dominating powers of society and science?

On the moral nature of the universe

Murphy and Ellis are convinced that any wall of separation between science and faith is most unfortunate. Their book is a powerful challenge to modern assumptions that have pushed ethics, metaphysics, and theology away from the public arena that for too long has been controlled by so-called value-free science and political pragmatism. Instead of separation, they seek to maximize the overlaps between reason and ethics. Ethics must again be a scientific study. However, such an attempt presumes that ethical statements refer not just to personal taste but somehow to structures in our common universe. Ethics must have an objective base in the moral nature of the universe. And if one rejects the idea that all ethics can be reduced to "facts" in the material realm, then this assumes a transcendent goodness and beauty that is beyond natural explanation but still present in the world as a claim on us to seek the ultimate good. Thus, a claim that ethics is among the sciences must first clarify how one ought to understand the presence of a transcendent and final purpose (*telos*). Further, metaphysical and theological perspectives must be interrelated with the structures of the universe and, consequently, within the

scientific domain (the question of ontology). Second, such an undertaking must show how ethical reasoning can be evaluated in a scientific manner (the question of epistemology).

Murphy and Ellis's ontological presuppositions imply that the universe is seen as a unified whole. Of course, they do not want to reduce every phenomena of reality to the same level. Instead, they regard the universe as a multi-levelled complex order where different systems hierarchically co-ordinate with one another (19-22).[3] The total hierarchical system must then be seen as an open and incomplete system that needs a transcendent reference. Thus, theology and morality can be placed at the top of the hierarchy.[4] Ethics (and theology) becomes a science without being subordinated to the categories of natural science.

However, in order to integrate ethics into this stratified world-view, Murphy and Ellis must split the hierarchy into two branches above the level of physics, chemistry and biology. The reason for this split is that they distinguish between top-down *effects* and top-down *actions*. The first branch includes the sciences dealing with non-human realities. In this material realm, they accept that the hierarchical system is rigorously determined by a set of laws that cannot be altered. In order to distinguish this branch from the one guided by intentional actions, they differentiate a branch consisting of ecology, geology, astrophysics and cosmology from another including psychology and social and applied sciences (see 86). This split gives a specific location for ethics. Moreover, they regard this as their central contribution to the dialogue between theology and science and to the notion of the hierarchical order (see xvi and 18). This location of ethics depends on the assertion that every system which includes intentions is driven by goals. But goals presuppose an implicit or explicit vision of the good quality of life. Thus, "the hierarchy of the human sciences calls for a top layer . . . . [I]t is necessary to have an answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of human life, or to use a less ambiguous term, of the final purpose or *telos* of human life. This has traditionally been understood as the province of ethics" (87). The suggestion that ethics should be at the top of the human-sciences branch does not imply that they contend the *telos* of human morality can be derived as a bottom-up distillation from the social sciences. The ethical core can surely be supported from below by the social sciences. But Murphy and Ellis clearly acknowledge that it can only

be grounded and confirmed from the top down in a metaphysical or theological interpretation of the nature of ultimate reality (173). There is no claim that ethics (and the goal of social sciences) can be founded on a referential relation with the objective orders of creation.

In relation to the tendency of science to subjugate everything that is other, Murphy and Ellis propose an ethical core that seemingly challenges normal explanations of the moral character of the universe: "Self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind's highest goal" (118). Their claim is that the core of a scientific interpretation of the universe ought to be the notion of the self-emptying of God – a core they summarize with the Greek concept of *kenosis* used in Phil 2:7. Though they argue for the ecumenical significance of this view, their presentation is largely shaped by the Anabaptist tradition and more specifically by Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder (see 173-201).[5] From Yoder's kenotic doctrine of God and from his non-coercive understanding of the relationship between God and the universe, ethical pacifism logically follows. But ethical pacifism is not just an individual program for some heroic Christians. It is rather the clue for interpreting the universe (*cosmos*) and for social-scientific programs (*polis*). So instead of viewing biological evolution as confirming the survival of the fittest, they propose a kenotic reading of evolution as a recycling of life through giving of one's life; that is, a cruciform cosmos (211-13).[6] And instead of accepting the inevitability of violence in all societies, they argue for the social possibility of a less violent society.[7] The kenotic core also suggests a doctrine of divine self-limitation and vulnerability: the relation between God and creation is noncoercive (209). Thus, their scientific program provides the rationale for a non-interventionist divine activity within physical reality, as well as God's respect for the freedom of others even to the point of evil and suffering. This does not just make space for freedom, it also explains why the ultimate goal of nature is hidden: God does not force us to believe.

When Murphy and Ellis formulate such an ethical core, they obviously move beyond the observation of present realities. And they underscore this by citing Yoder's rejection of the view that the Incarnation ratifies the assumed nature as revelation. "The point is just the opposite; that God broke through the borders of our standard definitions of what is human, and gave a new, formative definition in Jesus" (183).[8] In some of the most challenging parts of the book, the authors then explicate the social embodiment of their ethic in

contrast to most current social opinions. In the realm of jurisprudence, they reject the present penal system based on retribution and state monopoly in favor of a system that aims at restoration to the community (122-26). They discuss alternative economic strategies that do not presuppose selfishness (126-31) and argue for consensus decision-making in the political realm (131-35). Finally, they attempt to produce empirical confirmations for non-violent strategies (141-72). In the current situation, with pressing problems to face, the only ethical science of interest is one that can stimulate a social embodiment that goes beyond present arrangements. As such, it surely takes us far beyond conventional views of scientific normality.

From such a critical and transcendental stance, is it possible for Murphy and Ellis to argue that ethics is among the sciences (the question of epistemology)? First, ethical convictions about goals and intentions are, as a matter of fact, presupposed in the social sciences. And since to a great extent they structure and direct these sciences, it becomes mandatory to evaluate even this higher level. For only when the end of human existence is explicated can one make scientific studies about the means for proper social transformations (see 142). To argue for a pure science that ignores the need to apply the results of scientific research in social management is, for Murphy and Ellis, a form of "academic snobbery" (79). In order to make useful contributions to the running of society, social scientists must be clear about worthy goals for a society. Thus the authors argue the practical necessity of the ethical belonging among the sciences.

Secondly, as seen above, Murphy and Ellis divide their hierarchy in order to make space for intentional actions. Yet this split is not the traditional hermeneutical distinction between natural sciences and human sciences that would question the scientific character of ethics. The scientific character of ethics, and of the social sciences, does not rest on a qualitative distinction among different branches of science. Of course, it is obvious that ethical concepts and judgments are not amenable to scientific testing as we ordinarily understand it – namely, through an assessment of their correspondence with facts. The scientific evaluation of ethics must rather take the form of implanting, testing, and refining a transcendentally grounded vision, something which can be done only in retrospect. However, Murphy and Ellis claim that this does not make ethics radically different from other sciences.

Their book presupposes a methodology that Murphy has formulated in dependence on the research program of Imre Lakatos,[9] for whom no scientific theory is derived simply from observed facts. It always includes a core theory that unifies the program by providing an overall view of the nature of the investigated object. This hard core is itself not possible to derive from facts or to falsify directly. It is rather the inferred theories of the lower levels – the auxiliary hypothesis – that are amenable to testing and that then confirm, refine, or discard the whole theory. According to Lakatos, scientists are justified in sticking to a research program as long as it is progressive in predicting new facts and solving anomalies. Thus he can construe the history of science as an evolutionary history progressively moving upward to universality.

Murphy and Ellis are confident that ethics can be presupposed as a research program which makes a central core immune to direct falsification. It is the auxiliary hypothesis that can be examined scientifically. They give several examples. It must be shown that an ethical program can be applied in a realistic form of life (the possibility of social embodiment) and can give a consistent account of the wealth of information and data provided by the social sciences. The ethical vision is confirmed only if it is somehow in harmony with the character of reality as it is expounded, for example, in the natural sciences (205-18). Furthermore, according to Lakatos, it is crucial that a research program be progressive through content-increasing stages by a capacity to predict future confirmations. Finally, Murphy and Ellis add, in reference to Alasdair MacIntyre, that an ethical research program must be able to reinterpret and incorporate its rival alternatives. As a cumulative argument, such work can provide a good test as to whether an ethical theory is a "true" reflection of the moral nature of the universe. It is no surprise that this Lakatos-Murphy methodology has attracted philosophers of science in the theological camp (e.g., Ian G. Barbour, Phillip Clayton, Philip Hefner, and Robert John Russell).

In relation to the hermeneutical division, it is crucial to notice that Murphy and Ellis emphatically counter a dualistic separation between nature and social being. The natural order and the social realm must be synthesised within one cosmological view. Thus, they are not content to end up with two differentiated branches. These branches must be integrated not just at the bottom of physical and biological entities, but also at the topmost level that discloses an idea of an ultimate reality explaining the character of both branches (204). "The link

between the two," they say, "is provided by an account of the moral character of God and of God's purposes in creating both the Cosmos and the Polis" (3).

Ethics without methodologism and Constantinianism

Murphy and Ellis make an exciting attempt to combine Yoder's non-conformist theology with Imre Lakatos's philosophy of science. And they surely eliminate many of the traditional shortcomings found in arguments for the ethical belonging among the sciences. Yet, while their attempt is promising, I argue that their proposals crumble due to their effort to integrate Yoder's theology within Lakatos's research program. It is difficult to see how they can escape two of Yoder's objection to modern ethics: (1) that conflicts in science can be solved by methodological procedures (methodologism), and (2) that ethics cannot be formulated from the perspective of a minority (the symbol of this idea is, for Yoder, the change when "Christendom becomes the Empire" in the time of Constantine).

First, the scientific character of Murphy and Ellis's program depends on the possibility of being able "to isolate a core theory – a central thesis from which all the rest of the theoretical structure . . . follows" (178). According to Yoder, the essence of methodologism in academic moral reasoning is the domination of a search for a first principle which is "beyond" or "beneath" considerations of the moral practice.[10] There are obvious differences between "a first principle" and "a hard core." A hard core is not prior to, or foundational for, the morality of a community but follows from such practice. Yet, when academic moral reasoning condenses practical morality into a hard core, it inevitably turns into an epistemological debate and an endless discussion concerning which hard core to accept. To use Murphy's own example, it becomes a question of whether Schleiermacher's, Bultmann's, or Yoder's hard core best express "what Christianity is basically all about."[11]

In Yoder's conception of the Anabaptist moral tradition, Christianity is not about something basic that can be condensed into a theoretical core, but it is rather the life of Jesus and the social embodiment of discipleship within the church. That is, at its heart there is a *"practical moral reasoning."*[12] Such practical moral reasoning functions differently than a research program. It is not a deduction from some central core or value within a coherent system (or an application of universally valid rules; neither is it simply doing "what the

scripture says"). For Yoder, practical moral reasoning is rather the skill of binding and loosing described in Matt. 18:15-18.[13] A particular moral choice is made in communal conversation (where two or three are present), in a context of forgiveness, reconciliation, and listening to witnesses. To explain this communal hermeneutics, Yoder asserts that "we need to ask not how an idea works but how the community works";[14] that is, how prophecy, memory, teaching, and supervision function together within a community whose members seek to be true followers of Jesus. Instead of a general epistemological rationality, Yoder contends that "communion works as an epistemology." The community's reasoning therefore does not follow strict epistemological rules: "Pluralism as to epistemological method is not a counsel of despair but part of the Good News."[15] Thus, Yoder's position seems opposed to a confident trust in methods with unifying ambitions. Rather than putting a methodological construction at the center of moral academic reasoning, it seems more appropriate to focus on practical moral reasoning and scientific practice.

Instead of connecting Yoder with Lakatos's philosophy of science, we should see him as standing closer to scientific practice as it has been described by Paul K. Feyerabend.[16] In a famous debate between these two philosophers of science, Lakatos put forward the rationalist case that there is an identifiable set of rules of scientific method which make all good science, science. Feyerabend attacked this rationalism and developed an "epistemological anarchist" conclusion (see his *Against Method*) that there are no useful and exceptionless methodological rules governing the progress of science or the growth of knowledge. Great scientists are methodological opportunists who use any move that comes to hand. The history of science is so complex that if we insist on a general methodology which will not inhibit progress, the only "rule" he could accept would be the useless suggestion: "anything goes." Without accepting all of Feyerabend's criticism, I find his view closer to Yoder's practical moral reasoning that also uses every possible argument that suits the situation.

It is also difficult to see how one can compare competing moral and theological programs in order to determine their relative progress and degeneration. Murphy refers in other contexts to MacIntyre's description of how the Augustinianism of Thomas was rationally superior to its major rivals since it succeeded in incorporating Aristotelian philosophy. Yet it remains to be shown that the notion of "hard core" illuminates this process in any significant

manner. To take another example, how could Murphy and Ellis's idea of "progress and degeneration" clarify conflicts in the time of the Reformation? Ought one to continue within the catholic program? Or has that program been counter-productive, so that one ought to switch to Luther's, Calvin's, or the Anabaptists' program? And how can one evaluate which program has been more fruitful in explaining results and predicting advances in knowledge? The procedure is so well-defined but so wide that it can support anything. From the history of the Radical Reformation, one should be suspicious of arguments based on the historical success of a moral tradition. Thus, it seems better to accept that the moral realm consists of a practical activity with such diverse and conflicting ingredients that it can hardly be systematized in the manner of Lakatos.

A practical moral reasoning implies a more humble position. Murphy and Ellis affirm that a core feature of kenotic ethics is "to empty ourselves of pride daily, to walk humbly with God" (195). Yet, as scientists working with Lakatos's scientific methodology, they argue that "the time has come to attempt the reconstruction of a unified worldview" (1) and thus they aim at rebutting the charge that a kenotic worldview would be conceivable for only a minority group (173). Surely, they can appeal to Yoder's statement that the ministry of Jesus has cosmic significance (201). But it is a bigger step to create a systematic analogy between the cross of Christ and phenomena such as the interpretation of evolution, the penal system in the modern state, and transactions within a market economy. Yoder's practical moral reasoning is stretched beyond its limits when transformed into such a unified worldview.

Can Murphy and Ellis's proposal really be reconciled with the Anabaptist renunciation of Constantinianism? Can the idea of a unified worldview be separated from coercive strategies? Isn't such a hierarchical structure all too reminiscent of a time when the church was at the head of society? An Anabaptist position would better reject the position of dominance that belongs to a science claiming to integrate all knowledge within its domain. Certainly Yoder agrees that the kingdom of God has a claim on all life – but not as a vision of a harmonious solution within a unified worldview. The main target of his criticism remains ecclesial involvement with the great powers of empire and state (Constantinianism). These dominating powers will not take a critical stance toward the present order and its moral views. Over against them, it is imperative

that someone brings an awareness of transcendence that shatters conformity. Thus, Yoder maintains: "Nonconformity is the warrant for the promise of another world" and "it is the function of minority communities to remember and to create utopian visions."[17] The task is not to provide an entire worldview but rather to keep science humble by deconstructing present structures of dominance, giving hints of other possible social constructions of morality, and confronting rigid systems with surprises and questions. A non-conformist morality must adopt a minority position. As such it can make the wider scientific community a little more hesitant in its pronouncements. Murphy and Ellis provide many suggestions for such a task which are much more fruitful than their epistemological theory.

Several passages of their book disclose a more limited ambition. Since they maintain that the transcendental level provides the foundation for an ethical hard core, it follows that the interpretation of social data and the rational standards for evaluating it partly depend on the chosen *telos*. So if their hierarchical order is correct, then we have no possibility of determining the moral nature of the universe without knowledge of the ultimate goal. The scientific attempt to determine that nature thus shows that what nature is is a highly contested question, depending on the *telos* one has selected. It is therefore no surprise that proponents of different positions regarding jurisprudence, economics, and politics can all appeal to "nature" for confirmation. For example, even though Murphy and Ellis's idea of a "cruciform nature" is exciting, it is equally possible to argue that the evolutionary process confirms the necessity of violence and struggle. The contribution that a reference to nature can offer in such a conflict, which seems typical of most ethical debates, is nothing more than "a desk-thumping, foot-stamping shout of 'Reality.'"[18] Thus, the scientific analogy leads Murphy and Ellis to overstate the possibilities of testing theories with scientific observations of "nature."

Murphy and Ellis also accept the limitations of their scientific approach when turning to the reality of freedom. A choice of *telos* affects not only the human interpretation of reality, but also the manner in which we construct social relations and, if we accept the partial social construction of a person, the construction of human nature. Consequently, they counter Reinhold Niebuhr's account of a "fixed human nature" by claiming that changes in the social environment (preferable in a less coercive direction) also make possible the

development of human nature (150-51). Thus, the contrast between different ethical research programs concerns not just different interpretations but also diverse social realities, from the level of different constructions of empirical experiments up to the formation of institutional organizations. Of course, such freedom is not unlimited (even though it is difficult to determine the limitations for social interrelation). But the more one accentuates freedom and consequently its possible misuse, the more difficult it will become to instill a universal law-like character in social organizations. And if one follows the logic of a kenotic theology, it would even seem part of the divine strategy to renounce coercive interference in social life in order to uphold *the* One rational order. In analogy with a vulnerable God, a non-Constantinian and non-coercive morality (as well as ontology) must focus on self-limitation and vulnerability and, thus, on contingency and openness.

In the final stage, Murphy and Ellis also recognize the rather restricted result of their scientific argumentation: "Note that this same account of divine action, including the emphasis on human freedom, makes it entirely reasonable to expect that there should be a variety of accounts of ultimate reality, many in conflict with our own" (250). This is surely a reasonable prophecy about the future of ethical discourse. With such prospects, it seems incontestable that all social and ethical theories include not only strict scientific arguments. Ethics is also a matter of persuasion (of faith) stirred by fascination with the intrinsic beauty and goodness of the final purpose one has chosen. Such an aesthetic judgment is not at all subjectivism, but neither can it be formalized in "normal" scientific categories and rational epistemologies.

Is there then any reason to count ethics among the sciences? Like Murphy and Ellis, I think it is mandatory that ethics participates in the crucial debate about management, goals and ontological convictions within scientific discourse. Yet, for the voice of a minority the most important task is perhaps to explicate the moral practice of science and to show that things taken to be "natural" are not always as self-evident as supposed. Thus it is essential that ethics, even in its non-conformist position, not accept being relegated to a well-defined ghetto without relevance for the realm of natural and social studies. To some extent Murphy and Ellis provide reasonable arguments for the ethical being among the sciences. Yet, an ethical position focused on the cross will probably assure that the presence of the ethical among the sciences never

becomes comfortable. More than these authors acknowledge, it seems reasonable to predict that the moral constructions of a cross-marked community will remain at the margins of the wider stories told in our present society (like a prophet at the margins of a great empire). Still, it is as urgent as ever to participate in the common quest and struggle for the true "social embodiment" even among the sciences.

Notes

[1] Cf. well-known distinctions such as Kant's between Pure and Practical Reason, and Dilthey's between Explanation and Understanding.

[2] *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

[3] See also Murphy's interpretation of the hierarchy of the sciences in *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Post-modern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1996), 135-53.

[4] Murphy and Ellis refer especially to Arthur Peacocke for this notion. See his *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming Natural, Divine, and Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). An another example is the Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance. He also uses the notion in order to argue for the scientific nature of morality. For a critical discussion of Torrance, see my *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence in the Theologies of Thomas F. Torrance and Eberhard Jüngel* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1995).

[5] Murphy and Ellis claim that similar views are put forward by theologians such as Walter Wink, Stanley Hauerwas, James Wm. McClendon, Paul Fiddes, Jürgen Moltmann, and Martin Luther King. See p. 174.

[6] The idea of a "cruciform evolution" follows suggestions made by Holmes Rolston, "Does Nature Need to Be Redeemed?", *Zygon* 29.2 (June, 1994): 205-29.

[7] For a remarkable explication of the extent to which modern social thought presupposes "an ontology of violence," see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

[8] See John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 101.

[9] See especially *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[10] John H. Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Alternatives to Methodologism," in Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy and Mark Nation eds., *Theology without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 77-90.

[11] See *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 103.

[12] *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 17.

[13] See *ibid.*, 26-34.
[14] *Ibid.*, 28.
[15] "Walk and Word," 83.
[16] Compare "philosophy of science versus scientific practice" as it has been described by Paul K. Feyerabend in *Problems of Empiricism: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 80-88.
[17] *The Priestly Kingdom*, 94.
[18] Arthur Fine, *The Shaky Game: Einstein, Realism and the Quantum Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 129.