Response to Roland Spjuth

Nancey Murphy

George Ellis and I want to express our gratitude to Roland Spjuth for his review. We appreciate the fair and accurate report on the content of the book, as well as the fact that he raises important questions regarding the internal coherence of the project.

One of Spjuth's major worries is a (perceived) inconsistency between John Howard Yoder's rejection of "methodologism" and our very self-conscious methodological maneuvering in the book. I will not attempt to comment on all of the detailed criticisms Spjuth raises, but rather will focus on the genuine difference between Yoder's *style* of academic work and ours. Yoder argued for a style of theology that might be called "occasional" rather than "systematic." This was due, first, to his rejection of any starting point, e.g., philosophical anthropology, apart from the life and teaching of Jesus – a point with which we agree. Second, it reflected his view of the theologian as servant to the gathered community: the only legitimate task of theology (including theological ethics) is to help formulate answers to live questions that arise within the church as it seeks to be faithful to the way of Jesus.

Yoder's objection to "methodologism" in ethics might best be described as an objection to the view that one has first to choose among assorted metaethical theories (Kantian, utilitarian, etc.) and then go on to deal with the substance of morality itself. It is important to note, however, that Yoder has no objection to engaging in "*a posteriori* elucidation" of a community's or an individual's (e.g., his own) moral reasoning.[1]

In contrast to Yoder, my primary interest (and that of Imre Lakatos) is methodology itself. But "methodology" is an ambiguous term and, in addition, there are a variety of understandings of the relation of methodology to intellectual practice. "Methodology" can be used to refer to concrete methods

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of doing research – the sort of thing one learns in a "methods" class in psychology, for example. The meaning at issue here is more abstract. "The methodology of science" refers, most basically, to methods of reasoning. Philosophy of science attempts to give an account of what constitutes good reasoning in science. It is easy to list some of the desiderata of good theorizing: coherence and consistency, elegance, empirical fit, scope. I was attracted to Lakatos's account of scientific reasoning because it recognizes that there are good and bad ways to maintain theoretical consistency and to take account of potentially falsifying data. That is, any theory can be saved if enough qualifications are added. Some such additions lead to further discoveries and explanations ("novel facts"), while others are merely ad hoc. Programs can be compared as to the extent that their changes over time are progressive rather than ad hoc.

Lakatos's point about ad hoc modifications is well illustrated by this example:

> The story is about an imaginary case of planetary misbehavior. A physicist of the pre-Einstein era takes Newton's mechanics and his law of gravitation, (*N*), the accepted initial conditions, *I*, and calculates, with their help, the path of a newly discovered small planet, *p*. But the planet deviates from the calculated path. Does our Newtonian physicist consider that the deviation was forbidden by Newton's theory and therefore that, once established, it refutes the theory *N*? No. He suggests that there must be a hitherto unknown planet *p'* which perturbs the path of *p*. He calculates the mass orbit, etc., of this hypothetical planet and then asks an experimental astronomer to test his hypothesis. The planet *p'* is so small that even the biggest available telescopes cannot possibly observe it: the experimental astronomer applies for a research grant to build yet a bigger one. In three years' time the new telescope is ready. Were the unknown planet *p'* to be discovered, it would be hailed as a new victory of Newtonian science. But it is not. Does our scientist abandon Newton's theory and his idea of the perturbing planet? No. He suggests that a cloud of cosmic dust hides the planet from us. He calculates the location and properties of this cloud and asks for a research grant to send up a satellite to

> test his calculations. Were the satellite's instruments (possibly new ones, based on a little-tested theory) to record the existence of the conjectural cloud, the result would be hailed as an outstanding victory for Newtonian science. But the cloud is not found. Does our scientist abandon Newton's theory, together with the idea of the perturbing planet and the idea of the cloud which hides it? No. He suggests that . . .[2]

When I turned my attention from philosophy of science to theological method it was clear that theologians need to avoid the same temptation. To illustrate the point in somewhat crude fashion, compare Antony Flew's parable of the Gardener.

> Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"[3]

Now, about the relation between methodological reflections and the disciplines themselves: Methodologies (in the sense in which I'm using the term) are theories – theories about good theorizing. Since the work of Lakatos it has been recognized that these theories cannot be formulated *a priori,* apart from the actual practice of science. A good methodology is intended to serve

as a prescription for doing good science, but it can only get its force from the fact that it also serves as a description of science at its best.

In my first book, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,* I argued that Lakatos's methodology could just as well work for theology as for science.[4] The chapter on Yoder's theology in *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* is an extension of that project. The quality and sophistication of the reasoning in Yoder's work has always impressed me. So an interesting question was whether Lakatos's methodology would serve as an "*a posteriori* elucidation" of Yoder's reasoning. I believe we have shown that it does. (Yoder, by the way, had no objections to this presentation of his work.)

Spjuth's second, related worry about our book is that its attempt at a unified and well-argued worldview (including ethics) is Constantinian. Ellis and I agree with Spjuth's claim that, from an Anabaptist perspective, a connection between ethics and science is *likely* to be problematic. As he says, "such a position has often implied trust in a generally accessible morality, which in practice has often only served to justify dominant moral views as 'natural.'" I believe that Spjuth's own account of the content of the ethical position we promote is adequate to dispel any worries that our book represents a justification of the status quo. In fact, we argue not for an ethic that conforms to dominant scientific images of human nature, but rather for one that calls into question the moral presuppositions of the social sciences themselves.

However, I also detect in Spjuth's comments an assumption of the "postmodern" claim that all systematic knowledge is inherently oppressive and all argument inherently coercive. This is a point of view that needs to be taken seriously and, in particular, stands in need of a theological critique, which I cannot undertake here but have attempted elsewhere.[5]

A final issue is whether we have succeeded in providing adequate justification for our point of view. We follow Alasdair MacIntyre's account of the possibilities and difficulties of justifying a tradition over against its rivals. MacIntyre's work is valuable for Anabaptists because it indicates how particular (even minority) points of view can be argued in the public arena. We believe we have made a start, but much remains to be done. Of course, the prior issue, as Spjuth points out, is whether there is something intrinsic to Anabaptism that makes such a task inappropriate from the start.

Notes

[1] John H. Yoder, "Walk and Word: The Altenatives 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; quotation p. 80.
[2] "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in John Worall and Gregory Currie, eds., *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 8-101; quotation p. 16-17.
[3] Antony Flew, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology,* 96-99; quotation 96.
[4] *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). In that book, by the way, I elaborate an account of theological method that takes as its data the deliverances of the same sort of communal discernment that Spjuth emphasizes in Yoder's account of ethics.
[5] See "A Theology of Education," in H. Huebner, ed., *Mennonite Education in a Post-Christian World* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1998); "Missiology in the Postmodern West: A Radical Reformation Perspective," in J.A. Kirk and K.J. Vanhoozer, eds., *To Stake a Claim: Missions and the Western Crisis of Knowledge* (New York: Orbis, 1999); and "Traditions, Practices and the Powers: A Radical-Reformation Epistemology," in H.T. Engelhardt, Jr., ed., *Christian Epistemology in the Third Millennium* (forthcoming).