
REVIEWS

Nancey Murphy and George F.R. Ellis. *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology and Ethics*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996. Pp. xvi + 268. ISBN: 0-8006-2983-3. \$22.00, paper.

Nancey Murphy, Associate Professor of Christian Philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary, and George F.R. Ellis, Professor of Applied Mathematics, University of Cape Town in South Africa, construct a bridge between the humanities and the sciences in this ambitious project. Inspired largely by Imre Lakatos, Alasdair MacIntyre and John Howard Yoder, the two authors develop a schema for relating the natural sciences, the social sciences, ethics and theology at the same time that they construct a theology that draws from these areas of inquiry. They propose that a kenotic theology and ethic (one of self-renunciation) is indicated on both scientific and theological grounds and that such an ethic is, in fact, socially viable.

The first chapter of the book introduces their project by first identifying the need that inspires it. Murphy and Ellis suggest that, given evidence of a new hunger for meaning in the post-modern world, the time has come to develop a coherent cosmology “that relates human life to both the natural world and to nature’s transcendent ground” (1), thus providing an objective basis for morality. They carefully set out a summary of the findings of the natural sciences regarding top-down and bottom-up causation, evolution, the big bang, and the anthropic principle, concluding with the assumption that the sciences cannot resolve the metaphysical issues raised by the results of their own investigations. In this chapter, Murphy and Ellis also identify their philosophical commitments, aligning themselves with those who acknowledge that all knowledge is conditioned, even the scientific and moral, but who do not think that such a fact entails the conclusion that such knowledge is unreliable or relativistic. Theologically, they assume that theological reflection does, in fact, provide knowledge of the

transcendent, in addition to locating themselves in the Anabaptist wing of Christianity (Murphy is Church of the Brethren and Ellis is Quaker). They also give an account of how science works, synthesizing Carl Hempel’s explanation of hypothetical deductions, Lakatos’ account of scientific research programs and MacIntyre’s proposal for rationally adjudicating conflicting claims made by forms of inquiry that are all tradition-bound.

Over the next several chapters, Murphy and Ellis construct the framework by which they propose to relate the sciences, ethics and theology. One can visualize this framework as consisting of a roof supported by two columns that rest on a three-layered floor. Starting from the bottom of the structure and working up, the floor consists of three layers: physics, chemistry and biology. The column on the left is made of geology and ecology, astrophysics and cosmology. The column on the right is made up of psychology, the social and applied sciences, motivational studies and ethics. The roof, that serves to connect both columns, is metaphysics/theology.

Murphy and Ellis organize this model according to two principles, the first of which is complexity, so that more complex entities (and the corresponding forms of inquiry) show up higher in the structure. It is important to note at this point that the authors affirm that the complexity of reality allows for causation to occur both from the top down and the bottom up (see especially 22-32), which makes room for human freedom (32-37) and divine action (214-218). A second principle is to distinguish between human and natural sciences, which diverge as one moves above the biological level and thus warrants the two columns.

Murphy and Ellis argue that the social sciences are incomplete without attending to ethics, by which one can assess the assumptions and goals of the

social sciences (chapter 5). Ethics itself, however, is incomplete without some way to adjudicate its claims. Put differently, any ethic presupposes a metaphysic (173). That observation, combined with the realization that any scientific cosmology leaves unanswered many metaphysical questions (60-62) leads the authors to place metaphysics/theology at the top of their hierarchy, thus finally bringing together both natural and social sciences.

As impressive a feat as it is simply to construct this edifice for locating various forms of human inquiry, Murphy and Ellis are not content to leave matters only in the abstract. They therefore propose ethical and theological content for the model, content that they think will make sense of at least some of the scientific data and provide a rich program for further research. They recommend a kenotic ethic, i.e., one that asserts that “self-renunciation for the sake of the other is humankind’s highest good” (118) because it, paradoxically, “is the way to open oneself up to a greater good . . . totally transcending the miserly ethic of nicely calculated debts and duties” (121). Such an ethic entails renouncing possessions, rights (including a right to retaliate), and violence (but not necessarily coercion—see 151-159), as well as submitting to God, and developing of intellectual humility. Murphy and Ellis go on to argue that such an ethic is indeed possible as a social ethic, suggesting applications in and examples of specific practices in the areas of law, economics and politics. For example, they examine societies that have tried to practice restorative justice instead of punitive justice (122-126). They conclude their ethical proposal with a call for others to design studies that might test their thesis that “the consistent policy of using the lowest degree of coercion needed to be effective will have a cumulative effect, increasing the effectiveness of less coercive means in the long run” (159).

Such an ethic, by their own admission, needs a metaphysical basis in order to be complete. They therefore turn to Yoder’s understanding of God, which they summarize in this way: “The moral character of God is revealed in Jesus’ vulnerable enemy love and

renunciation of dominion” (178). They defend their Anabaptist view in several ways, first by suggesting that it can better account for the anomaly of the Church’s complicity in evil than can Roman Catholic or Protestant traditions (198-199). Secondly, they offer plausible alternatives to traditional readings of biblical passages that are usually used to rebut nonviolence (199-201). In addition, they argue that a kenotic ethic and metaphysic is consistent with findings of the natural sciences. They summarize this claim by saying that the sciences suggests that “all living things must participate not only in taking of life in order to live but also in the painful *giving* of their lives that others might live” (213, emphasis theirs). Finally, they find that this way of understanding best helps us understand the problem of theodicy, by showing that “suffering and disorder are necessary byproducts of a noncoercive creative process that aims at the development of free and intelligent beings” (247).

Polanyians will certainly find much with which to sympathize here. Even though it does not explicitly draw from Polanyi, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe* resonates with several features of Polanyi’s work. It echoes his drive to develop a comprehensive vision of humanity’s place in the cosmos, as well as his understanding of the process of discovery and his account of hierarchies and dual control. At the same time as Murphy and Ellis in many ways follow a Polanyian trajectory they differ most notably in their quite specific theological and ethical commitments.

By way of critique, there is much to affirm about this book. It offers an example of creative bricolage, bringing together sources, most notably MacIntyre and Yoder, for service in a project that echoes the quintessentially Enlightenment/modern attempt to develop an encyclopedia of human inquiry (interestingly enough, a project with which MacIntyre and Yoder vigorously disassociate themselves!). Murphy and Ellis make their case clearly, and in many ways convincingly, in part because they build on already widely-accepted positions, such as the claim that the sciences raise boundary or limit questions that

cannot be resolved on scientific grounds, or the state of evolutionary theory. The authors are to be affirmed for treating ethics and theology as comprehensive forms of inquiry that cannot work in a vacuum. As complicated and messy as the process may be, ethics and theology must be pursued with multiple conversation partners, including the natural sciences. In addition, Murphy and Ellis provide a useful apology for the practicality of nonviolence by challenging critics with specific examples of how nonviolence can and has, in fact, “worked,” as a social ethic. The way they differentiate persuasion, coercion and violence is quite helpful and worth widespread consideration. Moreover, in a culture as self-centered as ours, the call to self-renunciation needs to be sounded and heeded.

There are also some questions that need to be raised about the project. First, are the authors too enamoured with the anthropic principle? As much as they try to remain cautious about and qualify their affirmation of the “fine-tuning of the universe” for the emergence of human life, they clearly affirm its truth and may well ignore evidence that the universe is not designed to guarantee human well-being. As theologian James M. Gustafson might observe, Murphy and Ellis seem to work anthropocentrically and not theocentrically. A second question concerns the non-violence of the natural world. While it is fair to say that death plays a role in the creation of new life, is it fair to say that all lives are freely given? Might some be simply taken nonvoluntarily? Put differently, is nature as noncoercive (and thereby as nonviolent) as the authors suggest? A third question concerns the adequacy of self-renunciation as a comprehensive ethic. As feminist thinkers and others have reminded us, there are important matters at stake in when someone calls another to self-renunciation. If someone in power is speaking to someone who is relatively powerless, self-renunciation may well result, not in the finding, but in the loss of the self. While I would expect Murphy and Ellis to acknowledge this danger, their account of self-renunciation needs to be more finely-nuanced. Moreover, most systems of ethics do not reduce the moral virtues to a single one. What happens to other qualities of character in an ethic of

renunciation? Again, is self-renunciation sufficient basis for an ethic? Such one-dimensional ethics often turn out to be incomplete, thereby distorting the richness and complexity of moral experience and reflection.

Such criticisms are, in the end, somewhat misplaced, however, because the authors readily acknowledge that any single chapter of the book deserves its own book-length treatment. Overall, one must be impressed with the scope and creativity of this project, as well as the authors’ willingness to go against the grain of much post-modern thinking that resists the kind of expansive and synthetic project in which Murphy and Ellis engage.

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Michael Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe: The Harvard Lectures*. Shirley Letwin, ed. Introduction by Kenneth Minogue. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. Pp. xii + 115. ISBN:0-300-05644-3. \$18, hard cover.

This book consists of eight lectures delivered by Michael Oakeshott at Harvard University in April, 1958. He was then in his fifties and had occupied the chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics since 1951. He was also, at the time, editor of the *Cambridge Journal*.

As a university lecturer, Oakeshott’s approach was typically to present his topic in its detailed and elaborate cultural context, weaving subject and related culture together within an equally exacting theoretical framework. Those who have agonized over Oakeshott’s more philosophical works, marked by his proclivity for abstraction and his further proclivity for “clarifying” his abstractions with still more abstractions (which, to his thinking, are all really encounters with the “concrete”), will find relief in this latest published addition to his more political/historical writings.

This is not to say that this lecture series does not conform to his usual style. It is characteristically elaborate, detailed, and ordered by an encompassing theoretical structure, but the concepts and ideas that emerge are presented in a very tangible, often lively, connecting narrative of persons and historical events that take the reader on a very engaging and surprisingly encompassing, nearly five-century, tour of changing moral beliefs in Europe and their political repercussions.

In his early ground-breaking philosophical work, *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott establishes that the primary task of the philosopher is to articulate the grand “whole of experience” by means of clear definitions in order to make this experience, as it is refracted into the more limited and immediate areas of human thought and practice, comprehensible and orderly. Therefore, he devotes his first three lectures to distinguishing such basic concepts as “government” and “politics,” “constitutional” versus non-constitutional societies, various types of political reflection, legality versus morality, “sovereignty,” the “character” of a political society, and (drawing upon both Aristotle and Montesquieu) the specific types of governments – definitions that he consistently adheres to throughout the rest of the lecture series. However, these concepts are represented not as something distilled from the ethereal realms of abstraction, but as major historical thinkers and events have presented them to us.

The overall task that Oakeshott sets for himself in *Morality and Politics* is to show how, over the course of modernity, the “morality of communal ties,” which had been identifiable in Europe as early as the eleventh century, began by the sixteenth century to give way successively to the “morality of individuality” and, in reaction, eventually to the “morality of collectivism.” Again, he is consistent with his insistence in *Experience and Its Modes* that, since we have no access to any higher, least of all absolute, standard by which to evaluate moral values, the study of morality should be descriptive rather than prescriptive: it

should analyze, without normatively assessing, moral ideas as they are presented to us by history – merely reporting the moral judgments that others have made and showing how these might be “explained” in terms of their social, economic, political, and historical contexts.

Further breaking down the “individualist” and “collectivist” moralities into their specific religious and secular expressions, and – still further – “collectivist” morality into its “productivist” and “distributionist” versions, Oakeshott devotes the final five lectures to his breathtaking survey of the contributions to each of these “moralities” by such thinkers as Milton, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Descartes, Francis Bacon, Rousseau, Kant, Paine, Hegel, Bentham, Mill, Adam Smith, William Petty, Robert Owen, St. Simon, Marx, and by such moral/political movements as those represented by the Calvinist communities in Geneva, Basel, Bern, and Zurich, as well as the various Puritan Millenarian sects, the French *Philosophes* – and others.

For other authors, such an ambitious attempt in the space of barely over one hundred pages would probably end up reading like a set of CliffsNotes, but – coming from the always fascinating mind of Michael Oakeshott – this work represents a delightfully informative read.

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Stephen Turner. *Brains/Practices/Relativism: Social Theory after Cognitive Science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Pp. ix + 214. ISBN 0-226-81740-7, \$19 paper; ISBN 0-226-81739-3, \$46 cloth.

Stephen Turner, graduate research professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy at the University of South Florida, is well known for his writings on Max Weber and on social philosophy, in which field, to take one example, his *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994 – see the review article by Walter Gulick and response by Turner in TAD 25:1 [1998]) has stirred up a good deal of interest.

Brains/Practices/Relativism consists in essays of Turner that were, with one exception, published between 1998 and 2001. Of his ten essays in the book, nine are social philosophical, the other being an intellectual-historical account of sources and themes of that fascinating thinker, Edward Shils. Tacit learning, social reality in the account of John Searle, relativism, and contextualism are among the topics of Turner's essays in this collection.

The present review dissects Turner's ideas on different dimensions of *practices*, paying particular attention to his 'Introduction' wherein the bone structure of his thinking is to be found.

Turner suggests a number of distinct questions concerning *practices*: are practices teleological, to what do they owe their continuity, do practices involve composites ('ensembles') of objects, if so, in virtue of what 'glue' do the ensembles cohere, and do the composites have psychological counterparts?

Having wrestled with it in his book of 1994, Turner's chief problem about practices continues to be to identify the *source of their unity*. According to 'collectivist' theories, members of a group, engaging in the same practice, do so, immediately, on account of their having mental contents in common, and, mediate, in virtue of there being cultural objects (whether traditions, presuppositions, frameworks) in which the common mental contents in some sense partake. Turner

cites Michael Dummett's theory that in order for people to speak a language they need to have implicitly grasped the principles governing its use.

A complex hypothesis of Turner, logically adventitious to but informing a good deal of the discussion in this book, turns on the connectionist theory of the brain. Contrasting to cognitivist accounts of the brain as a manipulator of symbols, connectionism depicts the brain as a multilayered neural network, the units of each network consisting in simple processors that activate or inhibit one another along myriad links. The distinguished connectionist, Paul Churchland, envisages humans learning within the constraints, and in response to the pressures, of experience. Experience, according to Churchland, alters the strength of synaptic connections, with each individual agent being affected differently and having a unique history of learning.

Drawing from this theory, Turner explains that such mental contents as rules of language, structures of conversation, and gestures are learned through connectionist habituation. Recurrence of certain of the inputs (including words, and syntactical rules), and the fact that groups of agents may receive many of the same inputs (as in school classrooms), help in explaining why it is that agents often have similar habits, notwithstanding that each agent has to use interpretative skills so as to convert inputs into personal mental contents. Other inputs are non-explicit, with intelligent problem-solving and emotional responses, for example, being conditioned by tacit mechanisms.

Turner *rejects collectivism*: tacit mental contents and practices do not consist in a group of practitioners possessing a collective object. There is no means by which a collective object could be mentally acquired by agents, no mechanism such as could ensure that agents *shared the same* rules, presuppositions, or the same practice. None of these things, so far as Turner is concerned, exists autonomously, over and above the primal process of habituation by connectionist learning. (Neither in this book, nor in that of 1994, does Turner discuss Karl Popper's theory of *objec-*

tively existing knowledge, the content of which Popper denominated as World 3. It would be of interest to have Turner's assessment of Popper's theory of autonomous cultural objects.)

The items that Turner subsumes under the class of 'practices' are nothing if not diverse. Turner suggests that concepts of practices are roughly distinguishable into four types. Of particular importance for Turner is the class of concepts of practices as *social-and-cognitive* (Turner cites such notions as paradigm, worldview, presupposition, structure of meaning, tacit knowledge). There are, as well, concepts of practices as social-and-*subcognitive* (the notions of skill, *habitus*, *mores*, form of life, tradition as conceived of by Oakeshott and Shils respectively). As well, Turner divides concepts of practices as *nonsocial* between the cognitive and the subcognitive.

The devil's advocate might ask whether worldviews, for example (or the likes of presuppositions or tacit knowledge) are *practices per se*, as Turner suggests. Perhaps some of them are. But identity is not the only imaginable relation between worldviews and practices. Worldviews might *underlie* and influence practices; *different practices* might arise in the context of a single worldview (or on the basis of the same set of presuppositions). A worldview may *not* give rise to, or be coupled with, any practice (as with atomism and heliocentrism in the ancient world), or a worldview might *outlive* a practice(s) to become a mere object of intellectual-historical curiosity (e.g. 'the great chain of being' as studied by A. O. Lovejoy, E. M. W. Tillyard, and others). Furthermore, each of what Turner regards as a concept of practice (presuppositions, tacit knowledge, skills, traditions) may in fact refer to *parts*, intimately interrelated, of a practice, with Kuhn's paradigms as the complex *disciplinary matrixes* of 'normal science' being a case in point. So the concepts of 'practices' that Turner cites may relate to practices, and to one another, in very different ways. Is an abstract study of practices such as we find in *Brains/Practices/Relativism* (and in Turner's *The Social Theory of Practices*) able to do justice not only to these criss-cross relations but to the

considerable differences of substance, method and aim that exist between the plethora of practices (speculative physics, engineering, archaeology, horticulture, sculpture, wine production, etc.)?

Written by a scholar of impressive learning and extensive interests, *Brains/Practices/Relativism* is recommended by this reviewer to anyone who wishes, not so much to be introduced to but, at a more advanced level, to become better informed on recent thinking on social ontology and epistemology.

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Electronic Discussion List

The Polanyi Society supports an electronic discussion group that explores implications of the thought of Michael Polanyi. Anyone interested can join. To join yourself, go to the following address: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/polanyi_list/join If you have difficulty, send an e-mail to Phil Mullins (mullins@mwsc.edu) and someone will see that you are added to the list..