

Commentaries

THE ANALOGY BETWEEN ETHICS AND SCIENCE

by Ronald L. Hall

It is highly appropriate that the editors of *Zygon* have seen fit to publish Virginia Held's "The Validity of Moral Theories" (1983), for they are explicitly aware that our culture is in dire need of yoking far more than just religion and science; indeed, they seem to be aware that such a yoking may require, perhaps even as prolegomena, a consideration of other yokings such as the one Professor Held explores between ethics and science.

Congratulations also to Held, for hers is a radical voice calling on all of us to move against the grain of our culture's persistent worship of what J. L. Austin once characterized as "neat and tidy dichotomies."

I have indeed written to praise and not to bury. My praise, however, is for what I take to be the central thrust of Held's argument. I have tried to embody this in the following summary of what I take to be her main theses, with which I am in unequivocal agreement: ethics and science are methodologically analogous at crucial points; from this it follows that the old fear that ethics (in comparison to what is often taken as the paradigm of rationality, science) is in the final analysis irrational can at last be allayed; and from this it follows that ethical validity can be established and perhaps even moral progress can be achieved. Because I am in such thorough agreement with these theses, I feel a particular urgency to indicate two related points at which the argument risks the danger of weakness, if not the danger of undermining itself. These are intended to be, and are, I believe, constructive criticisms.

First, there is a dangerous assumption that runs unchallenged throughout Held's paper, an assumption, by the way, that runs unchallenged and may now be beyond challenge in the modern mind, namely,

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that we all know perfectly well what science is and that, whatever it is, it is the unquestioned paradigm of the rational. Always for Held, the issue is whether a suspected "irrational" aspect of ethics, for example, its failure to achieve agreement, can be paralleled in science. If there is a parallel, and in the case of agreement she thinks there is, since there are many scientific disagreements, then the suspicion of irrationality in ethics is recognized to be unfounded and ethics is seen to be just as rational as science.

What is the danger in this? Perhaps nothing if we are correct about what science is. But that is precisely the problem. Modern westerners have long held firm to a conception of science and its correlate picture of rationality that may be mistaken. This picture of rationality, which began to take hold in the Enlightenment and culminated in logical positivism, conceives of scientific inquiry as a strictly mechanical process of detached, objective, and passive empirical observation. This Enlightenment picture of rationality generates and sustains stringent dichotomies between the subjective and objective, and between fact and value. Indeed it is precisely this view of science that has led to the problem of rationality and validity in ethics. Moreover, if this is our view of science, then ethics is not analogous to it; and if this view of science is identified with the rational, then there can be no rationality and validity in ethics.

What has begun to change in the last few years is our conception of science, and this has brought with it a re-examination of our picture of rationality. Thanks to philosophers like Michael Polanyi, we have begun to see that scientific inquiry is an art which calls for the unformalizable personal participation of the scientist who skillfully chooses, judges, and evaluates his observations as he attempts to discern coherencies in nature. The ideal of a detached, objective observer is now recognized as a destructive falsification at odds with the actual practice of scientific inquiry.

This shift in our conception of science and rationality, I suggest, is the unacknowledged backdrop of Held's claim that there can be ethical validity as much as there can be scientific validity. While I agree with the claim, I think it should be explicitly noted that it can only be true if our conception of science and its correlated picture of rationality has changed from the one we inherited from the Enlightenment.

What I have said thus far is that, if we assume the Enlightenment view of science and rationality, ethics must finally be seen to be irrational and hence the possibility of validity in ethical theory does not exist. Ethical validity can be saved only when a post-Enlightenment view of science and rationality is assumed. Only under this condition can science and ethics be seen to be analogously rational.

This leads to what seems to be the second weakness in Held's position. Does Held have a post-Enlightenment view of science and rationality? On the one hand, she certainly does, for otherwise she would not have recognized the analogy between ethics and science. Moreover, she says this explicitly: "... the picture of science appealed to in denying that moral theories can be tested is often unrealistic. It presents a view of steady scientific advance according to rules recognized by all" (Held 1983, 179). Held's rejection of this picture as "unrealistic" is a rejection of what I have called the Enlightenment picture of science and rationality.

On the other hand, and this really is the heart of the problem with the whole argument, Held talks at certain key points about science in a way that seems to betoken the Enlightenment picture of science she wants to deny. If this is in fact her view of science and rationality, it undermines her central claim that science and ethics are analogous.

What seems to betoken the Enlightenment picture of science and rationality in Held's paper is the strict way she dichotomizes moral experience and empirical experience. She says: "moral experience is the experience of consciously choosing, of voluntarily accepting or rejecting, of willingly approving or disapproving, of living with those choices and above all of acting and of living with these actions and their outcomes" (Held 1983, 173). For Held moral experience is not empirical experience nor vice versa; they do not seem to intertwine at any point. Yet on a post-Enlightenment view of science, all the factors she mentions in characterizing moral experience are all essential elements that also characterize the scientist's empirical experience. The scientist chooses, accepts, rejects, approves and disapproves, and so on. On the Enlightenment view, this is not so, for the scientist is a passive observer, detached and objective. Yet this is precisely how Held describes empirical experience. She says: "In the case of perception we ought to let the world impose its truth on our observations, we ought to be *passive recipients* of the impressions leading us to consider observation statements as true or false" (*italics added*) (Held 1983, 174).

The upshot here is that Held's dichotomy between moral and empirical experience seems to entail a reversion to precisely that view of science and rationality she wants to deny and must deny if the analogy between science and ethics is to be consistently maintained. On a post-Enlightenment view of science moral and empirical experience are analogous in just the way Held would like to conceive the analogy of ethics and science.

REFERENCE

Held, Virginia. 1983. "The Validity of Moral Theories." *Zygon* 18 (June):167-81.