



The Moral Responsibilities of the Scientist

Charles De Koninck

Volume 6, numéro 2, 1950

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019843ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019843ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

De Koninck, C. (1950). The Moral Responsibilities of the Scientist. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 6(2), 352–356. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019843ar>

The Moral Responsibilities of the Scientist*

Like any other speculative science, the natural sciences are above human action and are pursued primarily for their own sake: no individual, no government has the power to decree what is true or what is false, what is probable and what is not. Yet, we all know that some governments have tried to interfere with geometry, with the structure of space and the uncertainty relations of physics, not to speak of heredity in biology. Now, if the subject of these sciences remains unaffected by such decrees, the man of science does not. He can be thrown into prison, liquidated, in fact, very much annoyed. This raises a moral problem for the scientist: can he support such a government? The answer is apparently simple, but perhaps not really so. When we said that these sciences are above human action, that they pursue, for its own sake, a truth which is beyond our choice, we were already basing ourselves on what is called "a philosophical opinion." A number of distinguished scientists flatly deny this position. This is particularly true of those scientists who are the willing subjects of governments which describe themselves as "scientific."

Fortunately, most scientists would say that such colleagues are unfaithful to science — free pursuit being essential to its ideals. But even they are not all of one mind. Some would hold that any government which interferes with the free flow of information so indispensable to the development of science oversteps its rights. This, again, raises a moral problem — and a far more delicate one. Science has no national, no political boundaries. This is true even of the scientist himself *qua* scientist. But the scientist is also a man, a person who acts and who, in his actions, can do right or wrong. As a man, one scientist can steal a discovery from another scientist and take the credit for it. Is a physicist, or a biologist, free to communicate a piece of information, knowing that it will immediately be turned to some wicked purpose? The natural sciences have a habit of becoming more useful as they progress — most of all when they are pursued for no practical purpose at all. It is this growing usefulness that raises the problem of moral responsibility so urgently today.

Yet, the problem itself is not new. It really amounts to this: can the good of the scientist be identical with the good of man? Is science the architectonic virtue of human life? Or, to put it in still another way: is one a good man because one is a good scientist?

Many believe — and most of them are "scientific" philosophers — that all we would have to do to straighten out the irrational complexities of the human situation is to make the scientific method, along with the results to which it leads, the ultimate norm of human conduct. If humanity is still in a mess, it is because we are still too unscientific.

* The present paper was read to a gathering of American biologists, on the occasion of the dedication of a new laboratory building for research on Germ-Free Life, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, June 22, 1950.

Thanks to the objective application of the scientific method (which is, of course, already objective!), some day man will be as he should be whether he will or no — whatever recalcitrants there might remain shall have been voted out of existence by the enlightened public.

Whether it is Utopia or Nightmare that is likely to emerge from a practice inspired by such a theory, surely it is still far off, especially in those countries where they are now freely experimenting with this method. And so my question is: What are we to do in the meantime? What could be our present responsibility, besides preaching the virtues of this as yet unachieved ideal?

The problem we are faced with is a far more urgent one. Surely it is not yet true that *this* man is good simply, because he is a good scientist. If, while being a good scientist, he can still be unjust, petty, selfish, vain, indifferent to the lot of his neighbour, is it perhaps because he is still not a good enough scientist? And hence the question: Is it possible to be a good man *today*?

Some of the ancient philosophers put this question in an even more radical fashion. They saw a distinction between the speculative sciences, which are of those things we can do nothing about and seek to know for the mere sake of knowing; and the practical sciences, which we pursue for the sake of knowing how to make or do things, such as architecture or ethics. Now the latter is studied for the sake of knowing better how to act. And so these philosophers asked: would a moralist be a good man because he is a good moralist? The answer was no. Knowledge alone never compels a man to do what he knows he should do.¹ The only guarantee of right action is that one should also want to do what one knows one should do to the extent of actually doing it. And there's the rub.

It is precisely this role of the appetite in practical truth that is almost universally overlooked. It is the main reason why science cannot replace prudence, the architectonic virtue of human action. Prudence is not the most noble of the virtues — science has greater excellence — but it is the most necessary: it is "sapientia viro." Science is not the wisdom of man (or : the wisdom for man) nor even metaphysics, though we hold that the latter is wisdom proper, whereas prudence is not. That which is best in itself is not always best to us.

The reality science is concerned with is the one which is rational. Whether or no all reality is rational *in itself* is a matter we may leave alone for the present; that it is not all rational *to us* is too evident to need expansion. Unless we are completely blind to their variety and complexity,

1. "Arguit [Philosophus] quorundam errorem, qui non operantur opera virtutis, sed confugiendo ad ratiocinandum de virtutibus aestimant se fieri bonos *philosophando*".— ST. THOMAS, *In II Ethicor.*, lect. 4, (ed. PIROTTA) n.228.— Pius XII recently called attention to this same error: "Cavendum siquidem est ne obtineat errata opinio quae 'illumini-mi' tempore invaluit, simpliciter nempe nosse causam esse, cur homo ejusque vitae actus boni fiant," *Oratio ad patres Cardinales*, etc., Nov. 2, 1950.

the circumstances of our action always involve a strong sense of obscurity and uncertainty. If, in order to act in a reasonable manner, we had to know all the objective circumstances of our action, we should never be able to move or to refrain from moving; nor even be able to think or not to think. And accordingly, the truth of human behaviour consists, not in the mind's conformity to what is, but in its conformity with right desire — with the rectified appetite. We cannot infer what a man ought to do *here* and *now* either from our speculative knowledge of the facts or even from moral science as such, however elaborate. The truth of an action resides in a type of judgment formed according to a mode of inclination, and not merely according to a mode of cognition. That is why this truth is inaccessible both to mere speculative knowledge as such and to mere moral science as such. Neither a just evaluation of the circumstances of an action nor even one's certitude as to what one *ought* to do *here* and *now* suffice to constitute prudential truth. Over and above these, it is requisite for the judgment to be true that the agent love the good as it is proper for him to love it and that he determine himself to do what he ought.

The role of appetite in a practical judgment can be seen in the following example. Suppose a man hears a nice piece of gossip about a person he dislikes intensely. He cannot be quite sure that the gossip is more than mere gossip, but he may judge that it is good enough to pass on. This is what we call a practical error.

A point I should like to stress is that practical truth is quite compatible not only with a great deal of speculative ignorance, but even with a speculative error. If you gave a man dying of thirst a glass of water and it turned out to be poison, you would be speculatively in error, since you thought it was plain water and it was not. Yet under the circumstances you may have performed an act of mercy. This does not mean that knowledge is irrelevant — that it may safely be neglected — ;¹ it means merely that knowledge *alone* is not the reason why an action is good.

The real difficulty man is always faced with is one of appetite. And we are always trying to side-step this difficulty by such efforts as a recourse to mere science, to art, to history, and what not. In short, we are in revolt against prudential truth.

I have made this detour to point out that there is a moral universe quite impenetrable to science alone and that the scientist can escape it no more than anyone else; that it is indeed more important than science; that progress in science does not inevitably entail moral progress. The latter statement has become cliché. Yet why is there no correlation between scientific and moral progress? Because the good must be pursued in the mode of the good, not merely in the mode of the knowable. Mankind is still haunted by a “*science of good and evil*” as a substitute for prudence;

1. ST. THOMAS, *IIa IIae*, q.49.

we are in revolt against the exigencies of prudential truth, against the wisdom of man.

It has been said that the old morality has failed and that the time has come to construct a new, preferably a scientific one. But this is quite beside the point, precisely for the reason we have given. If a man does not practise what he teaches, this does not prove that his teaching is wrong. The only thing it proves is that he is not a good man; that there can be a great deal of speculative truth in a prudentially messy universe. The abyss that separates the two is that of wrong desire.

Some scientists — the ones who are most vocal outside their own field — take an attitude of disgust towards the whole world of moral action, or, if you wish, towards the general mess of human life and society as they are. Either they will have none of it, or they will propose some preposterous plan as our sole means of salvation. The only thing this would require is that tomorrow, at dawn, the Marxist will renounce his Marxism, and every one else his own brand of "ism." And that is all there is to it. Of people who make such proposals we may well wonder where they have been all this time.

Even apart from this we may ask why they now get so excited. The same proponents have denied free will — because, as one of them has said, it is so much more consoling to know that people are not responsible for their actions, and it allows us to retain our sense of humour! — ; they have denied that man has an immortal soul and that a very personal Someone is actually running this universe with an infinite wisdom. Surely their genius is here out of its depth. For if all that were true, it would be most unscientific to get stirred about the menace of the future. No one would have any choice in the matter — which of course must comprise our getting excited or no. What if humanity does blow itself up? Tomorrow it shall be as if we had never been; and this tale "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," does not have even an idiot to tell it.

None of these things — the existence of God, our soul and its immortality — can be established by the scientific method understood in the narrower sense. This method, then, leaves out some pertinent problems — the most pertinent of all to human life even as we lead it here and now. At this point, we might recall that the most advanced of our experimental sciences, physics and biology, leave out some primitive and essential facts, and that, if there were no other avenues of approach, the leaving out of these facts would make the very names of "physics" and of "biology" (not to speak of "psychology") unwarranted anachronisms. *Physis* means nature, and this notion cannot possibly be expressed in physical terms (i.e. physico-mathematical); the same holds for biology: the only reason we first know for certain that there is such a thing as life is our internal experience of it: to me, it means first of all to feel, to taste, to smell, etc. If we prescind from this experience (it is more important to our daily life and to our thought than we are wont to think), the distinction between living and non-living can be no more than a hypothesis.

In other words, if, by "what is truly real" (as opposed to "mind-spinning") we meant that which can be established by the "objective" method of science, we should be left with very little — though with plenty of work. We are not suggesting that the scientist should change his procedure, only that he should remember the things he had to leave behind. For they have not ceased to exist and he feels them all the days of his life. He could not physically exist as a human being without them. In fact, they contain the most relevant part of his self.

This is what makes the idea of a Catholic university so difficult in our times. Its curriculum comprises subjects apparently quite incongruous, such as Mathematics, Physics, Biology on the one hand; Theology and Philosophy on the other. Not just the History of Theology and Philosophy, mind you, but even Philosophy itself. The presumption is that nature is every bit of what science can reveal, but a great deal more besides, and that some of this, too, can be known.

Fortunately, there remain scientists who believe there is more to reality than can be dreamt of in their science, and they are not the more ignorant for that. They can see in nature all that their colleagues see in it — and more, because, as Aristotle said in reply to those who recoiled with childish aversion from defiling their hands in the examination of the humbler animals, if some have no graces to charm the sense, yet even here, by disclosing to the mind "the Art which fashioned them," Nature provides joys that cannot be measured. And he tells the story of "how some visitors once wished to meet Heracleitus, and when they came and saw him in the kitchen, warming himself at the stove, they hesitated; but Heracleitus said, 'Come in; don't be afraid; there are gods even here.'"¹

CHARLES DE KONINCK.

1. *De Partibus Animalium*, I, cap.5. (A. L. PECK transl.)