



Response to Lynch

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OPINIONS

Response to Lynch*

Steve Fuller†

Mike Lynch has now published several articles in several journals condemning (typically under the guise of analysis) my role as an expert witness for the defence in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, where I claimed that intelligent design theory should be taught to high school students in publicly supported schools in the United States. His argument in each case—the latest being Lynch (2009)—consists in drawn-out exercises of bafflement and outrage, which appear only to increase as I continue to defend the proposition outside the courtroom. I leave it to readers to speculate why he finds it necessary to reiterate this position so much. My own—by my own lights charitable—opinion is that as editor of the leading journal and now president of the leading association in our field, he sees it as his professional duty to oppose what I have been doing whenever he can. At least this would explain his outrage at my claim that tenured academics in science studies are obliged to get involved in public controversies where the nature of science is at stake (Fuller 2008).

Although he claims broad familiarity with my work, Lynch cannot fathom the source of my deontological stance. It follows from my endorsement of the principle of *negative responsibility*, which I have been long developing as a normative response to Kuhn's political quiescence during the Cold War, most recently in Fuller (2009). People are negatively responsible for actions in which their distinctive position would enable them to do much good for others at relatively little cost to themselves. From this principle it follows that tenured academics bear enormous negative responsibility in society because their unique combination of intellectual credentials and institutional security permits them to challenge established authorities and command public attention in ways unavailable to others. Whatever one thinks of their specific views, Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, and

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Richard Dawkins would count as exceptional instances of academics who have used their tenured (or, in the case of Dawkins, tenure-like) status to exercise negative responsibility.

But this doesn't quite account for Lynch's concern. While he is clearly upset by my obliging tenured academics to become involved in public controversies, his arguments are mostly about my apparent failure to anticipate that the side I defended would lose. As a matter of fact, I always knew that there was a strong chance that the defence would lose, but given the protection afforded to me by tenure I calculated that the cost of losing was not sufficient to deter me from professing in a courtroom what I have been writing and talking about in academic settings for many years. Anything less would be tantamount to not taking oneself seriously as an academic (Corbyn 2006). When I accuse Michael Ruse or Robert Pennock of being "traitors to their training," I am saying that their easy support for the scientific orthodoxy compromises what they should know about the history and philosophy of science (Fuller 2008, 15). With that in mind, readers can judge for themselves the probity of Pennock (2009), which presents a "ballpark" definition of science that is philosophically accountable yet sufficiently elastic for courtroom purposes.

In this respect, I find Lynch's claim that I refuse to admit having made a "mistake" very revealing (214). He doesn't seem to mean "mistake" in the sense I would gladly admit. Of course, I have made technical errors, based on spontaneous statements generated for the occasion, and indeed, sometimes based on ignorance—in which case I was prepared to be educated in public. The errors here cover not only the courtroom transcript—which, under a critical gaze, does neither side any favours—but more importantly subsequent responses made on the internet, where comments that would have been restricted to the common room twenty years ago are now subject to public comment in cyberspace. The latter is worth recalling when explaining the difference in response to the participation of myself and Michael Ruse, a quarter-century earlier, in similar trials. To this day, Lynch remains the most hostile critic in traditional peer-reviewed forums, though his opinions are amply reinforced on the internet.

However, the sort of "mistake" that Lynch would really like me to admit is that my entire foray into the intelligent design controversy has been a folly. To grasp Lynch's point, perhaps I need to put myself in his shoes. He is a noted micro-sociologist who may be inclined to judge efficacy in terms of a relatively limited sense of "context" defined by the dominant agents. It would follow that, as an expert witness, I was being invited to play a particular position in a game whose rules I could not control. Under the circumstances, I should have recognised it as a no-win situation and

declined the offer. But standing in my own shoes, I am playing a much longer game, in which short-term success is measured in terms of the avoidance of complete disgrace (including job loss) and the promotion of my own views about the nature of science, which I do not believe stray very far from what science studies normally teaches. In that context, I undertake a risky performance in the spirit of a living experiment, the results of which should prove instructive not only to myself but also to others who in the future are similarly well-positioned to bring science studies to bear on public policy. The only mistake would be for others not to repeat the experiment.

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