



The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation

Steven Shapin

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"[N]obody without some sort of virtue could write a great history of the boll weevil or come up with a stunning scientific discovery."

Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

Steven Shapin's *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (Princeton University Press, 1985), co-authored with Simon Schaffer, was an early and important contribution to the field of sociology of scientific knowledge. SSK takes as a starting point that science is a human activity, not significantly different from other human activities. Hence it can be appropriately studied by just the same methods, without undue deference to objectivity, scientific method, or any other factor that had traditionally been considered an essential part of the character of science. What then should one say about scientists themselves? Are they entirely ordinary as well? Or are there personal characteristics — "virtues" — that are in some way fundamental to the practice of scientists and to the authority granted to scientific knowledge?

In *The Scientific Life* Shapin sets out to examine this idea of "moral ordinariness of the scientist," with the goal of understanding "what relations obtain between the *authority* of knowledge and the *character* of knowers." He begins by exploring the history of the idea, from early modernity through the post-World War II period. The common understanding, as described in this introductory, rather philosophical section, is that in earlier days, being a scientist was generally considered to require special virtues. The concept of moral equivalence began to be promulgated only in the 20th century — most explicitly by Robert Merton around mid-century — and took firm hold largely as a reaction to science's role in the war. Shapin argues for a much more nuanced picture, showing that both the early and the later stances were far from universally held.

Shapin then turns his attention to the main content of the volume: an account of 20th (and 21st) century scientific life. He proposes — quite reasonably — that such an account must be made from the point of view of those who live that life, rather than of outside commentators like himself, and tries to reach that viewpoint by collecting and summarizing opinions, both from published sources and contemporary interviews. He also makes a point of denying any normative status to “pure” scientific research: he treats academia and industry alike as fruitful sources, and sees no reason to maintain the traditional differentiation between science and technology. Indeed, in the chapter entitled “The Scientific Entrepreneur” Shapin demonstrates how thoroughly the boundaries between academic and industrial research have become blurred in recent years, as more and more start-ups are spun off from university programs.

Although Shapin predicts that the book’s audience will consist primarily of academic historians and social scientists, “hard” scientists may well find this material interesting, and perhaps even useful — particularly young scientists faced with a choice between academic and industrial careers. Another attractive (possibly more so to me than to the average *Physics Today* reader) consequence of treating those domains equally is more attention to fields such as chemistry and biotechnology than is typical of science studies, which often tend to be physics-centric.

However, as he pursues the topic up to the present, he gets further and further afield from the contemplation of deeper philosophical issues that the beginning seemed to promise. The last (aside from a brief Epilogue) chapter, in particular, consists of a survey of high-tech venture capitalists and how they pick the projects in which to invest. Shapin finds that they pay considerable attention to the moral character of the people who lead those projects. Whether this outcome, that “Character counts,” is much of a surprise, is open to debate; but it’s far from clear that it has much to do with the essential nature of scientists, or where the authority of scientific knowledge comes from. It’s basically just about the money.

But perhaps that’s what Shapin is trying to tell us: in these late modern days of late capitalism it may no longer be legitimate or useful to distinguish between science and the money that funds it. If so, the title he chose for that last chapter, “Visions of the Future,” forecasts a rather depressing outlook for those of us who still would like to believe otherwise.

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