

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

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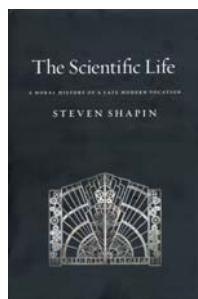
The Scientific Life

A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation

Steven Shapin

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Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer's *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton University Press, 1985) was an early, important contribution to the sociology of scientific knowledge. The field views science as a human activity not significantly different from other human endeavors; hence, it can be appropriately studied by the same methods used by social scientists, without undue deference to objectivity, the scientific method, or any other factor that has 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 science and the authority granted to scientific knowledge?



In *The Scientific Life: A Moral History of a Late Modern Vocation*, Shapin sets out to examine the 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." In chapters 2, "From Calling to Job," and 3, "The Moral Equivalence of the Scientist," he explores the history of the idea from early modernity through World War II to the present. In those somewhat philosophical chapters, he writes that it is now commonly held 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 in the 1940s, and the conventional wisdom is that the idea took firm hold largely as a reaction to science's role in World War II. Shapin argues for a much more nuanced picture; he shows that both the early and the later stances were far from universally held.

He 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 based on the viewpoint of those who

live that life, not on views of outside commentators like himself, and he tries to ascertain that viewpoint by collecting and summarizing opinions from both 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. In chapter 7, "The Scientific Entrepreneur," Shapin demonstrates how thoroughly the boundaries between academic and industrial research have become blurred in recent years as more and more startups are spun off from university programs.

Although he predicts that the book's audience will consist primarily of academic historians and social scientists, researchers in the physical and biological sciences may find the material interesting, perhaps even useful, particularly if they are young scientists faced with choosing either an academic or industrial career. An attractive consequence—possibly more so for non-physicists like me—of treating the domains of academia and industry equally is that Shapin places more attention on such fields as chemistry and biotechnology than is typically the case in science studies, which often focus on physics.

However, as Shapin pursues his topic up to the present, he gets further and further afield from exploring the deeper philosophical issues that the beginning of the book seemed to promise. In the final chapter, 8, Shapin surveys some high-tech venture capitalists and how they pick investment projects. He finds that they pay considerable attention to the moral character of the people who lead those projects. Whether the discovery that character counts should be much of a surprise is open to debate. But I'm not convinced that this material has much to do with the essential nature of scientists or where the authority of scientific knowledge comes from: It's basically just about money.

Yet perhaps that's what Shapin is trying to tell us, that in these late modern days of capitalism it may no longer be legitimate or useful to separate science from the money that funds it. And if that distinction no longer matters, then the final chapter, "Visions of the Future," offers a depressing outlook for scientists like myself who still want to believe otherwise.

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