

Polkinghorne, D. (2004). **Practice and the Human Sciences: The Case for a Judgment-Based Practice of Care.** Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press (205 pages)

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A problem in the practices of care

Donald Polkinghorne is Professor of Counseling Psychology at the University of Southern California. He is well-known for his books *Methodology for the human sciences* (1983) and *Narrative knowing and the human sciences* (1988), which established hermeneutic modes of knowing as crucial for human science inquiry. His new book, *Practice and the Human Sciences*, is not just a fine piece of scholarly work, but also a book that goes to the heart of one of the main problems in contemporary psychology and other applied human sciences: How should practitioners of care, i.e. teachers, nurses, social workers and psychotherapists, conceptualize what they do? On the one hand, there is a powerful demand from governments, insurance companies and the public that “practices of care” should be based on scientific evidence concerning their effectiveness. Practices of care involve face-to-face interaction between a practitioner and a client, which is a very costly affair, and therefore it seems fair to demand some kind of evidence that these practices are useful. In the case of psychotherapy the response has been, as Polkinghorne recounts, manualized treatments based on lists of empirically validated therapy sequences. In the 2002 Code of Ethics from the American Psychological Association, psychologists are required always to tell their patients whenever they engage in therapeutic acts that have not been strictly empirically and scientifically validated. Thus the situation today is that it is not just a professional issue, but also an *ethical* issue for practitioners to use empirically supported therapy as formalized in treatment scripts. It has become unethical not to follow the manualized treatments. The background assumption is that it is the technique, rather than the practitioner, who is the producer of change.

On the other hand, the kinds of practices engaged in by practitioners of care seem to be marked by vagueness, uncertainty, change and particularity to such an extent that one cannot capture their “logic” in formalized treatment schemes or procedures. As Pierre Bourdieu, one of the authors often quoted in the book, says, practice has a logic of its own, which is not that of logic. If that is so, then abstract and formal plans based on deductive logic (e.g. “all instances of depression require treatment T; this is a case of depression; therefore: I shall do T”) will not do justice to the complex phenomena of most lived human practices. And this is, indeed, Polkinghorne’s conclusion: We should abandon the dominating *technical approach* according to which practice should consist of the application of general knowledge validated by science, and instead embrace what he calls a *judgment-based approach* according to which practice should consist of actions informed by situated judgments of practitioners, sensitive to contexts and particularities. In the judgment-based approach, it is the person rather than the technique, which is viewed as the factor producing change.

Technified culture

As Polkinghorne explains, it is not just in the circles of practices of care that a “culture of evidence” has become dominant. It is part of a much larger historical development in Western societies culminating in our current “technified culture” (p. 35). After outlining “the technical-judgment practice controversy” in chapter one, Polkinghorne characterizes our culture, in chapter two, as a technological culture in which science has become that which legitimates all kinds of knowledge, including practical knowledge, i.e. knowledge about how to *do* things. And, Polkinghorne complains, we unfortunately tend to assimilate all forms of practical knowledge into one kind only, viz. what the ancient Greeks called *techne*: the knowledge required to produce things. But, as Polkinghorne’s main protagonist Aristotle knew, there are crucial differences between practices directed at the physical world and practices directed at the human and social world, and the forms of knowledge needed to act excellently in these realms are different. If I teach someone to build a house, then my whole attitude towards my apprentice is very different from my attitude towards the materials used in our building practice. The materials are objects to be manipulated in order to achieve our pre-set goal, according to the logic of a technological rationality. My apprentice, on the other hand, is not an object to be manipulated, for if I want to carry on with our practice, I must communicate with him, explain things to him, give him reasons, and even attend to his needs and care for him, if he should fall ill or lose his motivation. A piece of wood is – more or less – a piece of wood (although some carpenters and sculptors may disagree), whereas no two humans are alike, and understanding someone is always an act of understanding some *particular* person. Just as the understanding of literary texts is a particularistic matter (one does not understand Shakespeare’s works just because one understands those of Homer), so it is with humans and human practices as Gadamer (another of Polkinghorne’s sources of inspiration) has pointed out.

According to Polkinghorne, the problem today is that we confer our practices of care to the kind of activity Aristotle called *poiesis* (productive activity) and likewise practical knowledge to *techne*. Thereby we limit our vision of the world to a technological vision, where everything and everybody appears as objects to be used and controlled. As Heidegger argued in his essays on technology – which are also taken up by Polkinghorne – a general technological worldview has stripped the world of meanings, values and purposes, and all that is left is “a fund of raw materials” (p. 41) to be manipulated according to our interests and desires. We have forgotten that there are “other, richer ways in which being can show itself” (p. 42).

***Phronesis* and background understanding**

Polkinghorne’s book can be said to be an attempt to show us such other ways. He does not primarily look to Heidegger for this, however, since he finds in Heidegger a clear preference for *poiesis* over *praxis* (e.g. Heidegger is criticized for seeing the state in aesthetic terms as an “artwork” rather than democratic social practice). Instead, in chapters three and four, Polkinghorne turns to what he calls “practice theory” represented by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, and, more fundamentally, to the works of Aristotle, Dewey and Gadamer.

From Aristotle he gets the concept of *phronesis*, which is defined as “the excellence by which one deliberates well about what to do in the human realm. It is the process of reasoning used to make the appropriate practical choices that constitute a good life” (p. 111). *Phronesis* is different from *techne* (knowledge about how to produce things) because it concerns multiple values, particularity and emotionality. In human practices, notably practices of care, practitioners are rarely confronted with a single, overarching goal to reach, or a clear plan of how to reach it. Instead one is confronted with multiple goals, values and interests configured in a unique, particular way, where one’s feelings and affectedness play an important role in understanding. General knowledge and procedural plans and scripts can only *assist* the practitioner in making reasonable judgments here; they cannot *replace* the situated understanding of a human being.

From Gadamer and Dewey, Polkinghorne extracts a theory of “background understanding”, which is elaborated on in chapters five, six and seven. The idea is that all human life is lived on a background of beliefs, skills and practices, which are taken for granted and largely operate outside awareness, and are rarely (if ever) explicitly thematized. For example, I cannot have a single belief (e.g. that the Eiffel Tower is in Paris) without having a host of other beliefs (about towers, geography etc.). This is sometimes called “holism of meaning” in modern philosophy. We can only intend to do something, believe something or represent something, given a web of other implicit beliefs, representations and skills: i.e., background understandings. As Polkinghorne explains, “everyday practices do not ordinarily issue from conscious, rational calculation; instead, they flow from background understandings that are culturally embedded” (p. 152). In contemporary philosophy, there are exciting and fruitful discussions going on about the nature of the background: John Searle thinks it is neuronal, Richard Rorty thinks it is conceptual, Hubert Dreyfus thinks it is made up of embodied skills and habits, whereas others (including Polkinghorne himself) argue that it is a mixture of linguistic *and* embodied understandings (this was also Kuhn’s and Polanyi’s view) (p. 153). Gadamer understood background understandings as “a repertoire of responses to particular situations” (p. 98), and Dewey thought that they consisted of habits, existing in our bodily comportment – literally in the muscles – rather than consciousness.

Both Gadamer and Dewey studied what happens when the background to everyday practical activities breaks down. This is where reflection comes in: “When a practice has led to an impasse or veered off course, people can switch to a reflective mode and consider different actions” (p. 163). This is also where the notion of *phronesis* enters, for *phronesis* involves the ability to perceive salient features of complex social situations, and to deliberate about the right course of action. This is possible only given the background. Polkinghorne stresses that “reflection occurs within the context of one’s background, not outside it” (p. 165). Reflection is not carried out from a God’s-eye-view or with the help of universal or transcendental categories or procedures. Reflection is always embodied and involves *extending* rather than *transcending* our background understandings.

Chapters five, six and seven of the book are about the background, and while they are the most difficult ones in the book, they are well worth the reading, since they constitute Polkinghorne’s

main argument. For if background processes are involved in all human acts of social understanding, *and* if background processes resist formalization, then the conclusion is that human understanding resists formalization. There simply cannot be decontextualized procedures of human understanding. All acts involve what Bourdieu called a “sense of practice” (p. 60): a fundamentally non-formalized, practical dimension. And consequently the “culture of evidence” and the formalized treatment plans cannot tell the whole story about practices of care. Such attempts at formalization will never capture the richness, plurality and particularity of human interaction, Polkinghorne claims. And in the final chapter eight, Polkinghorne illustrates this convincing claim with a case study of psychotherapy, where he recounts the history of the increased technification of psychotherapy. This chapter is a powerful defense of a view of psychotherapy as a non-codifiable human practice against a view of therapy as “psychotechnology represented by short-term, manualized treatment” (p. 191).

Critical notes

The book is a very persuasive account of the importance of the kind of practical knowledge Aristotle called *phronesis*. It defends value-laden, particularistic knowledge against the invasion of value-neutral, general knowledge in human practices. Yet, apart from the final chapter on psychotherapy, it is a very *general* and *theoretical* defense of something *particular* and *practical*. This may give the book an air of paradox in the eyes of some readers. Such air of paradox has been with “practice theorists” since Aristotle, who himself was aware of this. Aristotle gave theoretical accounts about matters practical, but, as Joseph Dunne has noted in a fine book whose argument closely resembles Polkinghorne’s, although Aristotle’s practical philosophy is theoretical, it is a theory “designed to protect practice against unwarranted theoretical incursions”¹. So with Polkinghorne’s book, which can be said to be a general theory of practice designed to protect practices of care from unwarranted generalizations, formalizations and theorizations. In this light, the book is very successful, and its attempt to formulate a practice theory relevant for practices of care is much needed and relevant.

However, it is important to try to balance the critique of technology and technification with the human need for technology, and Polkinghorne often tends to demonize technology in this regard. In Aristotle’s works, which serve as the backdrop to Polkinghorne’s critique of technification, the discussion of *phronesis* appears in just a single part (book six) of the *Nichomachean Ethics*, whereas discussions of *techne* are everywhere in his works. One cannot simply assume that the Greeks were *phronetic* and that we are *technified*, for *techne* was clearly an important form of knowledge to them, just as it is for us. Furthermore, valuable human practices such as the practice of medicine were all about *techne*, according to Aristotle, because medicine is defined by a practice-external goal (getting well), whereas a genuine *praxis* is carried out for its own sake (e.g. moral actions). Such practices of care as psychotherapy, social work and nursing would likewise be seen by Aristotle as infused with *techne*, but this would not at all disqualify them as important activities in his eyes. Polkinghorne skips this problem when he dichotomizes *techne* and *phronesis* more than the concepts can bear.

¹ Dunne, J. (1997) *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique*. 2nd ed. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press: p. 160

Finally, the book ends with a defense of “the humanistic tradition in psychotherapy as self-exploration and personal growth” (p. 191), and, with the dichotomy of *techne* and *phronesis* in mind, it is almost too easy to align the benign humanistic psychotherapies with *phronesis* and the malign traditions of behavioral and cognitive therapies with forms of *techne*. In my view, this is again to skip very important and interesting questions. Writers such as Nikolas Rose have recently analyzed the humanistic tradition as a significant human *technology* – what Foucault called a *technology of the self* – in contemporary consumer societies that promises growth and development premised on private and subjective values, bordering on egoism². In my view, one ought to suspend judgment concerning who are on the good team and who are on the bad, until careful investigations have been carried out about how forms of therapy work in our culture. In fact, manualized forms of therapy *may* have some benefits that are overlooked, or at least not discussed, by Polkinghorne. Money is one issue here that should not be ignored. If one must choose between giving 100 persons “manualized therapy” or 10 persons “judgment-based therapy”, what, then, is the right thing to do? I don’t know the answer, but I do think we are dealing with a genuine dilemma here that one doesn’t solve by conferring all “manualized therapies” to the bad team, and all “judgment-based therapies” to the good team. In my view, matters are more intricate than that.

These matters aside, Polkinghorne’s book should, if read and understood properly, be of some consequence to psychological practice. If practitioners rather than techniques are the producers of change in practices of care, then educating competent practitioners have to involve non-formalizable aspects. This means that hands-on experience and supervision from more experienced practitioners are indispensable. One learns to make correct judgments in practical situations by *being* in such relevant situations. It also means that we should regard formalized manuals as tools that may *assist* us in making good judgments. They cannot *define* correct judgment for us. There is no way of evading the human factor in good judgment.

More provocatively, Polkinghorne’s argument aligns psychology more with education than with medicine. Unlike medicine, which normally has a clear goal that structures medical activities (health), psychology is portrayed as being involved in more complex issues of value. The psychological practitioner should not just find the best means to obtain a pre-given end, but should be an expert in figuring out what ends clients actually pursue, and, together with the client, evaluate whether these ends are *worth* pursuing. This is not unlike educational practices that are often concerned with working out the *goals* of education, for the discussion of what we ought to aim for clearly precedes the discussion of how to achieve it. If this is true of psychological practice, then its practitioners cannot be considered value-neutral engineers of the human soul, for they are inescapably engaged in a moral struggle to make more determinate what the soul *ought* to look like. Furthermore, if good judgment grows out of the particularities of practice, then the oft-heard argument that practitioners ought to pay more attention to scientific generalizations is invalid. Polkinghorne’s view is not that practitioners should *ignore* generalizations, but that competent practitioners are aware that good, correct and objective

² For an extended argument, see Brinkmann, S. (2003) Psykoterapi som selvteknologi [Psychotherapy as a technology of the self]. *Matrix: Nordisk tidsskrift for psykoterapi*, 20(4): 360-376.

judgment is necessarily situated judgment, where careful understanding of the particular situation is more important than abstract theoretical generalization.

In conclusion, I would like to recommend the book to students, researchers and practitioners of the practices of care. It is a timely, motivating and well-argued book that will hopefully stir some debate. It has great scholarly potential, but even greater practical value. And, as Polkinghorne will surely agree, the value of the book will prove itself pragmatically in how it comes to inform future practices.