ISSN 2319-5339 IIS Univ.J.A. Vol.11 (2), 102-113 (2022)

Re-evaluating Ethics in Science Fiction: A Study of Arthur Conan Doyle's Professor Challenger Saga

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Abstract

The question of ethics in the domain of science is as old as science itself. Responsibility, guilt and the philanthropic zeal to serve human civilization on the part of the scientist have always been contested spheres of persisting debates and scrutiny that have found faithful reflection in literature over the centuries. The present article aims to examine the ubiquitous and intriguing role of ethics in Arthur Conan Doyle's select science fiction tales featuring the fictional scientist Professor Challenger and to demonstrate how the texts traverse the subtle liminal space between the ethical and the unethical. Unlike his literary predecessors, Doyle's scientist protagonist is acutely conscious of the ethics involved in any scientific invention and acknowledges that the scientist cannot shrug off responsibility for the impact on society of his innovation. Interestingly, he is also depicted to be dismissive of the ethics question in some other cases. This dichotomy of responsibility and guilt constitutes the core of the ambiguous role of ethics in Doyle's science fiction and serves as the pivot of this article.

Keywords: Ethics; Fin-de-siècle; Liminal; Monomaniac; Scientist.

Arthur Conan Doyle, universally known and remembered as the creator of the iconic fictional detective Sherlock Holmes whose gigantic literary stature has overshadowed every other work of Doyle and who has ensured that the author is associated with a single character in the common perception, has also authored some of the finest pieces of science fiction in the fin-de-siècle era. Professor George Edward Challenger is one of the most phenomenally popular and dexterously portrayed fictional scientists of the fin-de-siècle. Such is the abiding influence of the Professor Challenger series that Doyle's fame would still be secure even if he had never created Holmes. Conan Doyle's thought-provoking science fiction

works have received very little critical attention and the vital role that ethics plays in them has altogether gone unexplored. The present article intends to fill this research gap. The five texts that constitute the Professor Challenger series offer an astonishingly rich matrix of study on the complex dynamics of ethics and science.

Along with the inventions customarily described in science fiction, come a new set of ethical challenges and new forms of humanity's moral imagination. Russell Blackford opines: "Science fiction is a cultural response to the revolutions in science and technology during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These altered the existing understandings of the universe and ourselves, and concepts of time and history. . . . Science fiction writers have employed the characteristic tropes of SF to engage with a wide variety of philosophical and moral questions" (Blackford 24). Although science fiction as a genre is "notoriously difficult to define" (Seed 1), it invariably delineates an exceptionally talented scientific mind possessing an extraordinary, superhuman or bizarre power that can be in the form of an invention or a discovery and that wields supreme authority over fellow citizens. The way how this power ought or ought not to be utilised is where the ethics question comes in. It is here too that the role of the scientist protagonist becomes a subject of inspection since it is he who gets to design the fate of his fellow humans in a majority of science fiction works including Conan Doyle's works. This interplay of ethics and science as a discourse is something that began to be discussed, debated and understood in a new way since the nineteenth century.

Writing in 1827 for the Quarterly Review, geologist Charles Lyell complained about the perception of science in England: "It has been imagined in this country that physical science, as it cannot make known to us the moral principles of our nature, nor point out to us our social duties, so it cannot, like religious instruction, or ethics, or history, or even poetry, contribute to perfect the moral character." Lyell deplored the belief that science is irrelevant to moral principles or social duties; "nothing can be more erroneous than this kind of reasoning," he declared. While Lyell acknowledged that science does not take up as a subject the moral and social issues that concern such fields as religion, ethics, history, or poetry or he insists that science *can* "perfect the moral character" because of the kind of thinking that it requires. According to Lyell, science uniquely demands "an habitual practice of examining proofs with an unbiased desire of discovering truth," and such a practice has benefits that reach beyond scientific work; "men acquire independent habits of thought, and just principles of reasoning, which are not limited in their operation to philo-

sophical enquiries alone, but conduce both to the moral and intellectual advancement of society." (DeWitt 1)

The aforementioned claims appeared in an article titled "The State of the Universities" that argues for science's introduction into the educational curriculum. While on the one hand, science was aligned with moral excellence, there was another stream of thought that emphasized the pernicious effects of scientific thinking on the scientist's moral character and social commitments. Doyle blends both these Victorian worldviews in his science fiction. Due to the limited scope of an article, this work discusses two of the Professor Challenger tales: *The Lost World* and *The Disintegration Machine*.

The first and most significant text in the series, *The Lost World*, portrays not just Professor Challenger but another scientist who is almost equally renowned in the fictional world, Professor Summerlee who is a veteran professor of Comparative Anatomy. Although it is mostly through their scientifically informed conversations, arguments and debates that the novelist ponders upon the crucial and emerging discourses of science and ethics in contemporary Britain that engaged the attention of real scientists and other intellectuals, the question of ethics appears quite early in the text. The narrator Edward Malone who is a journalist working for the *Daily Gazette* newspaper circulating in London, on a visit to his beloved Gladys Hungerton, is disenchanted when he learns that she wants to marry someone who has accomplished heroic, perilous feats, is fearlessly adventurous, is unafraid of death and thereby acquired great fame. Her poor opinion of his mundane, unexciting life drives him to hunt for a suitable opportunity to prove his mettle. As repeated several times in the text, this is the primary reason why Malone joins Professor Challenger's squad in their highly perilous expedition to South America rather than his interest in the scientific matter. Gladys, lost in her fantasy land of knightly gallantries, is unaware of how unethical her selfish demand actually is. The narrator, writing in retrospection, ruminates: "Was it hardness, was it selfishness, that she should ask me to risk my life for her own glorification? Such thoughts may come to middle age, but never to ardent three-and-twenty in the fever of his first love" (Doyle 7).

Following this brief prelude to the plotline, the action permanently shifts to the redoubtable Professor Challenger and his interactions with fellow professor Summerlee, the narrator and Lord John Roxton. The narrator's first interview with Professor Challenger is primarily meant to throw light upon the ethical and moral constitution of Doyle's scientist protagonist

and thereby to set the stage for the succeeding narrative. The interview turns out to be both unexpectedly stormy and violent on the one hand and unexpectedly fruitful on the other. The initial hostility shown by Challenger to him is on account of Malone's false ruse to get an appointment with the scientist getting exposed. When the scientist learns that Malone lied to meet him, he takes it as an unwarranted intrusion upon his precious time that he devotes to his research and violently thrashes the narrator. He goes to the extent of threatening, intimidating, bullying, insulting and finally assaulting Malone, and all for just a harmless curiosity of Malone to meet the scientist. Thus the first impression of Challenger upon the reader is an unpalatable one. Through Malone's editor Mr McArdle, the reader gets to know that the scientist has already assaulted other reporters in the past. McArdle fumes in anger upon seeing Malone's black eye: "We can't have this reign of terror, Mr Malone. We must bring the man to his bearings. I'll have a leaderette on him tomorrow that will raise a blister. Just give me the material and I will engage to brand the fellow for ever. . . . I'll show him up for the fraud he is" (31).

The scientist justifies his violence by explaining: "When men like yourself, who represent the foolish curiosity of the public, came to disturb my privacy I was unable to meet them with dignified reserve. By nature I am, I admit, somewhat fiery, and under provocation I am inclined to be violent" (29). The text is replete with instances of similar and even greater insolence of the scientist protagonist and the author has repeatedly emphasized the fact that his protagonist is far from being polite and courteous to his fellow beings, although it is also brought out that they do benefit a lot from their proximity to the genius. The ethical and moral dimension of the late Victorian and early Edwardian scientist was not in the public eye a favourable one. The aura of mystery, suspicion and stealth surrounding the practitioners of science was a legacy of the industrial revolution and the rapidly advancing technology coming up with new inventions at a pace that was perceived widely as a threat to human civilization. Added to this existing prevalent gloomy stereotype of the scientist figure was the anti-vivisection debate that further fuelled the cynicism of late Victorian England. Born in such socio-cultural milieu, Doyle's creation Professor Challenger is both a product of the time and a reaction against this predominant discourse. Supposedly there is in science "a dangerous tendency to withdraw from society and pursue questions that have no relevance to ordinary human life. . . . It is thematised in scientific practitioners whose absorption in science leads to their removal from human society and from human ethics" (DeWitt 166). This withdrawal and aloofness was construed by the Victorian media and public as a contributing factor to the lack of

human warmth, morality and ethics found almost invariably in scientists. Challenger is a curious creation with his erratic demeanour vacillating between insensitivity and momentary flashes of human warmth. The narrator recognises his uprightness when he vehemently opposes his editor's labelling of Challenger as a 'fraud'. He is the first person in entire London who trusts the scientist's outlandish claims. At the Zoological Institute lecture, the infamous insolence of Doyle's protagonist is underscored by the author to serve as a prelude to the upcoming expedition where the reader would get to explore more about the psyche of the highest scientific mind in Europe. Delineating the haughty attitude of Challenger towards the enthusiasm of the audience, the narrator writes, "Challenger smiled with weary and tolerant contempt, as a kindly man would meet the yapping of a litter of puppies" (33). This lack of fundamental human courtesy in the scientist figure has long been a subject of critical analysis. What has not been observed in Doyle's work is the corresponding adherence to ethical standards when it comes to scientific claims and discoveries, their evidences, their usefulness, their possible advantages and disadvantages to the society at large. This aspect of Doyle's scientist protagonist is uncovered steadily as the story progresses to the key action of the novel, that is, the unprecedented expedition.

The interplay of ethics gains an entirely new dimension with the introduction of Professor Summerlee who serves as a highly useful foil to the character of Challenger, both in terms of scientific expertise and moral standing. Their varying responses to the bewildering challenges that confront and threaten to decimate their whole expedition enable the reader to gauge the ethical concern or the lack of it existing in the scientific practitioner. "While men of science aligned the study of science with moral excellence, the novel provided a way to explore this alignment, to examine the interaction between scientific practice and the personal morality, behaviour towards others, and attitudes towards larger social obligations" (DeWitt 2). This latter aspect is the pivot of the dynamics between science and ethics, the ramifications of which have preoccupied critical theory for decades and that occupies a key position in the canon of Doyle and other science fiction writers in the fin-de-siècle.

Here it would be relevant to point out the fact that even before the squad leaves for South America—apart from the narrator—Lord John Roxton believes in the veracity of the bizarre claims of Professor Challenger about the existence of prehistoric life. When an overwhelming majority is against Challenger, the narrator Malone and Lord Roxton keep their trust in the integrity of Challenger's character. Roxton advising Malone about

guns, says: "You'll need to hold your gun straight in South America . . . we may see some queer things before we get back. . . . I believe every single word he said to you was the truth, and mind you, I have something to go on when I speak like that" (Doyle 43). This is surprising given the frequent cases of bullying and violence that are reported against the scientist by his visitors. The author intends to convey to the reader that in spite of all his faults and instability of temper, there must be something in the man that compels reverence and faith in his acumen. The traditional code of ethics would have one to feel grateful to the few persons who chose to believe in you when the world was against you. On the day of departure, Professor Challenger, in his customary arrogance, tells the squad: "I beg you not to imagine that I am in any way indebted to you for making this journey. I would have you to understand that it is a matter of perfect indifference to me, and I refuse to entertain the most remote sense of personal obligation. Truth is truth, and nothing which you can report can affect it in any way, though it may excite the emotions and allay the curiosity of a number of very ineffectual people" (46). It stems from his confidence that even without a single soul on earth to support him, he would have proved to the world, sooner or later, that his claims are premised on truth.

About Professor Summerlee, the antithetical scientist on the enterprise, the narrator Malone has a high opinion: "The scientific attainments of Professor Summerlee are too well known for me to trouble to recapitulate them. . . . From the beginning he has never concealed his belief that Professor Challenger is an absolute fraud, that we are all embarked upon an absurd wild goose chase and that we are likely to reap nothing but disappointment and danger in South America and corresponding ridicule in England" (48). On their way to the designated plateau, the group encounters a sudden flying creature that puzzles everyone. Challenger triumphantly declares that creature to be a pterodactyl. The assertion is met with derision from Summerlee who ridicules it calling it a "ptero-fiddlestick" and adds that it was just a stork. Later he admits that he was being unethically hostile to Challenger's assertion without even watching the creature carefully and this is on account of his personal grudge against Challenger. On their second encounter with the pterodactyl, Summerlee does acknowledge Challenger's victory over himself. Instead of cooking up excuses, he honestly confesses his that it was his folly to disbelieve and mock Challenger's assertions. He expresses his sincere apologies and willingness to atone for his guilt. He observes that it would have been unethical to not congratulate the winner even if the winner is his avowed opponent and competitor in the world of science. Challenger, on the other hand, returns this courtesy and ethical conduct in very few of his in-

teractions with Summerlee with the most part being laced with ridicule, lampoons and expressions of repugnance to his colleague. As mentioned elsewhere, Challenger's personal code of ethics is strictly confined to the domain of science. It is never applicable to his interactions with any of his fellow beings with the unusual exception of the narrator Edward Malone whom he treats in a somewhat nicer manner than others since he refused to give the scientist in charge to the police for bullying and thrashing him. A remote sense of guilt functioning at the back of his mind prevents him from being his usual rude self while talking to Malone.

The author portrays not just conflicting interests of the two rival scientists but also their similar reverence for and adherence to the code of scientific ethics. Upon sighting a fierce and gigantic dinosaur crouching in front of their camp at night, both of the scientists—since they are unable to see its face clearly in the dark—refrain from the lure of unethically taking the credit of assigning a scientific name to the beast. Professor Summerlee says: "Personally, I am unable to classify the creature with any certainty", to which Challenger retorts, "In refusing to commit yourself you are but showing a proper scientific reserve. I am not myself prepared to go farther than to say in general terms that we have almost certainly been in contact tonight with some form of carnivorous dinosaur. It would be rash to suppose that we can give a name to all that we are likely to meet" (95). The predicament between the philanthropic zeal to serve science and humanity on the one hand and the selfish urge to return to Britain in order to save one's own life has been dexterously delineated by Conan Doyle in a way that throws light upon the question of scientific ethics as it was conceptualised in the fin-de-siecle era. After spending a few peril laden days in the deserted plateau in South America, Professor Summerlee gets irked to find that the rest of the troupe is not bothered about their return to the world outside and advises them to plan their escape from the place as early as possible.

This brings the two scientists to a momentous clash of ethics about the role of science and scientists in the human civilization. Professor Challenger reprimands Summerlee: "I am surprised, sir, that any man of science should commit himself to so ignoble a sentiment. You are in a land which offers such an inducement to the ambitious naturalist as none ever has since the world began, and you suggest leaving it before we have acquired more than the most superficial knowledge of it or of its contents. I expected better things of you, Professor Summerlee" (98). Challenger weighs on the scale of ethics the highly relevant issue of selfless service to science even if it means risking one's precious life on the one hand and

the selfish urge to save oneself leaving the task incomplete on the other. He pronounces the result of his judgement on the ethics scale and declares Summerlee to be thoroughly unethical as a scientist. Summerlee, instead of refuting the allegation, simply shows Challenger the reverse side of his weighing scale and proves how their safe return to Britain would be, instead, the better service to science and humanity, and thereby more ethical. He argues that if their extended stay in the unpredictably perilous land proves to be fatal to all of them, then human civilization would be deprived of the newly gained knowledge about the existence of prehistoric animals on earth:

> Let me remind you that we came here upon a perfectly definite mission, entrusted to us at the meeting of the Zoological Institute in London. That mission was to test the truth of Professor Challenger's statements. Those statements, as I am bound to admit, we are now in a position to endorse. Our ostensible work is therefore done. As to the detail which remains to be worked out upon this plateau, it is so enormous that only a large expedition, with a very special equipment, could hope to cope with it. Should we attempt to do so ourselves, the only possible result must be that we shall never return with the important contribution to science which we have already gained. (99)

He further adds that he has students to teach in Britain and his life is precious to science on that account too. This sets Challenger thinking and he admits that their lives need to be saved for the sake of science since both of them have potential to serve science for many more years. This is the most crucial debate on ethics in the text and the narrative takes on a new direction henceforth. The introduction of the ape-men or what the scientists term as "missing link" brings a new dimension of ethics. When the two scientists are in the custody of the ape-men, Lord Roxton and the narrator are free to conceal themselves and save their own lives from the enemies who are sure to kill them too if they could catch hold of them. Although Malone is a bit hesitating in his attitude, Lord Roxton firmly announces his decision that it would be unethical to leave the two scientists at the mercy of the ape-men and that they would certainly go to rescue them whatever be the consequence. Here the decision of Lord Roxton, as mentioned in the text, is not completely owing to the fact their untimely demise would mean a huge loss in the scientific world but owing to the fact that as men having a sense of honour, it is their utmost duty not to flee leaving one's teammates in jeopardy. The play of ethics permeates the fabric of the text in a way that juxtaposes the two important Victorian

values, ethics and scientific prowess.

The symbiotic relationship between ethics, morality and science along with their corresponding corollary, religion, in the fin-de-siecle has been succinctly expressed by John Kucich:

> The revolutionary discoveries of science may have done as much as anything else to shatter Victorian faith in theological order, but many philosophers and writers turned to science itself to provide a secure source of moral and social unity. Although they are commonly thought to have been antithetical to one another, Victorian religion and science can actually be seen to coincide in their quest for some grounds of consoling belief in either social or moral order. The accessibility of Victorian scientific writing, among other things, was a remarkable stimulus to this mutual quest. Nineteenth century science shared a common language with the educated public, and scientific writing was read avidly by lay readers and writers. (Kucich 217)

Arthur Conan Doyle, writing his fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, rejected any preconceived notion of strict demarcation between scientific aptitude and morality or ethical uprightness, as evident in the works of many of his renowned contemporary novelists like H.G. Wells and R.L. Stevenson. Doyle, through his science fiction, rather fostered the concept of a liminal zone between science and ethics where science does not necessarily imply ethics or the lack of it and the two are interweaved in a mesh of seamless ambiguity.

Another gem in the canon of Arthur Conan Doyle that has been subjected to decades of critical neglect compared to other science fiction works of the author is *The Disintegration Machine*. Although the text is not a quite memorable part of the Professor Challenger series, yet the unique depiction of the paramount significance of ethics involved in any scientific innovation makes the text worthy of scrutiny. Doyle keeps the spectrum of his characters and their demeanour unchanged in all the texts that constitute the series. *The Disintegration Machine* is a direct confrontation with the contemporary debate of curiosity versus responsibility on the part of the scientific practitioner with arguments pouring in from the masses supporting both the sides. While the late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientific epistemology favoured the proliferation of scientific curiosity in particular and the unhindered quest for knowledge in general, there existed a corresponding contemporary discourse centred on the eth-

icality of the scientific inventions that sought to put restrictions on how far a scientist could proceed. Anne Dewitt repeatedly draws attention to the general resistance to science and the widespread conviction of the "morally injurious effects of professional science" even at the time when science was quickly gaining prestige and professional status throughout Europe. Doyle's text is a reflection of the nexus between ethical and unethical science. The text illustrates the confrontation between Professor Challenger and another gifted Latvian scientist, named Theodore Nemor, whose momentous invention is the pivot of the plot. Dragged unwillingly from his work by the narrator, Challenger consents to accompany the narrator Malone to the Latvian scientist's laboratory to assess the authenticity of the hype created by media and public about Nemor's Disintegrator, the machine invented by Nemor. This new scientist figure has been portrayed by the author as the epitome of the unscrupulous scientific practitioner, one whose sole concern is with knowledge and the quest for newer horizons of knowledge regardless of where it might lead humanity to. This thoughtless quest, more often than not, is coupled with a singularly selfish motive to achieve fame and to amass wealth. This latter intent is the stronger one in Nemor's case and he blatantly admits it in public. He makes it quite clear that the highest money bidding nation would acquire monopoly over his supremely destructive machine which has the power to disintegrate everything into atoms within a specific range.

Upon testing the veracity of Nemor's claims and his invention several times, Challenger is aghast to realize that neither is this invention a hoax—as he had presumed—and nor is Nemor an impostor. In the words of the narrator, "I have never seen my old friend so utterly upset. His iron nerve had for a moment completely failed him. He grasped my arm with a shaking hand. 'My God, Malone, it is true,' said he. . . . I was, I confess, horrified.' He mopped his moist brow with his big red handkerchief" (Doyle 415). This is the first and last time that the reader gets to see this visibly shaken image of the otherwise invincible Professor Challenger. The incident adds to the reader's perception of the magnitude of the machine's power. The initial shock experienced by Challenger soon paved the way for a new emotion, that is, the realization that this machine is a supremely lethal weapon that can decimate entire population in a jiffy. The inventor Nemor explains, "You don't even now see the full possibilities if placed in capable hands. They are immeasurable. Conceive a quarter of London in which such machines have been erected. Imagine the effect of such a current upon the scale which could easily be adopted. Why, I could imagine the whole Thames valley being swept clean, and not one man, woman, or child left of all these teeming millions!" (418). Nemor burst into laughter

picturing the terrible apocalyptic vision and his evil demeanour leaves Challenger and Malone stunned. The ethicality of the invention that has the potential to literally wipe out humanity from the face of earth is one question that has never presumably occurred to its inventor or if occurred has been conveniently shoved under the selfish motive of attaining fame and wealth without the least thought for the fellow humans. Challenger does not hesitate even for a moment to make up his decision about the action to be taken after gaining the true reality of the Nemor's Disintegrator. He cleverly persuades the Latvian scientist in a way so as to make him seated on the designated pedestal and presses the button that disintegrates the scientist into a cloud of atoms suspended in the air. Challenger then simply goes home along with the narrator without restoring Nemor and with the knowledge that nobody else can ever bring Nemor back to life. This act of the protagonist, as wrongly construed by many critics, is not done out of spite or envy or any of those negative emotions usually functional between two rivals, but done in order to save the human race from a pernicious scientific invention. Challenger, in a rare heroic and noble gesture, takes the most ethical action and refrains from applauding the brilliant yet unethical invention. He succinctly explains himself to the narrator: "The first duty of the law-abiding citizen is to prevent murder. I have done so" (419). This text again sends out the message that Doyle has in various ways tried to establish through his science fiction works, that there is nothing of more paramount importance in science fiction than ethics. The role of ethics in science serves as the pivot of the two texts discussed in this article. The texts hold up the fin-de-siecle precept that science is for humanity and not the other way round.

To conclude, I would argue that although the fiction of H.G. Wells and other science fiction writers of the Victorian age claimed ethical issues as the special province of the novel and represented science as ethically detrimental, these two realms have eventually merged seamlessly to give rise to a kind of science fiction, pioneered by Conan Doyle, that puts the consideration of ethics at its crux. That Doyle's Professor Challenger series has an abiding influence on posterity is evident from the modern and postmodern focus on the question of science's potential to serve ethical and altruistic ends. This Doylean trend has ushered in a plethora of succeeding generations of sci-fi works including novels, operas, movies, plays and short stories that have maintained and remodelled the key notions of the ambiguity of ethics and science propounded in the Professor Challenger series through decades to come.

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