

Review of Philip McShane, *The Future: Core Precepts in Supramolecular Method and Nanochemistry*
(Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2019), 113 pages.

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An audience for this book will be graduate students, faculty and independent scholars who have ever complained that their academic disciplines “can’t go on like this.” But diagnosing existing deficits and inventing remedies are not simple matters, and the author is upfront: “The real ascent and its fantasy culture belong to a later period of history.” Still, the ascent to a base camp and an envisioning of further climbing are possible, and this book offers some climbing tips.

The author formulates his overall aim as “the effective engineering of progress.” One prerequisite is raising our expectations: do we detect our own confinement within narrow, albeit conventional, estimates of what it means to be a scholar, a scientist, a serious inquirer? If we do, how do we break free? Detecting the problem here may depend on how central to our living is the desire for explanatory understanding of whatever we are investigating. Next, breaking free of the problem may depend on whether we desire to be effective in making history better than it has been. A personal “inventory” of our desires for further growth and for making a difference may reveal a settled view that resists any fantasies about a better world within and beyond the academy.

Again, this book is for academics or independent scholars seeking alternatives to inherited routines. The author endorses functional specialization as providing a way forward, but he thinks that for now a simplified version of that more complex procedure is what may “get the ball rolling.” Thus, in Chapter 2 he describes the “Duffy Exercises” as a base camp that we can set up now and that will allow later generations to climb higher. His Chapter 3 sketches the basic tasks for establishing the base camp: (1) participants individually assemble the available interpretations of a selected issue; (2) each affirms what he or she thinks is the most advanced interpretation; and (3) each identifies what promising ideas or new policies might make for further progress.

How might this be the beginning of a way forward? Fantasize that collaborators in these exercises take a further step. They circulate their individual responses to the first set of tasks and invite criticisms from one another. Their personal estimates of advances, both current and future, are

thus being “recycled” as materials for group evaluations. What might come of doing this? Well, peer review is already common practice in some fields and has yielded good results. Now imagine that it became conventional practice in all fields of inquiry. Fantasize even further that those familiar with Lonergan’s universal viewpoint employed it both to criticize competing interpretations and to state explicitly where they stood on basic questions about the meanings of reality, knowing, objectivity and the sequence of displacements those meanings implied. Might such self-exposure within the recycling process lead to further refinements in their stances on basic questions and some progress in identifying which interpretations were actually the best informed ones of the day?

