



When Science Meets Religion

Martyn Shuttleworth 28.3K reads

The Aftermath of the Schism

"I am become death, the destroyer of worlds."

J. Robert Oppenheimer

The schism between science and religion, in the 17th century, was a necessary step in the advancement of human knowledge, because rigid adherence and dogma were undoubtedly halting progress.

Science has continued, over the centuries, to uncover vast areas of knowledge and answer pressing questions, for the undoubted benefit of humanity. There is little doubt that science has improved the quality of human life, but the focus is now shifting to whether this progress needs a counterweight.

Technological advances are unrecognizably, and irreversibly, changing human culture. The question is now about whether humanity, and morals, is lying forgotten on the road of discovery.

Many scientists, whilst brilliant in their field, are often guilty of not looking at the wider implications of their research, and become fixated on the result. They become caught up in their elegant theories, and innovative experiments, without asking whether they should be pursuing the line of research.

Ethical questions are an integral part of the scientific process, and should always be built into the steps of the scientific research process.

Currently, there is little consensus on who or what determines these ethics, and self-regulation is not working. Politicians make laws, but their judgment is suspect and subject to ulterior motives.

For example, the environmental mess is due to politicians cynically selecting research that gives them the answers they want, not what is beneficial for humanity. The strategies of politicians are built around the election cycle, and are not conducive to laying down solid foundations for future generations.

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The Ethical Codes Regulating Science

Science has always faced questions about ethics ^[1] and morality, during the experimental design process ^[2], and also in determining how the results are used.

The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment ^[3], where sufferers of the disease were denied treatment, in order to provide a control group, was very unethical and bordered upon murder. The exposure of servicemen to the unknown health effects of radiation was extremely immoral.

Modern science does display a better sense of internal morality. Mental suffering is now regarded as unethical, with the Asch experiment ^[4], where subjects were subjected to intense emotional effects would not be permitted in modern science.

Science is now governed by strict protocol, and layers of legislation, dictating procedure and protecting the rights of the individual.

For example, in a medical test where a placebo control group ^[5] is used, if the medicine appears to be helping, the experiment is terminated and all patients are given the drug. These protocols are admirable, but are rarely used in a wider, external sense.

The problems arise when we look at wider ethical concerns, governing the whole of humanity. Here we appear to be stuck in a mentality of 'Scientists know best.'

Whether an individual subscribes to concerns about stem cell research, Hadron particle colliders, or genetic manipulation, these are areas that affect the whole of humanity, and should be governed by collective responsibility.

In the same way that philosophy underlies the basic reasoning process governing the structure and validity ^[6] of scientific research, religion should play a greater part in ethics. When using, lazily, the term religion, this should also encompass humanists and atheists, who can, and often do, express valid opinions based around a strong moral code.

Religious and Scientific Extremism

This is not about fear of the unknown, but an insurmountable barrier across which there is little discussion. The lack of room for compromise is a breeding ground for extremism and intolerance, at both sides of the spectrum.

If scientists were more willing to address the genuinely ethical concerns, would the Intelligent Design argument have been allowed to fester for so long?

Religious fanatics spouting off narrow-minded and distorted views of the world are extremely dangerous, but so are scientists refusing to accept the possibility of a creator. Atheism is perfectly acceptable, but it is important not to fall into the same trap of believing that it is the only viable belief.

Ethical concerns are not solely the province of religion and those with or without faith have the right to express their views upon the subject, as long as they are reasoned, and well thought out.

Esteemed scientists stating that 'people who believe in God are idiots' are as intolerant as religious leaders ranting that those who do not subscribe to their restricted view of the world are evil, and deserve death and eternal damnation.

The Power of Compromise

For too long, there has been little overlap between the two fields, and this contributes to extremism. The path surely lies somewhere in the middle, where religious bodies are able to question ethics, without being shouted down, and scientists are allowed to establish their theories without attacks from those who believe in the literal truth of ancient texts.

Science and religion have not always occupied mutually exclusive fields. The Age of Islam, from the 8th century to the 13th century, saw a period of great scientific advancement, sponsored by the controlling Theocracy.

Unfortunately, the aftermath of the schism, and the accusations of blasphemy caused by the theory of evolution ^[7] and natural selection ^[8] left scars, which need to be healed. This worked both ways, with great scientists such as George Carver Washington mocked by the scientific community for their religious beliefs.

The Intelligent Design debate is widening this rift, and religious extremists are striving to maintain distance between science and religion. Despite the view being held only by a vocal minority, the debate is capturing the public consciousness, and masking any constructive dialogue and discussion.

Despite the fringes of science and religion causing difficulties, there are signs that the uneasy co-existence is thawing. Many scientists are happy to proclaim their religious beliefs, and many religious organizations support real science, rather than trying to use it to support narrow beliefs.

Once the course of debate switches, and religions are allowed to air ethical concerns,

humanity will be able to improve and develop at an even greater rate.

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