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A Haunting Specter — Modern Science Without Moral Limits

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Modern science most often operates under a cover of moral neutrality. It is probably safe to assume that most Americans think of science as a morally neutral enterprise — one that can as easily be used for good as for evil. Nevertheless, this impression of moral neutrality is a myth . . . and a dangerous myth indeed.

Yuval Levin makes this point in his important essay, “The Moral Challenge of Modern Science,” published in the Fall 2006 issue of The New Atlantis. Levin, a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC, sums up his argument with these words:

The real challenge lies not in the tools that science gives us, but in the attitudes it forms in us. The trouble is not that technology can be used for both good and evil, but that people in the age of technology may have real trouble telling the difference between the two. The moral challenge of modern science is, like every genuine moral challenge, a hazard to the souls of men; and the danger that confronts us in the scientific age arises not from our tools or our machines but from our own assumptions and attitudes.

He is right, of course. In this age of technology, many persons (including both scientists and non-scientists) have difficulty seeing the moral realities and challenges presented by many advanced technologies.

Furthermore, science is no longer just about science. As Levin observes:

The moral challenge of modern science reaches well beyond the ambiguity of new technologies because modern science is much more than a source of technology, and scientists are far more than mere investigators and toolmakers. Modern science is a grand human endeavor; indeed the grandest of the modern age. Its work employs the best and the brightest in every corner of the globe, and its modes of thinking and reasoning have come to dominate the way mankind understands itself and its place.

Resigning himself to a change in economic philosophy, President Richard M. Nixon once famously referred to John Maynard Keynes, the father of massive government spending, and quipped, “We’re all Keynesians now.” Well, we might say that we are all scientists now. Science is a worldview, a way of life, and a mode of thinking that affects every other discipline and dimension of thought. For many moderns, science has replaced Christianity as a touchstone for understanding reality.

Here is the heart of Levin’s argument:

Many of us nonetheless think of science as neutral because it does not match the profile of a moral enterprise as understood in our times. Put simply, science does not express itself in moral declarations. It is neutral in the very way in which neutrality is seen to be a good thing in a free liberal society: science does not tell us what to do. It takes as its guides the needs and desires of human beings, and not assumptions about good and evil. Our desire for health, comfort, and power is indisputable, and science seeks to serve that desire. It is driven by a moral imperative to make certain capacities available to us, but it does not enforce upon us a code of conduct. It can therefore claim to be neutral on the question of how men and women should live.

But a project on the scale of the modern scientific enterprise cannot help but affect the way we reason regarding that

fundamental moral question. Modern science, after all, involves first and foremost a way of thinking. It is founded upon a new way of understanding the world, and of bringing it before the human mind in a form the mind can comprehend. In forcing the world into this form, science must necessarily leave out some elements of it that do not aid the work of the scientific method, and among these are many elements we might consider morally relevant.

Science forces itself to consider only the quantifiable facts before it, and using those facts it forms a picture of the world that we can use to understand and overcome certain natural obstacles. The more effectively the scientific way of thinking does this, the more successfully and fully it persuades us that this is all there is to do. The power and success of scientific thinking therefore shape our thinking more generally.

Only when we understand modern science primarily as an intellectual force can we begin to grasp its significance for moral and social thought. The scientific worldview exercises a profound and powerful influence on what we understand to be the proper purpose, subject, and method of morals and politics.

But Levin also warns that we are prone to “moral forgetfulness.” We are not adequately attentive to the moral dimensions of modern science and, before long, all that is left is a sense that whatever science produces is good — end of subject.

As Levin explains:

Modern science and technology stand to exacerbate and worsen this forgetfulness, both by taking away some of those things that now and then make us remember—the child whose potential is a great surprise to us, the limits that respect for others must place upon our vanity, the truths and lessons we can only learn by growing old—and by accustoming us to a mode of thinking and learning that always seems to know more today than it knew yesterday. Rightly enamored by the possibilities and achievements of forward-looking science, we are often blinded to the possibility of progress through remembrance and tempted to believe that we can rise beyond the limits and constraints that the past always seeks to remind us are necessary. This forgetfulness risks leaving us knowing much less than we knew yesterday, even about science.

Finally:

This, in the deepest sense, is the moral challenge presented to us by modern science: to advance the great moral good of relieving man’s estate while remaining ever mindful of other, and perhaps greater, moral goods. It is a challenge to our sense of what matters most, to our commitments to equality and self-government, to our appreciation of the necessarily varied sources of wisdom and authority, and to our grasp of the right questions to ask.

The reality and seriousness of this challenge is readily apparent in so many contemporary debates. Why not use and destroy human embryos in the quest for therapies from human stem cells? Why not create chimeras (human-animal hybrids) or new transgenic species? Why not allow human cloning and customized human infants?

In reality, many Americans simply assume that whatever science is able to do is good — because science is morally neutral. This is one of the most dangerous myths of our times. The incredible wonders that have come to us through modern science — so many wonderful developments that have transformed human lives for good — can blind us to the reality that other technologies and applications can be inherently evil. The myth of moral neutrality in modern science is a myth we cannot afford.

