

Biology, Medicine and Society

Dear colleagues,

I have great pleasure in informing you of the activities of the think-tank: "Biology, Medicine and Society".

Progress in the biological and medical sciences has been rapid, pressed forward by the explosion in technology, in particular in genetics and genomics. These developments must be accompanied, supported, and put into perspective by parallel deliberation in the arenas of religion, psychology, psychoanalysis, history, philosophy and politics ("Politics" is not meant here in the sense of politicking, but rather as an elaboration of a vision of society and the world).

The dialogue between the hard sciences and the social sciences is a difficult one. Attitudes, sensibilities, and vocabulary differ. This dialogue, freed from all hegemonic temptation on both sides, is nevertheless essential if it is our ambition to draw up a new ethics and epistemology of biology that is truly adapted to our era. I believe that this enterprise responds to the expectations of many (most particularly students, whether they be in the biomedical sciences or the social sciences), and I find they are indispensable to revitalizing scientific thinking that personally I see falling into a state of total decay.

This scientific thought seems to me to be mainly weakened by scientific taboos, the "gurutizing of science" and the proliferation of irrational thinking.

Taboos: all subjects relating more or less to a biological vision of human nature are a priori heretic. Certain taboos have perverted and biased the scientific approach and, in a new "clerical treason" (Benda), have resulted in salvaging ideologies whose good intentions are not much on an excuse. Science has a duty to remain objective and neutral. "Only truth is revolutionary" (Gramsci). A modern ethics/epistemology of biology will be born only if it can be founded on a science liberated of every taboo.

Gurutizing of science: many of our colleagues have succumbed to the "guru" syndrome. Awarded with some title to glory in a very specialized domain, they proclaim themselves omniscient and pronounce oracles to decision-makers who are too easily misled by the aura of the learned scientist on subjects ranging from global warming to reproductive cloning, and the equality/inequality of Man. It is urgent that we return to truly rigorous scientific thinking, that we establish strict hierarchies between what has been solidly (but never definitively) established and the speculative. The credibility of science depends on it, given the:

Proliferation of irrational thinking: Scientific thinking is in decline, and science is in the throes of considerable mistrust from the public, who lend a receptive ear to a wide variety of demagogues. We must undoubtedly banish excessive scientism, smelling sweetly of the 19th century (the belief that science was capable of resolving all of society's problems and that only rational thinking was the source of true knowledge). However, when it is a matter of problems falling within the domain of science (GMOs,

global warming, the biological component of human nature), obscurantism, superstition and the irrational should be combatted by revitalized scientific thinking.

The "Biology, Medicine and Society" (BMS) think-tank is a place for multidisciplinary dialogue, hosting not only specialists (biologists, physicians, psychoanalysts, ethnologists, philosophers, people of letters and religion, historians, politicians, etc.), but it will also be a place for high school and university students, nonspecialist citizens, etc. We intend to make it a place of true debate, able to unite in a spirit of tolerance participants whose convictions may at first seem irreconcilable. A "debate" gathering protagonists who agree on nearly everything is about as exciting as a flat electroencephalogram. If the controversy focuses on the theory of evolution, it seems to me unacceptable not to listen to the point of view of the creationists. If the genetic diversity of the human species is on the table for debate, the holders of inegalitarian ideas should have the right to express themselves, under the strict condition that their attitude remains polite and does not contravene the laws in force. Moreover, a correct attitude will be required of everyone, and, for example, the intolerant and sarcastic behavior of certain scientists toward people of religious faith will not be tolerated in our debates.

The activities of the BMS consist of oral debates and conferences, with rotating locations. A website is being set up to accommodate written communications. These communications will be moderated. A true cyberjournal could thus be born. Later, if the group's activities develop encouragingly, the launch of a new scientific journal on the theme is envisaged. The publisher Elsevier (Amsterdam) has been contacted and is interested in publishing it.

To be informed about our activities and coming debates, it is enough to send me an email with your name and professional activity.

With best regards,

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