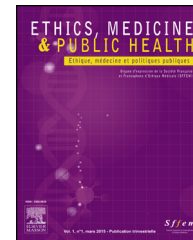




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EDITORIAL

Controversies in Bioethics: The exotic charm of another system of thought



Controverses en bioéthique : le charme exotique d'un autre système de pensée

English version

A discipline's *status quo* set of beliefs is not an absolute, universal set of truths, although it is often treated as if it had a touch of the sacred to it. Stuart Firestein challenges general meta-assumptions about science, in part with his claim that, "Science produces ignorance, and ignorance fuels science" [1]. Ignorance is not only a bigger subject than knowledge – because there are vastly more things we do not know than there are things we know – it is the driving force of scientific inquiry. "Ignorance works as the engine of science because it is virtually unbounded, and it makes science more expansive. . . as long as we are doing science it is better to see it as unbounded in all directions so that discovery can proceed everywhere. It is best not to be too judgmental about progress" [1]. Firestein encourages scientists and the public to use their ignorance to question what appears to be settled matters, delve into other sciences and disciplines to find connections, or take other approaches to satisfy their curiosity [1].

Firestein controversially – perhaps – advocates that hypothesis-driven research should be replaced by curiosity-driven research. Attacking the common assumption, even among scientists, that science is the paradigm of objective, preference-free research, he claims that hypothesis-driven research is full of partiality, which ultimately prevents science from advancing. Hypotheses by their very nature are "imprisoning, biasing, and discriminatory" [1]. A scientist with a hypothesis becomes biased against competing hypotheses and contradictory data because his "bet" is already placed on the proposed explanation to which he has committed himself and a great deal of his life's work [1]. To have it proven that he has bet on the "wrong" explanation is to imply the work he did was a waste of time, and hence, it devalues his research, intelligence, and the meaning of his life. To maintain self-esteem, hence, the scientist might have to make reality fit his hypothesis.

More troubling, hypotheses create groups bordering on the tribal. In universities, at conferences, and through publications, a hypothesis's adherents exalt their explanation and themselves for being wise enough for adopting it, whilst denigrating any competing hypothesis and its followers in some sort of zero-sum game based on self-esteem and the need to be valued by others in their group. To have a contrary view is to be perceived to be a threat as The Other, which justifies tribal actions to mitigate or eliminate the apparent danger.

Curiosity-driven research, on the other hand, involves serendipity for prepared minds. Firestein states, "we are often not smart enough to predict how things should be, and...it's better to be curious and try to remain open minded and see what happens. Most important, never dismiss anomalous data; it's often the best stuff." [1]. In other words, preconceived hypotheses often are mental strait-jackets. To do good science, it is better to use one's curiosity to tinker around with things to see what happens as a result of the tinkering, and then take that data to craft a pragmatic explanation rather than forcing the data to fit the existing hypothesis.

Much of what Firestein says about science applies equally well to ethics as a discipline, especially bioethics. Morality is essentially values and principles; principles that are generally about how we are to work with the values in an appropriate way or how we *qua* moral agents should be. The bad news is that the values and principles each person favors in his life and research are often those that most closely align with the individual's emotional interests. Like a scientist with a pre-existing hypothesis, the values and principles some ethicists espouse are unconsciously made to fit their emotional values and interests rather than being adopted on more objective grounds.

Consider how this skewing of values and principles to fit emotional values and interests has worked in the past. Frederic Bastiat, for instance, claimed that "Each of us has a natural right – from God – to defend his person, his liberty, and his property" [2]. Setting aside Bastiat's puzzling limitation of rightsholders to those accidentally possessing XY chromosomes, there are two connections to hypothesis-driven research that are interesting here. Firstly, one can plausibly infer that Bastiat's emotional interests and values favor an unbound freedom for the individual—read, Bastiat and those like him - as he exists in his society. Basically, it is the emotional value-belief that "I have mine, and it should stay mine unless I freely want to give it up, which I generally don't," which seems a common position for most Libertarians. From that inference, it would not surprise us if Bastiat had been financially well-off and secure in his society. A bit of internet research shows us this was the fact. It would have been extremely surprising if Bastiat had been a very poor person who required outside assistance to help supply the basic needs of himself and those for whom he cared. Just as there is no atheist in a foxhole, there is no Libertarian in starvation. Hence, the emotional values and interest the ethics researcher already has can make him adopt formal ethical values and principles that support those interests, much like a scientist with a hypothesis makes data fit the hypothesis rather than listening to what the data are telling her.

Bastiat's use of "natural" and attributing God as the source of men's rights supports the contention that emotional interest-driven ethics research shares bias and tribalism with hypothesis-driven research. To call something natural is to appeal to normal bias most people have against the unnatural. The unnatural is a violation of the natural, impure, evil, and wrong, whereas the natural is pure, good, and right. Emotionally, the unnatural repels, whilst the natural attracts. Hence, claiming that one's position is merely recognizing what is natural implies that every other option is unnatural, which means in turn that one is pure, good, and right, whereas others are the opposite.

Additionally, by grounding these alleged rights in divine action, Bastiat entails that his argument gains an emotional unassailability that one based on evidence and reason cannot achieve. In rational disagreements searching for truth, as long as civility is maintained, one person can permissibly challenge the beliefs, opinions, premises, and conclusions of another. In these disagreements, when people are mistaken, if they are given adequate evidence an error has occurred, they will rationally alter their belief, opinion, premise, or conclusion to correspond to the facts. If rights can be shown to have no ontological basis other than being social constructs, for instance, then that is how they would be understood in all areas relevant to rights talk going forward. If overriding information for either position cannot be found, the parties should still be able to agree to disagree until such evidence becomes available. Basically, this is how marketplaces of ideas work.

Enlisting supernatural justifications into an argument, on the other hand, changes how dialogue functions between two people who disagree. If someone asks whether there are Bastiat's rights or why they are limited to the fraternity of men, then that person is questioning an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipresent God and his actions, rather than an equal human person in the marketplace of ideas. And we know that questioning God—or the person's interpretation of her or his divine entity and his actions—can be a rather dangerous thing to do, regardless of God's ontological status. Even if one is safe raising the issue, the person who believes that morality springs from his god is not going to countenance much in the way of nay-saying or reasonable arguments against the former's position. With God being Truth's guarantor, the believer finds it incomprehensible to be wrong in his beliefs, opinions, et al. if he believes that they are in accord with God's will. Anyone who disagrees with the person's perceived Truth is a heretic, an infidel, or worst of all, an atheist, and therefore must be shunned/damned as The Other. It cannot become more tribal than that.

Bioethicists might not always use the divine to ground their arguments, but bioethics does load beliefs, opinion, and conclusions with the strongest emotional values and interests, merely because of its subject matter. Bioethics is about the morality of pleasure, pain, suffering, well-being, and happiness. It interests itself with who we are as *Homo sapiens*, persons, community members, and other ways in which we identify ourselves in the world we inhabit. Bioethics deals with the moment of quickening to the moment of death, and everything in between and beyond by valuing each moment and the overall whole of our existence.

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