Science and Ethics

By Alan E. Donant

Civilizations are often measured by their material progress and, in part, this is fair since improved living standards often decrease human suffering. It is the inner life of a people, however, that guides its material prowess; and altruism and compassion are the cornerstones that mark a truly great civilization. The twin behemoths of modern civilization -- science and technology -- have indeed brought wonders into our lives. Yet we continue to suffer, in some cases because of science and technology, for while they bring benefits, they also challenge our humanity and can threaten our very existence.

Some feel religion may act as a safeguard against the moral abuse of scientific knowledge. Unfortunately, the contentious relations between science and religion since the end of the Dark Ages has divorced, among other things, a sense of ethics from science as a discipline. It is important to remember, however, that technology, science, and religion do not cause the problems or create the solutions of civilization; it is *we* who are the problem and the solution, and scientists must look to their own thought and standards for moral guidance.

From time immemorial people have sensed that they are more than their bodies. That the transcendental experience, well documented throughout the ages, is not within the purview of modern science does not mean that it does not exist. Invisible phenomena are an accepted arena of science, and the unseen 90% of the matter in the cosmos and the 90% of an iceberg below the surface suggest that the invisible is at least equal in importance to the visible. Consequently scientists in their search for ethical bearings would be well advised to consider the unseen and the transcendental. Most scientific theories omit consciousness as a causative factor, but it is difficult to conceive of law and design, so obvious from the "beginning," without it. As scientists begin to explore consciousness in earnest and continue to work toward a unified understanding of all natural phenomena, the day will come when consciousness and matter are seen as one, and this *one* will be seen as the heart of manifestation.

In recent decades, despite its exclusive concentration on matter, science has continued to broaden its approach and findings. Gaia, the web of life, and other biological and ecological conceptions present the idea of oneness as integral to nature. The search for a unified field theory in physics is also an acknowledgment of interdependence and an underlying unity. Oneness has many implications for science, not the least of which is moral; for a connection of all things with each other, and all things as reflections of the One, changes how we consider our actions.

Cause and effect is the very foundation of the modern scientific method; without it experimentation to test a hypothesis would be meaningless. When contemplating new scientific advances, and especially their technological applications, we need to ask what the effects will be -- not only in the laboratory, but also on individuals and societies. Decisions should not be based solely on the alleged benefits that a new discovery may have; the detriments must be considered as well. Going beyond public-relations ethicists, advantage/disadvantage analysis should take into account nature, culture, and the moral weaknesses of humanity. Pure science does not mean isolated science. Its fundamental tool (cause and effect) and leading edge theory (oneness) are sufficient to explore science's responsibility not only for those immediately involved, but for all beings, human and other.

The world of randomness where human beings descend from animals, live one life, and then cease to exist, recognizes no grand destiny or ethics, and sees evolution as related to bodies not beings. Contrast this scientific/technological worldview with the wisdom tradition, where all beings are sparks of the One continuously unfolding their infinite capacity in a purposeful universe, subject to causes and effects over countless lifetimes. How differently might these two viewpoints approach cloning, stem-cell research, in-vitro fertilization, vivisection, abortion, and similar issues. Rather than stopping the advancement of

science, let us look at where we are going. Do we really want to support the torture of animals? Should optimal health rather than the study of disease be our emphasis? If we are ever-evolving consciousnesses, how does engineering our physical forms advance us? Is finding ways to control nature more important than finding ways to live in harmony with her? Do we diminish our humanity when we proceed down some avenues of exploration? The questions we ask and the answers we find depend on our sense of who we are and where we are going.

The *Star Wars* series presents two metaphors for future human potential: Luke Skywalker and his father, Darth Vader. The son emphasizes the mystical path where the forces of nature are used with a sense of service to others; the father emphasizes the path of applied technology accompanied by selfish gratification for power. Both use nature and technology, but it is their sense of morality that matters most. What kind of humanity do we want to become, and how do we affect evolution? These questions are important when considering the areas of scientific investigation our civilization should pursue.

The human mind approaches meaning in many ways. Sometimes it proceeds by searching and studying nature in a systematic manner conforming to particular rules; sometimes it gathers and coordinates natural or intuited truths intellectually; sometimes it plumbs the depths of inner reality, exploring through its mystical and transcendental capacities. In their lower expressions these three -- science, philosophy, and spirituality -- can all be divisive and dogmatic; in their purity of expression all three can lead toward truth and have the capacity to uncover and encourage a universal ethic. Perhaps combined, a synergy benefiting humanity may far exceed any one discipline alone. Today, as always, science stands on the verge of an enormous divide: whether to see its role as an agent for the material betterment of society or for the far-reaching betterment of humanity and all nature, inner and outer.

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