

June 26, 1966
Psalm 90
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SCIENCE AND MORALITY

"... but there is a spirit in man."
Job 32:8

"' Survival of the fittest' no longer holds true, and as a result, man is in danger of breeding himself into a genetic weakling--if he survives at all."

Thus begins an article on genetics in a recent issue of the magazine Science News. Let me quote a bit further:

"In prehistoric times people born with genetic defects died off quickly . . . Today, however, children born with inherent weaknesses, such as susceptibility to infectious disease, are being kept alive by antibodies and a host of other aids. The weakness genes are being perpetuated."

Science, especially medical science, has indeed performed miracles in ferreting out the causes of many diseases that once limited the average life expectancy to thirty or forty years. Today the life expectancy of a newborn child is just over 70 years.

The wonders of science seem never to cease. But there is another side to this matter. Every time science solves one problem it creates another, and speaking generally, it can be said that the greatest problem science has created is the tremendous threat of over population. No matter how optimistic one may be, there is nevertheless a limit to the number of human beings the resources of the earth will support. Today we have more people and they live longer. There are, however, those who believe that the population is in general inferior physically, mentally, and spiritually, precisely because of the advances made by science. Indeed, there are those who fear that the advance of science may be the very thing that will destroy the human race.

Today it is theoretically possible to keep a human body alive almost indefinitely in the sense that the heart and respiration have not come to a complete stop. But, is life without consciousness a blessing? French scientists have in fact recently devised a new working definition of death.

It is science that has produced the threatening possibility of a nuclear holocaust. It is science that has developed drugs like LSD and other psychedelics that men misuse and abuse. It is science that has made it possible for millions of people to live to the age of 70 years and then have a 15 year life expectancy beyond that, but has given them no meaning nor purpose for these additional years. It is science that has created a world population explosion.

Is there anyone who will condemn science or scientists for having done this? No one, certainly, who is normal and who is enjoying all the benefits of science. We praise these achievements of science, even while we often worry and fret over the consequences.

But as a philosopher and a moralist, I submit to you that too often science has dumped all of this new knowledge into the hands of men and women incapable of using it wisely, and then washed its hands of any moral responsibility for the consequences. The world has then turned to the philosophers and moralists and condemned them and religion for having failed to produce men wise enough and good enough to use all of this knowledge. As one sociologist has put it, "The satisfaction of man's instinctual, biological, animal needs is not sufficient to make him happy; they are not even sufficient to make him sane." *

Scientists cannot live in a vacuum, any more than can any of the rest of us. They too belong to the human race. Their responsibility is not over when they have made a new discovery and offered it to the world. They too are responsible for the way in which the world uses what they have discovered or invented. It is their creation, their child, and they have the responsibilities of parentage. It will not do to give these new devices to the world and then claim that religion and philosophy, clergymen and politicians are responsible for their proper use.

II

Sometime ago a book was published in Canada entitled The Comfortable Pew. It became almost a best-seller, which was somewhat unusual for a book which discussed the Christian church. The author, a newspaper man, condemned the church for not having made more progress in creating a climate of peace in the world, and praised scientists who had spoken out in favor of controlling atomic weapons.

To be sure, there are many areas in which the church merits criticism, and not least in the field of peace. But what this author does is to praise individual scientists and condemn an abstraction called the church. This, to say the least, is an illogical comparison and an unforgivable confusion of terms.

When it comes to morality we are not scientists, clergymen, church members, professors or lawyers; we are men. Every man has an equal moral responsibility, scientists no less than others, clergymen no more than others. Whether the world ends with a bang or a whimper, the devastation will affect us all equally, no matter what our vocation; physicist, philosopher, or herpatologist.

What I am saying this morning, therefore, is that morality is a human problem, for we are all involved in humanity. No man is more grateful to science or has more respect and admiration for it than I, but scientists can no more be excused from seeking a higher level of morality in the human race than can the clergyman, for the simple reason that morality is always the responsibility of the individual.

Too often science has tended to deal with ends exclusively. But there can be no valid distinction between ends and means. This was never said better than by a scientist himself, W. K. Clifford, the mathematician and philosopher who died nearly a hundred years ago:

"If I steal money from any person, there may be no harm done by the mere transfer of possession; he may not feel the loss, or it may even prevent him from using the money badly. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself dishonest. What hurts society is not that it should lose its property, but that it should become a den of thieves; for then it must cease to be society. This is why we ought not to do evil that good may come; for at any rate this great evil has come, that we have done evil and are made wicked thereby."

* Dr. Jack Weinberg, quoted in Science News, June 18, 1966

To insist that one's actions did not hurt anyone else is never a sufficient justification for an action. Did it hurt you? Did it make you less of a human being? Did it corrupt your character? You too are a part of society, and if that action hurts you it hurts society. Contrariwise, if an action hurts society, it always hurts you.

III

Now let us at this point stop talking about science and scientists and start talking about ourselves and our own relationship to morality. I have attempted to use science only as an illustration and I have endeavored to make it clear that whoever we may be, we are just men involved in the world and human society. None of us stands outside of society. Each man's action or inaction affects the whole, however imperceptibly. Too many people in today's world want to be good in general rather than in particular. By that I mean this. Here is a man who looks at himself and says, "I have achieved a place in business. I am respected in my community. I have never been in jail, nor have I ever been accused of a crime. Therefore, I am a good man." This is being good in general.

But that same man has often been drunk, smokes to excess, does a little cheating on his income tax, tells little white lies to his wife, puts over a business deal by means of deception, and does it all with the excuse that the end justifies the means, and that everyone else is doing it. That man may be good in general, but he is evil and immoral in particulars. Society has been damaged by his actions because he has been damaged by his actions.

William Blake said it beautifully:

"He who would do good to another, must do it in minute particulars. General good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatterer."

And one might also add, it is often the plea of the politician.

Everyone seems to be getting very ecumenical these days, so I'll refer to one of my ministerial colleagues, Father George White of the Episcopal Church, who is retiring in a few days after 36 years in one church. Reminiscing the other day, he spoke of juvenile delinquency and said he thought it was no worse today than it was 30 years ago, but that 30 years ago we called it "youthful exuberance".

Contrast that, however, with the statement made by a member of the Wauwatosa Police Force who recently insisted in my presence that this city now has the worst reputation in the state for teenage drinking. Can both of these men be right? Is it not another case of generalization in one case and specifics in the other? Generally speaking, I think Father White is right. Specifically, however, the police department recognizes a very real and potentially dangerous problem in our community.

Too often we are tempted to confuse the general with the particular and generalizations are never the whole truth. I look out over this congregation this morning and I am pretty well convinced that the people who are here are in general

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very good people, but specifically it might well be that there are in this congregation this morning people who have committed every sin in the book.

When we talk about morality, we must speak specifically. Am I a moral person? Am I striving moment by moment and day by day to be the best possible person? This is the only real answer to a better society for all of us. It is fruitless to talk about science or the church. These are abstractions. Only individuals do wrong, commit sin, perpetrate crimes. Only individuals can do good.

There is, as Job pointed out 3,000 years ago, a spirit in man, and it is a free spirit which enables him to choose. The choices of every man are important. If more and more men make better and wiser choices, we shall all reap the blessing. But if we make the wrong choices, "Do not come to ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for you."