

Science as a Force for Morality

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There is much about science that makes it fitting for moral guidance.

It is not by accident that the words science and conscience look similar. Science concerns itself with knowledge, while conscience deals with balancing knowledge for social good.

Knowledge is essential to good moral systems. If one claims it's immoral to pollute our air or water, deplete our forests, or squander our fisheries, it is important to accurately measure whether we are, in fact, harming our environment. In such matters, science provides accurate knowledge.

Flexibility is also important to good moral systems because sometimes longstanding traditions turn out to be irresponsible. History is replete with traditional moral systems upholding slavery, gender inequality and the prohibition of inter-racial marriages. The scientific values of fairness, equality, and objectivity support that flexibility and allow humaneness in dealing with others. For example, in raising children, good parents consider each child of equal worth and to provide equal opportunities with a flexibility for their different abilities.

Consistency — the even-handed application of moral principles regardless of circumstances — is essential to moral systems. Unfortunately history is full of examples of moral systems that accommodated themselves to violence, war, slavery, prejudices, child labour, etc. Science's objectivity and a disinterested pursuit of truth can guide moral systems to be consistently fair, just and equitable.

Caring is at the core of good moral systems. In health care, scientific knowledge prevents disease, alleviates pain, and saves and prolongs life.

Avoidance of authoritarian pronouncements is an outstanding feature of good moral systems. A more effective approach is to explain why one action is better than another. The self-correcting nature of science shuns authoritarian conclusions. Newtonian physics has been modified, and Einstein's relativity and Darwin's evolution theories have been revised.

Inclusiveness applies to a wide range of topics within a good moral system. Science includes topics such as environmental protection, racial equality, women's rights, child poverty, world peace, and equal opportunities. In contrast, religious evangelists often concentrate on limited topics such as sexual morality, homosexuality, and the inherently sinful nature of human beings.

The Golden Rule is a guide by which all major religions promote the principle of treating others as we ourselves would like to be treated. Moral philosophers, from Confucius and Plato to current insightful thinkers, uphold this principle.

One can easily, though, get the Golden Rule wrong. We have probably all had the experience of having our offers of assistance misunderstood or unappreciated, or sometimes we make mistakes and our actions turn out badly. To apply the Golden Rule productively, we need to pay attention to possible consequences of our actions — a truth recognized by the pragmatist philosophers William James and John Dewey. When it comes to measuring and evaluating results, science can be helpful. For example, are the genetically altered seed grains produced and controlled by Monsanto Inc. helping or harming society?

Good moral systems are proactive — they tell us how to proceed. Science is one of the best means by which moral systems can be proactive. It tells young smokers that smoking tobacco will be injurious to their health in the long. It cautions us about environmental problems as we deplete rainforests and hasten the expansion of deserts. Such warnings may seem to be practical matters concerning political or economic issues, but they also have implications for moral changes, such as stewardship, caring for others, and limiting greed.

Motivation is critical to good moral systems. People are motivated through rewards, approval, and gratitude, as well as through guilt, punishment, and legal sanctions. Science enhances our ability to think clearly and act wisely in solving problems. Moral systems that include science not only provide motivation, they satisfy both our curiosity and our search for truth and meaning.

I urge you not to think of science and ethics in opposition to each other, but to think instead in terms of making choices in both science and morals that are compatible pathways to progress.