

COMMENTARY

Medicine saved ethics. Has ethics harmed medicine?

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Abstract

In an article in *The Boston Globe*, Steven Pinker holds that the primary moral good of bioethics should be to “get out of the way”. The accusation that bioethics is an obstacle to research because it calls attention to basic principles such as personal dignity and justice is clearly contradicted by the facts. There are, nonetheless, other ways in which bioethics can stand in the way of science, two of which, bureaucratisation and the loss of cultural vivacity, are worth addressing. Ethics committees provide a framework for evaluating problems and determining an appropriate course of action.

Key words

- bioethics
- ethics committees
- human experimentation

Every so often, over the last ten years or so, some more or less well known author has caused a – usually brief – uproar by bringing serious charges against bioethics. In a famous intervention in 2008 Steven Pinker maintained “the stupidity of dignity” [1]. Now his target is the whole bioethical discourse: in a recent opinion piece in *The Boston Globe*, Steven Pinker makes the suggestion that the primary moral goal of today’s bioethics should be to “get out of the way”: Pinker adds that: “a truly ethical bioethics should not bog down research in red tape, moratoria, or threats of prosecution based on nebulous but sweeping principles such as ‘dignity’, ‘sacredness’ or ‘social justice’. Nor should it thwart research that has likely benefits now or in the near future by sowing panic about speculative harms in the distant future. These include perverse analogies with nuclear weapons and Nazi atrocities, science-fiction dystopias like ‘Brave New World’ and ‘Gattaca’ and freak-show scenarios like armies of cloned Hitlers” [2].

Steven Pinker is a controversially debated Harvard psychologist. His “The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature” [3] caused widespread disputing at the international level. For example, his public debate with an anti-reductionist antagonist, the neuroscientist Steven Rose [4], has raised important questions about Pinker’s approach while considering hotly-debated scientific issues. This latter possibly may well be inserted in a long series of shots he shows a tendency to display with the general public. It may be worth mentioning that he was a finalist for the Pulitzer prize, given his capability to produce bestselling books at a quite regular pace.

The article in *The Boston Globe* [2] triggered a flood

of comments not only on a variety of blogs and other social media but also in scientific journals of every kind. The controversy even prompted a summary report in *Nature* [5].

Jonathan Baron’s 2006 book *Against bioethics* [6] had a similar effect, and was followed in 2012 by, among others, Tom Koch’s *Thieves of virtue. When bioethics stole medicine* [7]. In 1982 the noted essayist Stephen Toulmin claimed that bioethics, which over the preceding decade had set itself apart as a separate discipline [8], had saved ethics [9]. Recent advances in medicine had, according to Toulmin, forced ethicists to tackle concrete problems and, by abandoning fruitless abstract speculation, to find practical solutions. Today we might ask ourselves if ethics has returned the favour. Pinker and other authors who criticise bioethicists suggest the answer is negative: bioethics is an obstacle that stifles biomedicine and prevents its progress.

Pinker’s assertion echoes the thoughts of many scientists whose research requires the approval of an ethics committee before starting. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to defend the committee’s role: numerous examples could be cited of research studies that, in the total absence of any ethical assessment, have seriously violated human rights [10]. The accusation that bioethics is an obstacle to research because it calls attention to basic principles such as personal dignity and justice is clearly contradicted by the facts.

There are, nonetheless, other ways in which bioethics can stand in the way of science, two of which, bureaucratisation and the loss of cultural vivacity, are worth addressing.

Bureaucratisation is a real problem. According to

data collected from 51 of 56 facilities participating in a multicentre trial in one European country in 1993, the assessment procedures demanded by local ethics committees called for 25296 pieces of paper and 62 hours of photocopying [11]. In today's world informatics has lightened the paper load and cut time requirements, and such an episode would no longer be compatible with European regulations [12], although in many European nations the administrative workload is one of the main causes of bottlenecks in the procedures for obtaining ethical approval.

The second risk – loss of the ability to stimulate, which bioethics should possess – was highlighted already in 1999 by Albert R. Jonsen in a lecture he gave at the Lifetime Achievement Award Ceremony at the American Society for Bioethics and the Humanities. The lecture spawned a delightful article entitled “Why has bioethics become so boring?” [13], which suggested several reasons to explain the phenomenon. One of these “is that bioethics has become a respected part of the world of medical, scientific and social policy and, like anything that becomes respectable, loses a bit of

its rough edge and some of its rudeness. Thirty years ago, all ethicists (if we may in retrospect call them such) were outsiders, strangers, engaged in criticism of the establishment. Their ways of talking were foreign, their academic credentials odd” [13].

So what is to become of the principles of bioethics? Some general principles are very simple, but their translation might be very difficult. This is why regulation of research has a positive balance of benefits over costs. The main reason why ethics committee approval of a project is required is that neither researchers nor research subjects are always knowledgeable and objective enough to determine whether a project is scientifically and ethically appropriate. Researchers need to demonstrate to an impartial expert committee that the project is worthwhile, that they are competent to conduct it, and that potential research subjects will be protected against harm to the greatest extent possible [14]. Ethics committees provide a framework for evaluating problems and determining an appropriate course of action.

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