



PUBLIC LECTURE

What is Science For?

A lecture delivered by Professor Sir John Sulston and Professor John Harris with Professor Richard Dawkins.

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Scientific advances frequently have ethically desirable outcomes. They may, for example, improve the quality and length of our lives. On one view, science can be justified only by reference to these outcomes. But on another view, science is justified by the simple fact that it generates knowledge. Appeal to the possible applications of that knowledge is unnecessary. In this public lecture, Professor John Harris advocated the first view, while Professor John Sulston defended the second.

Professor Harris illustrated the ethical value of science by discussing the possibility that scientific advances may allow us to produce better beings. He claimed that humans will not exist in the long term future, but argued that this is nothing to fear provided that we are replaced by non-human persons – beings which have “those capacities that make it worthwhile to be human”. Indeed, he claimed that we should use science, particularly synthetic biology, to ensure that our successors are enhanced beings, lacking the weaknesses that evolution has bequeathed us.

Several concerns with Harris’s project were raised in the discussion. One questioner wondered whether it would be better to leave the design of ‘post-humans’ in the hands of natural selection rather than attempting intelligent design. However, Professor Richard Dawkins offered tentative support for Harris’s claim that we may be able to nudge evolution in the

right direction. After all, we have foresight, whereas evolution does not. Dawkins wondered, however, who 'we' refers to here. There are, he claimed, difficult questions about who should decide what would count as better-than-human.

Another objection, raised by Harris himself, maintains that the creation of enhanced beings would inevitably lead to unfairness. For example, the enhanced may gain an unfair advantage over the unenhanced. The appropriate response to this problem is, Harris argued, to use social institutions to fairly distribute the spoils of science, not to halt its progress and thus deprive all of its benefits.

Professor Sulston, while agreeing with most of Harris's conclusions, pursued these concerns about fairness. Pointing to existing inequalities in access to healthcare and other important resources, Sulston claimed that humans have a track record of failing to distribute the spoils of science fairly. The recent trend towards private funding for science is, Sulston argued, exacerbating this unfairness. Though the move to private funding may have benefited most taxpayers and investors, it has led to the neglect of important areas of science where little profit can be made. Sulston thus argued for a limited restoration of the distinction between pure and applied science, where pure science would be to some degree insulated from commercial pressures.

Professor Sulston's main strategy for defending pure science, was, however, to point to the value that it has quite apart from its possible implications for future beings. Science is, he claimed, valuable as an "exercise of curiosity". Indeed, he ended by claiming that science, conceived of as an exploratory project, is *the* chief purpose of humanity.

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