

Praxis and Technology.
or
The Stalemate Between Knowing and Doing.

by
D. Wyatt Aiken

These reflections are the result of a panel discussion that took place in March 1997 on the topic: Genetic Engineering: A Blessing or A Curse?

In an attempt to illuminate the difficulties we are presently facing in the Modern World, I would like to begin my reflection with two stories from the Ancient World.

The first story tells of the coming of Pandemonium into the world. In *Works and Days*¹ Hesiod tells the story of a time in the world's infancy when man was alone, before the coming of the woman; of when, in his idleness, Epimetheus led men to wage war against the gods (this took place during the regime of the Olympian gods). To divert warring man's attention Zeus created a subterfuge, what he call the kaloskakon –the beautiful woe— to whom he gave the name Pandora (because she carried in her person a gift from each of the gods). Zeus fashioned this beautiful weapon as a gift for the idle, mischievous man, and gave her to carry with her to her new home a jar. Unbeknownst either to Pandora or to Epimetheus, Zeus' jar was filled with every kind of misfortune, misery, hurt and woe, and in an unforgettable instant in the world's history, Pandora emptied that jar into the world. Thus changing the world, and man's destiny in that world, forever.

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jar into the world. Thus changing the world, and man's destiny in that world, forever.

The second story is the story of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the story of Eden... The story goes that the Serpent had persuaded Eve that the Fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil –the forbidden tree — was ‘good for food, that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise’. Eve was persuaded, despite the Interdicting Command that God had given Adam and that Adam had transmitted to Eve. So following down the pathway of Deliberate Curiosity, the Woman & the Man traveled beyond their own natural knowledge, the science that was born with them, and into a domain of knowledge that was the proper only of the Gods: the knowing of Good & Evil.

The Moral of these Stories? From Hesiod, let us learn that confusion and disorder are known quantities both in the world of men and in the world of ideas. From the Hebrews, let us learn that Human Curiosity is not ‘Sufficient Reason’ to justify pursuing every type of Knowledge that strikes our Fancy or that happens to be a part of the knowable world.

I believe the moral of these two stories to be applicable, at least to some degree, to the condition of the ‘Animal that reasons’. Hence my question to biologists and genetic engineers: What will we do, really, with the types of knowledge that will be afforded us by research into the various and sundry dimensions of Genetic Engineering? This is perhaps the most relevant ethical question of the modern world, for the sake of the future world.

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I do not find it useful, from a philosophical point of view, to speak of individual instances of genetic engineering (e.g., Science-Fiction or scientific cloning, gene therapy, Eugenics-either positive or negative, cell fusion & hybridization, etc.). For better or for worse, each of these various applications in the field of genetic engineering will eventually be defined by a court of law not as right or wrong, but as 'legal' or 'illegal'.

I do think, however, that before the scientific community, or the federal government through its research grant programs, even begins to travel the road of genetic engineering in practice, we must first address the following question in theory: "[I]s it possible to revoke in some way the historical development that has so far taken place and return to a 'prescientific' understanding of nature...?"² In other words: Is it possible to ignore the irresistible forward 'pull' of knowledge? No. Is it possible for us to return to a time of pre-scientific innocence? No. We cannot simply ignore the progressive, unfolding nature of human knowing where knowledge leads to knowledge. Yet I think it foolhardy to follow down the broad road of genetic engineering. Not because this particular type of knowledge, or any knowledge, is to be avoided; for knowledge is a neutral quantity. But rather, because the applications of all knowledge, as with this knowledge, are never neutral.

George Steiner is correct when he asserts that "[t]he reach of technological man, as a being susceptible to the controls of political hatred and sadistic suggestion, has lengthened formidably toward destruction."³ Technology also enjoys the great good fortune of a privileged existence in the relationship of science to thought and action; for it "transforms the world without being able to give an account of the goodness of what it is

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"transforms the world without being able to give an account of the goodness of what it is

doing”.⁴ Genetic Engineering is a weapon we shall one day point, irresistibly, at ourselves. We are now at a juncture in the history of human knowledge where we have an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the Aristotelian egkrateian of the prudent man: we can refuse on principle to follow our desires in this area of knowledge.⁵

My argument is obviously ingenuous, but thoughtfully so.

These stories, of Eden for the Hebrews and of Pandora's Box for the Greeks, are simply the first in a series of Frankenstein Effects. They are the original telling of the story of Caligula, Faust and MacBeth—of knowledge gone too far afield too quickly. And Man has not ever demonstrated that he has the spiritual or emotional maturity to keep pace. But the problem is not really that man should possess tools or processes & methods that allow him to delve into the unknown; rather, it has always been spoilage by misapplication – the slow process of taking one ‘piece’ of information and consistently stretching it by application and misapplication until it becomes a knowing of different things entirely.

Historically, the high opinion Modern Science has of itself, and Modern Man's possessive attitude toward Nature (physis), is born of Enlightenment Rationalism. The Naming Animal/Cultivator of the Old Testament has become scientist –the knowing one- of the modern world. And this idea of Modern Science contains, implicitly, the hubristic Enlightenment Assumption of limitless ‘Progress’.

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One reason for my negative conviction regarding Genetic Engineering is the moral ambiguity, indeed the ambivalence, we have acquired along with Scientism – a Scientism mixed together with European Nihilism and Value Relativism. For better or for worse the ‘old’ values have disappeared, and we do not know where they have gone. And we cannot just make up a new set; for only laws, and not moral values, are discovered by reason. Says Allan Bloom:

Values are not discovered by reason, and it is fruitless to seek them, to find the truth or the good life. [...] Good and evil now for the first time [i.e., following upon Nietzsche] appeared as values, of which there have been a thousand and one, none rationally or objectively preferable to any other. The salutary illusion about the existence of good and evil has been definitively dispelled. For Nietzsche this was an unparalleled catastrophe; it meant the decomposition of culture and the loss of human aspiration.⁶

A second reason for my conviction that we should not embark on this particular journey, is the irresponsibility and lack of thoughtful wisdom that marks this road. In the exhilarating rush of scientific progress there reigns an absolute default of sober responsibility toward future generations. As an illustration of that default, let me cite a leading spokesman for Scientism. A Material Determinist, Edward O. Wilson waxes eloquent:

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New species have been created in the laboratory and evolution has been traced at the molecular level. Genes can be spliced from one kind of organism into another. Molecular biologists have most of the knowledge needed to create elementary forms of life. Our machines, settled on Mars, have transmitted panoramic views and the results of chemical soil analysis. [...] And still the process of great scientific discovery gathers momentum... [...] In time, much knowledge concerning the genetic foundation of social behavior will accumulate, and techniques may become available for altering gene complexes by molecular engineering and rapid selection through cloning. At the very least, slow evolutionary change will be feasible through conventional eugenics. The human species can change its own nature. What will it choose? [...] Perhaps there is something already present in our nature that will prevent us from ever making such changes. In any case, and fortunately, *this [...] dilemma belongs to later generations* [emphasis mine].⁷

As a people, and certainly all the more as thinking leaders of people, regardless of our position on each of the specific applications of Genetic Engineering, we must continually oppose the separation of power & accountability, and we must, if necessary, violently oppose putting power into the hands of thoughtless intellectuals, such as the scientist just quoted.

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I would like to close this brief with certain quasi axiomatic remarks drawn from an interview with the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's remarks will be followed by certain personal reflections of my own; this serves to illustrate the interactive dialectical nature of philosophy that transcends both time and culture.

Despite Martin Heidegger's own personal distressing ethical ambiguities,⁸ he is still arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. This interview, entitled "Only a God Can Save Us Now"⁹ ("Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten"), took place in 1966 with *Spiegel* magazine, and was published in 1976 shortly after Heidegger's death.

Prof. Heidegger: "In its essence, technology is not something that man, of himself, masters." (Die Technik in ihrem Wesen ist etwas, was der Mensch von sich aus nicht bewältigt (p. 206)).

DA: Heidegger is perhaps suggesting that the relationship between Man and Technology is, essentially, one in which Man is not only subservient, but also out of control.

Prof. Heidegger: "...modern Technology is not a 'tool', and it has nothing more to do with tools." (die moderne Technik ist kein "Werkzeug" und hat es nicht mehr mit Werkzeugen zu tun (p. 206)).

DA: Perhaps Heidegger is thinking of Technology in much the same way as Knowing; for Knowing, or Knowledge, can hardly be considered a tool.

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Prof. Heidegger: "What is astonishing, is that everything works and, in turn, leads to more Working, and that Technology increasingly tears Man away from the Earth, causing him to become more and more uprooted. [...] [T]his uprooting of Man, which is here playing itself out, is the end, if not even Thinking and the Writing of Poetry succeed in becoming a non-violent Power. (...das Unheimliche [ist], daß es funktioniert und daß das Funktionieren immer weiter treibt zu einem weiteren Funktionieren und daß die Technik den Menschen immer mehr von der Erde losreißt und entwurzelt. [...] die Entwurzelung des Menschen, die da vor sich geht, ist das Ende, wenn nicht noch einmal Denken und Dichten zur gewaltlosen Macht gelangen (pp. 208-209)).

DA: Man is already severed from his original philosophical anchor, which was rooted in an experience with, or at the very least a belief in, the divine. Weaned philosophically from that spiritual foundation, he is finally beginning now to gnaw at the material umbilical cord that keeps him rooted in the Earth. There is no place else to go when he cannot return to the opulent breast of Mother Earth.

Prof. Heidegger: "...[E]verything essential and great derives from the fact that Man **HAD** [emphasis mine] a Homeland and **WAS** [emphasis mine] enrooted in a Tradition".
(...alles Wesentliche und Große [ist] nur daraus entstanden, daß der Mensch eine Heimat hatte und in einer Überlieferung verwurzelt war (p. 209)).

DA: Remaining true to the earth/Homeland is a spiritual destiny, an inseparable unity of purpose and meaning that binds Man to the World, it is not a call to

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DA: Remaining true to the earth/Homeland is a spiritual destiny, an inseparable unity of purpose and meaning that binds Man to the World, it is not a call to

manipulate the earth for our own ends. This sense of belonging to the earth is reminiscent of Zarathustra's Third Discourse in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathoustra*¹⁰: the Übermensch is the Reason for the Earth. Your Will says: the Übermensch is the Reason for the Earth! Remain true to the Earth and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Apothecaries of Poison are they, whether they know it or not.

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Melt Down

by d. wyatt aiken

When the Great Mother has been finally and irreparably defiled,
When it becomes impossible to find refuge in her opulent bosom,
When she can no longer be our recourse, or most-sure hiding place,
When even she has become utterly defeated, and cannot save herself...

Without hope and without absolution,
the voice of the man-animal,
and the laughter of his woman and of his child,
shall fall into the heavy, musty silence
of the long-forgotten and the never-known,
and the very memory of them
shall pass out of thought forever,

and out of time.

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