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Dangerous Knowledge: Is There Anything We Should Not Know?

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The issue is the morality of knowledge, a matter quickly swept under the carpet in most ethical debates. After all, we moderns live by Francis Bacon's famous statement that "Knowledge itself is power." The powerful are those who possess knowledge and can thus use it to their own purposes. But is there a moral duty not to know something that can be known?

The question came to Roger Shattuck from the cockpit of a B-25 bomber as he flew over Hiroshima just days after the nuclear attack had leveled the city. He has been haunted by the quandary ever since. In *Forbidden Knowledge*, his most significant book of essays, Shattuck presses the question: "Can anyone or any institution, in this culture of unfettered enterprise and growth, seriously propose limits on knowledge? Have we lost the capacity to perceive and honor the moral dimensions of such questions?"

Though hardly recognized as such by the larger culture, questions of the morality of knowledge arise in a constant rush of scientific investigation and technological innovation. The arrival of the atomic age followed directly on the heels of the discoveries of modern physics. As we now know, the decision to use an atomic weapon was inherent in the discovery of how to split the atom.

The end of World War II did not mean the end of the hunger for knowledge which would lead to weapons of even greater destruction. Looking back at the hydrogen bomb and his own role in its development, J. Robert Oppenheimer came face to face with the morality of knowledge: "In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

Edward Teller, known as the father of the H-bomb, dismissed such concerns. "There is no case where ignorance should be preferred to knowledge—especially if the knowledge is terrible." The juxtaposition of views from Oppenheimer and Teller demonstrates the complexity of this issue. Pragmatism tilts the table in Teller's favor, it would seem, for if a nation neglects this knowledge, its enemy may put it to threatening use. After all, the failure of German scientists to develop the bomb for Hitler is one of the great near-misses of the century. The thought of Hitler with the atomic bomb was enough to spur the United States to action—and to prompt Albert Einstein and other physicists to flee from Germany. But Teller's dismissal of responsibility is too easy. His defense admits no moral limits.

The morality of knowledge is not an easy issue, but it will surely be one of the great debates in coming decades. Can a human being be cloned? Should we know? Will not that knowledge lead automatically to its use? These are no longer merely theoretical questions. The recent announcement of the successful cloning of a human embryo in South Korea puts this issue front and center. Can we fool ourselves into thinking that human cloning will be put on hold once the knowledge base expands? The biomedical revolution raises an expanding universe of challenges like these.

With tests for many genetically-linked diseases now available, should patients be told their chances of developing a deadly disease? Should they want to know? Doctors report a surprising number of patients who choose not to know. New technologies offer the potential of customizing the human species through genetic manipulation. Dare we know this truth? The knowledge offered by prenatal testing offers parents the opportunity to abort a child who does not meet their expectations, and physicians who order the tests often know or suspect why the knowledge is sought. The physicians too, have known sin.

The massive Human Genome Project has now mapped the entire human genetic code, offering unprecedented opportunities to treat or prevent diseases—but also to take the genetic future of the human race into our own hands. What will we do with such knowledge?

The Bible affirms the desire for knowledge—but for the right kind of knowledge. True wisdom is to know God, but too often our desire for knowledge is that we would be as God. This is, of course, the story of the Fall, and it is our personal story as well.

After Adam took the forbidden fruit, the Lord God said, “Behold, now man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil.” That knowledge has been our burden ever since, and it explains why we live so far east of Eden. If no knowledge is forbidden, we will surely face evils beyond our power to imagination.

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