

## **Genetics, Citizens and Moral Choice: Comments on "Genome: Moral Choices and the Polity"**

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We can all agree with Thomas Fitzgerald that new genetic knowledge is thrusting on citizens of the developed world many new choices freighted with moral and ethical valences. Fitzgerald is also justified in declaring that the science creating these options is undermining previously held beliefs, beliefs that for some are sited in religion. Meanwhile, science, by its nature, cannot provide a value system to guide us through the choices it brings us. Finally, one can also agree that many will have little ethical apparatus to apply to these choices and may select their option based on short-term self interest rather than some higher moral principle.

That said, we might do well to retrace the path of argument leading Fitzgerald to conclude that these developments pose social and cultural threats of great magnitude. I would like to propose five points.

First, it is worth pointing out that those attending the town meeting in which Fitzgerald participated apparently dealt with the moral scenarios rather well. If the intensifying impact of genetic research - which has been unfolding for decades, but which is now accelerating - is such a fundamental threat to the coherence of traditional values, one might have expected fiercer argument in Fitzgerald's meetings, and more difficulty in arriving at results attendees were willing to let stand. Do these meetings not portend an ability among ordinary people to thoughtfully deal with the dilemmas ahead?

Second, though I agree that powerful and articulate interests are central players in government policy making most of the time, the public's influence may not be quite as toothless as the author suggests. That plebes can prevail was shown by the death of Princess Diana; the dissatisfaction of British commoners with the stuffy and remote demeanor of their Royal Family threatens to reorder succession. President Clinton's ardent first-term commitment to reform health care was left high and dry when the fire of public interest went out, leaving the administration to face alone the mobilized stakeholders of the status quo. Too, there is the almost-sycophantic readiness of politicians to

consult polls and monitor talk shows before taking a position on various public issues. None of this belies the enormous influence that moneyed interests have in our political system, but suggest that Fitzgerald overstates the case when he argues that "Plain people . . . will be overwhelmed."

Third, Fitzgerald overstated the degree of peril in asserting that citizens of the developed world are having their lives "increasingly directed from a distance and informed by nameless expertise." Ranked against such large-scale threats as consolidated ownership of communication channels, the rapidly widening gap between the well off and the poor, and the rapacious greed accompanying corporate globalization, Big Science (my term) seems to throw a rather small shadow. Indeed, news coverage of science predictably follows the interview with the excited scientist announcing a discovery with another scientist dismissing it as bunk. "Balance" we have in abundance. One can argue, in fact, that Science's public role today is more as a victim, as corporations, courtroom lawyers, political players and the media use the expert scientist for their own purposes. Fitzgerald's worry that Big Science is changing our lives is by no means baseless, of course, but I suggest that there are far bigger sharks with us in the pool.

Fourth, Fitzgerald worries that the statistical probabilities in which genetic diagnoses will be expressed, will fluster, even "alarm or panic" citizens unused to dealing with probabilistic risk. Perhaps that is unlikely. The television weather forecast gives the probability of rain, life insurance premiums are based on the buyer's likelihood of dying, and when one plays the numbers or the horses, probability is the idiom. It may well be that genetic probabilities will be expressed in terms more precise than we are accustomed, and that sometimes life itself may hang in the balance, but probabilities will be familiar.

Fifth, Fitzgerald's worry that science is inexorably eroding the credibility of religion (and thereby casting "plain people" into a moral void) is, I think, questionable. True, religion has not seen science as a

friend. Galileo was persecuted by the Church for his findings, and even today the public outrage Darwin so rightly feared has not entirely subsided. Too, I suppose today's astronomy makes the location of heaven problematic. But as science, medicine and engineering present us with an avalanche of startling propositions, astonishing technological wonders, and potential remedies to a multitude of bodily miseries, it is far from clear that Americans have given up on spiritual beliefs. Indeed, contrary to Redfield's supposedly inevitable secularization, very large numbers of Americans appear to be steadfast believers. Recent polls indicate that about 95 percent of Americans state that they believe in God, more than 80 percent consider themselves "a religious person", and fundamentalist faiths are expanding. Horoscopes and palmists endure, newly joined by New Age religions, feminist spiritualism, and sundry cults. A fierce national debate rages on whether we will allow prayer in public schools, and if the accidental death of Princess Diana tells us anything, it is that her personal support of poor children, of AIDs victims, and against the maiming of innocents by land mines - all matters of values and morality - were essential elements of the phenomenal public reaction to her death. The same is illustrated by the death of Mother Teresa. So I think it is hard to be so certain that "science" is just about to finish off religious belief and moral convictions. Indeed, a case can be made that many, many Americans are, in varying degrees, "bi-

paradigmatic." We adhere to a religious faith, we accept the fruits and findings of science, and we ignore points of logical conflict.

In sum, Thomas Fitzgerald does us a service to call attention to the multiplying moral dilemmas that the Human Genome Project, and medical research generally, are sending our way. No doubt these dilemmas will challenge cleric, counselor, and ethicist alike, and in the long run our civilization will be changed. It seems also true that the resources given us by our society, and by other societies, give us some capable tools as we deal with the products of human ingenuity.

#### Notes

1. A past president of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Tom Greaves has served as program chair of the AAA annual meeting and editor of the *American Anthropologist*. He writes on intellectual property rights, environmental rights of indigenous societies, and contemporary indigenous struggle, and in 1994 edited *Intellectual Property Rights for Indigenous Peoples: A Sourcebook*. A professor of anthropology at Bucknell University, Tom Greaves currently chairs the AAA Committee for Human Rights.