

ETHICS & MEDICS

A Commentary of The National Catholic Bioethics Center on Health Care and the Life Sciences

THE CORRUPTION OF SCIENCE BY IDEOLOGY

The scientist, we like to think, dedicates himself to objective truth. He examines the facts and follows them wherever they lead—no matter what the consequences. Galileo supposedly serves as the prime example of this heroic stance, though the main difficulties he faced were not due to ecclesiastical prejudice, as is so often claimed, but to the fact that there was not, at that time, convincing proof of the heliocentric theory. What got Galileo into difficult straits was that he pressed his case in a belligerent and impolitic manner, despite the lack of evidence. The Church did not take Galileo to task because he had apparently contradicted the Bible (though that added fuel to the fire), but because he claimed that he could prove scientifically what in fact he could not.

Proof of the heliocentric theory appeared only well after the seventeenth century. In 1820, Benedetto Olivieri, O.P., Commissary of the Holy Office, reported to Pope Pius VII that conclusive demonstrations of the earth's motion had finally been made. Two experiments, he said, had been done by researchers that showed the truth of the Copernican theory: objects dropped from a high tower showed a deviation to the east; and there was a measurable parallax for the star Alpha in the constellation Lyra. These experimental findings appeared prior to Friedrich Bessel's parallax measurement in 1838 and to Leon Foucault's experiments with the pendulum in 1851, though it is these two events that are (incorrectly) remembered as the decisive moments of discovery.¹

No one denies that Galileo was a man of scientific genius—or that he was treated very harshly—but the Church was right to demand a strict scientific demonstration of his theory before accepting it as fact. No one is obliged to simply take someone else at his word. Scientists, after all, are just like the rest of us. They have their personal biases, their preferences, and their prejudices. At a recent conference on stem cell research, I heard a scientist describe the progress that he had been making in the promising field of adult stem cells, only to have the next speaker, also a scientist, stand up and say that adult stem cell research was basically a fraud in which no progress had been made at all. When I asked the first man to explain how the second could so completely ignore what he had said only a few minutes earlier, he expressed no surprise. Scientists have their own systems of belief, he said, and can turn a blind eye toward any theory that does not agree with their own pre-established convictions.

This type of hard-headedness is not necessarily bad. Some scientists have pursued avenues of research that others had long ago abandoned as worthless, and then made important discoveries—despite the naysayers. But what we see today is not the lone scientist, struggling against the blindness of those around him, and working toward some ground-breaking new discovery. What we see instead is the scourge of political ideology creeping into science and corrupting it from within.

Denying the ABC Link

The most recent example of this problem is the denial of the abortion-breast cancer link. In the November 2004 issue of *Ethics & Medics*, Angela Lanfranchi, M.D., carefully examined the recent claims of Valerie Beral and others whose article in *The Lancet* denied that there was any increased risk for breast cancer among women who have had an abortion.² There clearly is, but before proceeding, let us look briefly once again at the facts.

The hypothesis that abortion leads to an increased risk of breast cancer makes perfect sense to any educated mind. The sudden removal of a child from a mother's womb certainly must have some effect upon her physical condition. Or shall we suppose that such a sudden change makes no impression at all? The body of a woman who has become pregnant undergoes certain physiological changes in preparation for the birth of her child. Some of these involve changes in her breasts, which undergo a development that prepares them for nursing. When a pregnancy is terminated, that process is abruptly ended, and it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that the developing tissues suffer some loss of direction. Following the removal of the child, all of the physiological processes alter, due to abrupt changes in hormone levels in the mother. Specifically, human chorionic gonadotropin, which is responsible for full and protective breast maturity, is eliminated by the termination, leaving the breast cells immature and susceptible to carcinogens. It should not be surprising that some of these cells should become cancerous.

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THE ABORTION-BREAST CANCER DENIAL

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INVESTING IN A HIGH-TECH WORLD

HOW TO AVOID THE MORAL PITFALLS

Charles Neubecker

The hypothesis appeals to common sense, but we must also see whether there is any scientific evidence to support it. What we find when we look at the available studies, as Dr. Lanfranchi has pointed out, is that there is a great deal of support in the literature.³ In fact, the majority of the scientific studies that have examined the possible connection between abortion and breast cancer have shown a definite link. Not all of them, of course, but the preponderance of evidence points in that direction. Cancers tend to develop in those types of breast tissue that appear in early and mid-pregnancy. These are the immature Type 1 and 2 lobules, as Dr. Lanfranchi explained. When a pregnancy ends early, it is these tissues that remain undeveloped, thus becoming a potential site for the ravages of cancer.

But we are told by some that this reasoning is incorrect, and that when one looks carefully at the studies so far published, there is no appreciable evidence of a connection between abortion and breast cancer at all! Such a claim might have been believable if the analysis carried out by Beral and her colleagues had held up to scientific inspection, but that is not the case. The published study in the *Lancet*, purportedly one of the most definitive “meta-analyses” yet carried out, was seriously flawed. Specifically, it omitted many studies that showed a link between abortion and breast cancer—and as Dr. Lanfranchi showed in our November 2004 issue, Beral and company could give no good reasons for those omissions. Also, the authors chose an inappropriate control group for their comparison. Obviously, one must compare women who have ended pregnancies with abortion to those who carried their pregnancies to term, and not to those who have never been pregnant.

The Influence of Ideology

Would it be cynical to think that the issue that causes this unwillingness to confront the facts squarely is abortion? There is no topic that is more divisive or that carries with it more ideological freight. In another day and age, the commitment of the scientist to the ideals of research might have assured us of the objectivity of any study published in *The Lancet*, but we can no longer be so confident. Secular society has its own dogmas, and these cannot be challenged without incurring the wrath of new inquisitors who know how to use tools that are as effective at silencing dissent as those wielded against Galileo. Professional ostracism means not only social isolation, but also exclusion from the major grants, speaking engagements, and other professional opportunities that make for a successful career.

Jacques Derrida died in October of this year. For those who do not know of him, he made his name by denying that there is any objective truth. This thesis won him great fame in America, especially in the humanities. Texts, Derrida said, do not have any inherent meaning, not even that supposedly given to them by their authors, but each of us brings our own interpretive understandings to the text and imbues it with our own subjective understanding. Derrida’s deconstructionism has seriously corrupted the study of the humanities in America. The field now lies in rubble, but the sciences were supposed to be immune from this kind of debilitating attack.

The Beral study is therefore cause for alarm. When a leading scientific journal allows its pages to be used as a political platform, and sets aside objective standards of scientific research, we must begin to wonder whether the spirit of Derrida has infected even scientific discourse. Scientific papers should arrive at conclusions based on a review of the facts. Picking conclusions ahead of time, and arranging the evidence to support them, will only serve to undermine the respect that scientific inquiry deserves. All of this would seem to be obvious, but the fact is it must be said.

The ideal of the scientist who has set aside all preconceptions, dogmas, and political agendas, and who is willing to pursue the truth wherever it leads, no matter what the consequences, remains the standard—yes, even in politically volatile times such as our own. Such times, in fact, are the only ones that matter. The unwillingness of scientists to speak out against the shoddy research that is being advanced by those who deny the abortion-breast cancer link is a very serious breach. The lives and health of millions of women are put at risk.

There is a great deal at stake here. When the public learns that a causal link between abortion and breast cancer has been downplayed by the scientific community—for reasons that are ideological rather than factual—the feeling of betrayal will be strong. Science needs to stand as an independent discipline, one that follows its own set of principles and that does not suffer interference from those outside its field. But when it abandons its commitment to the truth and makes itself a party to political aims, the scientist, like any other, must be called to account.

To speak against the secular dogmas attending abortion is to suffer public censure, but those who seek to protect such outdated dogmas against the advance of science are now the scientists themselves. When Galileo was forced to abjure the theory that the Earth revolves around the Sun, he reportedly said in an audible mutter, “And yet, it moves.” Today, in view of the denial of any link between abortion and breast cancer, we can say, with Galileo, “And yet, it is there.”

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Notes

¹William A. Wallace, O.P., “*Fides et Ratio*: the Compatibility of Science and Religion,” in *What Is Man, O Lord? The Human Person in a Biotech Age*, ed. Edward Furton and Louise Mitchell (Boston: The National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2002), 159–161.

²Angela Lanfranchi, M.D., “The Abortion-Breast Cancer Link Revisited,” *Ethics & Medics* 29.11 (November 2004): 1–4. Dr. Lanfranchi responds to Valerie Beral et al., “Breast Cancer and Abortion: Collaborative Reanalysis of Data from 53 Epidemiological Studies, Including 83,000 Women with Breast Cancer from 16 Countries,” *Lancet* 363.9414 (March 27, 2004):1007–1016.

³Angela Lanfranchi, M.D., “The Abortion-Breast Cancer Link,” *Ethics & Medics* 28.1 (January 2003): 1–4.