

Will Our Knowledge Stay Ahead of Our Wisdom?

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Last week's unveiling of the human genome sequence—the genetic blueprint for the human body—is, of course, a dazzling scientific accomplishment. Like all leaps in human knowledge and power, breaking the code of life is laden with both promise and peril.

Whether the thing carries more promise or more peril depends on whether human wisdom is keeping pace with human knowledge—whether the clarity of modern thinking equals the clarity of modern microscopes.

Some of the past week's philosophizing gives one pause.

Scientists, it seems, were “particularly struck,” as *The Washington Post* put it, “by how few genes it takes to make a human being.” Turns out it takes “only about 30,000 genes, down from an estimate a few years ago of as many as 140,000.”

The Post quoted Eric Lander, a leader of the Human Genome project, reflecting: “There's a lesson in humility in this.”

When I first read that remark, I assumed, with admiration, that Lander meant geneticists are humbled to learn that their predictions about the number of human genes were wrong. But Lander had something more global in mind—a lesson in humility for all humankind.

“We have only twice as many genes as a fruit fly or a lowly nematode worm,” Lander continued. “What a comedown.”

Many religions and philosophies have agreed that human beings ought to be more humble than they naturally are, so there's nothing new about that. It's true, of course, that old-fashioned moralists mainly recommended humility in regard to our individual moral failings—not because all humanity resembles insects and invertebrates. But progress marches on.

What's puzzling about Lander's idea is that it implies humans would have more reason to be proud if only we had more genes.

Does chemical complexity have some obvious relationship with value? As a chemical compound, hair spray is more complex than water. But is it more significant, more valuable, more interesting?

Lander's theme was expanded upon in an article in the journal *Science* by Svante Pääbo, from the Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. Pääbo reveals that

. . . the similarity between humans and other animals . . . has long been realized by insiders in the genetics community.

Now everyone, he says, will discover in the similarity between animal and human genomes “both a source of humility and a blow to the idea of human uniqueness.”

Really? Why? The “idea of human uniqueness” existed for millennia before anyone ever heard of genes. Genesis is clear on this point.

The idea of human uniqueness might, of course, be a mistaken idea. But it has always been based on observable, one-of-a-kind qualities of human beings that are undiminished by the human race’s surprisingly low gene count. Humans, for example, still seem to have a rather greater capacity for science, art, literature and philosophy than worms or birds or kangaroos.

It’s not simply that monkeys’ surgical techniques are clumsier than humans,’ while reptiles’ architecture is shabby. It’s that no nonhuman creature does these things at all.

What’s more, the mystery of human uniqueness co-existing with extensive similarities between humans and animals (family resemblances, without a doubt) was actually noted in the past, even before insiders in the genetics community discovered those similarities.

If anything has suffered a blow from the new discovery, it would seem to be the idea that genetics accounts for human uniqueness. If humans are more genetically like animals than experts thought, it seems at least somewhat more likely that distinctive human qualities have their origin somewhere else.

But it wouldn’t follow that human uniqueness must be an illusion simply because genetic differences seem rather small to explain it.

Human beings once believed that disease was caused by evil spirits. Gradually, most came to doubt this explanation. But they didn’t see this as “a blow to the idea of disease,” and conclude that sickness was an illusion. They looked for other causes.

But progress marches on.

If ancient people were too eager to explain everything by supernatural causes, modern skeptics may be too eager to explain everything by physical causes. Much modern thought is trapped in what G. K. Chesterton called “the clean, well-lit prison of one idea”—an idea that locks out doubt as completely as did the most rigid religious dogmas of old.

This is the idea that human life and everything else we perceive consists, at bottom, of nothing but chemicals, genes, atoms—material stuff, and nothing more. To minds in the custody of this idea, human beings must either be biologically unique, or not really unique at all. Other explanations might fit the evidence, but they cannot fit the materialist dogma.

Most people who hold this idea are good people. But the idea itself may prove increasingly hazardous as society gains incalculable new powers to duplicate and redesign human bodies, to alter emotions, personalities and behaviors.

Just to be on the safe side, let’s keep such powers in the hands of simple-minded folk who aren’t easily impressed by similarities between human beings and fruit flies. Ω