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**THINKING ETHICS:
DOING ETHICS**

Contemporary debates around the ethics of the new technoscience are the crucible in which some of our most important shared values as a society will be forged. We have always formed those values around the two great events in each human life, birth and death. The new science has the potential to radically change both those events. Whether it will and to what extent depends on our decisions about the ethics that should govern it.

That we would disagree on at least some of the answers to the ethics issues posed by the new science is to be expected. But rather than bemoan our disagreements, we should welcome them, because they signal that we are engaging in “ethics talk”. That talk requires a broadly based, public conversation on the ethics that should govern scientific and technological innovation and the unprecedented powers over life it has given us. Disagreement is also important because it’s in exploring our disagreements, rather than where we agree, that we are most likely to find new insights about ethics.

We often acknowledge the need for public input into public policy about matters that raise serious ethical issues and speak about the need to act in the public interest. As a recent editorial in *The Lancet* points out, however, frequently it’s not clear what is meant by ‘public interest’.

Even worse, efforts to incorporate the public interest into policymaking produce a reality that is often very different from the aspiration. In many public consultations, there is commonly little serious attempt to include public comment into policy in an explicit and methodologically robust way. Public engagement is often used as a means to legitimise a political process, to give it added credibility, and to “proof” it from criticism. Power and private interest remain far stronger governing forces in policymaking than consideration of the public interest.¹

Indeed, I have had people tell me that “official reports” – for instance, on the use of controversial new technologies such as xenotransplantation (the use of animal organs in humans) – have been finalized prior to the public consultations ‘marketed’ as contributing to them. Such realities are not neutral in their impact, they do serious harm: they elicit justified cynicism and mistrust on the part of the public, especially because they are presented specifically under the banner of being ethical and “doing good”. That brings to mind an old saying in human rights: Nowhere are human rights more threatened than when we act purporting to do only good.

The role of ethics in science...

¹ Editorial, “Where are all the philosophers when you need them?”, *The Lancet* 2006; 368: 175

I turn now to the role of ethics in science. Let me start by telling a story, one that I relate with the permission of its subject, Dr John Saunders, a pioneer scientist in developing magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology.

In the early 1990's the National Research Council of Canada – the NRC which is a major funder of scientific research in Canada – asked me to set up and chair a “human subjects research ethics” committee for the institution. This was at a time when we were all becoming aware of the need for more formal ethical review of research involving human subjects, before supporting or undertaking it. The committee was established and our first major task was to draft ethics review guidelines, which were then sent out to the various NRC institutions across Canada. One was the Institute for Biodiagnostics (IBD) in Winnipeg, where Doctor Saunders was conducting his research on MRI.

Shortly after the guidelines were distributed, I received a telephone call from Dr. Saunders who said he wanted to make an appointment to see me. I asked what it was about, and he said, “Ethics”. I said, “Fine, but can't we talk about it on the phone? It's a long way to come to Montreal.” He said, “No. It's too important for that”. So the appointment was made.

About a week later I arrived at my office to find Dr Saunders, who had arrived well before our agreed time to meet, sitting in the chair outside my door. He was dressed in a dark, pin-striped suit – not the usual daily working uniform of scientists. I opened the door, asked him in and invited him to take a chair. He remained standing and seemed very tense. He looked at me and, after a pause of a few seconds, said, “I want you to know that you are the single worst experience I have ever had in my whole professional life.” With that a few large tears rolled down his cheeks. He is a big man and an Australian by birth, as I am, so I know that big Aussie men don't cry, especially not in a professional encounter. I was stunned. “What on earth are you talking about?” I blurted out, “That can't be true. What have I done?” He said, “You and your ethics are going to shut down science, you're going to ruin research, including mine”. He then took a seat and we talked at great length and, over time, John Saunders became a powerful advocate of ethics in science. He is one of the people on the inside who understands and accepts that unethical science is not just bad ethics; it's also bad science, because ethics is integral to science, an inherent, embedded part of it. He moved away from the view, that many scientists have, of ethics as the moral police, to seeing ethics as trying to ensure that scientists understand the larger moral picture of which their science is a part.

The *World Conference on Science: Science for the Twenty-First Century, A New Commitment* organized by UNESCO and ICSU (the International Council for Science) was held in Budapest in 1999. A vast majority of the three thousand delegates were scientists, many of them eminent ones, including six or seven Nobel Prize winners. But there were very few ethicists – I met only one other, who arrived on the last day of the meeting. Some speakers were still arguing for the importance and validity of the split between “pure science” or basic research and applied science or technology in relation to

ethics. The long accepted position was that the search for scientific knowledge is value neutral and ethics is only relevant when we apply the knowledge we discover through technology. That view was finally firmly rejected at the conference. The *Declaration on Science and the Use of Scientific Knowledge* that resulted from it makes clear that ethics must be embedded in science from its inception. It affirms the position that ethics is integral to science, not just an add-on: good science requires good ethics; bad ethics is also bad science. That idea, which sounds so ordinary and obvious, is in fact revolutionary.

Seeing ethics as integral to science has never been more important. Recent cases involving unethical practices in research, for instance, fraud in human embryo stem cell research and the non-disclosure of the risks of certain drugs, mean embedding ethics in science is a message the public, not only, is anxiously waiting to hear, but also, hopes is being taken to heart and acted upon. Scientists sometimes don't realize that they do not own science, but hold it on trust for the public as a public good. In the past that trust was a *blind trust* – “trust me because I know what's best for you”. Today that trust is an *earned trust* – “trust me because I'll show and continue to show that you can trust me”. In other words, we cannot take that trust for granted. If we don't earn it, the public will withdraw it. Put simply, in engaging in science, scientists have a fiduciary or trust based obligation to “first do no harm”.

What that obligation entails in any given circumstances can require deep thought and analysis as ever more mind-altering scientific and medical breakthroughs continue to raise ethical questions we've never faced before. For instance, advances in reproductive technologies that offer the prospect of precise laboratory manipulation of the genetic makeup of human embryos do so. The transhumanists believe we should use these technologies to become post-human – to make humans, as we know them, obsolete. The convergence of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, robotics, genetics and information technologies challenges us with unprecedented powers and unprecedented ethical issues no humans before us have faced. They allow us to hold the essence of life, including human life, in the palm of our collective human hand and to intervene to change it in ways that were never before possible. Synthetic biology, with its capacity to allow us to make organisms that don't exist in nature, faces us with never-before-encountered risks.

It also raises ethical problems because of its possible diversion to perpetrate intentional harm and because it presents unknown, but potentially very serious, threats to public health, other species and the environment. And, as I discuss in detail elsewhere², unprecedented as are the physical risks and harms the new science presents, the potential risks and harms to our moral and metaphysical realities - such as widely shared human values – are at least as grave and unprecedented. Depending upon what we decide we may or must not do with it, the new science could irrevocably alter how we think about ourselves and what it means to be human. In view of such possibilities we must ask what

² Margaret Somerville, “The Ethical Imagination: Journeys of the Human Spirit”, Toronto; House of Anansi Press, 2006.

are our obligations to future generations? What must we hold on trust and preserve for them? What is sacrosanct as of the essence of being human, which we must protect?

All of which means that holding science on trust can, occasionally, require us to exercise restraint – that is, our freedom to explore or use science may need to be restricted. The most pressing current example is in relation to the possible misuse of the life sciences for bioterrorism. Post 9/11 we recognize that advances in the life sciences that could be used for bioterrorism, confront us with the issue of how best to prevent the life sciences from becoming the death sciences in the hands of bioterrorists. Ethics could be one such means, by setting out for scientists the ethical principles, conditions and limits that should guide their research³. Over millennia, the law has used the term “freedom in fetters” to describe situations in which we need to restrict a freedom, in order to protect the very conditions that make freedom possible. But such restrictions are exceptions and must be clearly justified. And deciding whether such justification is present, requires mutually respectful dialogue about the facts we are dealing with; the benefits, risks and harms of what we want to do; our arguments for and against restrictions; and articulation of the values and beliefs on which we base our position. In other words, working out what ethics requires always requires freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of association and, for those of us with the enormous privilege of being academics, protection of academic freedom.

Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, including that a person in authority is acting unethically or an institution does not have a high “ethical tone”, it’s very difficult to “do ethics”. Ethical conflict is when we disagree about what ethics requires; ethical distress is when we know that unethical conduct is taking place, but it seems an overwhelming task to prevent it, partly because doing so faces us with harms or risks to ourselves. But we shouldn’t give up in despair – good guys do win out, even if only in the long run. Let me tell you about a remarkable paper I heard at a conference on the history and philosophy of science held at the University of Melbourne⁴.

We used to make jokes about philosophers spending their days counting how many angels could sit on the head of a pin. Today, philosophers are using computers to create sequential, computer-generated, decision-making sets. They generate, for instance, five thousand consecutive decisions or ten thousand consecutive decisions. In one of these experiments, the philosophers started with two equal-sized groups of decision makers: one they called rats, the other lemmings. The rats (the bad guys) were represented by red squares. They always decided just in their own self-interest and without regard to the welfare of others. The lemmings (the good guys) were yellow squares. They did the opposite; they tried to protect others, their relationships and the community, as well as

³ Margaret Somerville and Ronald Atlas, “Ethics: A Weapon to Counter Bioterrorism” *Science* 2005; 307: 1881-1882

⁴ G. Malinas, J. Bigelow, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta, Ed. (The Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford, CA, 2004); available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2004/entries/paradox-simpson/>.

themselves. At first, the rats won. Initially, the yellow squares disappeared very quickly; the lemmings were losing badly. But eventually, the lemmings started to come back; yellow squares began to appear among the red ones. What was extremely interesting and the most important message from this study was that as long as a small cohesive cluster of lemmings remained, they were not lost forever; they came back - eventually ethics was spreading again throughout the society. But if that small group was lost, if their number fell below a small critical mass, the whole graph turned red and could not be reversed. So, one ethical person plus a few ethical friends matters ethically.

It's a message that's both hopeful and fearful. A few ethical voices crying in the wilderness can make a major difference. But loss of those voices causes a complete loss of ethics. We must make sure that doesn't happen, because scientific progress without the accompanying ethics progress would indeed be a hollow victory

Reprogenetics...

In her essay, Helena Kennedy looks to some of the most *avant garde* technologies that are raising unprecedented ethical issues, particularly in the area of reproductive technologies and genetics (reprogenetics). These have been a major focus of my work in the recent past. Helena Kennedy notes that we can make "artificial germline cells" – the precursors to sperm and ova – and remarks, without further comment, that "same sex couples will have the opportunity to be both fathers and mothers to their own children". It is highly likely that scientists will be able to create a genetically shared baby for two men or two women by making artificial sperm or ova. The same technology might make it possible to create a "one parent" baby who is not a clone – for instance, a woman's ovum could be fertilized with a sperm made from one of her stem cells. I believe that to transmit human life other than by the union of a natural ovum and a natural sperm is profoundly unethical, both in terms of respect for the transmission of human life (a new form of respect for life that we now need because of possibilities opened up by reprogenetic technologies) and, most of all, it is unethical *vis-à-vis* the resulting child. As I have written and debated publicly⁵, I believe that children have a right to a natural biological heritage - that is a right to be conceived from the union of a natural sperm from a living, identified, adult man and a natural ovum from a living, identified, adult woman; a right to know what that heritage is; and unless an exception is justified as being in the best interests of a particular child, as in some cases of adoption, a right to be reared by their own biological parents within their wider biological family.

Canada has recently legalized same-sex marriage. Marriage is a compound right: the right of two adults to marry and to found a family. Same-sex couples can now argue that to prohibit them founding their own genetically shared family by prohibiting cloning or technologies such as those described above, is a breach of their constitutional rights against discrimination. I strongly disagree and for that reason have publicly opposed same-sex marriage – but not civil unions, because they do not involve any such right. As a result, I have become a very public target of the same-sex marriage lobby. I recently received an honorary doctor of science degree from Ryerson University. When that was

⁵ Somerville, *supra*, note 2.

announced a powerful storm of protest erupted from the activist gay community, demanding that, because of my views on same-sex marriage, the University withdraw its offer of the degree. That, in turn, generated an even bigger media storm across Canada, in defense of freedom of speech.

I do not want to debate the ethics of the use of reprogenetic technologies here – I’ve done that elsewhere⁶ – but I now believe that we have to develop the ethics of respect for human life in new ways. We must still maintain respect for each individual human life and human life in general but the new science and what it makes possible challenge even these old forms of respect in new ways, for instance, individual cases of prenatal diagnosis can collectively function as a new eugenics – embryos or fetuses with a certain characteristic can be identified and eliminated. The new science and what it makes possible also mean we now need an ethics that will ensure respect for three fundamental aspects of human life that did not require such protection in the past We need to ensure respect: For *the transmission of human life*, because we can now transmit it in unprecedented ways for unprecedented purposes. For *the earliest form of human life*, human embryos, because they can now exist outside a woman's body *in vitro*. And, for *the essence of human life*, the human germ cell line, the genes passed on from generation to generation, because they can now be manipulated.

Common misunderstandings about the nature of applied ethics...

I turn now to Ms. Kennedy’s harsh criticism of ethics committees, ethicists and anyone whose own ethics might be informed by their religious beliefs. With respect, that is where I most strongly disagree with her. She writes: “Ethical committees which are to advise the nation on their morals fill me with horror. Morality cannot be off loaded to a new cadre of experts. I do not believe in the idea of superior professional moral expertise – the problem of locating such moral expertise and trusting it are the same as for technical experts. Many bio and medical ethical centres are funded by the pharmaceutical companies. ...In my worst dreams I see a cartload of sanctimonious persons of piety from the spread of religions entering the ring with glee.”

Although it is true, in some cases, that pharmaceutical companies fund ethics centres, Ms. Kennedy’s comment seems to be a casual insult to ethics expertise in general. But her statement about ethics committees and experts shows a serious misunderstanding of the role of ethicists and the nature of applied ethics. The scathing words about religious people also indicates a misunderstanding, in this case of the doctrine of the separation of church and state. That does not mean, as many people mistakenly believe, that religious voices have no right to be heard in the public square. They have just as much right in a democracy as non-religious voices. What it means is that there is no state supported religion and religion, as such, is not used directly as the foundation or justification of law

⁶ Margaret Somerville, “The Ethical Canary: Science, Society and the Human Spirit”, Toronto; Viking/Penguin, 2000. Somerville, *supra*, note 2.

or public policy. Ms. Kennedy also seems to assume that a democratic majority ensures ethics, which is not correct. A majority vote, as the Nazis so horrifically showed us, is only as ethical as the people who vote. I'd like to take the opportunity Ms. Kennedy's remarks open up, to point out some common misunderstandings about applied ethics, ethicists and their role in ethical decision making. These misunderstandings abound. I mention here just some of the ones that I've encountered over the years and still find are ubiquitous.

Some people launch an attack on ethics by objecting to the designation ethicist. But ethicists are to applied ethics, as scientists are to science. Ethicists do ethics. It's a further question what constitutes that and, of course, whether it's well and competently done. But the common throw-away attitude – even when that attitude is not expressly articulated – that they are nothing more than a bunch of charlatans or at best “do gooders” or “sanctimonious persons of piety from the spread of religions entering the ring with glee” needs to be strongly challenged.

A second attack point is that all that's needed for ethics is good personal conscience and, moreover, that ethicists' personal conscience or values are not preferable to anyone else's, so why should they prevail. It's true that good personal conscience is always essential in ethics. But it's wrong that it's all that's required. It's not sufficient when the matters dealt with involve risks or harms for others, especially for society, and decisions about law and public policy, especially in relation to unprecedented ethical issues such as the new science raises. It's also true that ethicists' may not be any more (or less) ethical than anyone else. But their role is not to apply their own values, but to help the people who should make a decision to do so ethically.

In practice, an ethicist's task is to identify and describe the ethical issues present and help decision makers recognize all the relevant values and whether any conflict. If they don't, there's no ethical problem – we just do “the right thing”. If they do, the appropriate decision maker (who's not the ethicist) must prioritize them and provide justifications for breaching the values not honoured. The last is the essence of “doing ethics”.

Ethicists do not agree, however, on how we should go about prioritizing values when they conflict and, depending on which approach is used, what we regard as ethical or unethical can be radically different. There are two main camps of ethicists: Utilitarians assess ethical acceptability by seeing if potential goods outweigh risks and harms; most commonly they assess that by searching for the greatest good for the greatest number of people. One contemporary strand of utilitarianism can be described as moral relativism, insofar as the adherents of this approach deny the absoluteness or inherent-ness of any given principle, and argue instead that all principles are culturally constructed. In doing so, they deny the existence of any moral order beyond that which humans create; in particular, they avoid the need to refer to any super human or supernatural entity as the source of ethics and morality. In stark contrast, principle based or deontological ethicists believe that some things are wrong no matter how much good could come from them and, therefore, must not be done. Their first consideration is whether any given course of

conduct is, in itself, inherently wrong. Many principle based ethicists found such judgments on concepts of a Natural Law or Natural Morality, which may or may not be seen as emanating from a supernatural or divine source.

In short, moral relativists argue there are no actions that can be described as “inherently” wrong; principle-based ethicists believe there are. Principle-based ethicists believe that sometimes “being good” must take priority over “doing good”, that is, we must not do that which is inherently wrong, even if great good could result. Put another way it’s not enough for the outcome to be ethically acceptable or even desirable, the means used to achieve it must also be ethical. But once principle-based ethicists decide a certain course of action is not inherently wrong, then they can join utilitarians in a harm-risk/benefit calculation, although there might not be consensus as to what constitutes harms, risks and benefits and the weights that should be given to each, because these are value judgments.

Sometimes, some people need ethicists to help them to work through all of the steps described above as part of the process of doing ethics. But it is precisely *not* the role of ethicists to make those ethical decisions, as people who misunderstand applied ethics often assume.

It also merits noting that people often confuse ethics as a sub-discipline of moral philosophy (what we can call classical ethics, which is long established in our universities) and “applied ethics” as a discipline that has developed in the last thirty years. Although they are related, it is useful to distinguish between them. Perhaps the best analogy is to the difference between legal theory (classical jurisprudence) and law in everyday practice. We don’t have to understand legal theory to use law, but some experts do need to study and develop legal theory if we are to have good law. And “doing ethics” is similar to “doing law” – but the body of knowledge used in each differs. Applied ethics requires the systematic application of informed, structured and disciplined discernment to analysis of situations in relation to the ethical issues they raise and to decision making in these situations. And it is not correct, as some people claim, that no established body of knowledge and technique to inform and support that process exists. In fact, there is a large, intellectually sophisticated and rapidly increasing body of such knowledge.

Ethics and law...

The relation between ethics and law, which both Miles Little and Ms. Kennedy address, is an important issue. In contrast to Dr. Little, I believe that the tension between ethics and law is a creative one. In the past, we relied principally on law and assumed that our actions based on law were consistent with ethics. If we overtly used ethics at all, it was to supplement law and ethics was informed by law. Now, the order of analysis is reversed: we do ethics first and then law. The major impact of that reversal of the order of analysis is not immediately obvious. It means that law is brought into line with ethics, rather than, as in the past, ethics being brought into line with law; ethics informs law, both in the

courts and in our legislatures; and ethics functions as an important base for law in relation to medicine and science.

The function of ethics in relation to law is made explicit in malpractice cases in which courts use ethicists as expert witnesses – an increasingly common practice – and, on the basis of the ethics evidence, establish the legal standard of care breach of which constitutes compensable negligence. The same is true when ethicists give evidence before Royal Commissions or parliamentary committees. I have had the experience of participating in all three ways in which ethics can become law. It can be a very challenging one because of the sensitivity of the issues involved and clashes of values.

Dr. Little says that “[e]thics are not enforceable in the same ways as law” and that “[n]o one is bound to do what the ethicists conclude.” While that is technically correct, it is not true that ethics is without penalty mechanisms, as some scientists who’ve been banned from receiving research funds for life because of breaches of ethics have learnt the hard way. Moreover, we need both ethics and law – they are complementary in ensuring that science is held on trust for present and future generations. In short, both a well functioning ethics system and a well functioning legal system are essential in guiding us in our development and use of the new science and technology.

Ms. Kennedy urges reliance on human rights. While human rights, which are legal instruments, are immensely important, they are not always the most effective approach to first doing no harm with the new science. I suggest that we need to use a tripartite concept of human rights, human responsibilities and human ethics⁷. Which is the most appropriate depends on the circumstances, but all have the same goal of ensuring morally acceptable conduct in relation to technoscience.

And I believe that reason (in the sense of logical, cognitive mentation) – which is often regarded as the backbone of law – is not the only important or relevant way of human knowing. Rather, all our ways of human knowing need to be used in both ethics and law, but it’s easier in ethics to be open about using ways other than reason, than it is in law. Often law hides behind a façade of reason in using these other ways. They include moral intuition, ethical imagination, examined emotions, human memory (history) and experiential knowledge, to name just some. They are all essential and we need to seek a balance among them.

Probably Dr. Little’s most interesting observation about the relation of ethics and law is that ethics has “become ‘legalized’ because ethics itself likes the secular moral authority that can substitute for the transcendent authority of religion”. That is to use law as a substitute for religion in order to find ethics. Might seeing the relation of religion, ethics and law in that way be, as I suggest in the conclusion below, an entry into finding a broadly shared ethics?

⁷ M. A. Somerville, *Death Talk: The Case against Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide*, McGill Queen’s University Press, 2001, chapter 22.

The paradox of intense tolerance...

I want, now, to discuss a more general aspect of our decision making, as societies, about the ethics, values and public policy that should govern radical new science such as we encounter in reproductive technologies. This aspect deserves our serious attention.

One element of the “perfect storm” that erupted over my honorary degree from Ryerson University was many people expressing to me their deep concern about “what’s happening in our universities.” The email, below, from a professor in communications studies, who has an academic background in history, is typical (I use it with the author’s permission, but anonymously for privacy reasons):

Here's the story in a nutshell: My colleague and I were interviewing prospective assistants for a course that examines the history of communication. I asked one candidate an open-ended question about the relevance of history - what the candidate's view of history was. This is a pretty 'softball' question I often ask. She replied that there really was no history possible - it's all hopelessly subjective.

I pressed on, crude historian that I am. I suggested the following scenario: what if somebody published a new history of the Second World War arguing that Nazi aggression was not really aggression, but a result of the quest for sufficient living space for a growing German nation in Europe - a nation that had been denied its rightful place? The book would also argue that, internally, the German nation had to rid itself of impure elements one way or another to survive. Would that book be just as relevant as the next one on the history of WW II? “Oh yes”, came the reply, “Why not? There is no such thing as absolute truth,” came the follow-up reply.

Now, presumably, this candidate would assail the writer of this book, but -- critically -- not the actual content of it. Why? Because content is irredeemably subjective. And it is also important to note this was a candidate who would be considered to be on the "left" of the political spectrum and aligned to all the most fashionable causes.

This is what this candidate learned in cultural studies classes, which were referred to like holy writ. As I've said in previous exchanges, of course context is important and of course every generation reinterprets its own history. And yes, one must take a look at the historian him/herself. But it is the nihilistic negation of any historical scholarship or undertaking as invalid that is the really disturbing part here - so much so that even the most archetypal tragedy of the past century can be drafted into it.

The candidate then went on to say one could, possibly, have a timeline or chronology of events (I wonder how they arrive at knowledge of these events?) but the interpretation was essentially garbage (as noted above.) This is what we are dealing with.

That is a big nutshell, isn't it? It's a big nut, I would suggest.

What this story so powerfully shows is that 'pure' or intense moral relativism is rapidly leading to a loss of substantive values and ethics nihilism on the part of university students – as Dr. Little's description of post-modernism warns us can occur.

Dr. Little tells us that we live in post-modern times and that “[p]ost-modernism is a philosophy of rejection – rejection of the grand narratives of religion and of the modernism that succeeded the enlightenment”. He is correct for those who espouse a post-modern philosophy, but I believe we tend to largely over-estimate what percentage of the population they are. Probably that is a result of universities being a central locus of post-modernism and the disproportionate access to the public square and media that academics have.

The approach of post-modern ethics is moral relativism. There is no grounded truth; rather what is ethical is simply a matter of personal judgment and preference. It merits noting that we use the prefix 'post' to describe something when we know what we were, know we are no longer that, and don't yet know what we have become. Miles Little adds that post-modernism is a methodology of deconstructing and a philosophy that can at an extreme, result in ethical nihilism. He concludes that “postmodern ethics barely exists”. That is correct in one sense, but not in another. Let me explain: It's correct that we are dangerously close to ethical nihilism, as Dr. Little suggests, as a result of the intense moral relativism of post-modernism; but the paradox is that that means that postmodern ethics exists, because its 'substance' is nihilism.

The student described in the email is a specific example of the approach of those who adopt a philosophy of post-modernism: She sees history as merely one person's subjective interpretation of events, so values and ethics are seen as merely subjective personal preferences. Moral relativism is the philosophy that implements that view. Moral relativism means that values are all of equal worth and which take priority, when they conflict, is merely a matter of each person's perception and preference. That approach deconstructs values - they lose their substance. The result, paradoxically, is that “the equality of all values”, itself, becomes the supreme value. Another is that this stance ultimately leads, at least in theory, to extreme or intense tolerance as the “most equal” of equal values. But does that happen in practice?

That is where political correctness enters the picture. It excludes politically incorrect values from the “all values are equal” stable. The intense moral relativists will tolerate all values except those which they deem to be politically incorrect – which just happen to be the ones that conflict with their values.

Political correctness operates by shutting down non-'pc' people's freedom of speech. Their arguments against a politically correct stance are not addressed; rather they are attacked as being intolerant and hateful simply for making those arguments. They are heinous – for example, they're bigots, anti-women or homophobic - and, therefore, fair game. This “derogatorily label the person and dismiss them on the basis of that label”

approach is also intentionally used as a strategy to suppress strong arguments against any “pc” stance and avoid needing to deal with them.

Moral relativism and political correctness in practice...

The issue that sparked the “Ryerson controversy”, same-sex marriage, is an example of what ‘pure’ moral relativism and intense tolerance, as modified by political correctness, mean in practice.

I argue that children need and have a right to both a mother and a father, preferably their own biological parents, unless the “best interests” of a particular child require otherwise. Marriage limited to the union of a man and a woman establishes that right; same-sex marriage eliminates that right for all children (which is why I oppose the redefinition of marriage), but support civil unions (which do not have that impact). My approach clashes head-on with the, ‘pc’ stance – that of “personal preference re founding a family” – that supports same-sex marriage.

My approach rejects all of the following: the idea that any type of family relationship, no matter how desirable for the adults involved, is as good as any other for their children; that family organization is no one else’s business--certainly not that of the state or the law to give preference to some modes over others; and that anyone who challenges the ‘pc’ stance is, thereby, automatically, intolerant, a bigot or hatemonger.

The Ryerson protestors sought to “deal” with me by labeling me. I was described as guilty of a hate crime; the new Ernst Zundel (a vitriolic Holocaust-denier, who, like him, should be deported – they were grateful that I came from Australia and could be sent back there); a neo-Nazi; and a member of the Klu Klux Klan. My views had no place in the university. It eliminated the need to deal with the substance of my arguments – I *and my arguments* could be summarily dismissed. It sent a very powerful warning to all those who might happen to share my views – or any other non-‘pc’ views - that they should not speak them publicly for fear of the same kind of treatment.

That’s what’s happening to freedom of speech in the context of political correctness in our universities. On the surface, tolerance is espoused by the ‘pc’ advocates as a very important value, but, in my experience it doesn’t work that way. Paradoxically, intense tolerance often results in intense *intolerance*.

People who are uncomfortable with uncertainty seek certainty and, in order to achieve that, are adamant about the rightness of their view. Many ethical mistakes are made on the basis of shoring up a firm position which is a false certainty that would be avoided if we could better tolerate necessary uncertainty.

Even if everyone respected freedom of speech, there are still problems. The combination of moral relativism and political correctness is leading to the annihilation of shared

values. That creates a situation that threatens society itself. We can't hold a society together in the long-term without shared values, that is, without a societal-cultural paradigm: the story about ourselves that supports our most important principles, values, attitudes and beliefs, one that we tell each other and all buy into in order to form the glue that holds us together. Tolerance alone, and especially unbalanced by other important values, is nowhere near enough to found that story.

To ensure our story does not disintegrate and continues to be enriched, among many requirements, the public needs academics to speak freely – and respectfully, openly, honestly, and without threat of repercussions - about contentious but important societal problems. That requires respect for freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and academic freedom – the latter of which is meant primarily for the benefit of the public by allowing academics to feel they can speak the truth, as they see it, to power. The Ryerson events were in breach of all those freedoms.

Conclusion...

The ethics of innovation is enormously important in view of the extraordinary powers the new science has and will continue to place in our hands. But in deciding on those ethics the wheel comes full circle, the snake swallows its tail: What we decide is ethical and unethical will determine the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human, our most important shared values, attitudes principles and beliefs, and how we find meaning in life. No small matter.

One of the most important matters we face is whether we can find a shared ethics in a multicultural, pluralistic, globalized world: Are there any foundational principles on which we might agree? And might some of those principles be constants across time and able to be accepted by everyone, whether or not they are religious? One problem is to find a moral authority that everyone can accept. Religious people can turn to an external moral authority – God or his earthly representatives; often in the past they included an absolute monarch – to establish the authenticity of their ethics. That is not open to non-religious people. Dr. Little points to law being used as a substitute moral authority for that of religion, in order to find a shared ethics. This helps to explain why our Western societies have become so legalized. But might non-religious people be able to find authenticity and moral authority for their ethics outside the law, for instance, simply as part of the essence of being human? If so, what must we not do to human nature with the new science if we are to act ethically with respect to protecting our innate capacity for morality?

Scientists tell us that life on earth might have resulted from organisms in meteorites that crashed into the earth and that we humans are the result of around 850 million years of evolution. If so, we are the wondrous outcome of the combination of stardust and time. The new technoscience is giving us powers to change that outcome - ourselves and our world – in nanoseconds. As these Deakin Lectures show, we are now engaged in the debates that must ensue about what we may, must not and must do with these powers no

other humans before us have ever possessed. Above all, we need to ask ourselves what must we protect about our humanness and humanity, and to respond wisely, humbly and courageously, keeping in mind that sometimes it takes far more courage to say no, than yes.