

KEITH FOX

Guest Editorial

Theoretical and practical knowledge in science and faith

Part of our human make up, that distinguishes us from other living forms, is the desire for knowledge, just for its own sake, irrespective of whether this will be of any practical use. Indeed we commonly use the word *academic* to describe such knowledge. Some things fascinate us just because they are there! Some of this knowledge results in clear benefits for humankind as we apply our God-given talents to understand the work of God's creation. However, much simply remains as intriguing insights that increase our sense of awe at the world in which we live. A similar situation pertains to Christian theology: some aspects have profound effects on our lives, while other doctrines have little obvious practical application, but enhance our sense of wonder at the God that we worship. My own enthusiasm for both Christianity and science stems from both these categories of knowledge, combining the passion to know, understand and share the Christian faith, with a fascination for understanding the world in which we live in all its chemical and biological richness. Both science and faith contain categories of abstract knowledge without obvious practical application, but equally both enterprises involve beliefs that have serious implications for the way that I live.

In science knowledge that initially appears purely academic may turn out eventually to have profound implications for our lives. New theoretical insights into the structure and properties of DNA made 50-60 years ago provide a striking example, leading to a recent flurry of articles on genome research and the discovery of genetic profiles characterising disorders such as heart disease, diabetes, Crohn's disease, Alzheimer's and cancer. These discoveries will allow better prediction of the likelihood that we could suffer from one of these multifactorial diseases, and may lead to new targets for pharmaceutical intervention. But to what extent will increased knowledge of our own genomes affect our lives? Will it simply increase our levels of personal anxiety about the future? What person by worrying can add a day to their life? Does anyone want to know in advance what they will die of, if no treatment or avoidance is possible? Will genomics lead to personalised medicines or control our human destiny, improved treatments or more worried people? Science highlights the ambiguous relationship between academic and practical knowledge.

The present issue of the journal spans the range between academic and practical knowledge in both science and theology. Both aspects are important in enhancing our sense of wonder and awe at God's world, challenging us to think about the ways that we live and act as stewards of God's creation.

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