August 4, 2015

Letters to the Editor
The Boston Globe
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To The Editor:

Steven Pinker's opinion [The moral imperative for bioethics, August 1, 2015] that the “primary moral goal for today’s bioethics” should be to “get out of the way” of science, which implies that ethics and science are by nature at odds, is dangerous and ill-informed.

We don’t have to look to fiction, or back 70 years to the Nazi experiments, to find evidence that science “unfettered” by ethics is bad science. Bad science delays development of effective treatments and damages public trust in the research enterprise, resulting in the same costs to human health that Professor Pinker decries.

Furthermore, he notes we already have “ample safeguards” for the protection of people who volunteer to participate in scientific research. Yet he fails to acknowledge that those safeguards reflect the very ethical principles—respect, minimizing risk of harm, and fairness—he dismisses as “nebulous.” Of course, it was ethicists, not scientists, who formulated those principles, which not only guide emerging research but protect it from ad hoc criticism.

Our ethical oversight system may be imperfect, but that’s not a reason to jettison ethical examination of new scientific developments. To foster advances in biomedicine, we need a more nuanced discussion about the relationship between ethics and science than Professor Pinker offers.

Sincerely,

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