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## Enlightenment: Science and Human Rights

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## Enlightenment: Science and Human Rights

### Abstract

The subject of science and human rights sparks off thoughts of how this link has historically and geographically been severed, which has the effect of finding it newsworthy that scientists speak out in favor of human rights.

The ancient Greek philosophers were not limited in their subject matters in the same way as we take for granted now: science, society and the self were all deliberated about both empirically and normatively. Moreover, there was no division of labor between thinkers about one or other of these subjects.

Pre-Islamic Persian influences also affected debates on science. In the Middle Ages with Christian, Jewish and Islamic scholarly efforts mainly located in religious contexts, still there was no separation between studying science and society.

### Keywords

Human rights, Science, Science and Human Rights Coalition, Advocacy, Conflict of interest

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## Enlightenment: Science and Human Rights

by Christien van den Anker

The subject of science and human rights sparks off thoughts of how this link has historically and geographically been severed, which has the effect of finding it newsworthy that scientists speak out in favor of human rights.

The ancient Greek philosophers were not limited in their subject matters in the same way as we take for granted now: science, society and the self were all deliberated about both empirically and normatively. Moreover, there was no division of labor between thinkers about one or other of these subjects.

Pre-Islamic Persian influences also affected debates on science. In the Middle Ages with Christian, Jewish and Islamic scholarly efforts mainly located in religious contexts, still there was no separation between studying science and society.

During the Enlightenment there was a clear link between progress in science and progress in human rights, both in theory and in practice. Despite the critics of the Enlightenment viewing the ideas of the period as dangerous in their adherence to universalism, social movements have taken up the idea of human rights as representative for their struggles all over the world. Science and society were still very clearly linked in this period.

The understanding in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of what intellectuals should or should not address, was the result of divided opinions. With the emphasis on objectivity and the emphasis on finding "laws" of science, the social sphere became more separated from science and engagement was seen as the wrong thing to do for scientists who should instead be abstracting away from society. This led to a response in social sciences aiming to be scientific, too. Yet, it also created a counter-narrative of engaged scientists who should contribute to critical studies of societies and power.

Over time, it became recognized that it is important to engage with science in society. To some extent the invention and use of the atomic bomb was a watershed; several scientists have expressed regret over working on the [Manhattan Project](#). Yet this was certainly not the only factor as there were other important scientific issues that affected large numbers of people: [genetically modified food](#), HIV/AIDS, social impacts of the discovery of the human genome, and so on.

The article celebrating the creation of a specific body of scientists working for human rights, is clearly US-based. After 8 years of the Bush-junior Administration, many academics are afraid to go against government policy and have limited their methodology to mainstream scientific methods. The US is not alone in restricting academic freedom but it has a significant effect on the wider world of science.

Yet, there are also arguments to make that support the logic of scientists engaging with human rights in a natural way. Scientists and intellectuals are viewed as suspect by authoritarian regimes and often suffer human rights violations; many refugees are academics.

Moreover, scientists are frequently involved directly in human rights abuses: the British Medical Association has produced [an official handbook](#) for medical personnel, which indicates clearly their central role in torture.

Therefore, while we must welcome the development of scientists engaging with human rights, we must also remember that this should be a well-embedded practice and encourage the organization to engage with the full list of human rights in the whole world instead of targeting specific rights in specific countries only.

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