

Reply to Talisse and Aikin

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Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin raise some interesting questions about my particular proposals concerning the ethics of inquiry. I am glad they share my view that there are important and neglected questions in this area, but I hope to show that my own treatment of these issues is not as problematic as they take it to be.

In “An Argument about Free Inquiry” (hereinafter AFI),¹ and more informally in *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (hereinafter STD),² I proposed that ethical constraints on inquiry arise in a class of situations whose structure I described schematically. The primary focus of my proposal was on situations with that abstract structure, but, evidently, my conclusions would have been of very little interest if there were no actual instantiations of that structure in the pursuit of scientific research. I accordingly suggested—perhaps too vaguely—that the structural conditions I specified were found in “the scientific controversies about sex and race.”³ I intended to claim that there would be *some* occasions of research into sexual and racial differences that answered to the structure I presented. Re-reading my formulations, I have to admit that I could be interpreted as asserting something stronger, to wit that these conditions permeate *all* inquiries into issues of racial and sexual difference. Talisse and Aikin appear to have interpreted me in this way, and consequently made some devastating criticisms of views I do not hold.

The trouble arises quite early in their essay, where they characterize my intended conclusion: I argue, they suggest, that “. . . inquiry ought not to be pursued in cases where the consequences of its pursuit are likely to affect negatively the lives of individuals who comprise a socially underprivileged group.” But plainly there are many situations in which inquiries would be detrimental to people who are socially underprivileged, situations that do not satisfy the structural conditions of my argument. Indeed, Talisse and Aikin make many good points about real-world scenarios that do not, or would not, meet my conditions. By attributing to me a blanket denunciation of all research into racial and sexual differences, they are able to use these scenarios to refute what they take to be my main thesis. Indeed, by the end of their essay, my supposed position turns out to be quite mad, morally condemning scientific searches for treatments of sickle-cell disease. I agree entirely with their judgment about this and kindred cases, but my approach, restricted to instances of inquiry that meet specific structural conditions, was never committed to the madness of rejecting those judgments.

All this is by way of clearing ground, so I can take up the central challenge posed by Talisse and Aikin. Suppose we frame the issue as I would prefer, in terms

of the moral wrongness of pursuing inquiries when the abstract conditions I lay down (the epistemic and political asymmetries) are satisfied. Talisse and Aikin can then be read as contending that my alleged instantiations of those conditions in research into sexual and racial differences are not faithful to the situations that typically arise. My conditional thesis that inquiries subject to these conditions are morally suspect is correct, but it is uninteresting because the antecedent is rarely, if ever, satisfied.

Consider, in this light, the apparently powerful argument that my consequentialist analysis errs in not considering the (dis)utility of not pursuing a line of research. In the scenario I envisage, a scientist has the opportunity to pursue some difference research (say); if she decides not to do it, that research will not be done (or maybe she has good grounds to think that nobody else will do it). So I thought that the consequences of omission were being considered, that they were the status quo, and that the appropriate utility was 0. Hence, if the utility of doing the research is negative, the research should not be done, at least not on consequentialist grounds.

The crucial question is whether this scenario corresponds to the circumstances of research into racial and sexual differences, in some significant class of cases. Talisse and Aikin might say that typical situations do not meet the conditions of my scenario: that if the scientist desists, there will always be others—including biased folk—who will do the job. I am not sure how realistic that is. There are many occasions on which scientists have unique opportunities to pursue a line of research: they have special access to a particular population in which they could collect data, and if they forgo the opportunity to generate the statistics, nobody else will. There have been many occasions on which a particular investigator has earned the trust of a particular population, and would thus be able to pursue investigations on a wide variety of topics, obtaining data from that population that no peer could acquire. There have been many other occasions on which someone finds an archive of statistical data that could be mined for various ends, and that will not be used in the service of difference research unless the finder draws attention to that possibility.

It is not necessary for me to claim that these scenarios are the rule. We can divide cases of difference research into two main types: one in which only a single investigator is likely to do the research, and one in which it is likely that the research will be done by someone, even if the person whose behavior we are assessing does not undertake it. I incline to think that there may well be plenty of instances of both types, and that it would take empirical research to determine the frequencies. But even in the second type of case, I am inclined to insist on a moral obligation to refrain from the research. Even if we suppose, with Talisse and Aikin, that the inquiry will be carried out by another scientist, the consequentialist analysis should go one stage further than they take it.

Imagine an investigator who contemplates the possibility of difference research in a context where she reasonably believes that, if she does not do the research somebody else will. She recognizes the possibility that the research may

be done and presented in a biased way. On my account, her correct choice is to refrain from pursuing the research herself, while committing herself to responding to any such biased research that may ensue. Nothing in my approach interferes with the thought that scientists might have an obligation to engage in methodological critiques of biased research. The recent practice of responding to the grand claims of IQ researchers, pop sociobiologists, and evolutionary psychologists show the strategy in action.

Perhaps Talisse and Aikin would reply that these reactive critiques are inferior to doing the research first; but I think that no matter how much difference research is done by unbiased folk, the prophets of difference will still make the same splash, and still have to be met with detailed analyses of their mistakes. So the consequentialist-approved position should be: don't do difference research yourself but be vigilant for such research in the community, and go after it when it is done badly. Moreover, this applies to that type of case that meets the assumption Talisse and Aikin make; in the other type of case, where the researcher has a unique opportunity to do the research, the analysis I originally gave proves adequate.

If, however, there is a widespread acceptance of the idea that difference research is morally problematic (under conditions like those I specify)—or, even worse, if there is a widespread belief that *people are supposed to think* that such research is problematic—won't this have counterintuitive consequences, feeding the asymmetries that give rise to the trouble? I considered this issue explicitly in AFI (p. 295), differentiating between judging that a line of inquiry is morally wrong and instituting a public policy of banning inquiries of that sort. Talisse and Aikin recognize that, even without any official ban, counterproductive suspicion can easily arise. Playing on that suspicion, difference researchers can claim Galileo's mantle, and "boldly dare to face the uncomfortable truth." But if there is vigilance in scrutinizing their research, then the harms may be undone. Moreover, as I suggest in AFI and STD, the right response to worries about backlash should be to use occasions on which it arises as opportunities for exploring the conditions of the Millian arena. As champions of affirmative action programs know all too well, the existence of those programs encourages the idea that people in hitherto disadvantaged groups who succeed only do so because they have been given an unfair advantage; the remedy is not to scrap the programs but to point out, again and again, the ways in which unfair advantages have accrued to those groups that have been traditionally privileged. My solution to the problem of backlash is exactly parallel.

Talisse and Aikin raise a further interesting issue in noting the international diffusion of scientific research. They see that the consequences need to be considered more globally than I did. I envisage two extensions of my original scenario: (1) There are societies in which the epistemic and political asymmetries do not hold, and in which difference research, so far as that society was concerned, would be sociopolitically neutral; (2) there are societies in which the specific epistemic and political asymmetries that hold in the original society do not hold,

and in which the difference research is needed to resolve local injustices. I would suggest that, with respect to (1), there is a global obligation not to do the research (doing it in one of the other societies will not issue in any harm within that society, but the knowledge will cross borders and harm people within the original society). But perhaps Talisse and Aikin have (2) in mind: there is an obligation to do the research to remedy the injustice in one or more of the other societies, and a conflicting obligation not to do it because of the harms that will travel to the original society. In that case, a zealous consequentialist would want to know the magnitude of the harms if the research is done and if it is not done. My own sense, however, is that there are likely to be plenty of cases like (1)—my hunch is that these are a hefty majority. I think the global obligation not to do the research in these instances is quite plausible. After all, even though we do not have particular problems about certain kinds of differences that are important in other societies (think of Hindu or Japanese castes), I think we would view research on those kinds of differences as having much the same status as research on the differences that do affect us.

So where does this leave us? When the issues are set up properly, the debate concerns the existence of genuine instances of the abstract structure I described in AFI and STD. Although I believe that Talisse and Aikin have shown that there are possible circumstances under which difference research would not exhibit the problematic structure, I have tried to argue that there is a significant range of cases in which it would. Moreover, in exploring some of their claims about expected consequences, I have pointed to ways in which quite similar abstract structures would be exemplified in difference research and would issue in the same moral verdict. I think that Talisse and Aikin have done valuable service in recognizing ways in which a more thorough investigation of types of inquiry would ground different moral conclusions, and, in this respect, I concur in their conclusion that we need further work and a broader conversation. Nevertheless, I maintain that AFI and STD provide some core examples, from which that conversation can hope to build.

Notes

¹ Philip Kitcher, "An Argument about Free Inquiry," *Nous* 31, no. 3 (1997): 279–306.

² Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³ Kitcher, "An Argument about Free Inquiry," 283.