

"As fire drives out fire, so pity pity"¹

John Harris

We English are an adversarial people: our courts adopt the so called "adversarial system" with lawyers literally fighting it out over the guilt or innocence of the accused. In our parliament Government and Opposition are called just that, they are supposed to oppose one another and in the debating chamber of the parliament they face each other, "eyeball to eyeball" across a space designed historically to place each side just out of sword reach of the opposing benches. We also, officially at least, admire fair play, although it has to be admitted that we do not always live up to that ideal. The Vikings too have bequeathed a fighting legacy which is not entirely absent from today's Nordic philosophers. Jan Helge has been a generous as well as a worthy opponent and when he mentions, if not praises, my "analytical brilliance" he does so from a position of strength. We are evenly matched philosophically and for me the contest has been enjoyable as well as instructive.

There is a story told, probably apocryphally, of Oscar Wilde, who had summoned his doctor and after examining him the doctor said "well Oscar, you are serious but not critical" to which Wilde replied: "On the contrary doctor I am always critical but never serious". This admirably sums up what I believe the right approach to debate is, critical of the arguments but always to an extent lighthearted and hopefully engaged in with a smile.

Jan Helge now points to what he sees as a sort of moral blindness in my work:

What he, however, fails to observe is that John Harris - the analytical giant of moral arguments - turns out as rather uncritical and naïve in his way of dealing with so-called empirical evidence. What I mean by this is that when he - from time to time - includes empirical data in his argumentation, its veracity seems to be taken for granted. Seldom are these inclusions followed by any critical assessment of the trustworthiness of the data employed, of the possibilities of distortion in the scientific reporting of them, of the problem of overselling of positive scientific claims, or of the problem of underreporting of negative findings to serve economic interests, etc.

I yield to no-one in the likelihood of my being somewhat blind to my own faults!

¹ William Shakespeare *Julius Caesar*.

Jan Helge has pointed to this obvious candidate and quite a number of other possible faults; and he may well be right, our readers must judge. I however freely admit to be ill equipped to carry out a critical evaluation of safety and efficacy of all the scientific and technological possibilities and actual innovations that are constantly appearing. What we philosophers and bioethicists classically have to do is ask whether, assuming this is "safe enough", should we welcome it or are we justified in banning it or otherwise limiting access? Where there is evidence that it is not safe enough, as I have said, this is usually (or should be) the end of the argument.