Acceptance speech

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Philip Kitcher, awardee in the Humanities category (17th edition)

I am most grateful to the BBVA Foundation, to those who have supported my nomination and to the members of the Humanities committee for the high honor of this award. It is both encouraging and humbling to follow in the footsteps of scholars I admire and from whom I have learned much. Thank you.

My intellectual trajectory can easily appear to be a random walk. I was trained in mathematics, and that's where my first ventures in the history and philosophy of science were focused. Early in my teaching career, however, a student's question prompted me to explore the life sciences, where I found a treasure trove of interesting philosophical issues. Among them, I tried to explain to a broader public why the attacks on Darwinism were misguided, but, equally, why efforts to translate evolutionary theory into a deterministic account of human nature and human conduct were flawed.

Then, in the early 1990s, I was invited by the Library of Congress to write a report on the ethical and social consequences of the Human Genome Project. Writing that report and the book that emerged from it changed the direction of my thinking. I came to see the search for knowledge as socially embedded, in ways intended to promote the common good. Research is valuable not because it amasses further wealth for the fortunate few, but because of the benefits it brings to the citizens of a society, or better, for humanity in general.

I thus found myself drawn into questions in ethics and political philosophy. In approaching these, I drew on my background in the sciences. My studies of evolution, primatology, anthropology and human history had taught me that human ethical life must be tens of thousands of years old. To understand our ethical practices, I believe that we should consider how they might have evolved. Instead of beginning with some grand ethical theory, I focused on the ways in which ethical life has grown out of a capacity that we share with our evolutionary cousins, the chimps and the bonobos: the capacity to identify the plans of our fellows and to facilitate them. Darwinian evolution has bequeathed to us a limited version of this capacity. Ethical life has amplified it. That amplifier has made us the species we now are.

From this guiding idea much of my recent work has flowed. I have explored our moral progress with the hope of seeing how it might become less bloody and

more secure. I have tried to expose and to address the ethical issues that arise in connection with climate change. And I have attempted to think about the fundamental goals of education, and about strategies for achieving them.

During the past decade, the issues I have wrestled with have come to seem ever more urgent. Dangers threaten some of the moral advances we have made. Efforts to act to ensure a relatively habitable planet for our descendants set inadequate targets – and then fail to meet them. Some nations pursue educational policies that view young people as cogs to be fed into an industrial machine to achieve maximal productivity. Around the world, societies seem to fasten on simplified measures of well-being, derived from a crude picture of humanity. Any commitment to ethics in politics, expressed in crafting measures to advance the common good, seems to have been eroded. Instead of amplifying our responsiveness to others, as in the ethical project that has made us the beings we are, leaders inculcate an attitude of narrow self-interest, where all must attempt to compete in a dog-eat-dog world. One of the crudest and most grotesque versions of this trend is found in my adopted country, the United States.

My retrospective vision, perhaps, deceives me. But I don't think of my intellectual journey as a random walk. It consists in trying to recruit diverse areas of inquiry as partners for one another in the project of human progress. The sciences and the humanities should be mutually complementary. Throughout my career I have sometimes reflected on scientific questions from the perspectives of philosophy, history, literature and the arts. At other moments, I have drawn on the sciences to tackle an issue in the humanities.

At a time when the humanities are often written off as unnecessary, it is reassuring that an award in this area exists; for that too I am most grateful to the BBVA Foundation. As someone whose parents lacked the opportunity even for a secondary education, I feel immensely privileged to be here today. My journey has benefited from much good fortune. I want to end by thanking those who have helped me along the way: scores of teachers, helpful friends and colleagues, and the support of a lifelong partner, also a philosopher, who has sometimes – but perhaps not often enough – restrained my wilder flights of fancy. Thank you all.