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Take Another Look

Stephen Jay Gould

An argument in three points and a conclusion. **Point 1: Disunity.** My graduate students usually enjoy my assignment of the *Origin of Species*. They then ask me about the technical monograph that Darwin must have popularized in order to write his preeminent book. And I reply that the *Origin* is Darwin's singular attempt, suitable for public and professional consumption alike, to foment the greatest revolution in the history of scientific thought. I then assign Galileo's two volumes of 1632 and 1638, both written as dialogues in Italian, not as academic treatises in Latin, so that all his literate countrymen might find them accessible.

I do not know when the technical and popular prose of science became separated, although I accept the inevitability of such a division as knowledge became increasingly more precise, detailed, and specialized. We have now reached the point where most technical literature not only falls outside the possibility of public comprehension but also (as we would all admit in honest moments) outside our own competence in scientific disciplines far removed from our personal expertise. I trust that we all regard this situation as saddening, even though we accept its necessity. After all, most of us entered science in the bloom of youth's idealism, hoping to remain broadly educated in all major disciplines of this grandest adventure in human intellectual history.

Point 2: Meeting. For most of our 150-year history, the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) served a dual function of presenting general information to an interested public and providing a forum where specialists could gather to share discoveries and transact professional business. Now the professional function has withered, and the AAAS annual meeting, the largest general convocation in American science, has largely become a device for communicating information, through the mediating efforts of attending journalists, to the interested public. Unsurprisingly, many scientists have become cynical about the AAAS annual meeting—"a good thing" as Martha Stewart likes to say, but not worth attending for any motive of professional learning.

Point 3: Fellowship. Do we not regret the loss of unity among scientists in all disciplines? Do we not still wish to regard ourselves as partners in a shared and noble enterprise? Would we not relish the opportunity to meet with colleagues in disparate fields, not to battle for political fruits of funding and space within our universities, but simply for the pleasure of learning about new developments in areas that once caught our interest, but have since faded from our narrowing purview?

A step toward a solution: I confess to the cynicism described above. I had not attended a AAAS meeting for 20 years, but had to go, in my role as president-elect, in 1999. And I experienced one of the most pleasant surprises of my life. So many wonderful talks, neither gee-whizzed up nor dumbed down, presented by some of our finest colleagues in all disciplines. And I thought, why can't the AAAS meeting become the touchstone for renewal of old ideals of learning and fellowship, and also for unification in two truly complementary senses often misconstrued as antagonistic: unity among scientists based on our shared love and fascination for the entire enterprise, and unity between our public and professional efforts, for good popularization never adulterates or debases its subject, whereas clear professional presentations should fascinate all seriously interested and educated people. If scientists reconceptualize the AAAS meeting as an expansive treat in reaffirmation and pleasure—an opportunity to increase their own breadth and learning, not just an occasional duty in public instruction—then all facets of science would shine together, a false gap between public and professional learning might begin to close, and we might even approach the Psalmist's ideal (133:1): "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren [meaning, in this context, all people allied by a shared love of science] to dwell together in unity!"

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