
The Menace of Magisteria

Richard Creath*¹

¹Richard Creath – Life Sciences Arizona State University Tempe, AZ, 85281-4501, United States

Abstract

The central idea of Stephen Jay Gould's "Nonoverlapping Magisteria" (1997) is that there are at least two nonoverlapping domains of human concern and inquiry. One comprises the empirical sciences, and the other includes religion and as part of that moral meaning and value. Their subject matters are just different, and so results from one domain cannot encroach on those from the other. The idea has a certain natural attractiveness for both sides for it seems to guarantee that "we" can proceed as usual without meddling from "those other guys". Gould himself spent little time articulating the central idea, but it is more nuanced than might be thought. Unfortunately, those nuances blunt somewhat the initial attractiveness of the idea. But the situation is worse than this. Now I have no desire to encourage or warrant imperialism from either direction, and certainly that still goes on. Even today some religious leaders make pronouncements on scientific subjects where they have no training and less understanding. And even today some scientists make claims about religion or morals far beyond their professional competencies. Silliness is as perennial as the spring. Erecting a wall between domains, that is, between magisteria, is not the answer, for the sharp separation of science from religion and morals is, as it turns out, indefensible, dangerous, and ultimately destructive of both sides.

*Speaker