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Everyday Practices of Social Justice **An Interview with Dr. David Koepsell**

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The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Dr. David Koepsell, whose recent research focuses on how ethics and public policy deal with emerging science and technology.

Q. What brought you to the area of Gene Patent research?

My spouse is a genetic/genomic scientist, and I wanted to understand better the science she was involved with. I began to read a number of popular and technical books on the subject. As I read, I learned that while the Human Genome Project was proceeding, a company that was involved in a private effort to map the human genome began to patent genes they found along the way. My doctoral thesis was about ontology and intellectual property, and I began to apply some of the ideas I generated in that book (*The Ontology of Cyberspace*) to the problem of gene patenting.

Q. In what ways do you situate yourself in activism?

I did not until I found myself in the center of a very active story in which activism was ongoing. Shortly after my book *Who Owns You* came out, the ACLU in the United States brought a lawsuit against a company that had patented the “breast cancer” genes. When I wrote my book, I approached the matter on a purely theoretical level, but as I watched the lawsuit evolve, and was asked to speak and eventually take part in amicus briefs on the issue, I realized that philosophical ontology had a role to play in sorting out legal issues. Now I am quite happy to chime in on issues relating the gene patenting and intellectual property in general, but I do not see myself as an “activist” in any way. Rather, I still see myself as confronting basic problems of ontology, in other words what the nature of various objects is, and then applying any clarifications I can make to the law and other social institutions.

* Shouhua Pei interviewed Dr. David Koepsell for this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*. Inquiries regarding Dr. Koepsell’s work can be directed to jctp@iastate.edu

Q. What do you see as the most challenging aspects of your work?

As a philosopher, dealing with the constant nagging questions about one's own approach and methods, as well as the necessary self-critical doubt that makes philosophical analysis work, are the hardest parts of what I do daily. When I approach a problem, setting aside my own prejudices is a constant battle, putting oneself in the position of having no preconceptions other than the basic laws of logic means that sometime the things we hope for to be true are not logically so.

Q. For people starting the social justice work, what type of advice would you offer?

Expect people to dislike you and what you do. I fell into that position quite by accident, and much to my surprise, as I approached the issue of gene patenting without a particular agenda, nor with any particular moral point of view. The logical conclusions I reached were, in my mind, necessary, not from a utilitarian perspective, but logically. I thus had no idea of the amount of anger from the business community that I would attract. People with something to lose will lash out at you if you end up on either side of an issue.

Q. You've published extensively about Gene Patent, how do you perceive gene patent as related to every day social justice work?

Issues of property and ownership, as well as autonomy and control of one's own health and body, are central issues in much of the ongoing public debate about health care, for instance. A fair amount of modern health care has been built around the establishment of governmentally supported monopolies, like patents, and companies expect to make monopolistic profits regardless of the implications for individual health and well-being. Many issues considered to be related to social justice can be perceived as having similar dynamics: some governmentally created privilege or barrier becomes well enough established to be expected by one party, and then becomes the basis for resistance by some other party. Resolving such issues means, eventually, that someone's privilege must somehow be compromised.

Q. As a national committee member of the *March for Science*, how do you see the role of scientists and academic researchers to public activism in an international context?

Scientists are not divorced from society. One clear way they are connected is through the source of their funding. As well, their research always benefits society in some way, even if just by increasing general understanding of natural phenomena. It is essential for scientists to be able to speak to the public, and too often recently, barriers to that communication threaten the role and duties of scientists to the public, and vice versa.

Q. What are the connections between ethics and contested social issues?

I think the ongoing research into ethical issues is an essential role for philosophy, even as it has generally failed to resolve metaethical issues. There is still no consensus on what the good is, neither in philosophy or elsewhere, but the manner by which philosophers continue

to try to resolve such issues, even if just by questioning and critiquing various approaches, necessarily improves our knowledge such as it is. It also provides context for the discussion of ethical issues, and helps to clarify the language used. Philosophers who understand their limitations in resolving big problems of philosophy, but nonetheless contribute to the clarification of the terms and objects of debate, as well as help people to engage in critical thinking, aid everyone, including those involved in contested social issues.

Q. Where should people go in everyday practice of social justice work for intellectual property ethics?

Most of the good work in intellectual property ethics and ontology is taking place in the law. There are not many philosophers involved in this work, as for many it approaches what some disparagingly call “metaphysics.” But lawyers are involved every day in trying to resolve ontological problems relating to the tricky questions around what constitutes intellectual property. The Supreme Court is constantly being challenged with wonderful philosophical issues about what the boundaries and nature of the objects of intellectual property are. I suggest that those who wish to work in the area study the law in conjunction with philosophical ontology.

Author Notes

David Koepsell is an entrepreneur, author, philosopher, attorney (retired), and educator whose recent research focuses on the nexus of science, technology, ethics, and public policy. He is the founder and CEO of EncrypGen, LLC.

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