

Social and ethical issues of human genome project to be analyzed by UCSD philosopher Philip Kitcher, for Library of Congress

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SOCIAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES OF HUMAN GENOME PROJECT

TO BE ANALYZED BY UCSD PHILOSOPHER, FOR LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Philip Kitcher, a professor of philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, has been appointed by the Library of Congress as a senior fellow to analyze ethical and social issues raised by the Human Genome Project.

During his year-long appointment, Kitcher will explore various--and often difficult--questions raised by the massive project designed to identify the 50,000 to 100,000 genes that make up human genetic blueprint.

Among other things, Kitcher will focus on how research from the project might have far-reaching effects in such areas as prenatal diagnosis and genetic counseling, workplace discrimination, forensics and criminal behavior, the feasibility or desirability of genetic therapy, and whether the project is the first step toward a new form of eugenics.

"There's no secret about the fact that when the Human Genome Project was proposed, people were extremely sensitive that it would raise important social issues," said Kitcher, who last spring was appointed the first holder of UC's endowed Presidential Chair in Philosophy.

"What I'm supposed to do is bring a framework to bear on these issues, to think about how all these individual problems might fit together," he said.

Following his studies next summer, Kitcher will report his findings to Congress.

Kitcher said his appointment represents an experiment by the Library of Congress to evaluate how university scholars might help define issues and play a role in making public policy. As part of his assignment, Kitcher will interview scientists participating in the Human Genome Project--as well as critics of the project--and brief federal legislators and their staffs on its status.

"We wanted somebody who comes at this with the idea of raising questions that philosophers and ethicists raise, rather than the kinds of questions that scientists raise," said Prosser Gifford, director of scholarly programs with the Library of Congress.

"Philosophers have been trained to look at these issues in the context of questions that have been raised over the millennia," he added.

Kitcher, an international authority on the philosophy of science, is one of the founding faculty members of UCSD's Science Studies Program, an interdisciplinary program incorporating philosophy, sociology and history in the study of modern science and scientific research.

Although Kitcher will be on three-quarters leave from UCSD during his appointment, he will continue to teach one course at the university, a graduate seminar on the Human Genome Project.

An award-winning teacher as well as respected researcher, Kitcher has been honored with the UCSD Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award. Over the last two decades, he also has been the recipient of numerous teaching fellowships and research grants, including a five-year research and training grant from the National Science Foundation in 1990 to develop the Science Studies Program at UCSD.

The multidisciplinary program is unique in the United States in integrating the perspectives of researchers in three disciplines (philosophy, history and sociology), and also in requiring students to complete an internship in a scientific laboratory so that they have direct experience with scientific practice.

Kitcher's published books include "The Advancement of Science," (Oxford University Press); the award-winning "Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature," (MIT Press, 1985); "The Nature of Mathematical Knowledge," (Oxford University Press; 1983), and "Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism," (MIT Press, 1982).

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