

Essence of values

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Comment

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RECENTLY, I made a presentation entitled Reinventing Science at the Academy of Sciences Malaysia Inaugural Lectures.

The crux of the talk was how Science, over the years, has become a mere tool of economic utility under the banner "commercialisation". In an era of knowledge economy, Science and Technology is the main vehicle for creating wealth to move up the value chain. The word "value" is now associated with "profitability" — the higher the value chain, the better it is for a company or individual. In other words, the meaning of "value" is narrowly understood in materialistic terms.

In many ways, Science as knowledge is treated as a tradable product and the concept of intellectual property is promoted in tandem.



Postgraduate student Maija Maskuninty works in a laboratory at Imperial College in London. The learning and practice of Science and Technology must incorporate the basis of ethics and public good

This development is a far cry from the days when knowledge was regarded as a public commodity to be freely shared across boundaries and cultures, and as a leveller of society. Indeed, the Renaissance of Europe arguably benefited from this "openness" in the transfer of knowledge, which is generally translated to mean "Science". In short, the value emphasised goes beyond the confines of materialism into an intangible notion of humanism towards a greater societal purpose. It is heartening that former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently remarked the lack of a "humanities-based value system in the advancement of Science and Technology is blocking the world from attaining full civilisation".

He reiterated this at the Conference of World Engineering, Science and Technology in Kuala Lumpur last week.

Science and Technology is unwittingly used to cause unnecessary death of the human species. Many wars were fought with ease, thanks to Science and Technology. The agenda of Science and Technology is closely intertwined with that of war where trillions are invested to make the rituals of killing more efficient. This further pushes the value of Science towards undesirable dimensions, not to mention the extensive ecological damage it causes.

"There is a need to be guided by better values... on why we teach Science and Technology, and how we can prevent its abuse," says Dr Mahathir. The real value of Science must be revived through the teaching of its philosophy and history, which is largely neglected now. The learning and practice of Science and Technology need to be urgently "reinvented" as it were. They must incorporate the basis of ethics, public good and social justice in the context of humanity.

I was also privileged to participate in a public dialogue on Value-based Development held at the International

Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies. Malaysia. The occasion was graced by speakers from New Club of Paris, which promotes the idea of a knowledge economy operating within a knowledge society. It emphasises that k-economy has an impact on the value creation process, fundamentally altering the organisation of work, creating new forms of borderless cooperation and intercultural exchange.

In the discussion, Professor Ahmad Bounfor, who was one of the speakers, talked about "open" world — open source; open, if plastic, economy. His colleague, Gunter Koch, highlighted that "intangible" aspects are taking up an even larger portion of the total organisational assets in many cases. This is more apparent in knowledge-based organisations, at times accounting for more than 70 per cent of the total. This fact is often ignored because of the uncertainty in dealing with such an elusive dimension.

All this is different from the traditional understanding of "value" from the metaphysics perspective as a "revealed" phenomenon, and therefore remains unchanged and unalienable. It is this dimension that is starkly missing.

With it, cultural dimensions, openness and inclusiveness are also neglected. In short, the humanistic dimensions of Science have gone astray as reflected by the economic reality of today.

Clearly as we move into the new economy based on knowledge, the journey will not be easy if we fail to embrace the presence of "intangibles".

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