

Is science a public good? One of the problems with answering this question is that there are many different branches and sub-branches of science. These may not be equally good, they may be good in relation to different goals and they are bound to have different downsides. To illustrate this, I present a few examples that widen out from biomedical facts to the research and health care practices around them. Take the fact that human bodies need around 2000 kilo calories a day. This depends on research practices in which people were underfed and overworked. It may now be used to admonish people with overweight to count calories as if they were their own laboratory technician. However, the fact that some ways of eating are more satisfying than others, suggests that it might be better for those people to enjoy their food. Or take the diagnostic probing into the fact if, and if so where, a particular patient might have a stenosis impeding their blood flow. Different diagnostic techniques help with that probing in different ways, that each have different benefits and side-effects. Or, other example, take the question how far aerosols spread if one coughs. The physicists who investigate this suggest that the answer is of direct relevance for epidemiological concerns about the spreading of infections. Virologists approach epidemiology in a different way, they are invested in the characteristics of different kinds of virus.

Hence, if science is a public good, this still leaves us with the question which specific goods different branches and sub-branches of science have on offer.