

ASU professor explores the ethics of scientific research and why they matter

February 18 2014, by Jason Robert

Discovery and innovation are important to science, but how are they connected to each other, and how can they be fostered to benefit the wider public? Jason Robert, the Lincoln Chair in Ethics and Dean's Distinguished Professor of Life Sciences at Arizona State University discussed that question today (Feb. 16) at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Chicago.

"While most of the people at the AAAS meeting are presenting their research results, we're asking scientists to think harder about what they're doing in their laboratories," Robert said. "Especially when some National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health programs are undergoing scrutiny from lawmakers and their constituents, it's important that scientists think critically about what they're doing, why they're doing it and how they justify it."

Robert organized the panel entitled, "Discovery and Innovation: What's the Connection and Why Does It Matter?" He discussed these issues along with Susan Fitzpatrick, vice president of the James S. McDonnell Foundation, and Kelly Edwards of the University of Washington. ASU Regents' Professor Jane Maienschein moderated the session.

Robert began the discussion with historical and philosophical insights into the nature of both [discovery](#) and innovation, offering a series of challenging questions that led into subjects the other speakers explored.

Fitzpatrick talked about the role public and private funders play in

fostering discovery and innovation in light of an emerging concern that funders themselves need to strengthen the connection between discovery at the bench and innovation in the real world. Edwards talked about her work on integrating societal values, such as justice, into the mix.

These subjects, according to Robert, have never been more important for scientists to think about, citing ongoing skepticism about publicly funding research.

Robert believes it is important for ethicists and philosophers to work directly with scientists to improve the pursuit of discovery and [innovation](#), since their research could potentially change the world for better, or possibly, for worse.

"If we have our own symposium at a philosophy of [science](#) meeting, then we're only talking to other philosophers," Robert said. "If we do it at the AAAS meeting, we're connecting with scientists in valuable ways."

Provided by Arizona State University

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