

HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL  
DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGICAL CHEMISTRY  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02115

September 26, 1969

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Dear Josh,

Here is the first of the fellowship reference forms I warned you about. It is due at NIH the second week in October, no later than October 15.

Since the fellowship I have now is essentially non-renewable, and since I haven't heard of any especially attractive ones intended for neurobiologists, I will probably only ask you to fill out this NIH form and one for NSF later (not available to me until October). I have thought of asking the Kennedy Foundation about some sort of career development award but feel that it would probably be better to propose to them something in the way of a personal program more comprehensive and covering a longer term than a postdoctoral traineeship of a year or less. What do you think?

I very much appreciate the comments in your last letter. It was of course clear to me that faculty positions cannot be simply equated with one another, but since the nature of my uncertainties is so poorly defined and elusive, it has been, and remains, difficult for me to pinpoint which of the variable features among positions might strongly affect the ease of my "fit". Probably the safest course will be to think of flexibility as a key virtue.

I was even more interested in your suggestion that I might subconsciously seek out a situation designed to confirm negative expectations. I had given some rather cursory thought to that possibility - an undergraduate indoctrination in Freudianism at the hands of Norman O. Brown makes it difficult to ignore the possible intrusion of Thanatos in all sorts of contexts - but probably not enough. I'd like to have you expand on the theme and point out any pitfalls you think I might overlook either through subconscious intent or simple inexperience.

That kind of commentary on your part will be of immediate use to me because, contrary to an impression I may have created in my last letter, the decision to stay here for part of 1970 doesn't relieve me for that period of the necessity to make plans for what comes next. It is my impression that I must begin an active exploration now for a place I will be ready to fill near the end of next year and, in fact, that I should probably have things pretty definitely settled by the end of this year.

I would, of course, very much like to talk over with you in

*see previous corresp in "Personnel Archive" file*

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detail the possibilities that might exist at Stanford and also have the benefit of the kind of response to my present reflections which you implied (and which I agree) cannot easily be provided through the limited communication channel of letters. Is there any chance that you are planning a trip to Boston this fall (possibly as one of the guest lecturers in Edsall's course on the "Social Implications of Biology" which I noticed in the Harvard catalog) which would give us some time to talk?

My thoughts on the future of science were stimulated anew a few weeks ago by Paul Goodman's article in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. In it he indicated his conviction that students are in some sense losing their "faith" in the existence of "objective truth"; or a real nature of things, that can be the object of fruitful (by which I think is meant humanly meaningful) inquiry. I think he probably overstated the case, but I do feel that the prevailing popular attitude towards science is a negative one, that in spite of media publicity otherwise, much of scientific research is widely viewed as a luxury enjoyed by those engaged in it, a possibly unjustified drain on limited national resources, and even a public menace, and that these sentiments are getting through to students and practicing scientists. I'm sure I needn't spell out for you the manifestations of these attitudes or the partial truths in them, but it might be worthwhile to suggest that their penetration into the (sub-)consciousness of the scientific community, and particularly that of its younger members, represents a psychic threat to the future of science more imminent than the threats posed by any diminution of physical support or any of the inherent limitations Gunther Stent worries about.

Very few of my contemporaries derive any deep satisfactions from the science they do (this is not to say they are not doing good science - the ones I think are doing the best are often the least satisfied), and I believe that the lack of popular appreciation (in the sense of gratitude) for what they do, for their efforts and "product", may account to a very significant extent for their dissatisfaction, at least for a pervasive sense of unimportance and human inconsequence that may be contradicted by but often overwhelms the rational image of their role they construct for themselves. (In a larger sense, I am convinced that the problem of conveying public appreciation for personal labor is a fundamental and very general one that will have to be dealt with soon. Why was the labor for People's Park in Berkeley apparently so fulfilling when precisely the same work is usually regarded as a last resort for the unemployed?) Needless to say the same analysis applies as an explanation for why the ablest students no longer opt for science as many claim is the case.

My excuse for including this lengthy, but still sketchy, outline of thought is that it may help you perceive another

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motive and importance for the study of metatechnology you have proposed. Fruits of the study may not themselves enable science to save society, but they may save science for another chance at society.

The personal, pragmatic importance of extracting the papers buried in my thesis is very much in my mind, but even with a growing enthusiasm for getting down to the task, it is hard to make time for it. In wistful moments I think of them as a potential excuse for a working vacation at Stanford this winter, but I am somewhat reluctant to leave the project here for any significant length of time.

I hope your vacation was a pleasant one.

Don't forget the subject of the first paragraph!

Sincerely yours,



Lawrence Okun