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Only Education Transmutes Evil in Science's Findings

IS FORESIGHT of any practical value? "The social order will never accommodate a problem until it becomes a painfully visible reality" would be the shrewd outlook.

In fact, we have a difficult enough job keeping up with existing pathologies, such as the myraid ways in which we pollute our environment. Why should we burden ourselves with problems we might foresee? What kind of foresight about nuclear power would have made any difference to the evolution of the system of calculated anxiety to which we are now committed as the foundation of world equilibrium?

The scientist is often taxed with the moral responsibility for the consequences of his discovery and insight, although he has neither the aspiration nor the practicality of political power and is usually admonished to stay "on tap, not on top." Then what are his real options if human imperfection evenutally dehumanizes the large-scale applications of scientific discovery?

In Durrenmatt's play, "The Physicists," the title characters pretend, perhaps even achieve, madness as the way to keep their thoughts outside the commerce of social evil. But in the end, they are outwitted and the world is relegated to the dominion of an insane asylum keeper.

ESCAPISM to the impractical is another answer. Space missions to search for life on Mars or huge, expensive accelerators to investigate the fundamental particles of matter, can be thought of as a kind of conscience-money investment. The men working on them can claim to be safe from the chance of making discoveries that could be turned to large-scale human disadvantage.

But of course the exobiologists and the physicists are sorely too shortsighted. They do not perceive how cleverly other men will find practical uses or abuses for discoveries in these fields.

A moratorium on science is sometimes suggested, as if that could turn off the nuclear bombs. With these weapons, we already have the utmost in self-corrupting power. We need much more, not less, understanding of ourselves and of the world to be able to survive in the company of such power.

If it were not for this reality, if the world were at peace, we could at least speculate about a new period of calm stagnation like the Middle Ages, but too many other nations are ready to take our place in the leadership of world technology. Anyhow, could we really contemplate a prohibition on thought, which is just what any restraint on science would amount to?

AS A SCIENTIFIC culture, we have no way to evade the future. And this tells us the ultimate responsibility of the scientist: to educate. He should first educate himself to be sensitized to the subtler implications of the work he himself best understands. His foresight then focuses on the most urgent areas for social education.

To jump to the concrete, it is obvious that the most important innovations in the science of the near future will be in human biology. We already have some glimmerings of this in our newly won understanding of the molecular chemistry of DNA and its role in genetics, but we are also beginning to see a little light on the way the brain functions.

However, I do not associate the enormous importance of this kind of science with awful forebodings about its abuse. I cannot point to novel legislation that should be passed in anticipation of the biological revolution. But it is obvious that human biology needs to be given much more emphasis in higher education if the next generation is to have the intellectual base to deal with its most crucial problems.

It might, for example, then be able to deal more humanely and rationally than we have so far with questions like a woman's right to defend herself and her family from unwanted or intolerable pregnancy. If we can reach some consensus on the private and public, moral and social accounting of this issue, it will be evidence of the kind of understanding of fundamental biology needed to cope with the subtleties of human DNA.

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