

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
STANFORD UNIVERSITY, STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305

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Prof. Jules Hirsch
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Dear Jules:

I have enjoyed the opportunity to read the essay on "Reflections on medical science-1977 and beyond" that you were kind enough to send me. I am sorry this has not appeared in print as it is an eloquent exposition of one pole of an extremely important and necessary debate. I find myself resonating affirmatively with a great deal of what you said (and perhaps will over persuade you about that by pressing on you a number of my own writings that deal with some of the same issues.) I have been particularly interested in questions akin to the somatopsychic and reverse-psychodynamic phenomena that you wrote about. At one time I had to take a look at the status of etiological explanation in infantile autism and was very much impressed by the burden that was placed on parents' attitudes; to me it was virtually self evident that these were derivative of the child's disease and that the psychiatrists were quite wicked in compounding the imputed guilt.

I am certainly in wholehearted agreement with you that medical research, and particularly medical education, need to be leavened and informed by insights about the adaptive behavior of the whole organism. How to translate that into effective research programs for an institution like ours poses additional problems of obvious complexity: We, of course, must pay heed to those areas of investigation that are amenable to attack by the methods available to us and we must also build on the existing strengths of the scientific collegium in order to have an efficient plan. But I can well understand how you may be reacting to a tradition that may well have been far too rigid and narrow on the other side.

This kind of reaction is also notable, and self-admitted, in your characterization of hard-core reductionism. The trouble is: that kind of caricature may be co-opted by people like Koestler and Weitzenbaum in ways that can end up being quite discouraging to the pursuit of the most important and achievable aims, both in basic biology and

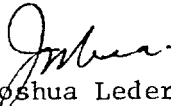
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in medical applications. Without some degree of reductionist fervor we would still believe that the replication of the gene was beyond human comprehension and we might well lack access to the most important psychotropic medications now available for the treatment of severe psychiatric illness. I guess I have met a few people who would conform to the stereotype of the hard-core reductionist, but they are rare, and rarer still is their insistence on that position in the face of sympathetic criticism. But I suspect you are much closer to my own position than you would be to a Koestler.

I am certainly looking forward to many opportunities to delve further into these issues, and to making practical use of the insights that we can develop collegially for the further planning of programs for the hospital and of the university.

Thank you again for a provocative and challenging essay.

Yours sincerely,


Joshua Lederberg,
Professor and Chairman
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JL/gel