

SCIENCE

VOL. 85

FRIDAY, JUNE 4, 1937

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SCIENCE: A Weekly Journal devoted to the Advancement of Science, edited by J. MCKEN CATTALL and published every Friday by

THE SCIENCE PRESS

New York City: Grand Central Terminal
Lancaster, Pa. Garrison, N. Y.

Annual Subscription, \$6.00 Single Copies, 15 Cts.

SCIENCE is the official organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Information regarding membership in the Association may be secured from the office of the permanent secretary, in the Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D. C.

THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ENGINEER¹

By Dr. F. G. COTTRELL

RESEARCH ASSOCIATES, INC., WASHINGTON, D. C.

IT is with very genuine pleasure and appreciation that I come here to-night, for in thus responding to your friendly and generous invitation and in adopting your chairman's suggestion for the subject and title of my remarks, I feel that it is primarily as a group representative for certain social ideas or way of life rather than as an individual that I am speaking to you.

There seems to be a wide-spread feeling, with which I heartily sympathize, that scientists and engineers as a class have a peculiar responsibility to society for leadership in certain directions which they have on the whole as yet, perhaps, not fully appreciated.

While this has been a matter of long standing, the acute social and economic problems facing the world to-day emphasize the importance of an awakening to the issue.

¹Address on the occasion of the presentation of the Washington award at a meeting of the Western Society of Engineers, Chicago, February 23, 1937.

Thorstein Veblen has perhaps most clearly sounded this challenge in "The Engineers and the Price System." The gist of Veblen's plaint is that while scientists and engineers are largely responsible for our material progress in the present age, they are so preoccupied and satisfied with these functions that they allow themselves to become mere cogs in the social-economic machine, which falls thereby all too readily and exclusively into hands whose training has been purely in trade and finance and thus dominantly directed to the goal of profits as contrasted with use or service.

There is sound wisdom in Veblen's exhortation of the scientists and engineers to take a more active interest and responsibility in the social economic side of life, for both by temperament and training we have a right to expect them to think most naturally in terms of service and utility.

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Vol. 10

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