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Social Responsibility of Science

On page 143 appears a report of the Association's Interim Committee on the Social Aspects of Science, a committee that was established by the Council a year ago. The specific problems of the relations between science and society that are discussed in the report help to define a prior and more general question: Under what circumstances and in what ways is it appropriate for an organized body of scientists to participate actively in the determination of social policy? This question—it should be emphasized—is asked of organizations, not of their individual members.

In a democratic society, an individual scientist enjoys the freedom accorded all citizens to express his judgment on social issues and to work for the social conditions he considers desirable. The committee report asserts that an organized body of scientists also has a right to express a judgment on public issues and to work for those conditions that its members consider desirable.

Some observers would deny such a right to scientific organizations. They argue along these lines: Members of scientific organizations are experts in science, but not in public affairs. They have organized to work on scientific matters, not on public issues. If organized science attempts to influence general policy, it is going beyond its realm of special competence, and its efforts will inevitably be misunderstood. Efforts to *influence* will be interpreted as attempts to *control*. Confusion will result, and science will be discredited.

Supporters of the other side of the question reply that other organized groups unhesitatingly speak out as active segments of public opinion without being inhibited by the fact that their areas of special interest and competence constitute only part of the proper basis for determining policy. Given this situation, the argument runs, scientific organizations have an obligation to present their recommendations. If they do not, scientific considerations will be inadequately represented in the formulation of policy, and the long-run interests of society will thereby be damaged.

It will be helpful to have active consideration of the proper role of scientific organizations in this regard, for the Association's own policy is not clear. At its 1956 meeting, the Council instructed the committee to continue to study the issues involved and asked for specific recommendations at the 1957 meeting. In so doing, the Council implied that the AAAS cannot remain aloof from questions of social policy. If that is agreed, it still remains to be decided how actively and in what ways the Association should be involved. There is a graded series of possibilities:

Scientific organizations should point out the scientific evidence that is relevant to a policy issue.

They should go farther and point out the implications of the scientific evidence.

They should go still farther and recommend the actions that seem, from the point of view of science, to be most desirable.

How far along this series is it proper for an organized body of scientists to go?—D. W.