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An Academic Question

In its classical formulation, the problem of *laissez faire* versus governmental spending and planning has been limited pretty much to economic matters. But the past 15 years have seen a considerable increase in the public funds devoted to scientific research and a growing concern with the place of science in public education. Consequently, the problem of the role of the state in the affairs of the individual has, in effect, been broadened to include the Government's responsibility to science.

Before attempting to define this responsibility, it is important to be clear about the actual enterprise toward which the public interest is presently directed. Unfortunately, a wish to manipulate the course of nature does not necessarily imply a wish to understand the natural laws upon which such control is based. To the consumer of scientific knowledge, that is to say, to the man who rubs the lamp and commands the jinni, the achievements of science are nothing more nor less than feats of magic. The various agencies devoted to science might just as well be given such titles as the National Academy of Magic, the National Magic Foundation, and the American Association for the Advancement of Magic, and one of the most pressing problems of the day might just as well be the shortage of magicians.

The time is past when one may speak of disinterested research, of scientists following the argument wherever it leads. We have all learned that sooner or later research leads to wealth and power, if not for scientists themselves, then for others. But today, as in the past, scientists are often motivated by a somewhat different set of values. Unfortunately, to explain, say, intellectual curiosity to someone who does not have it is not easy. The delights of research are likely to sound as unconvincing as the claim that virtue is its own reward. But if such explanation is difficult, scientists at least share this difficulty with poets, artists, historians, humanists, and other persons.

In an age when magic is at a premium, there is a tendency to see the Government's responsibility to science in terms of what science can do. With our national security under constant threat and with the general welfare usually understood to mean material welfare, it may be an academic question to introduce another viewpoint. But we suggest that, in addition to its responsibility to magic, the Government has a responsibility to science, and that this responsibility extends to other enterprises of culture and scholarship.—J. T.