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Letters

Applications of Social Science

I am concerned lest the points of view expressed by Ernest van den Haag ["Man as an object of science," *Science* 129, 243 (1959)] be taken by our physical and natural science colleagues as a measure of the current state of scientific studies of human behavior.

It is my belief that van den Haag's central thesis is irrelevant to the scientific study of man's behavior. His concern with use of social science generalizations for "the control of human behavior . . ." confuses a personal social philosophy with the process of acquiring and analyzing scientific data. Van den Haag's assertions that social scientists must be concerned with "application" of social science knowledge to the deliberate manipulation of human behavior are unfortunate, since they are shared by few scholars in the several social science disciplines. I am moved to voice my objections to the author's speculations, for they could lead a reader to conclude that contemporary social science research is no more than 19th-century social philosophism plus some scientifically rational and empirical procedures and conceptualizations.

Men in a free society seek scientific knowledge to understand the world of nature and man. I do not believe that many social scientists hold presently that such understanding as may be gained through the scientific study of human behavior must be used for "control" of human behavior. Who shall choose those who would control human behavior? Who may assume the right, in an open society, to assert that he can think for his fellows? Van den Haag reveals his fundamental doubt that men are capable of directing their own destinies, given an understanding of themselves through scientifically derived knowledge. Karl Popper, in his work The Open Society and Its Enemies (Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, N.J., 1950), has traced a similar doubt through the course of Western history; in one guise or another, the assumption, by one person or a group, that he or they could think "better" for others has led to the tyrannies that have oppressed man and, for long periods, halted his quest for knowledge.

More accurate answers to van den Haag's article's subtitle—"To what extent can the social sciences be expected to explain and help solve the problems of man?"—are to be found in such works as Bernard Barber's *Science and the Social Order* (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1952), Clyde Kluckhohn's *Mirror for Man* (Whittlesey, New York, 1949), or *For a Science of Social Man* [John Gillin, Ed. (Macmillan, New York, 1954)]. I would concur with van den Haag on one point in his discussion; value judgments about the use of knowledge pose most difficult problems. Such problems become more acute when one confuses scientific studies of phenomena with one's particular views of the nature of man.

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I have been unable to discover any logical relation between my article and Williams' comments. The social sciences, like all empirical sciences, try to predict (sometimes retrodict) future (past) behavior by observing past (present) behavior. They succeed when they isolate recurrent correlations. They have to face special problems of verification, and the incidental effects, some of which I sketched. Further, they meet misunderstandings often due to confusion of description and prediction with advocacy. Williams displays this confusion.

My discussion of actual, of potential, and of frequently proposed applications of social science for the attainment of human ends persuaded Williams (i) that I advocate this application; (ii) that I reduce the social sciences to nothing but this application because, according to him, I hold that they "must" be used for the "deliberate manipulation of human behavior"; and (iii) that I advocate a particular type of control amounting to tyranny because, according to Williams, I "doubt that men are capable of directing their own destinies."

I do not hold any of these views and resent the use of my article as though it were a Rorschach test (I shudder to think what happens when Williams interprets the views of an inarticulate primitive tribe). Point (iii) is obviously a red herring. Williams might just as well have berated me for advocating nudism. I nowhere even discuss this point (and I happen to agree with many of Popper's systematic ideas, though I find the anachronistic garb in which he clothed them unbecoming).

As to points (i) and (ii), Williams confuses discussion with approval. I pointed out that the social sciences can -not that they must-be applied and that application of science (which is of course the same as "control" or "deliberate manipulation") requires value judgments concerned with ends rather than means; these fall outside the scope of science, natural or social, since observation can establish what is desired but not what is (ultimately) desirable. I discussed at some length proposed "scientific" foundations for value judgments, concluding regretfully that none have been found. Williams appears to agree,

(Continued on page 1444)

Letters

(Continued from page 1398)

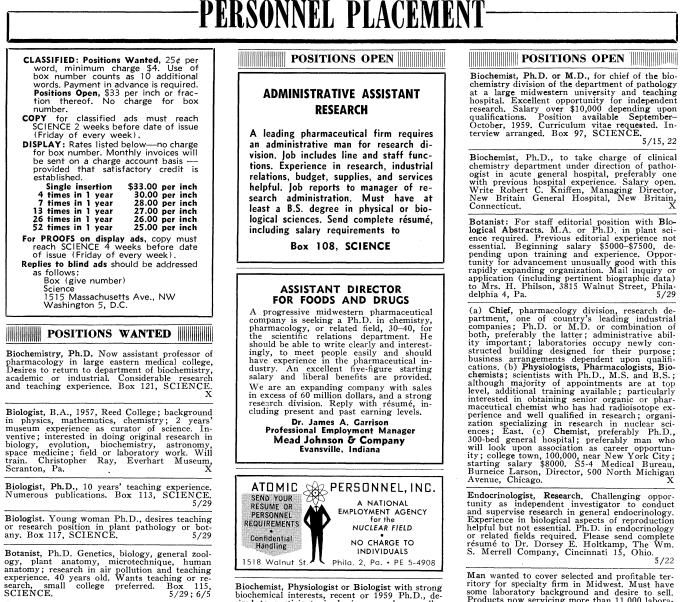
albeit obscurely, and thinking himself in opposition to my view.

Perhaps Williams thinks that application can be avoided altogether. I hesitate to presume that he is that naive. Legislators try to control human action by compulsion; political leaders (in a democracy), by persuasion; military leaders, by authority; educators, by logic and information; advertisers, by influence. By various combinations of means of differing legitimacy we control and manipulate each other. All societies-in however different ways-must control their members to some degree.

The social sciences, among other things, explore these controls-causes, effects, and effectiveness-and the results may be used to improve the means used. In the 20th century, social scientists advise government, business, and private citizens on a host of problems, all of which involve the control of human behavior. (I shall not discuss Williams' confusion between "control" and compulsion and his idea that compulsion is always practiced by the few over the many). Now, my central thesis was that

social scientists cannot as scientists determine what ends are to be served, though they can indicate what means are required by each and what effects attainment of the end may have, and this may influence the selection of ends. The situation is not very different from that of the physicists, though the similarities are obscured by misunderstandings such as those displayed by Williams. I do not believe, however, that these need deprive the social sciences of the scientific character that they share with the natural sciences.

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