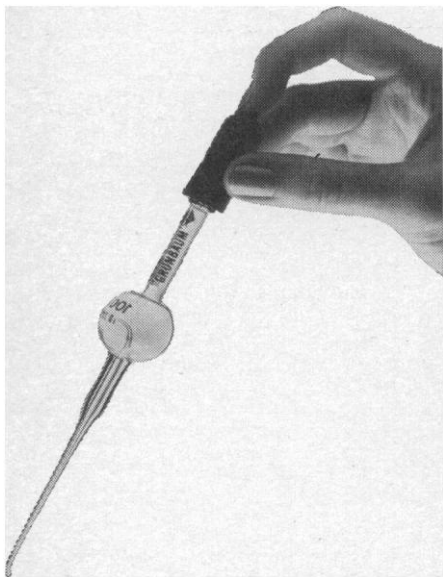


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with no readily perceived connection. In addition, two important references on the subject of interest which I had obtained by the old, more time-consuming (?) method were not listed by the computer.

This listing was obtained in response to a fairly specific request. Imagine the response to a generalized statement of interest covering a wide range of subjects!

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Survey Synonym

In reporting the results of a survey, Reagan (Letters, 5 April) suggests that scientists live with a "bifurcated tension situation." It sounds like a frightful thing to have around the house. Would it perhaps be less threatening if it were called a "dilemma"?

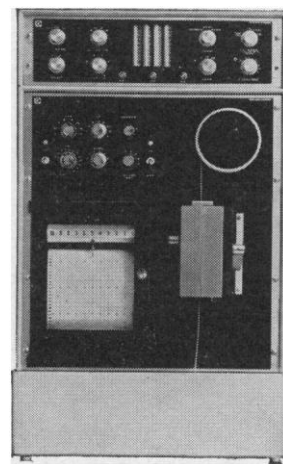
ARTHUR KOHLENBERG
40 Appleton Street,
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Importance of Being Important

In his article "When is research the answer?" (8 Mar., p. 1079), Pierce does not acknowledge that much of the great science of the past would have failed initially to meet any reasonable criterion of "importance," social or otherwise. Given the philosophical and practical concerns of the respective times, how "important" did it seem to wonder, for example, about the swing of the pendulum, the effect of current flow on magnetic needles, the properties of partial vacuums, and the fauna of the Galapagos? Not very important, it would seem from the historical record, and there is no evidence that we today are any smarter about guessing where the most powerful secrets of nature are hidden than were the contemporaries of Galileo, Faraday, Boyle, or Darwin.

However hard it may be, it seems essential that the scientific community try to distinguish between applied and basic research or between technology and science. The case put by Pierce is fundamental when research is being conducted for the sake of an "organization," but only then. The customer (individual or institutional) has a right to demand fair value for its investment. And if the commodity is useful knowl-

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edge, then, as Pierce says, the job is done only when knowledge is put to use. In the context of applied research, appeals to "basic" research often cloak poor quality and inadequate administration and should be viewed with skepticism. But the danger of too great a compliance with Pierce's enjoinders is that science, not for an organization or for useful consumption, but for the more detached and potentially far more creative exploration of nature, might be brought to a halt.

What looks "important" at any time reflects a consensus based upon what is already known. Thus, it should come as no surprise that many potent discoveries arise in the study of the apparently "unimportant," as history shows. The basic researcher may be wise to put considerations of importance out of his mind and attend instead to the inner logic of the subject he is studying. It is he, rather than either the administrators of science or the guardians of the public welfare, who must be trusted to lay out the course of science. It is unsettling to think how much the future of science depends upon society's willingness to place trust (and resources) in the hands of men who promise nothing more than to try to increase our understanding of nature, however unrelated to "important" aims their work may seem at the time.

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Academe's Window

Although I have not been sympathetic toward "secret research" under government contract on university campuses, I have had a second thought after reading Vice-President Humphrey's statement in "A point of view" (16 Feb., p. 717). If all secret research is removed from university affairs, and is conducted solely in government laboratories, the collective university community may find itself totally ignorant of certain government activities, many of which have already aroused suspicion and regret in the academic world. Who then can protest with "insight?" Who then, from the "outside," can advise the government on the wisdom of its course?

A. D. McLAREN

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