



CONTACT SCIENCE

Letters to the Editor

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See pages 108 and 109 of the 2 January 1998 issue or access www.sciencemag.org/misc/con-info.shtml.

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Passionate Science

The 150th Essay Committee*

Scientists tend to adopt a prudish approach in their public dealings. Prudish is prudent. We rarely get a glimpse of the raw passions that—strained through creativity, molded by the experimental method, informed by accumulated knowledge, and rigorously tested—are the essential ingredient of science. Nor do we get enough exposure to the powerful feelings, both positive and negative, that the sciences engender in the wider population.

The essential idea behind the essays that have been published throughout the year was to provide glimpses of the human elements that swirl around science and its place in society. These essays portrayed a wide range of emotions and world views. We saw displayed, for example, idealism in the interpretation of Dr. Faustus as a representation of science's attempt to subjugate nature, and pragmatism, as in the treatment of intellectual property rights at universities. Some essayists looked at the rights and obligations of individual scientists from poorer countries in following their calling, and the potential for technology to help the masses in those same countries. The psychology of presenting science in the media was addressed, as was the psychology of our community's most prestigious prizes.

The flow of correspondence generated by the series has been relentless and, at times, exhilarating. However, given that invitations to contribute to the series were honors conferred to mark the sesquicentenary of the AAAS, it would have been inappropriate to publish reactions to the essays. Furthermore, having urged our contributors to open their hearts as well as their minds, it would have been unfair to allow them to be kebabed in the Letters section. But a flavor of the mailbag can be given.

The tone was set by the first two letters received, in response to "The Great Asymmetry." One began "Stephen Jay Gould's as always optimistic view...." the other started "Stephen Jay Gould painted a very dark picture...." We worried—he came with the reputation of a man who makes his point clearly! There was dichotomy, too, in the lively reaction to Douglas Hofstadter's "Popular Culture and the Threat to Rational Enquiry." Many voiced agreement with Hofstadter, the general sentiment being that a culture of critical thinking urgently needs to be restored; but an equal number, no doubt those raised on cheesy horror books and confident that pop culture's "neon wiles" can spark positive developments, were loudly unconvinced. It would have made a great forum topic (see below). One other essay deserves mention for the controversy it generated. The inclusion of Bruno Latour attracted thunderbolts from the mighty, demands for rebuttal, and suggestions that a pseudoscientific mole was at work within our group. The truth is that we chose to follow the remit faithfully, and felt that we should not ignore a dimension of the science-society debate that currently generates so much comment.

What was true of these three essays was true of virtually all: No other section of *Science* has generated this much reaction. In wading through the comments, extentions, refutations, and congratulations, we saw strong support and vehement criticism of particular points in equal measure; but there was close to unanimous support for the concept of the series. It seems to have captured the spirit of the times. And as the opinions of (among others) schoolchildren, artists, and business leaders were being voiced in the essays, the world's leaders were also turning their attention to science's relationship with society: Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Gro Harlem Brundtland, Claude Allegre, and Tom Ehlers all wrote for *Science* this past year.

Given this *Zeitgeist* and this momentum, *Science* has decided to continue the series into 1999, in its Compass section. While the aim remains the same, the ground rules will change somewhat—correspondence will be considered for publication, and where there is particularly lively debate an interactive forum may be initiated in *Science* Online. We welcome suggestions for topics that should be addressed and for contributors, both scientists and nonscientists.

*Richard B. Gallagher (Chair), Christine Gilbert, Barbara Jasny, Andrew Lawler, Elizabeth Pennisi, Linda R. Rowan, and Julia Uppenbrink

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