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## A Note on Professor Edel's Paper

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## A NOTE ON PROFESSOR EDEL'S PAPER

BY

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Much of Professor Edel's discussion is unexceptionable, but his conclusions and recommendations are somewhat disappointing.

Scientists, according to Edel, have obligation to publish their work, to see that their papers are "properly abstracted and indexed", to write critical reviews, to communicate with the public and educate the young. To be sure. They should attend to the welfare of their collaborators and their experimental subjects. Scientists, says Edel, also have a "general responsibility" for "maintaining the conditions under which science can be continued." What that comes to will depend upon one's conception of science, about which more later. Scientists should "know or be aware of" the sources of their financial support and the probable benefits or adverse effects of their research: they have "some responsibility for decision" about whether to promote or to curb research. When we arrive at the "major, central, and . . . crucial problems affecting the whole life of the society", we are told that "*it may well be* a responsibility of all intellectual, scientific and cultural leadership in the community to *ask itself* what it can do to help face the problem".

Allowing for the usual academic disinclination to take firm stands, I find these conclusions excessively judicious. Perhaps Edel feels a creditable hesitation to lecture scientists on their "social responsibilities". But if a neighbour is handling dangerous weapons in a reckless way, my interest in self-preservation justifies me in asking him to consider what he is doing and the probable consequences of his actions. Incidentally, Edel's coupling of "recklessness in experiment" with what he calls the "recklessness of conservatism" seems to me dubious. There is a patent difference between letting well enough alone and introducing powerful catalytic agents in ignorance of the consequences.

Edel attaches too little weight to the extent to which we are, and are likely to remain, frighteningly ignorant of the consequences of scientific and technological innovation. I do not share his hopes for "a science of the psychological, socio-cultural and historical relations of the scientific enterprise," although any reliable information under this pretentious heading would be welcome. But can we afford to wait for yet another science?

I suppose one's attitude to the "social responsibilities" of science and technology will depend upon how dangerous the present situation

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looks. I think it not at all alarmist to consider it an open question whether our grandchildren will survive to read the indexes, abstracts and popular lectures that scientists who follow Edel's suggestions will continue to provide. If the main issue, upon whose resolution all else depends, is the very survival of the human race, at some modest level of the human race, at some modest level of general well-being, we might reasonably expect scientists, as individuals and as organised professional bodies, to treat the problem as one of over-riding urgency. Indeed, one encouraging thing about a generally doleful situation is the sense of urgency shown by an increasing number of professional scientists. Some people, of course, will continue to define science as the "disinterested pursuit of truth", no matter where it leads, whether to the transplantation of hearts or the devastation of colonial territories. But the case for the continuing support of science is that it has, on balance, done something for the relief of human misery. If we think of science as a social enterprise committed to the maintenance of life and the improvement of its quality, the "responsibilities" of scientists and of those involved, one way or another, in supporting science become reasonably plain.