ALEX COMFORT

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN SCIENCE AND ART

A Talk broadcast on the Third Programme

SECOND IMPRESSION
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
IN SCIENCE AND ART

By Dr. Alex Comfort

There have been times in the history of art and of science when the individual worker’s responsibility was not a pressing issue. Both, like any absorbing occupation, could provide a very real intellectual refuge. That is not true today, I think. In the first place, the pressure of ethical decisions upon all of us, all the time, is now intense and unavoidable, and that applies just as much to the postman, the shoemaker, and the solicitor’s clerk as it does to the artist or the scientist—any of them may at any time be called upon, under compulsion, to support or to carry out themselves actions which would have disgusted Ghengiz Khan. Secondly, I believe that the artist and scientist have special responsibilities, in addition to their normal duty, of remaining human beings in whose eyes no other human being is quite deserving to be treated as vermin.

I am claiming for the artist and the scientist no kind of privilege or leadership which sets them above that responsibility. In fact the only pre-eminence they can claim is one which makes the need for conscious ethical choice more pressing and more inevitable than it is for others with other aptitudes.

The Moral Choice Does Not Change

The problems we all face are not new. It can be argued that the atom bomb poses no fundamentally different moral choice from that which faced the Napoleonic conscript with his bayonet, or the citizen during the Hundred Years’ War, but the growth of our self-awareness, for which science and art are both responsible, has made a profound difference to our attitudes. We see ostensibly civilised cultures committing themselves to genocide as a weapon of war, we see the really fundamental human
problems of continuing over-population and disease neglected in favour of psychopathic feuds—and most significantly we are put in the position, all of us, of choosing between enforced participation and active resistance without being able to trust, as our fathers did, to the idea of protest and progress through the usual political channels. Everything we sense as individuals, and very nearly everything we learn as social psychologists, makes it clear that any gesture of protest, any attempt to modify the course of events, must initially, if not throughout, be a personal one—a reassertion of our own responsibility towards other individuals.

Throughout very nearly the whole of western culture, what is, in effect, the same problem of social ethics is uppermost in the minds of very nearly everyone who is capable of articulate thought and expresses himself publicly. And when I say western culture, I am referring not to any polemical conception of western culture but to an entity which includes both Russia and America, and spills over into all those parts of Asia where the intellectual techniques of the west are established. This preoccupation with social ethics has led to widely diverse results—much of the appeal of Marxism, for example, seems to me to have lain in the attempt it has made to restate the issue of social responsibility. That particular restatement fails to satisfy me personally, and it fails, I think, to satisfy the majority of English artists and scientists, but the fact that Marxism does make an explicit demand on the intellectual for him to formulate and act upon definite beliefs about his responsibility to society, may turn out to have been its most important consequence; it is this sort of formulation European intellectuals are trying, I think, to reach at the present time—or, at least, I find them doing it in every country I visit, and every country where I have friends, whether the immediate problem takes the form of resistance to war or resistance to irrational political institutions. Of all intellectuals, moreover, I think the burden falls most heavily upon the artist and upon the scientist.

The reason it falls on those groups springs, I believe, from their function. I did not select art and science arbitrarily, to discuss their responsibilities, or even because I have an interest in both of them myself. Man has so far developed only two effective techniques for widening his grasp on external realities: the technique of communicating total perception which we call art, and
the technique of investigating objective experience which we call science, and these are complementary techniques. In the past, artists have often been content to discuss their responsibility in aesthetic terms, and scientists have taken, and still do take, the kind of view which rejects any direct concern with the application of their results—the usual argument has been, I think, that the scientist has only the ordinary responsibilities of a citizen, and that he has no right to make special claims on the ordering of society. Those attitudes, I submit, have broken down. They have broken down in the face of the experience we have had of Nazism, in the face of the atom bomb, and the advent of policy-determination by mass hysteria; most of all they have broken down, for the scientist, in the face of the realisation that the policies now being applied over large parts of the earth are the result not of purposive planning, or even of purposive malice, but of entirely irrelevant factors springing from personality-disorder, neurotic and aggressive compulsions, and even of mental disease.

The scientist has been under obligation, all along, to the promotion of human welfare without being very keenly aware of the exact scope of his obligation, and often without taking the trouble to express it to himself in words. Now he finds himself, often to his great alarm, being asked to put unlimited powers of genocide, coercion, and destruction into the hands of limited groups of individuals, many of whom show themselves by all their public gestures quite unfit to control a sporting gun, let alone a vast military machine. In recent years many scientists saw, or thought they saw, the possibility of ridding themselves of this very heavy responsibility through the institution of collective security. I can testify to the effect which events in Korea have had on some of my colleagues who thought in this way. Having seen collective security in action, quite a number of them have come to the view that there is no compromise possible for them, short of personal and individual refusal to co-operate in destructive or psychopathic projects, however these may be rationalised. In the words of Professor Max Born: “The only remedy seems to me to be a violent moral reaction against the misuse of science. Scientists should organise themselves with the aim to outlaw the prostitution of science.”

Nobody, least of all myself, can lay down the law to contemporary science. But the confusion of mind there is real. Not
long ago, there was held a very important congress on atomic energy; one session was devoted to social implications. At that session, a speaker who said that he felt scientists should do something to implement their personal responsibility for the work they undertake, though he was not prepared to say exactly what, was very warmly congratulated on a courageous and provocative speech. The public, sensing this confusion of mind, has not been slow to express some fairly violent anti-scientific sentiments. The scientist has come to rank in news value and in penny dreadfuls with the spy and the international crook. That may sound a frivolous comment, but the kind of public attitude which underlies it has, I believe, begun to exercise a very real pressure and perhaps a very salutary one on scientific workers themselves.

Need for a Unified Ethic

The need to translate an amorphous sense of social obligation into practical action is being felt more and more. The profound shock caused by the atomic bomb certainly posed the question of personal responsibility for the projects in which one engages in a very sharp and inescapable form, but the issue had been growing to a head in other fields—the psychiatrists, for example, who were forced to choose between the creation of good soldiers full of hatred for the enemy, and the restoration of balanced personalities, or, more recently, the prospect of the military uses of bacteriology.

Some individuals have been in no doubt where their obligation lay: one eminent American exponent of cybernetics, for example, flatly refused to provide information to the Guided Missiles Project on the ground that he could not accept responsibility for the use to be made of it, or the international Microbiological Congress which passed an unequivocal resolution condemning the preparation of bacteriological warfare as unethical. Such definite attitudes are not yet general, and they are equally strongly opposed by other scientists, but it does seem to me that there is growing up very widely a desire, almost a craving, for an agreed ethical position. Those who feel this desire are frequently unwilling to formulate such a position, and may doubt the possibility of formulating it. Yet workers in specifically military research are, I think, already aware of a very slight fall in temperature around
them when they mix with their colleagues. The development of a unified ethical voice in science is slow, but it seems to me that its development is inevitable.

It happens that the branch of science in which I was trained, medicine, is the only branch which not only has such a unified ethic, but has had it for almost 6,000 years. The idea of the human responsibility of the doctor has been present since medicine was indistinguishable from magic. For some, it has been a supernatural duty based on religion or philosophy, but I doubt if that was the true origin of the Hippocratic tradition. It seems more likely that it arose because men recognised that since knowledge of poisons and more-or-less dangerous and powerful remedies was needed for the struggle with disease, some safeguard was necessary to place the possessors of this hazardous proficiency in a special category, a category which made them responsible to humanity in general. When we destroyed the data obtained by human experiments in the Nazi concentration camps, we were reasserting that tradition. Our own age is the first since early European history in which that tradition has been seriously challenged, and even today a government is going to think twice before it calls a medical psychologist to assist in spreading hatred, or a medical bacteriologist to assist in spreading disease. It knows it runs the risk of meeting a refusal which would have the support of very nearly the whole of medical opinion throughout the world. Non-medical science has grown up without that tradition.

**Unique Position of the Scientist**

Leonardo might suppress his submarine, but most scientific workers, even the most far-sighted, have felt no uniform, corporate pressure from their tradition to act in this way—if they did, the decision was an individual one. Many felt that by stepping outside the normal processes of politics and citizenship and withholding their support from a particular course of action they were taking the law into their own hands. Today, we have only just ceased executing Germans for failing, in such a situation, to take the law into their own hands. It may perhaps be our recent experience of totalitarianism which will be the decisive factor in making the acceptance of personal responsibility general in science. Another and a more important force is the growth of a science of human behaviour. It is becoming clearer and clearer,
through the work of social psychologists and psychopathologists, that if I make an atom bomb and entrust it to a political authority its use or non-use will not depend in any real sense upon threats from without, upon the moral will of the people, or upon any coherent argument or object, but upon quite irrelevant factors in the culture which possesses it and in the childhood upbringing and resultant personality of those who happen to hold office.

I do not think I need stress the unique position of the scientist in facing these problems. If he is prepared to formulate a humanistic ethic and stick to it, he can neither be replaced nor, in the last resort, coerced—it is possible for a state to command a certain amount of purely technical acquiescence but fundamental research and original investigation, on which the whole of technology now depends, can be produced only by willing and enthusiastic workers, not by conscript labour in a science factory. It must be quite clear that if science is prepared to take a really strong line about co-operation with anti-human and destructive policies it can be both effective and decisive. It can, moreover, rally very wide popular support, as the doctor relies on the sanction of world opinion when he asserts his professional neutrality in the care of the wounded. It is possible that in movements such as the American Society for Social Responsibility in Science, to which Professor Einstein has recently given his support, and in debates such as those conducted through the Atomic Scientists' Association, we may be seeing the emergence of such a unified ethical attitude.

In the situation in which our own country finds itself, it will certainly be argued that unless the scientist is willing to co-operate with what is termed, rather hopefully, defence, even if that means the preparation of highly destructive weapons, he must take the responsibility for the destruction of all scientific liberty by one or another totalitarianism. The same argument would apply to medicine, and I doubt if most doctors would be prepared to abandon their tradition because of that risk. In fact, the effect of atomic and other preparations on the growth of science and the liberty of information, as well as the psychological effects of the weapons on their users, are proving not much less serious than those of the forces they are supposed to counter. Even if that were not so, I would remind you that I am talking about a policy for scientific ethics, not scientific expediency. There are
some policies, such as Hitler's gas chambers, or war based on genocide, to which I believe we can only reply: "Here stand I, I can do no other." It is the point at which this stand must be made which is the constant anxiety of a great many scientific workers today.

Compared with the immediate practical responsibility of the scientist, the responsibility of the artist must seem puny. The decision which faces him is not, I think, one of practical action: of course he will try to throw his weight into the scale, and that weight, if he is a writer or even a painter of genius, may have its effect. For the novelist—in our society the only artist who has a mass audience and at the same time effective economic control of the means of addressing it—the hope of some decisive influence is a reasonable one. For him, since he takes of all artists what is probably the largest portion of his culture as material, there is no more escape from the necessity for treating the content of his work seriously than there is for the social psychologist he is coming so closely to resemble. The dichotomy which people have tried to establish between artistic proficiency and artistic content is becoming unbearable to almost all sensitive minds. I doubt if it has ever been real—we might have admired Shelley as much if he had been indifferent to such things as war and tyranny, though I doubt it; certainly had he been indifferent we should never have been led by him.

There is no Hippocratic oath in literature, and I am not attempting tonight to draw one up. As far as I am concerned, the artist is a human being writ large, and his ethics are the ethics of any human being. Perhaps I can best illustrate what seems to me the new consciousness of those duties of assertion and refusal from one writer, and I do not think it is without significance that this writer projects the whole situation of choice into a scientific parable, the parable of a pestilence: a pestilence many human beings are called to fight against, called not by any supernatural obligation but by the simple fact that the fight against a plague is something like a biological human obligation.

Albert Camus seems to me to be the first modern writer, though I am certain he will not be the last, to put the problem of responsibility in specific terms. "I only know," he wrote, "that in this world there are pestilences and there are victims, and it
is up to us not to ally ourselves with the pestilences.” For the medical scientist, who knows that he may quite well be called upon today to use literal pestilences, of mind and of body, in psychological and bacteriological warfare that statement has a meaning clearer, I think, and more imperative than its author intended. But for the scientist as general enemy of pestilences, and the artist as general representative of humanity, the basic pestilence which, by its epidemic spread in our time challenges his allegiance, is the same—it is the pestilence which, through the spread of irrational fears and irrational hatreds, through the acceptance of coercion, through the neglect of what one can only call social and personal sanitation in our attitudes to society, leads us to forget who we are and who our fellow men are: the pestilence which exterminates “gooks” or dissidents, which apologises for torture and massacre in any shape or form, whether it be called for the moment revolution or collective security, the pestilence of atom bombs and concentration camps. In the last resort, there is only one ethically satisfactory reply to that pestilence: an unqualified and unargued “No.” This “No” does not spring, I think, from any idealistic or metaphysical imperative, but simply from the fact that by saying anything else we should cease to be human beings.

“On the Side of Man”

I know that this view will seem over-simple to some. Very often it will be denounced as neutrality, a neutrality which is morally unworthy because of the communist atrocities here, or the capitalist atrocities somewhere else, which we ought to oppose. To that, I would reply myself that so strongly do I oppose not only atrocities of all kinds, but the pestilence itself from which I believe they spring, that a bald reassertion of what I have called “humanity,” so far from being neutral, is a declaration of partisanship, of being, more specifically, on the side of man. And it is because both art and science are almost by definition “on the side of man” that the issue of choice which confronts them today seems to me more than a matter of personal ethics—it is rather the reflection in the individual of something in the social nature of the human species, something for the preservation of which the artist and the scientist have already assumed responsibility by the very nature of their work.
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