

Notes on Panel Discussion at Markel Foundation Meeting, Yosemite

September 29 - October 2, 1964

1. Principle of technological evasion. Scientists of course cannot shirk the general responsibilities of educated members of their communities in setting social policy and even in alleviating some of the problems that are aggravated by scientific advance. However, they rarely have special qualifications in making social decisions. On the other hand, as technicians they may have a special capability (a) to foresee stresses that may arise from scientific advance in which they or their colleagues are participating, and (b) to help define and accelerate technical means for mitigating them. In this sphere the technically trained person is irreplaceable.

2. Ethics as a process. Other speakers made what seemed to me a rather unsatisfactory elaboration of the humanistic basis of ethics. Many questions rapidly became bogged down on the matter of human purpose. In particular there has been considerable confusion concerning the proper application of analogies from evolutionary biology to the ethical sphere. The point that seems to be generally overlooked is that man is perfectable, that is to say, highly imperfect at the present time. In fact, given the existing context of human conflict, it would be surprising if contemporary man were able to give ultimate answers to any important questions of purpose. This suggests that the residual objective which is available to contemporary man is to conduct a holding action for the species (a) to help insure the possibility of its survival, and (b) to maintain the maximum variety and flexibility in approaches to ultimate questions so as to leave open at least some possibility of a closer approach to adequate answers at a more highly integrated stage of human evolution. This this proves to be a rationalization for a democratic ideology which does not require the preposterous deification of contemporary man. The expediency of maintaining some semblance of social order as a framework for the possibility of further progress then becomes the leading principle of present activity without being the basis of any absolute dogma as to eternal ethical positions.