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Reel  
151

Box  
53

Folder  
299

Will science save or destroy mankind?, 1928.



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"WILL SCIENCE SAVE OR DESTROY MANKIND?"

MRABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 8, 1928, CLEVELAND, O.

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Will science save or destroy mankind? This question would not have been asked a decade ago, surely not a generation ago. The amazing thing is that it is being seriously propounded today. No one who is at all acquainted with the philosophic thought of the literature of our day can be left in doubt concerning the apprehension which is growing up among thinking men in connection with the swift progress of science and invention.

Within the last few years three books appeared, two of them written by most eminent scientists--one by Professor Whitehead, who is the outstanding logician of England, called "Science and the Modern World"; the second one was written by Professor Kleis and is called "The Sins of Science," and the third, by C. E. Ayers, is called "Science, the False Messiah." And in all of these books these leaders of thought set out deliberately to warn mankind against the menace of unwarranted scientific presumption, and to defend humanism--the humanities, against the scientific materialism of our day.

Quite a literature has developed in the last few years around this central theme of the mechanization of life which the machine age is bringing about. In fiction, in drama, in the drama of the screen, this haunting dread of a possible debauche of civilization, of a breakdown of the whole of civilization which may be brought about by



man's inability to cope with the titanic forces of nature which he himself is releasing and will release,--this haunting dread that man will succumb to his own handiwork is being vividly presented.

On the one hand there is the fear that the age of machinery is making a machine out of man; that man himself is becoming an adjunct of the machine--an automaton. That thought, you will recall, is most vividly portrayed in that drama "R.U.R.", and in that startling German screen drama "Metropolis." On the other hand, there is the fear that some day the scientist will discover an agency of such universal destructiveness--a germ, a poison gas, a death ray, which, once released in the midst of war, may wipe out the whole human race.

As early as 1872 the canny, shrewd English writer, Samuel Butler, the author of "The Way of All Flesh," wrote an imaginary novel called "Erehwon," which is the English word "Nowhere" spelled backward. In this novel an Englishman finds his way into this mythical land of Erehwon, and there he learns that some hundred years previously the inhabitants of Erehwon had reached a high level of scientific advancement, but that they had deliberately smashed all their machinery and outlawed all science, because they began to realize that the machine was beginning to dominate them instead of the people dominating the machine; that they were becoming the tools, the victims of their own handiwork. So they smashed all their machinery and returned to a simpler



form of civilization.

Mankind, I believe, is today beginning instinctively to react against continued scientific progress, for two reasons: in the first place, they somehow sense that science is undermining their ethical standards, that it is disrupting their moral code; that science is somehow setting up a machine gauge for human worth; that it is destroying the cherished humanities of civilized life; that it is fatal to moral idealism; that it is banishing from life all the tenderer impulses which are the charm and the grace of civilization. They somehow believe--men do--that science is hostile to religion, and that therefore it is destroying the very foundations upon which all morality can be set.

Again, man sees himself propelled into a world which is becoming, because of scientific progress and invention, more and more complicated and involved. Inventions are tumbling in upon him like the waters of a cataract, and he is unprepared for them; he has not had time to adjust himself to them; and the new knowledge has brought about a frightful confusion in his life and in his thinking; he is confused about his codes and his standards and his motives; he is confused as to what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false, what is real and what is unreal, and along with this involvement of life which science has brought about, there has come no compensating inner illumination for man. Science has not given man a more



accurate means of judging human values; science has not given man truer motives, higher standards, surer direction; science has not given man an understanding, or greater understanding, at least, of the meaning of life and the purpose of life. And so man is confused.

Man is aware, for example, that he has been gaining a greater mastery over nature, but he is not at all sure that he has been gaining a greater mastery over himself. And he is afraid; he is afraid lest these machines which his hands are constructing and these gigantic forces which his mind is letting loose in the world may some day turn out to be a Frankenstein--a fiendish machine which will turn upon him and destroy him.

Clearly, man is confused today. Man has not had time to assimilate all the knowledge which has come to him in such profusion and in such a short space of time. Man has advanced more scientifically in the last fifty years than he has in the hundred thousand years previously. Up to the last half century, say a century, life moved very slowly for the human race. New discoveries and new inventions were rare and far between--one in a century, one in a thousand years. Why, between the close of the Greek period and the beginning of the new learning in Europe, the Renaissance, a period of over fifteen hundred years, there is hardly an invention of note recorded. Life was slow, almost stagnant. It wasn't an ideal life by any means, but it was not a hectic life; it was not a confused and unbalanced life. Man had



time to adjust himself to that modicum of knowledge that he possessed.

Now think what happened to us in the last fifty years, much of it in the last twenty-five years. Electricity, the wireless, the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, the dynamo, the motor, the automobile, the airplane--infinite machines,--time-saving, labor-saving and space-saving machines. Think of the advance in chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, history, comparative religion,--in almost every sphere of human thought amazing discoveries, perfectly revolutionary discoveries; and all crowded almost in one generation, in the lifetime of one generation.

Is it any wonder that man stands aghast, dazed; that he is disorganized and confused? Is it any wonder that some sane people, some wise people, have actually asked for a moratorium of science for a period? Bishop Rippon of England, not long ago, suggested that we call a halt, deliberately call a halt to scientific research. He said, "Dare I even suggest \* \* \* that the sum of human happiness outside of scientific circles would not necessarily be reduced if for, say, ten years every physical and chemical laboratory were closed, and the patient and resourceful energy displayed in them transferred to recovering the lost art of getting together and finding a formula for making the ends meet in the scale of human life."

Man today wants a breathing space, a chance to stop and to take stock and to see whither he is bound in



this headlong, neck-breaking pace of his. Of course mankind cannot stop even if it wanted to. Science has already gained that tremendous momentum which will carry it on. We can no more stop the advance of new knowledge than King Canute could stop the on-rushing tides of the sea. They are beyond his power. We have unleashed forces in the world which we cannot recall. It may be that some day our creative impulse will spend itself; it will be consumed, run down like a clock runs down. That has been the history of all creative enterprise periods in civilization; but until such time man can do nothing to stop the groping, inquisitive, searching mind of man. And why should mankind try to stop it? As long as there are dark continents of knowledge to be discovered and explored, why should we stop it? As long as there are diseases to be destroyed by science, why should we halt. As long as there are forces to be harnessed by us to do our work, why should we attempt to estop the progress of science?

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Again, the scientific mind, one of the noblest achievements of the human race, and the qualities of mind which science makes imperative,--application, persistence, accuracy, imagination, objective research,--why these are among the most admirable qualities of our race. Why should we attempt to interfere with them? And, furthermore, science has been a blessing to the human race, except where man made a curse of it. Science has given the human race, in the first place, increased comfort and

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increased competence. Millions are enjoying today those things which hundreds only enjoyed a century or a millennium ago. The machine is producing in quantity and in speed those things which men require for their comfort, and more and more of human beings are coming within the sphere of competence and comfort, whereas a century ago or five centuries ago the vast majority of the human race lived on the verge of penury, want and dread of want. Science has given the human race more leisure, and leisure is a prerequisite of culture. In the olden days a certain leisure class, which was the carrier of culture, purchased its leisure at the price of enslavement of other human beings.

The noble Greek civilization was built upon the bent backs of hundreds of thousands of slaves. Today we are purchasing our leisure not at the cost of enslavement of fellow human beings but at the cost of machinery. We are making things do for us much of our tasks and our labor, giving us leisure for the higher pursuits of life. The eight hour day of labor is a victory of the machine. That we have not learned to use our leisure properly is no fault of science.

Science has given us popular education. The printing press made possible the ultimate abolition of illiteracy in the world. Where once upon a time education was the privilege of a few, today it is the priceless possession of hundreds of millions; and education increases the life of a man a thousandfold. Science has enlarged and



extended the domain of man. The telescope brought nearer to us and within our ken universes of which we had no cognizance before; and the microscope has brought within our vision whole universes within the atom. It has pushed the boundaries of human life, has deepened and enriched human life. Science has given us greater security, greater protection and prolongation of life. The average life of man today is twice the average life of man of a thousand years ago. Science is conquering pain. Think what a boon to mankind the anesthetic has been; think what a surgical operation was seventy-five years ago. It has given us greater security, and has and is releasing us from the dread of epidemics and ever present pain.

And science has brought our human world closer together; it has made our world smaller, as far as our relationships, one to another, and one nation to another, are concerned. By bringing us closer together it has made possible, first of all, more wars, but it is also making inevitable ultimate international peace. And above all, what science has done for mankind is this: it has given it the glowing hope of unlimited promise; it has taught the human race to believe that untold possibilities of growth and development are in store for it in the future; that if it exercises its mind, its imagination, it may constantly discover new continents, new worlds, new knowledge and new truth.

Science has held up before the human race



the glorious vision of a kingdom of perfection to which the race may aspire. In the Middle Ages life was drab and stodgy and stagnant. Men somehow felt that they had reached the limits of their possibilities, and they sought refuge in the thought of the hereafter, where all of their unfulfilled hopes and ambitions would be realized.

Science broke the narrow confines of human life and revealed to the amazed eye of man fields of splendor, worlds without end for the adventuresome spirit of man. It has brought the zest and the romance of adventure and the challenge of adventure into human life.

All that is true, my friend says, but has science destroyed hate and lust and covetousness and revolution and wars and class struggles? No. In many instances it has increased them ten-fold. Has not science increased the possibilities of destruction and of evil? It has. Think of the last war. Think of ten millions of men butchered and slain by the last subtle inventions of science--by poison gas and by ingenious machines, by high explosives. Think of the deadly submarine; think of the airship used to hurl bombs, death, upon people. Has not science increased the possibilities of evil in the world? It has a thousandfold.

In an Armistice Day address delivered by Herbert Hoover I find this statement: "The world has learned many lessons from the war, but none more emphatic than that its increasing terribleness will, if repeated



again, destroy civilization itself. The mobilization of a whole people into war, the inventions of science turned to destruction and the killing of man, will make any other great war the cemetery of civilization."

What we say about the men of science may be true, for has not science given us the machine habits and the machine complexes and the machine reaction? It has. But the solution is to be sought not in the estoppage of scientific progress, which is really impossible, but in the discovery of a philosophy, a new philosophy, or perhaps a rediscovery of an old philosophy which will welcome all scientific truth but which will coordinate it into the spiritual life of man. Science must be made to serve human life and not to master it. Science is not an end in itself any more than art or religion or any enterprise of the human mind and spirit.

Science must be a servant of human life; it must contribute to its advancement and to its enrichment and to its happiness. Science is not civilization; ~~the two should not be confused.~~ Science is organized knowledge. Civilization is ~~the art of organized life~~, the art of community life, and in this art of living together much more than knowledge enters. Beauty is a factor; goodness is a factor; hope and faith and ideals and love and holiness are factors. Without knowledge, of course, civilization remains starved and stunted and beset with superstition and fear; but without beauty and goodness and ideals civilization



becomes baneful, cold, menacing, destructive.

It is very important, therefore, that science should, in the first place, be free, or released from that absolutism which its extreme devotees would like to attribute to it. Science is not only not the whole of life but it cannot solve all the problems of life. It has its legitimate sphere of activity; it cannot go beyond that. There are certain problems of life concerning which science can tell us nothing and has told us nothing. Professor Slossom wisely remarks that every question in nature has two sides to it: the how and the why. And science can answer but one of these, and only half of one of these-- the how.

Science can describe processes, can tell us how things work and observe their working. It may trace effect from cause and define it and analyze it and describe it, but science cannot tell us how things began, and certainly not as to why things are and came to be. Science can tell us nothing about the origin of life and of consciousness and of imagination, of altruism. In the sphere of primary causes, in the sphere of purposes, in the sphere of ultimates science is absolutely helpless; it is outside its sphere; and in those realms of speculation touching the why, the whence, the whither, man is warranted in choosing those convictions which will give to his life greater confidence, greater hope, greater happiness. In those spheres religion and moral idealism are imperial, autonomous,



free in their own right.

As religion and moral idealism, spirituality,-- use whatever word you prefer, but you understand what I mean--as the spiritual life of man becomes forceful and purposeful and aggressive, without being a handmaid of science and without waiting with bated breath upon every word which falls from the lips of the scientist, man will be able to welcome all real scientific truth and incorporate it into his own spiritual life so that it will become a blessing unto him.

Science can serve God; science can also serve the devil,--just as art can serve God and can serve the devil; just as religion can serve God or can serve the devil. And it is only as man, conscious that basically life is not a matter of machinery but a matter of personality, and that the business of living is not to produce <sup>accumulate</sup> things, many of them and rapidly, but to develop character,-- as man realizes these old truths of life will he take hold of science and see that it be directed into socially beneficent channels, that it will be a blessing.

Think of the industrial revolution, for example, and you will have an illustration of what I mean. In England people discovered new textile machinery, and before very long the whole industrial life was changed. Men were taken from their homes where they were producers and put into factories. The big city developed; life turned from being predominantly rural to predominantly



urban, and in these factories the laborers were exploited-- man, woman and child--long hours, miserable conditions; and man was herded into filthy tenements and congested quarters, and life in the factory towns of England and elsewhere became drab and miserable as the result of this scientific invention. Man was exploited, man was victimized by a new truth, a new invention which had come into civilization.

But--and here is the miracle--before very long the spirit of man began to assert itself and began to take hold of this invention, determined to make it a boon instead of a curse to mankind; and before very long the spirit of man began to insist upon industrial legislation to protect the workingman; before very long the spirit of man began to insist upon proper working conditions, upon shorter hours, upon more wages, upon better living quarters; before very long man began to insist upon opportunities for education and recreation for every workingman; before very long they began to build model homes for workingmen in model colonies; before very long they began to organize the workingmen into units so that he can defend himself against exploitation.

And so the spirit of man, at first in danger of being victimized by scientific invention, asserted itself and subjected industrial progress to his own spiritual rights, and industry today instead of being a curse to mankind is becoming a blessing. That can be done in every instance, when man is alert to what is going on about him.



And that, to my mind, friends, is the answer to the question: Will science save or destroy mankind? If science advances at the pace it has been advancing the last half century, and the spiritual life of man advances haltingly ~~or~~ remains ~~stagnant~~, a condition may arise when that marvelous edifice of scientific invention, constructed by man's mind and imagination, will come tumbling down upon man himself and his creations.

Other civilizations have fallen. It is altogether possible that this civilization of ours--steel, electricity, iron, which is the machine age--may also some day perish. But if man's spirit will be as enterprising as his mind, as vigorous and as alert as his intellect, in quest of new truth, man will be in position to welcome all scientific truth and all new inventions and use them to the greater glory of his own life, to his greater comfort, to his greater leisure, to his greater security, to the extension of his life, to the fullness of his life.

Science may serve God and humanity. It may also serve Moloch and the devil. It is up to man to answer that question.

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"WILL SCIENCE SAVE OR DESTROY MANKIND?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

JANUARY 8th, 1928.

Mankind is beginning to be apprehensive of some phases of scientific progress. It somehow fears that science is setting up a machine gauge of human worth. That it is destroying the cherished humanities of civilized life.

Again man sees himself propelled by science into a more and more complicated world of invention and machinery for which he is not prepared.

Life is being bewildered, speeded up and man is becoming more and more confused as to his codes, his standards and his values. Man is aware that he is gaining greater mastery over nature. He is not at all sure that he is gaining greater mastery over himself. And the dread that his own handiwork may turn out to be a Frankenstein, which will destroy him is gaining ground.

Some have suggested a moratorium for science - to shut down all chemical and physical laboratories for a space in order to enable mankind to catch up with itself and to adjust itself to all the amazing discoveries and inventions in the last generation.

But mankind can not stop even if it wishes to. The momentum which science has already acquired will carry it along until such a time as its creative energies are used up.



Nor is it desirable that it should stop. As long as there are dark continents of knowledge to be explored; as long as there is disease to be conquered; as long as there are forces of nature to be harnessed - - why should men halt?

Science has been a blessing to mankind except where man has turned it into a curse. It has increased human comfort and competence. It has given millions what hundreds only possessed in the past. It has given the race greater leisure - a requisite for culture; popular education, greater security; the protection and prolongation of life. It has widened the boundaries of man's domain and has revealed the unlimited possibilities of human life.

But science has also increased the possibilities of evil and of destruction. Science has not eradicated hate, lust and covetousness, revolution and war. Science is giving the race, machine habits, standards and complexes. It may lead us to a new dark age. The solution is to be found not in the destruction of science, but in a new philosophy, which will welcome all scientific truth <sup>but which</sup> and will coordinate them with the spiritual needs of human life.

Science must not dominate life. It must serve life. Civilization is more than science. Science is organized knowledge. Civilization is the art of organized living. The requisites of a high type of civilization are much more than knowledge. Beauty is a part of civilization and goodness. Faith and hope and ideals; love and holiness.

Without scientific knowledge civilization is meager and starved and beset with superstition and thralldom. Without goodness and beauty, civilization is menacing and cruel and cold.

Science must be integrated within the pattern of humanism.