

Science and Morality

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The task of providing an ethical structure or value system for society has never been assigned to scientists and is quite outside any competence which their scientific training gives them. This is as true of social scientists as of natural scientists. Either a natural scientist or a social scientist may contribute greatly to this problem if he happens to be a great man as some scientists have been, as was William James, but the establishment of amoral order is not part of the task of a scientist qua scientist. Strictly defined, it is not the function of the social sciences to determine public purposes or humanistic objectives, yet the work of social scientists can make great contributions to the commonweal. On the other hand there is always the possible danger that social science, by perfecting manipulative skills, can be turned to anti-social purposes in the hands of unscrupulous leaders. Obviously this is equally true of the natural sciences. One may hope that as methods of understanding and controlling human behavior are improved, these methods will be put to the best social use. Such a causal nexus, however, cannot be taken for granted. For example, the Germans during the war displayed a high degree of sophistication in the training and handling of troops from a psychological standpoint. As we know, they developed propaganda of extraordinary efficiency. Their knowledge of human behavior was, from our standpoint, turned to anti-social purposes. The improvement of methodology in the social sciences does not in itself mean an advance in social welfare. 1997. p. 4.

Herring, Pendleton. 1997. The social sciences in modern society. Items: Social Science Research Council. 51:1:2-6. March.