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THE ROLE OF PURE SCIENCE

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One anecdote has it that, when Gladstone, shown the electromagnetic motor, asked, "What good is it?" Faraday replied, "What good is a baby?" The same question might be asked about science itself, the last great offspring of civilization, sired by intelligence. If no longer a baby, it is at least an obstreperous child, already playing mischievous pranks on its staid mother, and fearlessly regarded by many as irreconcilably headed towards a wayward youth and a criminal maturity. Some babies are best unborn; is this such a one? Science, we hear, has warmed our homes but not our hearts, increased our longevity but not our charity, raised our speed but not our hopes, brightened our nights but not our spirit; in short, that it has comforted our flesh but destroyed our soul. Society is sick and science must be poisoning it, for it has been taking great mouthfuls of the bitter stuff; and is it not always something just eaten that is responsible for any ache?

As a physician, I know that a generous portion of peppermint, applied outside or in, neither brings on nor wards off a renal colic; and as a scientist I demand better evidence than "post hoc ergo propter hoc," before agreeing that the social organism is suffering from scientific dyspepsia. But let us clearly understand one another before proceeding.

"Science," as Conklin, retiring president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, said last week, "is organized knowledge, and knowledge itself is neither good nor bad but only true or false." Pure science is concerned only with understanding, not with using; it might be denounced as valueless, never as harmful. But, comes the cry, this is sophistry; for are not scientists incessantly prating their wares and

1 An address presented before the American Institute at a symposium on "Some Social Implications of Inventions."