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THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OF SCIENCE¹

By Dr. Wesley C. Mitchell
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¹ Address of the retiring president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Columbus, Ohio, December 27, 1939.

Until recently the attitude of the public toward science seemed to be growing more appreciative. There have always been folk who objected strenuously to the supposed implications of certain scientific hypotheses, but on the whole science was generally esteemed as the most progressive factor in culture, man's best hope for bettering his lot upon earth. Of late this tide of approval has ebbed. There is a widespread disposition to hold science responsible for the ills men are bringing upon themselves—for technological unemployment, for the rise of autocracies, for the suppression of freedom, for the heightened horrors of war. For their part, scientific men are appalled at the hideous uses to which their discoveries are put. They feel an urge to combat the misuses of science, to protect the social values they cherish, but what they can do is not clear. The quandary is one that all who cherish science should face, however unwelcome and difficult the task. I offer no apology for asking your attention to a discourse of uncertain issue on an unpleasant theme thrust upon us by developments we deplore.

I

Let me start by recalling certain changes in the relations of science to society that may help us see our present problems in historical perspective.

The beginnings of scientific knowledge have been traced to man's dealings with the implements of his daily life—the sticks and stones, the skins, fibers and clay he shaped to his uses, and in the shaping learned to know. Human beings are born speculators; even the simplest cultures have their explanations of matters that puzzle us to-day—diseases, weather changes,