

THE SEARCH FOR ABSOLUTE VALUES IN GUIDING THE CHANGING WORLD

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

SIR JOHN ECCLES

*Distinguished Emeritus Professor
State University of New York at Buffalo
USA/Switzerland*

THE SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON THE
UNITY OF THE SCIENCES

NOVEMBER 25, 1977
FAIRMONT HOTEL
SAN FRANCISCO

This conference is on unity of science, yet it may appear strange that we have committees entitled "Religion and Philosophy" and "The Social Sciences" because in this modern materialist world it has become an accepted practice to be suspicious of the scientific status of all disciplines that are outside the purview of the physical and biological sciences. Biology is admitted without reservations because of the general belief that it is entirely reducible to physics and chemistry. For example, great National Institutions such as the Royal Society of London and the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A., recognize only to a very limited extent psychology and philosophy—the former when it deals with programs of objective investigation stemming from physics and based on measurements, the latter in the limited field of the philosophy of science.

It was not so in the great creative period at the beginning of science in the 15th and 16th centuries or with the science of Classical Greece. There science had the much wider connotation that is still exemplified in the German word "Wissenschaften." Even today some national academies of Europe (France, Italy and Belgium) embrace such disciplines as philosophy, the social sciences, the arts, literature, as well as the natural sciences. The National Academy of Sciences comprises several divisions of the Social Sciences. Let us recall the times when theology was recognized as the "Queen of the Sciences"—a title that would not have been regarded as strange by Kepler, Descartes, Galileo and Harvey: and Newton himself spent much of his active intellectual life in Biblical Exegesis!

So the title of this series of conferences "The Unity of Sciences" has an exemplary lineage! I personally believe that we are on the threshold of fundamental changes in physics that are required in order to come to terms with that most perplexing of all problems—the so-called brain-mind problem. The restrictive materialist convention that has dominated natural science since Descartes has become out-moded. A conceptual revolution is necessary, but its form and development are as yet unsure. Nevertheless it will result in science coming to be much more oriented to man with his abilities in creative imagination, in conceptual thought, in moral decisions and in rational argument. All these are properties of the mysterious and wonderful self that is at the core of our being and they are central to the scientific endeavour to understand not only nature but also ourselves. This great theme of the human self will be implicit in much of the substance of our intellectual endeavours during this momentous conference.

We are in the midst of the most critical period of mankind's long history of crises and revolutions. The world is changing with unprecedented speed and often in ways apparently beyond prediction and control. In the past, crises in human history were often catastrophic in their impact, but were regional. Now they are global. The situation is exacerbated by the confrontation of great power blocks. The impending threat of nuclear annihilation compounds these problems. We feel how insignificant our efforts can be when pitted against this threat of overwhelming disaster. And now in many countries there is threat from within by organized gangs of terrorists.

Yet we have immense resources in the great cultural tradition of which we are the heirs. It is in this tradition that our conference is devoted to an analysis and evaluation of the factors responsible for our present crises and to an assessment of the many ways in which reason and sanity can eventually come to prevail. In the search for absolute values we can achieve a wise appraisal of the problems in the light of the accumulated wisdom of mankind. And hopefully

we can suggest principles that can give guidance in the attempts to solve or ameliorate the grave problems of the changing world in our times.

A wise study of history reveals that we must eschew utopian blueprints for creating some ideal state. Inevitably this leads to ends dominating the means and so to tyranny and the enslavement of mankind by the bureaucratic masters. Great social experiments of Marxist-Leninism have been carried out in a rigorous manner by the Communist countries. The resulting enslavement of the people is plain for all to see. It is not being ameliorated with time. On the contrary the forces of repression and thought control are growing in strength and efficiency. The suppression and imprisonment of the Russian dissidents provide ever present exemplars of this terrible state of affairs. And now we have the brutal repression of the signatories of Charter 77, which was simply a request for the respect of human rights as defined in the Helsinki agreement. It did not venture into the political field. I quote from Professor Jan Patočka, the philosopher, in his introduction to Charter 77: "At the present time, mankind, torn between ideologies and discontent in the midst of potential wealth, is longing for a solution through new technological precepts . . . but no society . . . can function without moral foundation, without a belief not based on opportunism . . . Human rights are nothing but conviction that states and all society recognize the supreme authority of a moral awareness . . ." As you know he died some weeks later, on March 13, from a cerebral hemorrhage that terminated an 11-hour police interrogation.

What then are the preferred programs for the future? The exploration and development of such programs will be a large part of our creative and critical thinking at this conference. We must recognize that no one has a prerogative of truth. But we can be honest and courageous searchers. We must try to discover, in our guidance by values, the ways to ameliorate conditions in a piecemeal manner. No dogmatic pronouncements should be made of certain salvation from this or that evil. As a general statement it can be said that we should adopt a modest position where there is continuous and critical evaluation of the proposed remedies and their continual updating in the light of this appraisal. Even the guiding principles should be continuously updated in the light of new insights into the nature of man as revealed in the search for absolute values.

Some changes have been made in the traditional format of this annual conference on the Unity of the Sciences, in accordance with the constructive suggestions made by the conferees of last year. The more formal plenary sessions will be curtailed in order to extend the opportunity for discussions in the various groups of the four committees. A strikingly new feature will be the 13 multi-disciplinary discussion sections on the Sunday morning. It is hoped that this will give the occasions for more penetrating discussions in special topics of great relevance. Some of these topics have been chosen to give opportunity for inter-disciplinary exchanges. Participants should not adhere strictly to one or other committee. The multi-disciplinary character of the whole conference will be fostered by the display in the committee rooms of the topics under discussion in the other three rooms. Each member will in this way be able to move from room to room in order to participate in the topics of greatest concern.

It is the hope of the International Cultural Foundation that you will enjoy these three days of free exchange of ideas and that you will grow in the recognition and understanding of the tremendous problems presented by this changing world. The aim must ever be wisely to guide change not to prevent change.

