

Alfred Kühn, Science and Moral Responsibility (1953)

Abstract

Zoologist and geneticist Alfred Kühn, who headed the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Biology (1937–1945) before leading the Max Planck Institute for Biology (1951–1958), spoke at a 1953 conference about the moral responsibility of science. In his address, Kühn referred to his own failures during National Socialist rule. Moreover, he emphasized that natural scientists had political and moral responsibilities, and that they needed to fulfill those responsibilities more fully than they had under National Socialism.

Source

From the Discussion:

ALFRED KÜHN:

[...] When Hitler was preparing to seize power, he considered German scientists a *quantité négligeable*, and regrettably, he was correct. I cannot rid myself of the tormenting thought that it might have been possible to prevent a great many things, if only a group of German scientists had protested at the very first moment when Hitler attacked freedom and justice. When valuable members of our circles were removed on account of racial prejudice, if, at that time, but in a heartbeat, spontaneously, without thinking of the consequences, only – let's say – fifty or one hundred German academics had protested, what would have happened?

If Hitler, back then, had erected the first German concentration camps for protesting German academics, then this concentration of power, on the inside, would not have occurred, and the Munich Conference would not have happened either. That would have been a sign! And why did so many German youths, our students, fall for National Socialist ideology? Well, because at best they only saw dismissive neutrality among us. What then could be expected of them?

We carried out an experiment. A natural scientist does not repeat a laboratory experiment that blows up his laboratory. And therefore, here and abroad, we must all prevent the repeat of such an experiment through our own personal efforts.

Mr. Plessner said quite rightly: the democratization of society does not preclude the danger of dictatorship, and those germs must be eradicated. And those who carry the germs must be made aware that they have an unrelenting enemy: the scientists of the entire world!

Source: The Congress for Cultural Freedom, *Science and Freedom*. International Conference Hamburg, July 23–26, 1953. Organized by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and Hamburg University. Berlin: Grunewald Verlag, 1954, p. 269.

Translation: David Haney

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