Issue 71

Citizens' Responsibility to Society

What responsibility, if any, do *scientists* have for anticipating or ameliorating the effects of their work on society? An important fraction of all the scientists in the U.S. are involved in military-related research. Does your answer apply equally to them?

Is the *engineer* responsible for the consequences when his or her product fails (e.g., automobile manufacturers for faulty design of your car's brakes, or a chemical company for the carcinogenic effects of dioxin in its herbicide)?

Is the *legislator* responsible for failure to legislate safety standards (e.g., not requiring seat belts when most other states do—so you are killed in a collision, or failing to fund the clean-up of a probably hazardous waste dump)?

Is the voting *citizen* ever responsible for the consequences—good or bad—of his or her vote?

Are *you* responsible in any way for the consequences of your job? Suppose you find a well-paying job working on atomic weapons or building tanks for the military?

Many scientists and engineers have refused to take such military-related jobs. Would *you* do so? Do you approve of "whistle blowers"—workers in government or industry who, as an act of conscience, report shoddy work or dishonest practices by their fellow workers?

Think about this . . . "*Scientists should be on tap but not on top.*" *Winston Churchill. Do you agree?*