

CORRESPONDENCE

Unsöld on Einstein

SIR — We find the statements regarding Einstein made by Professor Unsöld (see *Nature* 16 April, p.355) outrageous and would like to express our strong disagreement. This is particularly important to us now since, in a later letter to *Nature* (4 June, p.374), Professor Unsöld implies that the physics department of the University of Marburg might essentially share his opinion because nobody took issue during the discussion following his colloquium in April 1980.

At the end of his colloquium, Professor Unsöld made various remarks regarding the responsibility of scientists for the application of their discoveries and, in this context, mentioned such names as Einstein and Haber. Some members of the audience had the impression that in so doing he was attempting to compare the responsibility of Hitler and the Nazi leaders for the holocaust with the responsibility of Einstein for the atomic bomb.

In fact, this point was not further discussed after his talk, and one can easily guess why. The title of the talk was "Evolution of cosmic, biological and mental structures", and the remarks concerning Einstein and his relation to the atomic bomb came at the end of a very long talk when Professor Unsöld had by far exceeded the time allotted. The tired audience probably considered these remarks a slip of the tongue by the speaker. However, Professor Unsöld in *Physikalische Blätter* greatly elaborates on his opinion on the responsibility of Einstein. Therefore, we find it imperative to protest at his views.

In his contribution to *Physikalische Blätter*, Professor Unsöld attempts to remove Einstein from the allegedly unwarranted pedestal on which he was placed by some speakers at the meetings during the Einstein centenary. He also tries to revise opinion on the scientific merits of Einstein. It is, of course, quite possible that a judgement on Einstein's achievements in physics might lead to conflicting views among physicists. We dare say, however, that Professor Unsöld's evaluation of the great discoveries of Einstein is unacceptable. However, this is not the point in question.

Professor Unsöld sought to prove his theory that an ever wider gap appears between the

intellectual capacities of physicists to obtain far-reaching knowledge and their moral qualities, which would guarantee that they use their knowledge in a responsible way. He makes the physicists solely responsible.

Einstein was the example chosen to prove this theory. We believe that this theory is disputable in principle. Responsibility for the achievements of science does not rest only with the physicists, but concerns the entire human community. Professor Unsöld attempts to present Einstein as a person of dubious morals and to show that it was quite consistent with Einstein's nature that he should make the "criminal" (in Professor Unsöld's view) decision to write a letter to Roosevelt pointing out the possibility of constructing the atomic bomb. The subsequent use of this bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki appears to him to be the work of Einstein. He then compares the "criminal" behaviour of Einstein with the "highly moral" behaviour of German physicists who, despite their sufferings during the Hitler regime, managed to "do some teaching and to safeguard the libraries".

We find it unthinkable that, thirty-five years after the greatest crime in history, a German physicist dares to accuse a man who had to flee Germany to save his life, of criminal behaviour, when indeed he was obviously attempting to help mankind defend itself against the perpetrators of this very crime.

As members of the physics faculty of the University of Marburg, we consider Professor Unsöld's remarks totally unacceptable, and do not wish to condone them by remaining silent. We believe that it is the duty of every German citizen to remember the recent historical events. The written and oral statements of Professor Unsöld certainly do not demonstrate this. Moreover, the seeming acceptance of his statement by some people suggests that some German physicists are no longer conscious of this shameful past. We hope that this "discussion" about Einstein will contribute to an improvement in this direction.
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on its own, I agree that political statements such as those recently published in Nabi's name should be evaluated with knowledge of their author. Indeed, Nabi's consultants are politically diverse. While I am not a sociobiologist, my political opinions do not resemble those of Levins and Lewontin; neither did MacArthur's. However, this did not affect our collaborations.

Our consultation with Nabi was scientific, intended to further an analytic and unified approach to evolutionary biology, an approach which was then very unfashionable. Nabi's book, however, was only partly written when circumstances caused its abortion.

Nabi has survived, mostly, past his 71st birthday (on the same date as Mendel's), and his service in Czechoslovakia for the US Office of Strategic Services during World War II, for which he received US citizenship, was perhaps more dangerous than the public eye.

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Councils of dispare

SIR — During the past 12 months or so I have submitted about a dozen papers to various journals and about a dozen grant applications to various grant awarding bodies. I have also refereed about a dozen papers and a rather smaller number of grant applications.

I am sorry to say that not all my own submissions have been 100 per cent successful on their first attempt. Nevertheless, from the journals I usually receive copies of the referees' reports (often containing helpful suggestions) together with an overall assessment from the editorial office. From the research councils, however, almost no information at all is produced about reasons for rejection.

The curious thing is that as a referee I spend about as much time refereeing a grant application as a paper and submit reports of roughly comparable length. I know that the secretaries who service the research council committees have to prepare minutes. Why is one group prepared to be so constructive whereas the other is so negative? I do hope it is nothing to do with the fact that journals exist at least partly to make a profit (either for shareholders or for the members of some scientific society) whereas the research councils lack such an aim!

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Book learning

SIR — The recent letters from Andrew Brooks (*Nature* 7 May, p.7) and Robert Campbell (*Nature* 28 May, p.278) about the problems of retrieving information do not touch on a much more serious problem — the need for librarians with some subject expertise. Expecting students and researchers to learn about as well as maintain currency in both the intricacies of data base searching and the wide variety of printed data sources is simply unrealistic.

Asking for help is obviously *de rigueur* for efficient use of libraries. Are libraries meeting this challenge by recruiting staff members with some subject expertise, especially in the sciences?

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Stirling service

SIR — The general features of the cuts recently imposed on the university system by the University Grants Committee are now widely known. What is less well known is how arbitrary and inequitable some of those cuts appear to be. At the University of Stirling, the largest cuts (around 35 per cent) are to be in the sciences and although the physical sciences are to be given some priority, it is beyond question that our own department will suffer in terms of reduced resources. We would like to bring to the attention of the scientific community the inequity of what is proposed.

The Chemistry Department at Stirling University is one of the smallest university chemistry departments in Britain, and the

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Nabi — A life

SIR — I would like to make some corrections and additions regarding Isidore Nabi, now that his cat has partly emerged from its bag (*Nature* 3 September, p.2).

The committee called Nabi was formed in the early 1960s, with a programme analogous to, but much less ambitious than, that of the French mathematician Nicholas Bourbaki. Nabi's initial consultants were Richard Levins (not Lester), then at the University of Puerto Rico, Richard Lewontin, then at the University of Rochester, the late Robert MacArthur, then at the University of Pennsylvania, and myself, then at the American Museum of Natural History. Three of us later moved to the University of Chicago, which had no role initially. I believe that Edward O. Wilson, then as now at Harvard University, became peripherally associated for a while.

While scientific work can ordinarily stand