

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY

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SCHOOL OF NATURAL SCIENCES

June 19, 1975

Professor Paul Berg
Dept. of Biochemistry
Stanford University Medical Center
Stanford, California 94305

Dear Professor Berg:

Thank you very much for taking the time to read my "Costs of Saying No" article, and thank you even more for taking the time to write to me about it. I am grateful also for the text of the Asilomar report, which I had not seen before. It is good to know that the message which I sent via Maxine Singer did get through.

I do not disagree with anything you say in your letter. But I still feel when reading the Asilomar report, as I did reading the original "Berg statement", that you need to look carefully at the real costs of implementing your suggestions. Not so much the cost in money, as the costs in time, in flexibility, in freedom from bureaucratic vexations.

There is one additional point which I would like you to consider. No professional biologist can allow himself to say, "I work for the good of humanity." Such a claim smells too strongly of hypocrisy and self-serving. It is much more comfortable, and sounds more honest, to say, "I do my work because it is fun." I noticed when I was at the Salk Institute recently that even people working on tumor viruses are quick to say, "Of course we are not primarily interested in curing cancer, only in understanding it", as if the desire to cure cancer would somehow compromise their scientific respectability. So I think it is this reluctance to pose as benefactors of humanity which has caused you and your colleagues to omit from your statements any discussion of the human and social costs of delaying your work. Nevertheless, however unwilling you are to say so in public, it may turn out to be true that the fate of the starving millions of India may hinge upon the timely availability of some biological technique resulting from your experiments. You insiders are inhibited by your professional status from publicly discussing such possibilities. Just for

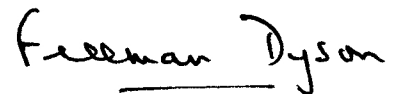
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this reason I, an outsider having no axe to grind, felt justified in stepping into your discussions. I can assert, as you cannot, that the starving millions of India have an interest in the continued progress of your experiments, and that for their sake we should be prepared to take some risks that we would not take if our only objective were the satisfaction of scientific curiosity.

I hope that in the weighing of risks that the biological community is now embarked upon, some among you will find the courage to speak up for the starving millions of India. When I gave my talk in Madrid last year, I was forcefully reminded that poverty is a more serious threat to human health even than recombinant DNA.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Freeman Dyson". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Freeman Dyson

FD:pb