

“Would you intend to do anything for the advancement of science?” I asked.

“No”, Mark Gable said. “I believe scientific progress is too fast as it is”

“I share your feeling about this point,” I said with fervor of conviction, “but then why not do something about the retardation of scientific progress?”

“That I would very much like to do,” Mark Gable said, “but how do I go about it?”

“Well” I said, “I think that shouldn’t be very difficult. As a matter of fact, I think it would be quite easy. You could set up a foundation, with an annual endowment of thirty million dollars. Research workers in need of funds could apply for grants, if they could mail out a convincing case. Have ten committees, each committee, each composed of twelve scientists, appointed to pass on these applications. Take the most active scientists out of the laboratory and make them members of these committees. And the very best men in the field should be appointed as chairman at salaries of fifty thousand dollars each. Also have about twenty prizes of one hundred thousand dollars each for the best scientific papers of the year. This is just about all you would have to do. Your lawyers could easily prepare a charter for the foundation. As a matter of fact, any of the National Science Foundation bills which were introduced in the Seventy-ninth and Eightieth Congress could perfectly well serve as a model.”

“I think you had better explain to Mr. Gable why this foundation would in fact retard the progress of science”, said a bespectabled young man sitting at the far end of the table, whose name I didn’t get at the time of introduction.

“It should be obvious,” I said. “First of all, the best scientists would be removed from their laboratories and kept busy on committees passing on applications for funds. Secondly the scientific workers in need of funds would concentrate on problems which were considered promising and were pretty certain to lead to publishable results. For a few years there might be a great increase in scientific output; but by going after the obvious, pretty soon science would dry out. Science would become something like a parlor game. Some things would be considered interesting, others not. There would be fashions. Those who followed the fashions would get grants. Those who wouldn’t would not, and pretty soon they would learn to follow the fashion, too.”

Leó Szilárd, The Mark Gable Foundation, 1961.
In “The voice of the dolphins and other stories”