



The triumph and tragedy of a chemical invention: Fritz Haber and the morality of science

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The renowned German Jewish chemist Fritz Haber (1868-1934) achieved in 1910 his first great success: the fixation of nitrogen, an invention with an immense beneficial impact for humanity in that it provides unlimited quantities of nitrogen fertilizer for food production.

But the fixation of nitrogen also provides unlimited quantities of nitrates for the production of explosives and allowed Germany to prosecute World War I for more than four years.

During the war Haber was the scientific head of the chemical weapons (“poison gas”) development program and had no moral qualms about using poisons in war. He was a brilliant and versatile chemist with great scientific accomplishments but his story raises question of morality in science. Thus, unlike Haber, some scientists refused to participate in chemical warfare development. He was also blind to the realities of post-WW I Germany, with tragic personal consequences. He died, exiled, in a hotel in Basel.

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