

SCIENCE

VOL. LXIX

MAY 10, 1929

No. 1793

MICHELSON'S ECONOMIC VALUE¹

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SCIENCE: A Weekly Journal devoted to the Advancement of Science, edited by J. McKeen Cattell and published every Friday by

THE SCIENCE PRESS

New York City: Grand Central Terminal.
Lancaster, Pa. Garrison, N. Y.
Annual Subscription, \$6.00. Single Copies, 15 Cts.

SCIENCE is the official organ of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Information regarding membership in the Association may be secured from the office of the permanent secretary, in the Smithsonian Institution Building, Washington, D. C.

IN the year 1896 Albert A. Michelson took a new egg into the nest over which he brooded—or the department on which he sat—at the University of Chicago, and after an incubation period of twenty-five years—so long a time did it take to prove that the egg had ever been fertilized at all—he at last had it hatched and sufficiently feathered to justify pushing it out of the nest and bidding it go scratch up its own worms.

To-night, Mr. Chairman, you, representing the public which is obliged to supply the corn-meal required to keep both Michelson and Millikan scratching, have brought us here to exhibit our worms and to let you see whether they are worth the price paid to get them. And as you will presently see that leaves me no choice but to take for the subject of my speech the length of Mr. Michelson's worm, or the economic value of Michelson. For if you ask him to explain, in terms that you can understand, the value of his work I think that you will be told to go to the interior of a star where the temperature is estimated to be 50,000,000° C., or even to a hotter place, if such there be, described by a familiar monosyllable especially beloved by men like Michelson trained for the sea. For Mr. Michelson is wont to say that the sole reason, and the good and sufficient reason, why he spends so much time trying to measure the velocity of light to one part in three hundred thousand is simply that he likes to do it.

But I am going to make bold, now that I have left the nest and am where he can no longer reduce my rations, to contradict him and to tell you, and to tell him, that that is not the sole reason, nor is it the good and sufficient reason. (You see, Mr. Michelson, the young rooster, after the immemorial manner of young roosters, is questioning the old cock's right to do just exactly as he "damn-pleases" in the hen-yard.) To prove my point I have only to call your attention to the fact that if Mr. Michelson had "chosen" to spend his days and his nights sitting on a log pounding it with the butt end of a hatchet he would soon have found himself in a straight-jacket in the nearest institution especially provided by the state for the care of the deranged.

¹ Address delivered at the dinner of the Society of Arts and Sciences held in New York on February 22, 1929, upon the occasion of the presentation of the gold medal of the society to Messrs. Michelson and Millikan.

Science

69 (1793)

Science **69** (1793), xii-504.

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