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SCIENCE, now combined with THE SCIENTIF-
IC MONTHLY, is published each Friday by the
American Association for the Advancement of
Science at National Publishing Company, Wash-
ington, D.C. SCIENCE is indexed in the *Reader's
Guide to Periodical Literature*.

Editorial correspondence should be addressed
to SCIENCE, 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW,
Washington 5, D.C. Manuscripts should be typed
with double spacing and submitted in duplicate.
The AAAS assumes no responsibility for the safety
of manuscripts or for the opinions expressed by
contributors. For detailed suggestions on the
preparation of manuscripts, see *Science* 125, 16
(4 Jan. 1957).

Advertising correspondence should be addressed
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York 36, N.Y.

Change of address notification should be sent
to 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington 5,
D.C., 4 weeks in advance. If possible, furnish an
address label from a recent issue. Give both old
and new addresses, including zone numbers, if
any.

Annual subscriptions: \$8.50; foreign postage,
\$1.50; Canadian postage, 75¢. Single copies, 35¢.
Cable address: Advancesci, Washington.

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A Distinction That Needs Elaborating

A popular thesis is that a scientific belief, like "The earth is pear-shaped," may be distinguished from an ethical attitude, like "Do not steal another person's ideas," in that the belief is readily open to justification, while the attitude is not. A belief, so the argument runs, may be either true or false, with the question a matter of experiment and reason, while an attitude may be judged only right or wrong, with the question resting ultimately on private conscience. This distinction would not be so widely accepted if it were not supported by much in daily and professional life. It is also supported by a good deal of recent philosophical analysis, but such analysis also shows that without some important qualifications, the distinction can be misleading. Agreement about beliefs is not so easily achieved as the distinction would suggest, nor is the disputing of tastes as impossible.

It is easy to forget, in the glory of those moments when a scientist abandons his own beliefs to adopt those of his colleague, that new scientific ideas do not always compel instant acceptance. One obstacle to agreement over beliefs is that such agreement is not independent of common acceptance of certain attitudes. Just to hold a scientific discussion requires prior acceptance of what might be called the rules of the game. At the simplest level, this means that *A* must not only have the wit to follow *B*'s reasoning, but that *A* must be willing to listen to *B* in the first place. Some of the difficulties, for example, that have plagued the East-West talks about the technical feasibility of monitoring a nuclear test ban have been the difficulties of securing an attentive audience. The Soviets have not always been eager to listen to the scientific arguments offered by the Americans, claiming that these arguments were being offered to forestall signing a treaty.

On the other hand, in those lonely moments when we attempt to isolate and justify our most fundamental attitudes, it is easy to forget that in the ordinary course of events people often do adopt new attitudes, and that nothing can be so relevant to a change of heart as a little bit of factual knowledge. Agreement over beliefs depends, in part, on sharing attitudes, but attitudes, in turn, are a function of beliefs. In disputing attitudes, *B* may succeed in changing *A*'s attitudes by the simple expedient of correcting *A*'s beliefs. Such beliefs may range from the findings of systematic science to conclusions drawn from personal experience. It seems safe to assume, for example, that the push this country is now experiencing from segregation of the races to integration is, in part, the result of better distribution of knowledge about the qualities of the persons being discriminated against and about the consequences of discrimination to everyone concerned.

These few examples suggest that, taken without further elaboration, the popular view concerning the distinction between beliefs and attitudes can misrepresent the actual process by which men deal with one another, and so mislead us in our expectations. Perhaps we should be a little less ready to assume that when scientific experts are brought together they will iron out their differences as a matter of course, especially when the time is short and the stakes are high. Perhaps also we should be prepared to grant that attitudes are not merely matters of personal idiosyncrasy, but are, in a perfectly legitimate sense, open to justification.—J.T.