

SCIENCE

VOL. LXIII

JUNE 25, 1926

No. 1643

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OPERATIVE VERSUS ABSTRACT PHILOSOPHY IN PHYSICS

THE limited usefulness in science of what we may, perhaps, call verbal philosophy has long been recognized, especially in the mathematical sciences. Unfortunately the term verbal philosophy conveys a suggestion of contempt, whereas no contempt whatever is here intended. By verbal philosophy we mean the marvelously effective method of thinking which all men use in their dealings with the complex problems of daily life, a method of which the most striking characteristic is the transformation of the essential phases of a problem into verbal forms, not solely for purposes of articulate speech, by any means, but to facilitate thought.

My own opinion is that the training of the mathematical physicist is vastly inferior to the training of a good lawyer as a preparation for dealing with complex human problems, and the lawyer's training is in verbal philosophy. I must not, however, let this statement stand unqualified, for it needs to be qualified in two ways. In the first place scientific men would like to see the training of a lawyer arranged so as to lead to mental honesty as certainly as the training of the scientist, and in the second place scientific men would like to see a wider recognition among men of affairs (meaning the men who use what we have called verbal philosophy with great success in dealing with the almost infinitely complicated problems of practical life) of the fact that in every problem we face in this world the philosophy of precise ideas has come to have a place and that in most purely physical problems the philosophy of precise ideas is supreme.

Every person with whom I have ever talked, theorist or practitioner, student-in-general or specialist in whatever line, has exhibited more or less distinctly an attitude of impatience towards this or that phase of the precise modes of thought of the mathematical sciences.

Da wird der Geist euch wohl dressirt
In spanische Stiefeln eingeschnürt
(There, alas, the spirit is constrained
And laced in a Spanish corselet)

Nothing, however, is so essential in the mathematical sciences as the possession of precise ideas. One must think so and so, there is no other way. And yet there is always a conflict in the mind even of the most willing student because of the narrowing

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

THE SCIENCE PRESS

Lancaster, Pa.

Garrison, N. Y.

New York City: Grand Central Terminal.

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.

Entered as second-class matter July 18, 1923, at the Post Office at Lancaster, Pa., under the Act of March 8, 1879.

Science

63 (1643)

Science **63** (1643), x-642.

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Science (print ISSN 0036-8075; online ISSN 1095-9203) is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1200 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20005. The title *Science* is a registered trademark of AAAS.

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