

VIEWPOINT

Science: The Slide Toward Decadence



by T.E. Phipps, Jr.

There can be little doubt that the last fifty years have seen a steady slide toward decadence of the hard sciences. The quality of ideas, the capacity to judge beauty, the status accorded to empirical fact vs. theory, even elemental ethical standards, have slipped intolerably to the point where another fifty years of the same should write finis to science as a serious human enterprise (of value beyond entertainment). Readers of this magazine will need no further proof of such a drastic claim than a reminder of the history of the cold fusion fiasco. For it was indeed a fiasco for the physics Establishment, which revealed by its puerile rush to judgment precisely what its judgment was worth.

We now have scientific journal editors so stuck on themselves that they dare to reject papers—particularly submissions from home addresses—on their own initiative, without the formality of refereeing. And we have emperors of the Internet (located at Cornell) who automatically reject all arXiv.org submissions unless vouched for passionately by people with academic return addresses. So, now it is officially out in the open, real science is the Cosa Nostra of academia ... all others need to apply (given such presumption) on their knees.

Thus it is tacitly acknowledged that the graduate-level science education

given to other than academia's own is worthless without additional academic endorsement. With blanket criteria like that in action, you can see without much study where things have got to and where they will go. There is even said to be blacklisting by journal editors, that is, singling out of individual would-be contributors by name for automatic rejection. Why not? Its a logical conclusion. If not today, then tomorrow for sure. Do the academic lovers of freedom raise irate voices in the sort of protest they have shown themselves so good at? Bless you, child, let us be academically precise: The freedom they love is academic freedom—that is, freedom for themselves.

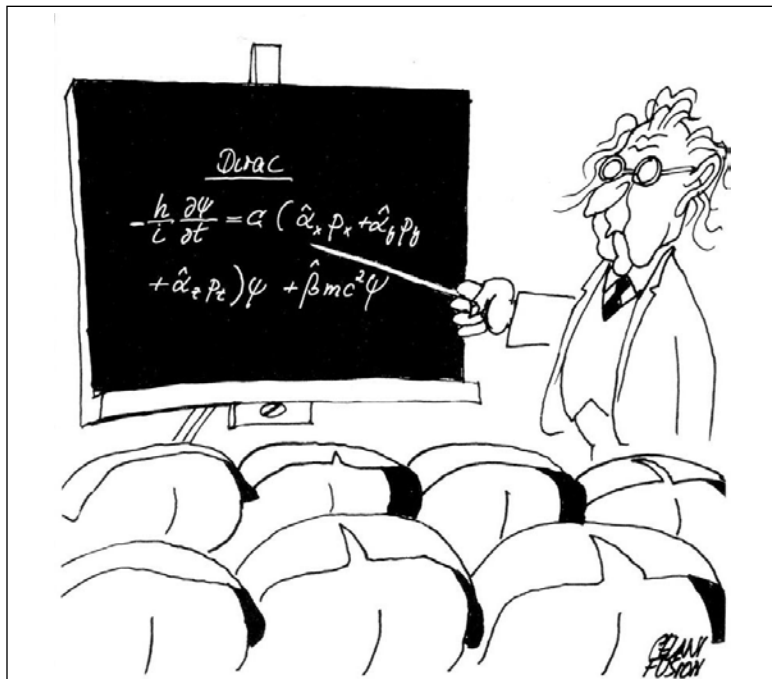
The same academic scientists who bemoan the public's lack of interest in science profoundly discourage such interest by repelling all contributions from the general public, other than their tax money in the form of grants. That, and the right of awe-stricken admiration, constitute the shrunken residue of non-academic freedoms granted to the unanointed, be they scientists or laypersons.

The Crash of the Merit System

So much for the merit system, which has quietly crashed in flames. In my youth, when I went to graduate school, I was encouraged to cherish the illusion that scientific merit would prevail. So, I thought I did not need to join the academic crowd nor curry favor with it. All I had to do was to do good science.

Experience has taught me better. The system has evolved during my lifetime in so many ways to prevent merit from prevailing, that I can only marvel at my former state of mind. Yet I suspect that that state is still inculcated in each generation of youth by the solemn hypocrites of academia, including those on the math faculties, as well as physics, astronomy, etc. Some have wondered how Einstein, the lowly patent clerk, would make out today. I wonder the same about Ramanujan.

Dissidents face two levels of difficul-



ty in getting across new ideas. The first is the basic one of initial communication, that is, of making their ideas available for public consumption and judgment. This means getting past editorial censorship—there is no reason to call it anything else. The best ideas, I am convinced, never make it. This is because they necessarily possess certain features that make them unacceptable, beginning with their rejection of some accepted shibboleth. That nowadays is enough to stop a paper right at the editor's desk.

Supposing, however, by some freak of inattention the editor allows referees to see the paper, and supposing the referees have heard something good about someone with a name similar to that of the author, or are too busy to pick up on his heresy, then the paper may actually be published.

Now it faces the real difficulty. Either nobody reads it (reading being essentially a lost art) or those few who do read it react exactly as they would have done if asked to referee the paper: they stumble at the rejection of the shibboleth, or whatever made the paper unique and a contribution. For, truth to

tell, most people, even (or particularly) those with doctorates, are not geniuses, nor equipped to recognize either genius or rightness, unless their colleagues are pressing it on them. So, there is a herd endorsement, a critical mass of approval, of any worthwhile new idea that constitutes an essential prerequisite for genuine progress, and is virtually impossible to attain under the conditions I have sketched.

In fact, the only kind of progress at all practically likely to occur is the sort offered historically by string theory: Some great Pooh-Bah (to wit, Ed Witten), laden with honors and already much admired in the profession, heads a school of sycophants who automatically provide the critical mass of "consensus" needed to ensure that any rotten idea is perceived as beautiful. Editors self-effacingly bow down. Science marches on, crushing all untruths beneath its vengeful heel. Alternatives devolve inexorably from dubious to career-poisoning.

This seems to be the story behind most of the media-trumpeted physics advances of the last half-century, beginning with the Big Bang and unlikely to

stop anywhere short of the ludicrous, if there. Whom the Gods would laugh at, they first make theoretical physicists, or what has become the same thing, mathematicians manqués.

J.M. Herndon, writing in *Against the Tide: A Critical Review by Scientists of How Physics & Astronomy Get Done* (Bocal Raton, Fla.: Universal Publishers, 2008), attributes the corruption of the current journal refereeing system to the anonymity of the process. That seems to me both an under-estimation and an over-simplification, but worth considering. The only downside to openly naming referees is that a tiny handful of truly nutty contributors are by nature litigious. Despite Constitutional Amendments, the grim shadow of the law dampens all genuine free speech in the home of the brave and the land of the advertisedly free. I should like to make the case against all tort law, but not here.

Is there any hope of reversing the trend of decadence in theoretical science? I opine that there is only one force in the universe strong enough to accomplish this. That is the force of disgust. If enough academicians become sufficiently disgusted with what they have done, the conditions needed for progress in science may recur on Earth. Until then, it will be string theories all the way down.

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