EDITORIAL

There seems to be a curious custom which makes it ungentlemanly to disagree. On retorting to someone whose views are an abomination, one is apt to say, "Of course you are right in what you say. . . ." Then, having made contact . . . "but don't you think it might be this way?"

Soon, if a third person listens carefully, he hears two completely opposing viewpoints guardedly expressed. When all is done, one person is satisfied that he has been an honest man and has presented his actual views. The other is pleased to know that, although there seemed to be minor differences of opinion, there is basic accord. He might even feel strengthened in his course.

We have been wondering how much this custom has to do with the difficulty of getting American physicists to enter into controversy on general matters which concern them as physicists. Their bold expressions in private conversation are not put to paper for fear of offending. And so there are buried differences of opinion which do not in themselves signify lack of respect between those who differ and which, if publicly expressed, could bring some good to all.

And then there are many parts of physics which are so fluid they contain more puzzles than answers. Not all the speculation on these puzzles rightfully belongs in the laboratory or at the tip of the theoretician's pencil—or even in bull sessions and private letters. Some of it belongs out in the open to make a stir where it may produce cross-currents of opinion from which fruitful ideas can take shape.

We have the feeling that this refusal to enter into discussion, unless one is armoured with proven facts, is somehow tied up with the state of affairs in which the United States is said to excel more in exploiting basic scientific ideas than in finding them. True, it is not the only reason, but the state of affairs is not good in any event. Unless one speculates in the broad strategic terms of fundamentals, the tactics of application—however excellent—may be of short-lived usefulness.

One Britisher is said to have remarked (surveying, we suspect, a map of the cyclotrons in the United States), "And now that you have all this wonderful new equipment, what are you going to do with it?" Plenty, of course! But in that program, the results of which are appearing in physics journals today, should also be sprinkled the chaff of far-fetched ideas that will never work. With it will be the wheat of far-fetched ideas that will work.

It is hoped that as time goes on more and more physicists will not be afraid to be wrong, will speculate on paper for what it is worth in public discussion, and will not be stilled for fear they may be thought to be indulging in personalities. It is not right to confine arguments to the temporarily irrefutable data expressed in terms of current accuracy. After all, it is the "fact" of today that must be nudged over a little for the theory of tomorrow, and its permanence is often only seeming.

Many thanks to those of you who took the time and had the patience to fill out and return the questionnaire on Physics Today mailed out to you in the fall. Only three per cent of the readership was polled, a sample whose small size was dictated by the limited funds available for such a purpose. The poll showed that we are on the right track but that readers want more magazine. This we will try to give you as time goes on. Features of different types were received with a comfortable difference of opinion; Books was the most popular department, with Notes from Abroad a close second. Whereabouts evoked the most indifferent reactions. In a way the results and remarks were a little too good to believe; but they were most heartening.

With this issue Physics Today starts a new volume although it is but eight months old. Volume Two will contain twelve issues in normal fashion, the adjustment having been made to begin anew at the turn of the year, as do all the journals published by the American Institute of Physics. Subscriptions will naturally run through for the full time contracted.

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