

D. Phil. or D. Phys.?

A useful hyperbole says that an educated person knows something of everything and everything of something. Nowadays with education largely in the hands of the specialist, we seem to take care of the everything-of-something aspect but almost neglect the something of everything. If the department chairman says that the man deserves his degree for the physics he knows, how many deans will interrupt to ask whether he is at home in more than one language, knows enough history to understand the rape of Czechoslovakia and can relate current events to world literature?

One physics student I knew, feeling he had an acceptable mastery of French and German already, chose to pass one of his PhD language examinations in Russian, which he had not studied previously. Apparently he is exceptional. The custom appears to be to protest existing hurdles, not to look for new ones to conquer.

Of course there need be no inconsistency if a man wishes to study only physics and not concern himself with politics, people and social problems. Like any skilled craftsman, he will be a useful individual.

On the other hand, some physicists want a larger voice in world affairs. A real conflict must exist if those who want to shout louder want

to learn less. Another conflict exists if we physicists are asking the public to know more of our world while we reduce our attention to theirs.

Perhaps we who are physicists have not really made our choice between skills and ideas, between being technicians or, to use Fred Hoyle's words, "the priests of a new religion." But we may have to face the decision: Shall we take care of our physics and ask the public to look after public affairs, or shall we assume greater responsibility and at the same time set standards that assure competence? If we study physics but refuse languages, sociology and history, do we need to attach the word "philosophy" to ourselves? If we ask for a louder voice, can we continue to saturate students with physics and give them no time and no requirement to study any of the humanities?

One solution is to put education back where it used to be, in the hands of educators. If a bachelor's degree required something of everything in a real and significant way, the department chairman would not feed into the world a PhD at home only in the laboratory. But if we retain the control of educational standards, must we not keep the standards high and general? Perhaps we are the salt of the earth. If we lose our savor, wherewith shall we be salted?

—R. Hobart Ellis Jr