



A PHILISTINE ASKS FOR EQUAL TIME

When a Philistine rooms with a physicist, who does the wiring, checks the calculations and makes the coffee?

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I FELT AN URGE to speak on the side of the Philistines, after reading Henry E. Duckworth's article "How to Live with the Philistines" (PHYSICS TODAY, September 1968, page 54). As an English teacher who roomed for two years with a physics teacher, I feel that I am a qualified spokesman.

Although I am one of those people who increases the amount of entropy in a scientist's world through my ideas of the semantics of organization and unifying principles, still I have devoted myself humanly and selflessly, as best I can, to the pursuit of scientific learning.

I have groped through pitch-black labs at ungodly hours, squinted through slits and wiggled prisms until they were just right. My feeling of accomplishment when I really saw that spectrum—all colors, not just some—paralleled, if not exceeded, any joy of Marie Curie.

In some respects, pragmatic

I've supplied the round base of my lamp, ink bottle, vase and cup to aid in the construction of diagrams no compass ever knew. And once, helping with the Sunday Times crossword puzzle, I deftly and correctly offered the word "ohm." "What's that?" said my mother. My scientific, humanist response: "You know, 'What is ohm without a mother?'" It wasn't the answer of an empiricist, but it satisfied her for what it was worth—she was a humanist too.

I'd never suggest that I am scientific in any way, but I am pragmatic in some respects. Now, in one physics textbook, for example, there is a problem involving a station master who dropped an object on a platform as a train passed at 98% of the speed of light. The question asked (to my mind irrelevant) complicated data as

to the engineer's reaction to it all. I'm not absolutely sure of the exact speed of light, but I know this much: If that train was going *that* fast (and I doubt it), then the engineer scarcely saw the platform, let alone the station master *or* the object. But alas, my friend, the physicist, spent hours and pages on the solution of that improbable situation. What would a humanist have done?

We wire the lamps

My friend, unlike me, can discuss electromagnetism and Faraday's ice pail; she can readily distinguish AC from DC, anode from cathode and step-up from step-down transformer; deep in my heart, however, I believe she's afraid of electricity. So I wire the lamps, make the extensions, change the fuses—yes, and even sometimes plug in her experiments. When it comes to the mundane, it's a Philistine to the rescue every time!

Coexisting with a physicist, though, has been a unique learning experience, and I am eager to learn. My fund of knowledge has been enriched and expanded with items that I may never use, even in the most erudite society. I have a familiarity and even a fondness for the Greek alphabet, the metric system and that piece of cat's fur. I listen and I care about cohesive forces and rarefactions. I try to correlate and integrate and I ask questions. I want to know why television tubes are the medium for some messages, how the second law of thermodynamics applies to communication and language, what makes the sound structure of language and when can molecular structure be analogous to literary structure. So I read physics magazines—almost in self defense—but I must admit I still have gaps, and I need to know. I ask.

No Philistine will ever penetrate your ranks. Not if you can help it, I think; not if the physicists I know are any indication of the others. My questions most frequently provoke the answer, "I don't know," which I immediately interpret to mean, "I *do* know, but you'll never understand." Now is that any way?

Physicists need Philistines

If we Philistines fall by the wayside, you'll be sorry. Who'll cook and clean and mend and sew while you differentiate and integrate and calculate? Who'll check your long division while you're learning to use your slide rule? Who'll correct your spelling while you adjust your sines and cosines and tangents? Who'll find your books in the library while you look for *n*? And who will, every now and then, slip a book of poems midst all your apparatus so that you may stabilize your equilibrium 'twixt heart and head? What *would* you do if we weren't there, Philistine, but none the less faithful? □



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