

LETTERS

subject of retired status. He persists in misinterpreting "retired status" as derogatory, when no such implication is intended.

This designation is merely a means to reduce membership dues for people who are no longer earning a salary. It does not reflect adversely upon the individual, nor does it affect membership privileges. The decision to assume retired status is entirely voluntary, and there is no public disclosure that a member has chosen to assume that status. Any member who wishes to retain nonretired status and thus pay full dues is welcome to do so.

Changing the designation to "senior status" as Cranberg suggests does nothing to clarify the meaning. He interprets "senior" as meaning "more distinguished," for which we use the designation "fellow." However, the term may also imply automatic status upon attaining a certain age (such as 65), as in "senior citizen," which would be inappropriate; it is a membership *option*, not a requirement.

Cranberg's suggestion to include seniority and publication data in the membership directory has been referred to the newly formed APS Membership Committee for consideration.

W. W. HAVENS JR

*The American Physical Society
New York, New York*

8/90

Should Physicists Lay Down 'Law'?

I oppose Art Hobson's suggestion (April 1990, page 122) to replace "law" by "principle" in our physics language.

Scientific ideas are not absolute, but they represent the individual scientist's and the collective scientific community's ultimate attempt to understand absolute truth. Proven scientific laws are far more accurate, enduring and truthful than writings our lawyer-dominated legislatures can devise. Scientific laws are also more beneficial to human society as guiding principles. No scientist should deny the existence of truth that is absolutely in contrast with falsehood. The problems associated with misuse, false data and misunderstanding of scientific laws are secondary. The respect for truthful, accurate understanding of nature represented by science demands that the best scientific ideas be honored by the authoritative, respectable word "law."

It is time to review the best scientific ideas proposed in the 20th century and determine which should be called

laws. It might at first sound odd to speak of "Heisenberg's uncertainty law," but it will soon sound natural. It will be correct, and it will enhance the public understanding of science.

JAMES C. LAU

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Art Hobson's letter is based on the assumption that *laws* are inviolate and immutable. When one observes the cavalier variations in interpretation with jurisdiction and the mutations with time of legislative law, it might be more logical to suggest that "law" is too mercurial a concept to describe basic scientific ideas.

ROBERT E. LEVIN

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5/90

HOBSON REPLIES: I sympathize with Robert E. Levin's witty point. But, as James C. Lau implies, the word "law" used in reference to nature has an authoritative (overly authoritative, I believe) connotation, more like a God-

sanctioned Law than a legislated law.

In my teaching experience, non-scientists tend to believe that nature, unlike fallible humans, rigorously obeys its "laws." So this terminology contributes to the mistaken notion that scientific principles are absolute. Scientific principles are simply useful and fruitful generalizations from observation, not absolute truth. In most people's lexicons, "principle" captures this notion better than "law."

I do agree with Lau's suggestion that we should decide on one term.

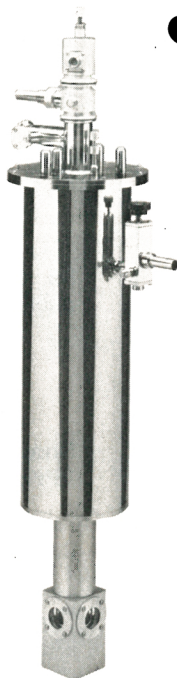
ART HOBSON

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9/90

Correction

December, page 20—The news story on the Wigner crystal should have stated that Eva Andre and her colleagues "claim . . . that their 1988 experiment gave direct [not indirect] evidence" for the crystal. ■



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