

IS THE SCIENTIFIC PAPER FRAUDULENT?

Yes; It Misrepresents Scientific Thought

I HAVE chosen for my title a question: Is the scientific paper a fraud?

I ought to explain that a scientific "paper" is a printed communication to a learned journal, and scientists make their work known almost wholly through papers and not through books, so papers are very important in scientific communication. As to what I mean by asking "is the scientific paper a fraud?"—I do not, of course, mean "Does the scientific paper misrepresent facts?" and I do not mean that the interpretations you find in a scientific paper are wrong or deliberately mistaken. I mean the scientific paper may be a fraud because it misrepresents the processes of thought that accompanied or gave rise to the work that is described in the paper.

That is the question, and I will say right away that my answer to it is "yes." The scientific paper in its orthodox form does embody a totally mistaken conception, even a travesty, of the nature of scientific thought.

Just consider for a moment the traditional form of a scientific paper (incidentally, it is a form which editors themselves often insist upon). The structure of a scientific paper in the biological sciences is something like this: First, there is a section called the "introduction" in which you merely describe the general field in which your scientific talents are going to be exercised, followed by a section called "previous work" in which you concede, more or less graciously, that others have dimly groped toward the fundamental truths that you are now about to expound. Then a section on "methods"—that is O.K. Then comes the section called "results."

The section called "results" consists of a stream of factual information in which it is considered extremely bad form to discuss the significance of the results you are getting. You have to pretend that your mind is, so to speak, a virgin receptacle, an empty vessel, for information which floods into it from the external world for no reason which you yourself have revealed. You reserve all appraisal of the scientific

evidence until the "discussion" section, and in the discussion you adopt the ludicrous pretense of asking yourself if the information you have collected actually means anything.

Of course, what I am saying is rather an exaggeration, but there is more than a mere element of truth in it.

The conception underlying this style of scientific writing is that scientific discovery is an inductive process. What induction implies in its cruder form is roughly speaking this: Scientific discovery, or the formulation of scientific theory, starts in with the unvarnished and unembroidered evidence of the senses. It starts with simple observation—simple, unbiased, unprejudiced, naïve, or innocent observation—and out of this sensory evidence, embodied in the form of simple propositions or declarations of fact, generalizations will grow up and take shape, almost as if some process of crystalization or condensation were taking place. Out of a disorderly array of facts, an orderly theory, an orderly general statement, will somehow emerge.

THIS conception of scientific discovery was mainly the work of a great and wise, but in this context, I think, very mistaken man—John Stuart Mill.

John Stuart Mill saw, as of course a great many others, including Bacon, had seen before him that deduction in itself is quite powerless as a method of scientific discovery—and for this simple reason: that the process of deduction as such only uncovers, brings out into the open, makes explicit, information that is already present in the axioms or premises from which the process of deduction started. The process of deduction reveals nothing to us except what the infirmity of our own minds has so far concealed from us.

It was Mill's belief that induction was the method of science—"that great mental operation," he called it, "the operation of discovering and proving general propositions." And around this conception there grew up an inductive logic, of which the business was "to provide rules to which, if inductive arguments conform, those arguments are conclusive."

Now, John Stuart Mill's deeper motive in working out what he conceived to be the essential method of science was to apply that method to the solution of sociological problems: He wanted to apply to sociology the methods which the practice of science had shown to be immensely powerful and exact. It is ironical that the application to sociology of the inductive method, more or less in the form in which Mill himself conceived it, should have been an almost entirely fruitless one.

The simplest application of the Millian process of induction to sociology came in a rather strange movement called Mass Observation. The belief underlying Mass Observation was apparently this: that if one could only record and set down the actual raw facts about what people do and what people say in pubs, in trains, when they make love to each other, when they are playing games, and so on, then somehow, from this wealth of information, a great generalization would inevitably emerge.

Well, in point of fact, nothing important emerged from this approach.

THE theory underlying the inductive method cannot be sustained. Let me give three good reasons why not.

In the first place, the starting point of induction is philosophic fiction. There is no such thing as unprejudiced observation. Every act of observation we make is biased. What we see or otherwise sense is a function of what we have seen or sensed in the past.

The second point is this: Scientific discovery or the formulation of the scientific idea on the one hand, and demonstration or proof on the other hand, are two entirely different notions. Mill confused them. Mill said that induction was the "operation of discovering and proving general propositions," as if one act of mind would do for both.

Now, discovery and proof could depend on the same act of mind, and in deduction they do. When we indulge in the process of deduction—as in deducing a theorem from Euclidian axioms or postulates—the theorem contains the discovery (or, more exactly, the uncovering of something which was there in the axioms and postulates, though it was not actually evident) and the process of deduction itself, if it has been carried out correctly, is also the proof that the "discovery" is valid, is logically correct. So in the process of deduction, discovery and proof can depend on the same process. But in scientific activity they are not the same thing—they are, in fact, totally separate acts of mind.

It simply is not logically possible to arrive with certainty at any generalization containing more information

than the sum of the particular statements upon which the generalization was founded. How could a mere act of mind lead to the discovery of new information? It would violate a law as fundamental as the law of conservation of matter. It would violate the law of conservation of information.

In view of all these objections, it is hardly surprising that Bertrand Russell in a famous footnote that occurs in his *Principles of Mathematics* of 1903 should have said that, so far as he could see, induction was a method of making plausible guesses. And our greatest modern authority on the nature of scientific method, Professor Karl Popper, has no use for induction at all: He regards the inductive process of thought as a myth. "There is no need even to mention induction," he says in his great treatise, on *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*—though, of course, he does mention it.

NOW let me go back to the scientific papers. What is wrong with the traditional form of scientific paper is simply this: that all scientific work of an experimental or exploratory character starts with some expectation about the outcome of the inquiry. This expectation one starts with, this hypothesis one formulates, provides the initiative and incentive for the inquiry and governs its actual form. It is in the light of this expectation that some observations are held relevant and others not; that some methods are chosen, others discarded; that some experiments are done rather than others. It

is only in the light of this prior expectation that the activities the scientist reports in his scientific papers really have any meaning at all.

Hypotheses arise by guesswork. That is to put it in its crudest form. I should say rather that they arise by inspiration; but in any event they arise by processes that form part of the subject-matter of psychology and certainly not of logic, for there is no logically rigorous method for devising hypotheses. It is a vulgar error, often committed, to speak of "deducing" hypotheses. Indeed one does not deduce hypotheses; hypotheses are what one deduces things from.

But hypotheses can be tested rigorously—they are tested by experiment, using the word "experiment" in a rather general sense to mean an act performed to test a hypothesis, that is, to test the deductive consequences of a hypothesis. If one formulates a hypothesis, one can deduce from it certain consequences which are predictions or declarations about what will or will not be the case. If these predictions and declarations are mistaken, then the hypothesis must be discarded, or at least modified. If, on the other hand, the predictions turn out correct, then the hypothesis has stood up to trial, and remains on probation as before.

This formulation illustrates very well, I think, the distinction between, on the one hand, the discovery or formulation of a scientific idea or generalization, which is to a greater or lesser degree an imaginative or inspirational act, and, on the other hand, the proof, or rather

the testing of a hypothesis, which is indeed a strictly logical and rigorous process, based upon deductive arguments.

THIS alternative interpretation of the nature of the scientific process, of the nature of scientific method, is sometimes called the hypothetico-deductive interpretation. And this is the view which Professor Karl Popper has persuaded us is the correct one.

To give credit where credit is surely due, it is proper to say that the first professional scientist to express a fully reasoned opinion upon the way scientists actually think when they come upon their scientific discoveries—namely William Whewell, a geologist, and incidentally the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge—was also the first person to formulate this hypothetico-deductive interpretation of scientific activity. Whewell, like his contemporary Mill, wrote at great length—unnecessarily great length, one is nowadays inclined to think—and I cannot recapitulate his argument, but one or two quotations will make the gist of his thought clear. He said: "An art of discovery is not possible. We can give no rules for the pursuit of truth which should be universally and peremptorily applicable." And of hypotheses he said, with great daring, "a facility in devising hypotheses, so far from being a fault in the intellectual character of a discoverer, is a faculty indispensable to his task."

I said this was daring because the word "hypothesis" and the conception it stood for was still in Whewell's day a rather discreditable one. Hypotheses had a flavor about them of what was wanton and irresponsible. The great Newton, you remember, had frowned upon hypotheses. "*Hypotheses non fingo*," he said, and there is another version in which he says "*hypotheses non sequor*"—I do not pursue hypotheses.

So to go back once again to the scientific paper: The scientific paper is a fraud in the sense that it does give a totally misleading narrative of the processes of thought that go into the making of scientific discoveries. The inductive format of the scientific paper should be discarded. The discussion which in the traditional scientific paper goes last should surely come at the beginning. The scientific facts and scientific acts should follow the discussion, and scientists should not be ashamed to admit, as many of them apparently are ashamed to admit, that hypotheses appear in their minds along uncharted by-ways of thought; that they are imaginative and inspirational in character; that they are indeed adventures of the mind.

—P. B. MEDAWAR.
in *The Experimental Method*
(British Broadcasting Corp.)



"I'm Daylight Saving. You must be the real thing!"

Fluoridation Debate (Cont.)

THANKS FOR the elucidating editor's notes to the letters you have published on fluoridation of public drinking water. I have just one criticism to make regarding your reference to the examination of Newburgh children [SR, May 2]. Those children who were most likely to be adversely affected by the fluoridated water were omitted from the study. See enclosures.

Mrs. EDITH WALDBOTT.

Detroit, Mich.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The enclosures mentioned in the above letter are photostatic copies of pages 21-42, "Journal of the American Medical Association," Vol. 161, No. 7, Jan. 7, 1956. Those pages carry a research report signed by Edward R. Schlesinger, M.D., David E. Overton, M.D., and Helen C. Chase, M.Sc., all of Albany, N.Y., and titled "Study of Children Drinking Fluoridated and Non-Fluoridated Water: Quantitative Urinary Excretion of Albumin and Formed Elements."*

A group of 100 twelve-year-old boys had been selected from the school register of Newburgh, N.Y., where the drinking water had been fluoridated for eight years as part of a United States Public Health Service experiment. Another group of 100 schoolboys of the same age had been chosen in Kingston, N.Y., where the drinking water had not been fluoridated. The given purpose of the study "was to determine whether any irritative effects on the kidneys followed long-term ingestion of fluoridated water." The report on this research concluded:

"The difference found in the results from the groups in the two cities tended to favor the Newburgh children. No medical sign can be attributed to any of the differences. This study adds further weight to the mass of evidence already available that point to the safety of water fluoridation as a public health measure for the prevention of dental caries."

In describing the methods used in their study, the three researchers stated:

"Stress was placed on the desirability of obtaining specimens from normal, active boys. No specimens were taken if there was any history of clinical illness, no matter how mild, during the previous two weeks."

YOUR EDITORIAL COMMENT to a reader's letter on fluoridation [SR, Apr. 4] implies that I am aware of evidence of harm from fluoridation (somewhere) in the world though not within "the confines of the United States." You wrote: "This tacit concession that . . . [fluoridation] . . . may not always have been safe in other countries. . . ."

The full quote from my letter that you referred to, and which I was courteous enough to send you a copy of, is as follows: "My usual statement on no evidence of injury, no ill effects, any segment of population, etc., refers to the United States and for recommended levels of fluoride intake. I should make this clear and will in the future."

To me this does not imply harm outside of the United States, neither is it a "tacit concession." Obviously I know the data on fluoridation in this country better than in other parts of the world. For your information, of the work on fluoridation outside of the U.S. that I am acquainted with, I am not aware of any harmful effects of fluoridation. I am acquainted with the Indian, French, and Japanese papers cited by SR as possibly indicating harm, and in my opinion, and that of a number of colleagues I have consulted, the data presented are not sound.

FREDERICK J. STARE, M.D.,
Department of Nutrition,
Harvard University.

Cambridge, Mass.

I WANT TO take this time to thank you for the wonderful way in which you have tried to put the facts before the public regarding the government's intent to fluoridate our public drinking waters.

I have in the last two Congresses introduced resolutions to investigate the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to determine why they are spending public funds in an attempt to socialize medicine and by innuendo take away more of our rights and freedom.

I sadly report to you that I cannot get a hearing because the Congressional committees will not act unless they get a favorable report from the so-called downtown bureaucrats. Naturally, you can't expect HEW to ask for an investigation of itself.

The only other Congressman who is behind my resolution now is Ralph Rivers of Alaska. Frankly, I don't believe other members are acquainted with the facts about fluoridation.

I feel that this question needs widespread attention so that the people will start a barrage of letters to their respective Congressmen. Just sending a letter to me does not help. But if enough members should see that their constituents are interested, we might perhaps move this resolution.

I intend to keep fighting. But I need more Congressmen to help so that our voices will be heard.

A complete investigation of fluoridation of public drinking water is necessary.

WALTER S. BARING,
Congressman for Nevada.

Washington, D.C.

Atrocity Mail

AS A SMALL nature loving committee of two, my wife and I would like to add our voices of violent disapproval concerning a very recent individual experience. Included in yesterday's barrage of daily mail was an advertisement for a set of children's books which was supposed to be brought to me by a beautiful winged messenger. In this case, the beautiful winged messenger happened to be none other than an authentic Oriental butterfly which was attached to the advertisement. One butterfly per advertisement adds up to a staggering number of virtual atrocities.

LEFF LAHUTA.

Staten Island, N.Y.

Shaky Stuff

IN YOUR ISSUE of May 2, 1964, you describe a "seismograph" of the year A.D. 132. In your description of the mechanism you perpetuate a misconception that is all too common. The heavy pendulum inside the jar is freely suspended from a point. The jar is rigidly attached to the earth. When an earthquake occurs the jar, being attached to the earth, sways with the earth. The inertia of the pendulum causes it to remain steady. It is the motion of the jar which causes the release of the balls, not the motion of the pendulum, which is essentially rigid in space and free of the earth, so little or no force is transmitted to it by the earth's movement.

RALPH E. CULLMAN.

Union, N. J.

Crab X-Rays

YOUR Grandest Firework issue [SR, July 4] was grand. Regarding Dr. Herbert Friedman's article in "The Research Frontier," would you please let us know the results of the rocket tests scheduled for July 7 for the purpose of determining whether the X-ray source of the Crab Nebula is a point source—a neutron star—or not.

S. DAVID KRIMINS.

Philadelphia, Pa.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Just as this issue of SR was going to press, Dr. Friedman announced that his experiment had succeeded, had shown no neutron star.*

Science and China

I READ the article "What Science Wants to Know About Communist China" [SR, Mar. 7] with great interest. As a scientist working in the field, I am greatly in favor of giving information to a broader public about the work that is being done, and therefore welcome the idea of reporting on problems and results of academic development. A writer doing that, however, should have a full appreciation of the nature of academic work and not try to ascribe to academic committees dealing with such work the function of influencing policy—in this case cold war policy—as your science editor does.

There are in all professions, as in ours, disagreements and arguments, and so there has been such disagreement among the band of scholars concerned with the study of modern China. In your account and your political interpretation of these disagreements, your journal has done a disservice to the profession. Academic argument over the character of the Chinese Communist movement, for instance over the "agrarian reformers" interpretation, was necessary to point out this and other fallacies. It has never led to anyone being "accused of 'selling out' capitalism to Mao," whatever that means.

Your description of the history of the establishment of the Joint Committee on Contemporary China is factually incorrect. At the Gould House Conference in 1958, which you describe, there was no "bitter split over the 'whole sellout' accusations"