

The APS: A Scientific Society or Cult?

The American Physical Society has changed its charter from that of a scientific society to a sort of religious cult. Last year the Council proposed and the members approved by an overwhelming vote, that the Objective of the APS, as defined in Article II of the APS Constitution, be changed to read: "*In the firm belief that an understanding of the nature of the physical universe will be of benefit to all humanity* the objective of the Society shall be the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of physics." [New language in *italics*.] Simply put, what distinguishes science from religion is that the one is engaged in a search for truth while the other starts with a commitment of faith in some particular dogma. It is thus strange indeed that the new definition of the APS starts with the phrase "In the firm belief that ...". Even stranger is the unqualified assertion that "an understanding of the nature of the physical universe will be of benefit to all humanity." As a mature physicist and teacher, I look at the world of human conduct and human history in a realistic way. Does the American Physical Society mean to promise or to guarantee that ad-

vances in physics WILL, without doubt or failure, turn out to benefit ALL humanity? Rationally viewed, the new APS statement is absurd. Most physicists would like the fruits of their labors to result in "benefit to all humanity," would hope for this happy outcome and would even expend some effort to help realize this goal. Such sentiments are laudable; but that is not what the new APS words say. One should not brush this off as merely an awkward choice of language. Leaving this new statement in place can be quite damaging. Members of the public who read these words may reasonably conclude that physicists are indeed like the infamous Dr. Frankenstein, who pursued his ego-driven research mindless of the awful consequences for others. Furthermore, students of physics and other members of our profession who have not yet adopted the burdens of Social Responsibility in Science may, upon reading the new APS language, feel that they need not bother with such concerns.

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Editor's note: The change to the APS Constitution noted above was proposed and approved by Council in November 1996 and April 1997 respectively and was announced to the membership in the June 1997 issue of APS News, where comments were solicited. Professor Schwartz's was the only written negative comment received. Members gave overwhelming (89%) approval to the mission change in their balloting over the summer.