

A HUMOROUS LOOK AT SCIENCE

By

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Science is a serious business and it might be thought that your average scientist wouldn't have much to laugh about, or much of a sense of humour. This impression is mistaken. The essence of science is logic and, one way or another, all humour is concerned with quirks of logic. I imagine that a mind attracted to science and mathematics, but not to humour, is a rare thing. In my experience scientists generally delight in humour. In this article I present a selection of humorous comments about science, many of them coined by scientist.

To be a scientist is to be preoccupied with ideas that can only be worked out by spending long hours in the laboratory and study. There are no pressures on one to adopt a flashy lifestyle or to live a life of conspicuous consumption. This can appear dull, or even forbidding, to the outside observer.

'Scientists - the crowd that for dash and style make the general public look like the Bloomsbury set.' (Fran Lebowitz).

'When I find myself in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes.' (W.H. Auden).

Some scientists become so deeply immersed in their work that they develop odd social behaviour. The English physicist Paul Dirac was one of the fathers of quantum mechanics, for which work he shared the 1933 Nobel Prize in Physics with Erwin Schrodinger. Dirac was extremely taciturn and reticent. He seldom spoke unless asked a direct question and even then would remain silent unless he could say something sensible. The physicist Jagdish Mehra dined one day at Cambridge with Dirac. He began his chat to Dirac with the remark, 'It is very windy, Professor.' Dirac said nothing, and several seconds later got up and left the table. Mehra was mortified, thinking he had offended him. Dirac went to the door, looked out, came back, sat down and said 'Yes'.

Much of physics is devoted to the study of the universe and the solar system:

'Only two things are infinite - the universe and human stupidity and I'm not sure about the former.' (Albert Einstein).

'My theology, briefly, is that the universe was dictated but not signed.' (Christopher Morley).

'Damn the solar system. Bad light; planets too distant; pestered with comets; feeble contrivance; could make better myself.' (Francis Jeffrey).

'The moon may be smaller than the earth, but its further away'. (Steven Wright).

Electromagnetic radiation (e.g. X-rays, visible light, microwaves and radiowaves) can travel through a vacuum. The properties of electromagnetic radiation can only be explained by visualising the radiation both as a wave and as particles called photons.

'The telegraph is a kind of very long cat. You pull his tail in New York and he is mewing in Los Angeles. Radio operates in exactly the same way, except there is no cat.' (Albert Einstein).

‘I’ve just heard that photons have mass. I didn’t even know they were catholic.’ (Don Geddin).

The grand unifying theme in biology is the theory of evolution, i.e. life began spontaneously on Earth about 3.5 billion years ago in a single form and all present life is descended from that original form.

‘The World was created on 22 October, 4004 BC, at 6 o’clock in the evening.’ (James Usher).

‘My theory of evolution is that Darwin was adopted.’ (Steven Wright).

‘Descended from the apes? Let us hope that it is not true. But if it is, let us pray that it not become generally known.’ (F.A. Montagu).

‘If man evolved from the ape how come there are still apes about? Some them were given choices.’ (Johnny Hart).

The computer and information technology are icons of the age.

‘To err is human, but to really foul things up you need a computer.’ (Paul Erlich).

‘The Internet is like a herd of performing elephants with diarrhoea - massive, difficult to re-direct, awe-inspiring, entertaining, and a source of mind boggling amounts of excrement when you least expect it.’ (Gene Spafford).

‘If there had been a computer in 1872 it would have predicted that by now there would be so many horse-drawn vehicles that the entire surface of the earth would be ten feet deep in horse-manure.’ (Karl Kapp).

‘All sorts of computer error are now turning up. You’d be surprised to know the number of doctors who claim they are treating pregnant men.’ (Isaac Asimov).

Most science is done in universities. The work strains against several constraints, including academic politics and under-funding.

‘University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small.’ (Henry Kissinger).

Scientific experiments often require expensive equipment but it is well to remember: ‘Insufficient attention is given to real costs when installing expensive laboratory equipment. In some cases it would be cheaper not to install the equipment, but, whenever it is needed to send each student in a separate chauffer - driven Rolls Royce to use the same equipment at another institution.’ (C.F. Carter).

Scientists in a particular field often do not understand the formulas used by scientists in other fields. Sir Solly Zuckerman, the famous English zoologist, was asked what he did when he came across mathematical formulas in a scientific paper. ‘I hum them’ he said.

And, what about psychology?

‘Show me a sane man and I will cure him for you.’ (Carl Jung).

‘Psychologists are scientists about as much as converted savages are Christians.’ (Georges Politza).

Scientists carry out their investigations using a procedure called the scientific method.

‘Science begins by saying it can answer only this [this in italics] kind of question and ends by claiming that these [these in italics] are the only questions that can be asked.’ (Bryan Appleyard).

‘If A is success in life, then A equals X+Y+Z. Work is X; Y is play; and Z is keeping your mouth shut.’ (Albert Einstein).

And finally, a personal note, inspired by Newton, to certain senior college colleagues: ‘He would see further, but giants are standing on his shoulders’.

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