



# The Limitations of Science

*Louis Trenchard More*

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## **The Limitations of Science** Louis Trenchard More

An excerpt from the beginning of the first chapter.

It has grown to be an axiom in modern thought, that the hope of discovering the laws of nature and our relation to them by metaphysical reasoning is impossible. The term metaphysical reasoning will be used consistently to mean the method introduced by the Greek philosophers who, however they might differ in minor matters, were pretty well agreed in looking upon what we call nature as something which could be investigated subjectively; that is, things are as we think them to be. It is thus directly contrary to the physical method, which maintains natural phenomena and laws to be entirely objective and independent of our thought; according to this method no theory or fact can be established unless it is completely verified by experimental tests.

So little in the long years since Plato and Aristotle has been done by the metaphysical philosophers to add to our positive knowledge, that they themselves are abandoning their former methods for that of the psychologist, who studies even the faculties and the emotions of the mind objectively by means of the physical or experimental method. Many will frankly admit that metaphysical studies are chiefly valuable now as a history of the development of thought, and agree with Renan that "Science, and science alone, can give to humanity what it most craves, a symbol and a law." If this be really the case, if the attainment of our desire for an accurate and real knowledge of our environment, its phenomena and the causes of actions, rests with science alone, then it becomes necessary to consider whether this hope also must prove to be fallacious. Will the results of experiment made objectively, which must however be interpreted subjectively, fail in their turn as criteria of truth?

Of the various sciences, physics offers probably the best means of attacking this problem, for it lies between the concrete classifications of the natural sciences, such as chemistry and biology, and the abstract theories of pure mathematics. Physics, on the one hand, is less disturbed by the multitude of details which often, in the natural sciences, prevent the grasping of a central idea; while, on the other hand, it is more circumscribed than mathematics by the necessity of constant comparison with concrete phenomena, and so avoids the danger of confounding speculation and reality. Thus the methods of physics have, to a degree, become the model which the other sciences seek to follow, a logical mathematical theory based on, and corrected by, experimental observation. Moreover, this science presents a longer and more consecutive history than most of the others.

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