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Professor Joshua Lederberg
Department of Genetics
The University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture
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My dear Professor Lederberg:

Thank you for your kind letter inquiring about a reprint of my article on scientific anecdotes, which I am delighted to send to you. It is an amusing subject and one which has always fascinated me, particularly when anecdotes prove to be authentic.

In your letter to me you take up the further question as to the remark of the eminent physicist of the 1890's who said that "nothing remained to be done in physics but measurements of the universal constants to a few more decimal places." My best information on this subject is that it was actually said by Oliver Lodge and is often ascribed to the American physicist, A. A. Michelson. The latter did make such a remark but attributed it to "an eminent physicist." Even earlier, the idea may be found in an address by James Clerk Maxwell inaugurating the Cavendish professorship at Cambridge University and opening the Cavendish Laboratory. This may be found in his collected papers which appeared in two volumes and which have recently been reprinted by Dover.

~~Cavendish~~^{Maxwell} said that the opinion had been expressed that before too long the great physical constants would have been estimated approximately and that the only job left for physicists would be to carry out measurements to another place of decimals. But Maxwell made this statement only to attack it.

Sincerely yours,


I. Bernard Cohen

IBC/mv