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A DYNAMIC THEORY OF PERSONALITY

*Selected Papers*

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# A DYNAMIC THEORY OF PERSONALITY

## *Selected Papers*

BY

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## PREFACE

The present book is a collection of originally independent articles which were written at different times and for quite different occasions. Hence, the reader will find some of the fundamental ideas recurring throughout the book. The selection has been made in order to give a picture of the fields thus far studied, the psychology of the person and of the environment, and at the same time to indicate their connections with the various applied fields, especially child psychology, pedagogy, psychopathology, characterology, and social psychology.

Only a few years ago one could observe, at least among German psychologists, a quite pessimistic mood. After the initial successes of experimental psychology in its early stages, it seemed to become clearer and clearer that it would remain impossible for experimental method to press on beyond the psychology of perception and memory to such vital problems as those with which psychoanalysis was concerned. Weighty "philosophical" and "methodological" considerations seemed to make such an undertaking a priori impossible. The first positive experiments in this direction seemed only to confirm the belief that the experimental psychology of (will, emotion, and character was condemned to rest content with surface facts and to leave all deeper problems to schools and speculation, incapable of experimental test.

Working in this field I felt that I had begun a task methodologically and technically sound and necessary, the broader elaboration of which could not be expected for decades. Nevertheless it soon became clear that though these problems are difficult, they are by no means impossible to solve. One had only to clear out a number of hoary philosophical prejudices and to set his scientific goal high enough to arrive at explanation and prediction. Today it can no longer be doubted that the questions set, for example, by psychoanalysis are readily accessible to experimental clarification if only appropriate methods and concepts are employed. Indeed, it seems some-

what easier to advance to dynamic laws in the field of needs and emotions than in the psychology of perception. My visit to American universities during the last year has shown me that, in spite of all the differences of historical background, the belief in these possibilities is giving rise to many experiments. The relations to psychopathology and to comparative psychology give promise of becoming especially fruitful. Naturally I know how near the beginning we stand. But the development seems to be proceeding much more rapidly than I had hoped. The reason for this is, above all, the historical position of psychology, which is ripe for a "Galileian" mode of thought.

I have been asked whether I approve of the name "topological psychology" for this type of research. I have no objection to it so long as the following points are emphasized. I am convinced that psychology is today in a position to grow beyond the "schools" in the old sense of the word. To contribute to this growth is a major goal of our work which uses, so far as possible, the language of mathematics. For this language is less equivocal than any other and at the same time "objective" and "unspeculative," since it expresses only the structural order of things and events. However, I do not limit myself to concepts of topology. Furthermore, the use of mathematical language is only an expression of a more general "constructive" method whose chief characteristic is its greater ability to bridge the gap between theory and particular fact. Nevertheless, topology remains the basic mathematical discipline for the presentation of dynamics in the whole field of psychology, and I am more and more convinced that it will become, beyond this, a solid framework for a dynamic sociology.

Doctors D. K. Adams and Karl Zener have undertaken the great labor of translating the articles into English. Only those who know the difficulties of this sort of translation in scientifically new fields will appreciate the extent to which I am indebted to them.

KURT LEWIN.

## TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

Several of the terms used in this translation may be better understood if the German terms which they are designed to translate are indicated. The adjectives *psychisch* and *seelisch* have both been translated "psychic" or "psychical" because it seems to us that events, processes, and structures that are properly called psychical do not become *psychological* until they have been operated upon in some way by the science of psychology or by psychologists. An ambiguity is thus avoided which could give rise to unnecessary misunderstandings and which, in the case of physics, has done so. Thus the expression "the physical world" is ambiguous because it may mean "the material world of experience" or "the world of physics," two radically different things.

The word *Seele* has been translated, with much misgiving, by "mind." We had thought to translate it by "soul," in the belief that the time was ripe for a reintroduction of the latter word into the technical English terminology of psychology. It seemed impossible that there should be any confusion of the psychological "soul," deduced as it is from concrete behavior, with the "soul" of theology, the properties of which cannot be derived from or tested by concrete behavior. But a sampling of opinion among American psychologists was against the use of this more accurate translation. It is consequently necessary to point out that "mind" as here used ("the totality of psychical systems") is not to be taken in any narrowly intellectualistic sense but rather in a meaning approximating that of McDougall. In his later papers Lewin uses the term *psychologische Person* (translated by "psychological person") in what seems to be essentially the same sense as *Seele* in the earlier articles.

Other translations which might require comment are explained either in the text itself or in notes.

Acknowledgment is due Professor Murchison, Director, and the Clark University Press for permission to reprint Chapters I and III, which originally appeared in the *Journal of General Psychology*, Volume 5, pages 141-177, and in Murchison's *Handbook of Child Psychology*, respectively.

The monograph *Die psychologische Situation bei Lohn und Strafe* (Chapter IV of this book) was first published by Hirzel of Leipzig in 1931. The "Theorie des Schwachsinn" (Chapter VII of this book) was published in *Hommage au Dr. Decroly* by Les Usines reunies Scheerders van Kerchove a St.-Nicholas-W., Belgium in 1933. "Erziehung zur Realität" (Chapter V of this book) was published in *Die Neue Erziehung* in 1931. We have to thank the publishing house of Julius Springer, Berlin, for permission to translate the portion of *Vorsatz, Wille und Bedürfnis* which appears in Chapter II and for the use of most of the figures in Chapter VIII. The latter have been redrawn after certain of those in the long series of articles edited by Professor Lewin in the *Psychologische Forschung*. We also wish to thank Mr. Charles E. Stuart for generous assistance in preparing the drawings.

D. K. ADAMS.  
K. E. ZENER.

DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA,  
March, 1935.

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# A DYNAMIC THEORY OF PERSONALITY

## CHAPTER I

### THE CONFLICT BETWEEN ARISTOTELIAN AND GALILEIAN MODES OF THOUGHT IN CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

In the discussion of several urgent problems of current experimental and theoretical psychology I propose to review the development of the concepts of physics, and particularly the transition from the Aristotelian to the Galileian mode of thought. My purpose is not historical; rather do I believe that certain questions, of considerable importance in the reconstruction of concepts in present-day psychology, may be clarified and more precisely stated through such a comparison, which provides a view beyond the difficulties of the day.

I do not intend to infer by deduction from the history of physics what psychology ought to do. I am not of the opinion that there is only one empirical science, namely, physics; and the question whether psychology, as a part of biology, is reducible to physics or is an independent science may here be left open.

Since we are starting from the point of view of the researcher, we shall, in our contrast of Aristotelian and Galileian concept formation, be less concerned with personal nuances of theory in Galileo and Aristotle than with certain ponderable differences in the modes of thought that determined the actual research of the medieval Aristotelians and of the post-Galileian

<sup>1</sup> *Jour. Gen. Psychol.*, 1931, 5, 141-177, edited by Carl Murchison.

physicists. Whether some particular investigator had previously shown the later sort of thinking in respect to some special point or whether some very modern speculations of the relativity theory should accord in some way with Aristotle's is irrelevant in the present connection.

In order to provide a special setting for the theoretical treatment of the dynamic problems, I shall consider first the general characteristics of Aristotelian and Galileian physics and of modern psychology.

#### GENERAL CHARACTER OF THE TWO MODES OF THOUGHT

##### *In Physics*

If one asks what the most characteristic difference between "modern" post-Galileian and Aristotelian physics is, one receives, as a rule, the following reply, which has had an important influence upon the scientific ideals of the psychologist: the concepts of Aristotelian physics were anthropomorphic and inexact. Modern physics, on the contrary, is quantitatively exact, and pure mathematical, functional relations now occupy the place of former anthropomorphic explanations. These have given to physics that abstract appearance in which modern physicists are accustomed to take special pride.

This view of the development of physics is, to be sure, pertinent. But if one fixes one's attention less upon the style of the concepts employed and more upon their actual functions as instruments for understanding the world, these differences appear to be of a secondary nature, consequences of a deep-lying difference in the conception of the relation between the world and the task of research.

##### *Aristotelian Concepts.*

*Their Valutive Character.* As in all sciences, the detachment of physics from the universal matrix of philosophy and practice was only gradually achieved. Aristotelian physics is full of concepts which today are considered not only as specifically biological, but preeminently as valutive concepts. It abounds in specifically normative concepts taken from ethics, which

occupy a place between valuative and nonvaluative concepts: the highest forms of motions are circular and rectilinear, and they occur only in heavenly movements, those of the stars; the earthly sublunar world is endowed with motion of inferior types. There are similar valuative differences between causes: on one side there are the good or, so to speak, authorized forces of a body which come from its tendency toward perfection (*τέλος*), and on the other side the disturbances due to chance and to the opposing forces (*βία*) of other bodies.

This kind of classification in terms of values plays an extraordinarily important part in medieval physics. It classes together many things with very slight or unimportant relation and separates things that objectively are closely and importantly related.

It seems obvious to me that this extremely "anthropomorphic" mode of thought plays a large role in psychology, even to the present day. Like the distinction between earthly and heavenly, the no less valuative distinction between "normal" and "pathological" has for a long time sharply differentiated two fields of psychological fact and thus separated the phenomena which are fundamentally most nearly related.

No less important is the fact that value concepts completely dominate the conceptual setting of the special problems, or have done so until very recently. Thus, not till lately has psychology begun to investigate the structural (Gestalt) relations concerned in perception, thus replacing the concept of optical illusion, a concept which, derived not from psychological but from epistemological categories, unwarrantedly lumps together all these "illusions" and sets them apart from the other phenomena of psychological optics. Psychology speaks of the "errors" of children, of "practice," of "forgetting," thus classifying whole groups of processes according to the value of their products, instead of according to the nature of the psychological processes involved. Psychology is, to be sure, beyond classifying events *only* on the basis of value when it speaks of disturbances, of inferiority and superiority in development, or of the quality of performance on a test. On all sides there are ten-

dencies to attack actual psychological processes. But there can hardly be any doubt that we stand now only at the beginning of this stage, that the same transitional concepts that we have seen in the Aristotelian physics to lie between the valuative and the nonvaluative are characteristic of such antitheses as intelligence and feeble-mindedness or drive and will. The detachment of the conceptual structure of psychology from the utilitarian concepts of pedagogy, medicine, and ethics is only partly achieved.

It is quite possible, indeed I hold it to be probable, that the utility or performance concepts, such as a "true" cognition versus an "error," may later acquire a legitimate sense. If that is the case, however, an "illusion" will have to be characterized not epistemologically but biologically.

*Abstract Classification.* When the Galileian and post-Galileian physics disposed of the distinction between heavenly and earthly and thereby extended the field of natural law enormously, it was not due solely to the exclusion of value concepts, but also to a changed interpretation of classification. For Aristotelian physics the membership of an object in a given class was of critical importance, because for Aristotle the class defined the essence or essential nature of the object and thus determined its behavior in both positive and negative respects.

This classification often took the form of paired opposites, such as cold and warm, dry and moist, and compared with present-day classification had a rigid, absolute character. In modern quantitative physics dichotomous classifications have been entirely replaced by continuous gradations. Substantial concepts have been replaced by functional concepts.

Here also it is not difficult to point out the analogous stage of development in contemporary psychology. The separation of intelligence, memory, and impulse bears throughout the characteristic stamp of Aristotelian classification; and in some fields, for example, in the analysis of feelings (pleasantness and

<sup>1</sup> E. CASSIRER, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff, Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntniskritik*, B. Cassirer, Berlin, 1910.

unpleasantness), or of temperaments,<sup>1</sup> or of drives,<sup>2</sup> such dichotomous classifications as Aristotle's are even today of great significance. Only gradually do these classifications lose their importance and yield to a conception which seeks to derive the same laws for all these fields, and to classify the whole field on the basis of other, essentially functional, differences.

*The Concept of Law.* Aristotle's classes are abstractly defined as the sum total of those characteristics which a group of objects have in common. This circumstance is not merely a characteristic of Aristotle's logic, but largely determines his conception of *lawfulness* and *chance*, which seems to me so important to the problems of contemporary psychology as to require closer examination.

For Aristotle those things are lawful, conceptually intelligible, which occur *without exception*. Also, and this he emphasizes particularly, those are lawful which occur *frequently*. Excluded from the class of the conceptually intelligible as mere chance are those things which occur only *once*, individual events as such. Actually since the behavior of a thing is determined by its essential nature, and this essential nature is exactly the abstractly defined class (*i.e.*, the sum total of the common characteristics of a whole group of objects), it follows that each event, as a particular event, is chance, undetermined. For in these Aristotelian classes individual differences disappear.

The real source of this conception may lie in the fact that for Aristotelian physics not all physical processes possess the lawful character ascribed to them by post-Galileian physics. To the young science of physics the universe it investigated appeared to contain as much that was chaotic as that was lawful. The lawfulness, the intelligibility of physical processes was still narrowly limited. It was really present only in certain processes, for example, the courses of the stars, but by no means in all the transitory events of the earth. Just as for other young sciences, it was still a question for physics, whether physical

<sup>1</sup> R. SOMMER, Über Persönlichkeitstypen, *Ber. Kong. f. exper. Psychol.*, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> LEWIN, *Die Entwicklung der experimentellen Willenspsychologie und die Psychotherapie*, S. Hirzel, Leipzig, 1929

processes were subject to law and if so how far. And this circumstance exercised its full effect on the formation of physical concepts, even though in philosophical principle the idea of general lawfulness already existed. In post-Galileian physics, with the elimination of the distinction between lawful and chance events, the necessity also disappeared of proving that the process under consideration was lawful. For Aristotelian physics, on the contrary, it was necessary to have criteria to decide whether or not a given event was of the lawful variety. Indeed the regularity with which similar events occurred in nature was used essentially as such a criterion. Only such events, as the celestial, which the course of history proves to be regular, or at least frequent, are subject to law; and only in so far as they are frequent, and hence more than individual events, are they conceptually intelligible. In other words, the ambition of science to understand the complex, chaotic, and unintelligible world, its faith in the ultimate decipherability of this world, were limited to such events as were certified by repetition in the course of history to possess a certain persistence and stability.

In this connection it must not be forgotten that Aristotle's emphasis on frequency (as a further basis for lawfulness, besides absolute regularity) represents, relative to his predecessors, a tendency toward the extension and concrete application of the principle of lawfulness. The "empiricist," Aristotle, insists that not only the regular but the frequent is lawful. Of course, this only makes clearer his antithesis of individuality and law, for the individual event as such still lies outside the pale of the lawful and hence, in a certain sense, outside the task of science. Lawfulness remains limited to cases in which events recur and classes (in Aristotle's abstract sense) reveal the essential nature of the events.

This attitude toward the problem of lawfulness in nature, which dominated medieval physics and from which even the opponents of Aristotelian physics, such as Bruno and Bacon, escaped only gradually, had important consequences in several respects.

As will be clear from the preceding text, this concept of lawfulness had throughout a quasi-statistical character. Lawfulness was considered as equivalent to the highest degree of generality, as that which occurs very often in the same way, as the extreme case of regularity, and hence as the perfect antithesis of the infrequent or of the particular event. The statistical determination of the concept of lawfulness is still clearly marked in Bacon, as when he tries to decide through his *tabula praesentia* whether a given association of properties is real (essential) or fortuitous. Thus he ascertains, for example, the numerical frequency of the cases in which the properties warm and dry are associated in everyday life. Less mathematically exact, indeed, but no less clear is this statistical way of thinking in the whole body of Aristotelian physics.

At the same time—and this is one of the most important consequences of the Aristotelian conception—regularity or particularity was understood entirely in *historical* terms.

The complete freedom from exceptions, the “always” which is found also in the later conceptions of physical lawfulness, still has here its original connections with the frequency with which similar cases have occurred in the actual, historical course of events in the everyday world. A crude example will make this clearer: light objects, under the conditions of everyday life, relatively frequently go up; heavy objects usually go down. The flame of the fire, at any rate under the conditions known to Aristotle, almost always goes upward. It is these frequency rules, within the limits of the climate, mode of life, etc., familiar to Aristotle, that determine the nature and tendency to be ascribed to each class of objects and lead in the present instance to the conclusion that flames and light bodies have a tendency upward.

Aristotelian concept formation has yet another immediate relation to the geographically-historically given, in which it resembles, as do the valuative concepts mentioned above, the thinking of primitive man and of children.

When primitive man uses different words for “walking,” depending upon its direction, north or south, or upon the sex

of the walker, or upon whether the latter is going into or out of a house,<sup>1</sup> he is employing a reference to the historical situation that is quite similar to the putatively absolute descriptions (upward or downward) of Aristotle, the real significance of which is a sort of geographic characterization, a place definition relative to the earth's surface.<sup>2</sup>

The original connection of the concepts with the "actuality," in the special sense of the given historic-geographic circumstances, is perhaps the most important feature of Aristotelian physics. It is from this almost more even than from its teleology that his physics gets its general anthropomorphic character. Even in the minute particulars of theorizing and in the actual conduct of research it is always evident not only that physical and normative concepts are still undifferentiated, but that the formulation of problems and the concepts that we would today distinguish, on the one hand, as historic<sup>3</sup> and, on the other, as nonhistoric or systematic are inextricably interwoven. (Incidentally, an analogous confusion exists in the early stages of other sciences, for example in economics.)

From these conceptions also the attitude of Aristotelian physics toward lawfulness takes a new direction. So long as lawfulness remained limited to such processes as occurred repeatedly in the same way, it is evident not only that the young physics still lacked the courage to extend the principle to all physical phenomena, but also that the concept of lawfulness

<sup>1</sup> L. LÉVY-BRUHL, *La Mentalité primitive*, Alcan, Paris, 1922, (5th ed., 1927).

<sup>2</sup> In the following pages we shall frequently have to use the term "historic-geographic." This is not in common usage, but it seems to me inaccurate to contrast historic and systematic questions. The real opposition is between "type" (of object, process, situation) and "occurrence." And for concepts that deal with occurrence, the reference to absolute geographic space-coordinates is just as characteristic as that to absolute time-coordinates by means of dates.

At the same time, the concept of the geographic should be understood in such a general sense as to refer to juxtaposition, correlative to historical succession, and as to be applicable to psychical events.

<sup>3</sup> There is no term at present in general use to designate nonhistoric problem formulations. I here employ the term "systematic," meaning thereby, not "ordered," but collectively nonhistoric problems and laws such as those which form the bulk of present-day physics (see p. 12).

still had a fundamentally historic, a temporally particular significance. Stress was laid not upon the general validity which modern physics understands by lawfulness, but upon the events in the historically given world which displayed the required stability. The highest degree of lawfulness, beyond mere frequency, was characterized by the idea of always, eternal (*ἀεί* as against *ἐπι τὸ πολὺ*). That is, the stretch of historic time for which constancy was assumed was extended to eternity. General validity of law was not yet clearly distinguished from eternity of process. Only permanence, or at least frequent repetition, was proof of more than momentary validity. Even here in the idea of eternity, which seems to transcend the historical, the connection with immediate historic actuality is still obvious, and this close connection was characteristic of the "empiricist" Aristotle's method and concepts.

Not only in physics but in other sciences—for example, in economics and biology—it can be clearly seen how in certain early stages the tendency to empiricism, to the collection and ordering of facts, carries with it a tendency to historical concept formation, to excessive valuation of the historical.

### *Galileian Physics.*

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From the point of view of this sort of empiricism the concept formation of Galileian and post-Galileian physics must seem curious and even paradoxical.

As remarked above, the use of mathematical tools and the tendency to exactness, important as they are, cannot be considered the real substance of the difference between Aristotelian and Galileian physics. It is indeed quite possible to recast in mathematical form the essential content of, for example, the dynamic ideas of Aristotelian physics (see page 16). It is conceivable that the development of physics could have taken the form of a mathematical rendition of Aristotelian concepts such as is actually taking place in psychology today. In reality, however, there were only traces of such a tendency, such as Bacon's quasi-statistical methods, mentioned above.

The main development took another direction and proved to be a change of content rather than a mere change of form.

The same considerations apply to the exactness of the new physics. It must not be forgotten that in Galileo's time there were no clocks of the sort we have today, that these first became possible through the knowledge of dynamics founded upon Galileo's work.<sup>1</sup> Even the methods of measurement used by Faraday in the early investigations of electricity show how little exactness, in the current sense of precision to such and such a decimal place, had to do with these critical stages in the development of physics.

The real sources of the tendency to quantification lie somewhat deeper, namely in a new conception by the physicist of the nature of the physical world, in an extension of the demands of physics upon itself in the task of understanding the world, and in an increased faith in the possibility of their fulfillment. These are radical and far-reaching changes in the fundamental ideas of physics, and the tendency to quantification is simply one of their expressions.

*Homogenization.* The outlook of a Bruno, a Kepler, or a Galileo is determined by the idea of a comprehensive, all-embracing unity of the physical world. The same law governs the courses of the stars, the falling of stones, and the flight of birds. This homogenization of the physical world with respect to the validity of law deprives the division of physical objects into rigid abstractly defined classes of the critical significance it had for Aristotelian physics, in which membership in a certain conceptual class was considered to determine the physical nature of an object.

Closely related to this is the loss in importance of logical dichotomies and conceptual antitheses. Their places are taken by more and more fluid transitions, by gradations which deprive the dichotomies of their antithetical character and represent in logical form a transition stage between the class concept and the series concept.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. MACH, *Die Mechanik in ihrer Entwicklung*, Leipzig, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> E. CASSIRER, *op. cit.*

*Genetic Concepts.* This dissolution of the sharp antitheses of rigid classes was greatly accelerated by the coeval transition to an essentially functional way of thinking, to the use of conditional-genetic concepts. For Aristotle the immediate perceptible appearance, that which present-day biology terms the *phenotype*, was hardly distinguished from the properties that determine the object's dynamic relations. The fact, for example, that light objects relatively frequently go upward sufficed for him to ascribe to them an upward tendency. With the differentiation of phenotype from *genotype* or, more generally, of descriptive from conditional-genetic<sup>1</sup> concepts and the shifting of emphasis to the latter, many old class distinctions lost their significance. The orbits of the planets, the free falling of a stone, the movement of a body on an inclined plane, the oscillation of a pendulum, which if classified according to their phenotypes would fall into quite different, indeed into antithetical classes, prove to be simply various expressions of the same law.

*Concreteness.* The increased emphasis upon the quantitative which seems to lend to modern physics a formal and abstract character is not derived from any tendency to logical formality. Rather, the tendency to a full description of the concrete actuality, even that of the particular case, was influential, a circumstance which should be especially emphasized in connection with present-day psychology. The particular object in all departments of science not only is determined in kind and thereby qualitatively, but it possesses each of its properties in a special intensity or to a definite degree. So long as one regards as important and conceptually intelligible only such properties of an object as are common to a whole group of objects, the individual differences of degree remain without scientific relevance, for in the abstractly defined classes these differences more or less disappear. With the mounting aspirations of research toward an understanding of actual events and particular cases, the task of describing the differences

<sup>1</sup> LEWIN, *Gesetz und Experiment in der Psychologie*, Weltkreis verlag, Berlin-Schlachtensee, 1927.

of degree that characterized individual cases had necessarily to increase in importance and finally required actual quantitative determination.

It was the increased desire, and also the increased ability, to comprehend concrete particular cases, and to comprehend them fully, which, together with the idea of the homogeneity of the physical world and that of the continuity of the properties of its objects, constituted the main impulse to the increasing quantification of physics.

*Paradoxes of the New Empiricism.* This tendency toward the closest possible contact with actuality, which today is usually regarded as characteristic and ascribed to an antispeculative tendency, led to a mode of concept formation diametrically opposed to that of Aristotle, and, surprisingly enough, involved also the direct antithesis of his "empiricism."

The Aristotelian concepts show, as we have seen above, an immediate reference to the historically given reality and to the actual course of events. This immediate reference to the historically given is lacking in modern physics. The fact, so decisively important for Aristotelian concepts, that a certain process occurred only once or was very frequently or invariably repeated in the course of history, is practically irrelevant to the most essential questions of modern physics.<sup>1</sup> This circumstance is considered fortuitous or merely historical.

The law of falling bodies, for example, does not assert that bodies very frequently fall downward. It does not assert that the event to which the formula  $s = \frac{1}{2}gt^2$  applies, the "free and unimpeded fall" of a body, occurs regularly or even frequently in the actual history of the world. Whether the event described by the law occurs rarely or often has nothing to do with the law. Indeed, in a certain sense, the law refers only to cases that are never realized, or only approximately realized, in the actual course of events. Only in experiment, that is, under artificially constructed conditions, do cases occur which approximate the event with which the law is concerned. The

<sup>1</sup> So far as it is not immediately concerned with an actual "History of the Heavens and the Earth" or a geography.