Mathematics and Empiricism

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The most vitally characteristic fact about mathematics is, in my opinion, its quite peculiar relationship to the natural sciences, or, more generally, to any science which interprets experience on a higher than purely descriptive level.

Most people, mathematicians and others, will agree that mathematics is not an empirical science, or at least that it is practiced in a manner which differs in several decisive respects from the techniques of the empirical sciences. And, yet, its development is very closely linked with the natural sciences. One of its main branches, geometry, actually started as a natural, empirical science. Some of the best inspirations of modern mathematics (I believe, the best ones) clearly originated in the natural sciences. The methods of mathematics pervade and dominate the "theoretical" divisions of the natural sciences. In modern empirical sciences it has become more and more a major criterion of success whether they have become accessible to the mathematical method or to the near-mathematical methods of physics. Indeed, throughout the natural sciences an unbroken chain of successive pseudomorphoses, all of them pressing toward mathematics, and almost identified with the idea of scientific progress, has become more and more evident. Biology becomes increasingly pervaded by chemistry and physics, chemistry by experimental and theoretical physics, and physics by very mathematical forms of theoretical physics.

There is a quite peculiar duplicity in the nature of mathematics. One has to realize this duplicity, to accept it, and to assimilate it into one's thinking on the subject. This double face is the face of mathematics, and I do not believe that any simplified, unitarian view of the thing is possible without sacrificing the essence.

I will therefore not attempt to present you with a unitarian version. I will attempt to describe, as best I can, the multiple phenomenon which is mathematics.

It is undeniable that some of the best inspirations in mathematics - in those parts of it which are as pure mathematics as one can imagine -have come from the natural sciences. [...]

 It is very hard for any mathematician to believe that mathematics is a purely empirical science or that all mathematical ideas originate in empirical subjects. Let me consider the second half of the statement first. There. are various important parts of modern mathematics in which the empirical origin is untraceable, or, if traceable, so remote that it is

clear that the subject has undergone a complete metamorphosis since it was cut off from its empirical roots. The symbolism of algebra was invented for domestic, mathematical use, but it may be reasonably asserted that it had strong empirical ties. However, modem, "abstract" algebra has more and more developed into directions which have even fewer empirical connections. The same may be said about topology. And in all these fields the mathematician's subjective criterion of success, of the worth-whileness of his effort, is very much self-contained and aesthetical and free (or nearly free) of empirical connections. [...]

 I think that it is a relatively good approximation to truth - which is much too complicated to allow anything but approximations-that mathematical ideas originate in empirics, although the genealogy is sometimes long and obscure. But, once they are so conceived, the subject begins to live a peculiar life of its own and is better compared to a creative one, governed by almost entirely aesthetical motivations, than to anything else and, in particular, to an empirical science. There is, however, a further point which, I believe, needs stressing. As a mathematical discipline travels far from its empirical source, or still more, if it is a second and third generation only indirectly inspired by ideas coming from "reality" it is beset with very grave dangers. It becomes more and more purely aestheticizing, more and more purely I'art pour I'art. This need not be bad, if the field is surrounded by correlated subjects, which still have closer empirical connections, or if the discipline is under the influence of men with an exceptionally well-developed taste. But there is a grave danger that the subject will develop along the line of least resistance, that the stream, so far from its source, will separate into a multitude of insignificant branches, and that the discipline will become a disorganized mass of details and complexities. In other words, at a great distance from its empirical source, or after much "abstract" inbreeding, a mathematical subject is in danger of degeneration. At the inception the style is usually classical; when it shows signs of becoming baroque, then the danger signal is up. It would be easy to give examples, to trace specific evolutions into the baroque and the very high baroque, but this, again, would be too technical.

In any event, whenever this stage is reached, the only remedy seems to me to be the rejuvenating return to the source: the re-injection of more or less directly empirical ideas. I am convinced that this was a necessary condition to conserve the freshness and the vitality of the subject and that this will remain equally true in the future.