

## Re: JSH: Your funeral

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- *From:* Jim Burns <[burns.87@xxxxxxx](mailto:burns.87@xxxxxxx)>
  - *Date:* Sun, 16 Sep 2007 23:22:50 -0400
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JSH wrote:

On Sep 16, 8:03 am, Jim Burns <[burns...@xxxxxxx](mailto:burns...@xxxxxxx)> wrote:

I fear that James has discovered The Secret: that his attempts at a factoring algorithm (or a short proof of FLT, and so on) have failed BECAUSE sci.math didn't accept it.

I'm only partly kidding here. Judging by the small percentage of his posts that I've read over the years, James seems to be infected by a particularly virulent form of social constructivism, wherein truths are true only BECAUSE of the social consensus that claims they are true.

No that is the rule that modern mathematicians use.

See: [http://www.maa.org/devlin/devlin\\_06\\_03.html](http://www.maa.org/devlin/devlin_06_03.html)

That links to an article from a leading mathematicians that a mathematical argument is a proof when professional mathematicians say it is.

I think you might be referring to this (from Keith Devlin's article "When is a proof?"):

: What is a proof? The question has two answers. The right wing  
: ("right-or-wrong", "rule-of-law") definition is that a proof  
: is a logically correct argument that establishes the truth  
: of a given statement. The left wing answer (fuzzy, democratic,  
: and human centered) is that a proof is an argument that  
: convinces a typical mathematician of the truth of a given  
: statement.

[later]

: [...] An argument becomes a proof when the mathematical  
: community agrees it is such. [...]

First of all, I don't like the labels he chose, "right-wing" and "left-wing", as I think they repeat unthinking stereotypes about the political spectrum (not least of which is that there exists such a one-dimensional line that political opinions can be usefully pinned to). However, I do think the processes or objects or whatever that he has so distinguished do deserve labels (even if they are not to my taste).

I don't expect you to agree with me on this, but it seems to me that Devlin filled his monthly column with four pages of very un-remarkable descriptions of the way the field of mathematics works and then gave it just a little controversy, just a little spice, so that his readers wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of it.

If, everywhere in his article that he referred to something being or becoming a left-wing proof, he had instead referred to it being or becoming /accepted as/ a proof, then everything in his article would be completely uncontroversial. But where is the fun in that?

A "right-wing proof" is just what is usually referred to as a "proof", and a "left-wing proof" is a document that the mathematical community (as an entity, in some way) has a great deal of confidence in its being a "right-wing proof", that is to say, a proof. Any particular /alleged/ proof can be "right-wing" only (truly valid, but not accepted), "left-wing" only (accepted as valid, but in error), both, or neither.

However, let's assume that you do not accept my re-interpretation of Devlin's article. There is still the question of what this proof-process for a left-wing proof consists of. (In Devlin's terms -- in my terms, how does one create the consensus that one has a valid proof?) Every example that he mentions (and his article is mostly made of examples) is of mathematicians trying to convince others (and themselves, often) that what they have /is a right wing proof/.

Nowhere in his article will you find warnings of Consequences if a proof is ruled invalid. No one seems to bolster their case by trying to get someone else fired. No generals, no security agencies, no mobs, no market crashes, no ends of civilization. Just math. I'm sure you find it very peculiar.

Since you seem to be fond of Devlin's article, maybe you will consider taking the mathematicians he writes about as

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your models. That's right, James, go the social route! Finally forget about your beloved Truth and leap whole-heartedly into convincing the math world that you have a proof, just as those other mathematicians do.

Just as they do, which is to say, convince the math world by finding some convincing math and telling us all about it .... just as they do.

Perhaps you will say that you've been there and done that.

Well, one possibility to consider is that what you have is not a right-wing proof, and others who know more math than you can see that, even if you can't. If they can see that it isn't a right-wing proof, then convincing them that it is one (which, remember, is all that the mathematicians in Devlin's article did) is sort of swimming against the tide, isn't it?

Another, more hopeful possibility is that you have never seriously tried to make a mathematical argument that what you have is a right-wing proof. Oh, sure, you've "tried", if "trying" means trying to win a race after tying your own legs together. You've never begun to study even the most basic material that you're supposedly interested in. Is that seriously trying?

Why not — Hey! Just for the fun of it! — sit down and work through some math textbooks? Are you doing anything else with your /next/ ten years?

That is why "pure math" is so dangerous!

Applied mathematics can be tested in the real world to see if it has real value.

I can only assume you mean "is correct" by "has real value" here, since this subthread is about the correctness of various pieces of math, not their value.

The situation with applied math is not as simple as you make it out to be. If something goes wrong with a particular application of math to the real world, it could be the math was incorrect, but it could also be that the math did not model the real world as well as it was hoped to be.

While so-called pure math is just about people's professional opinion.

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See, I just don't get this. Of course, I disagree with you, but, even assuming you're right, what's so dangerous about /pure/ math being people's professional opinion? Let's say it were some other profession, like art criticism. I'd be willing to get behind saying that's a lot of professional opinion. But I don't see what's so dangerous about art criticism, even so. Do you care to clear that up for me?

Jim Burns