

Preface

Beste Nico,

I was asked to write something personal about you. Now, to be very personal would embarrass you, and to be impersonal is not my style. The style should obviously be halfway between an after-dinner speech (very personal) and an obituary (very impersonal). So allow me to tell the gentle reader of some of the milestones in your life, and of your strengths, ignoring your weaknesses (if any), stressing your influence on and contributions to physics.

Your father, a professor in zoology, died young. Your mother, an intelligent and courageous woman, quite active in the resistance during the war, belonged to a renowned family, the Zernikes. After finishing at the top of your class in the Gymnasium in Leiden, you had barely started your studies when the University of Leiden was closed by the occupation forces. You went to Groningen to study with Zernike and Nijboer, and wrote two major articles on diffraction, which was the main interest in that institute.

After the war you went to Copenhagen to work on a subject that was dear to Kramers. Despite the fact that you succeeded in solving a difficult problem very exhaustively, this paper, published in the *Videnskabernes Skelskap*, attracted little attention at the time. Fortunately, this was corrected in the biography of Kramers by Max Dresden, who paid quite a bit of attention to this paper. After completing the formalities for your doctorate, you went to the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton, where you worked on causality and the S -matrix. In February 1955 you were appointed at the University of Utrecht, where you not only found your roots (staying there despite many invitations to go elsewhere), but also became the center of activities in statistical mechanics and related subjects, although technically you held the chair of nuclear physics. (Seldom has nuclear physics been more beneficial to statistical mechanics.)

Considering your long list of publications, it is clear that stochastic processes became your true love in life. This theme, recurrent in different forms, culminated in the book *Stochastic Processes in Physics and Chemistry*, which appeared in 1981. This book is important not only for its contents, but also as a masterpiece of organization; it reflects your almost

“microtomical” mind. Beyond this point your restless inquiry into crucial questions seems to proliferate, despite the fact that you once wrote an article called simply “Constraints.”

It is, of course, true that certain well-established theories have peculiar loopholes which are ignored by the average reader, who seems to feel that since nobody has objected so far to this or that inconsistency, why should he or she? Not so van Kampen! Tirelessly, and often pointedly, you contributed critical speeches to conferences, somewhat reminiscent of the Roman senator who requested the destruction of Carthage, albeit often less successfully. Meanwhile, you set up a veritable cottage industry to give counter-examples in order to substantiate your claims. This resulted in a number of very lucid and often amusing articles, as, for instance, the quasi-letter to Wergeland on pinball machines, in *Physica Norvegica*, in which the editor’s summary leaves no doubts about its real contents.

As already mentioned, one aspect of your activity has been the critical evaluation of theories. You range somewhere between Socrates and the little boy who shouted that the emperor wore no clothes. Second to this is your astonishment at what administrators, well-meaning or otherwise, were capable of inventing in their field of “science management.” You pulled out all stops on this topic in the *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Natuurkunde* in 1986. One of the pillars of the establishment wrote a rebuttal entitled “Nico go home,” showing that the article at least evoked some strong emotions. Another incident occurred when an experimental physicist wrote a not very exalting article in a literacy magazine explaining how things were “really” done in physics. This irked you to take up your pen to defend science.

The Dutch merchants in the golden age used to say that living was not necessary but “*navigare necesse est*”; your life, Nico, shows that “*physicare necesse est*” under all circumstances. Let me finish this brief and incomplete sketch of your fruitful career by congratulating you on the honor bestowed on you recently in the form of the Shell prize.

I remain your old fellow student,
Paul H. E. Meijer